

Bach in Central Australia

Early in T.G.H. Strehlow's autobiographical novel *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, his father Pastor Carl Strehlow is brought from their house to embark on his last fateful journey down the dry bed of the Finke in search of medical help. As he is lifted up on to the buggy that will trundle over the sands, the Aranda people of Hermannsburg mission gather around to pay their farewells and burst into song: *Kaarrerrai worlamparinyai*.

This vignette was the key to *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, the orchestral work Andrew Schultz and I have written for Symphony Australia and the Sydney Symphony, and which will be presented by the Sydney Symphony in the Opera House, in May. That one scene brings together subject matter relevant to Australian orchestras. An Australian scene, Aboriginal people, the European musical tradition. For what the Hermannsburg people were singing on that fateful morning in 1922 was *Sleepers, wake!*, Carl Strehlow's translation of *Wachet auf*, the Lutheran hymn harmonised by J. S. Bach and used by him in his cantata No.140. This was what came spontaneously to the Hermannsburg Aranda on that October morning. Aranda people at Hermannsburg, though it's no longer a mission, sing it still (They call it '309', its number in the Arrarnta Hymnal).

But that one vignette did something else. Andrew's music begins quietly, delicately – a harp, a single note on the organ, marimba, crotales, then a solo trumpet – notes adding up, like the 'rich tracery of pink veins which... spread through the sharply serrated edges [of the mountain ranges]' as T.G.H. Strehlow describes sunrise in the Western MacDonnells. Whispered voices tell us of the seriousness of the situation. The volume builds, and then the orchestra is joined by a chorus singing the hymn. But not just any chorus. In the first performance, the Sydney Philharmonia Choir will be joined by present-day descendants of those Aranda singers, the Ntaria Ladies Choir. The Sydney Opera House Concert Hall will resound with their voices, a very different sound, thick with Aranda 'r's; throaty, not unlike that, I have sometimes thought, of the Mysterious Voices of Bulgaria. From the moment the Sydney Symphony said yes to this piece, they were committed to involving the people for whom this story is part of the reality of their lives.

Journey to Horseshoe Bend tells of the last journey taken down the Finke River in 1922 by the mortally ill Carl Strehlow, superintendent at Hermannsburg Mission. The story is told through the eyes of young Theo, Carl's son, later the linguist, T.G.H. Strehlow. As the dying Carl battles with his faith, Theo is awakened to the mythical significance of the Aranda landscape by his guide, Njitiaka. As Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* takes its characters on a journey down the Finke valley through European pastoral holdings and Aranda totemic landscapes, Theo comes of age in the land of his childhood. The hymn is heard twice more in our piece - as memory of the mission left behind, but also as a source of new material emerging from sympathetic identification with the landscape.

Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is a literary re-telling. But *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is real history out west of Alice Springs. With the help of the Strehlow Research Centre and its wonderful staff, and the financial support of Symphony Australia, Andrew

and I have met Doug Abbott who tells us that his great-grandfather Njitiaka would turn in his grave if we rendered his dialogue in Central Aranda rather than the correct dialect; heard Mavis Malbunka say, almost in the same breath, how her children received their totem and of how proud she is to be a Lutheran. We've also met station people like Horseshoe Bend's Morphetts and Idracowra's Leo Murphy who still sympathises with 'those poor people' who had to travel over the hard country that is nowadays his cattle run. But in the Ntaria Ladies Choir we will have onstage descendants of the people who sang that hymn 80 years ago, people who connect with the real-life events.

Andrew and I, and Alexandra Cameron from the Sydney Symphony went out to meet the Ntaria Ladies Choir last year and persuade them to take part. West of Alice Springs is Namatjira country: yellow spinifex growing in sand and stone; red mountains grooved and eroded with gullies which show up purple in the slanting sun, coloured hills trailing off in the distance to papery blue miniscule peaks. Namatjira's colours were once ridiculed by southerners who had never set foot in Central Australia, and when dot painting became popular he was sidelined as too European. But unique blends between Aboriginal and European cultures are a way of life out here. They're uniquely Western Aranda, called Two Ways.

Hermannsburg was established by the banks of the Finke River in the 1870s. The historical precinct is a village of low-slung buildings on either side of a whitewashed church. You can still buy strudel in the old pastor's house. The windows have deep sills, and over the dining room doorway is a woodcut of a schloss with the words 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' (A Mighty Fortress is our God). The old missionaries tried to stamp out the old ways, taught new songs; but fortunately they preached 'in language', and preservation has enabled not only a more recent resurfacing of tradition but Hermannsburg's unique cultural blend. Our work reflects some of this, being composed in the three languages of the area, Aranda, English and German.

Western repertoire has been here since the end of the 19th century, even as the old ceremonies were within earshot of the superintendent's house. The choir which forms such an important element of our cantata has had several forerunners. Barbara Henson's biography of Pastor Albrecht, Carl Strehlow's successor, tells of Strehlow's son T.G.H. Strehlow returning to Hermannsburg at the end of 1932 and training the men in four-part arrangements of the Lutheran liturgy and Christmas hymns. The choirs have gone through a number of incarnations. Albert Namatjira sang in one in the 1950s. Around this time the choir made 78s of Bach chorales. More recently the choir has been reconstituted as the Ntaria Ladies Choir under the direction of David Roennfeldt and his wife, Lily. This choir, named after the significant Aranda site nearest the former mission, comprises women like Erna, Rosabelle, Gwen, Arfa, Lily, and Vivienne from Hermannsburg itself, but also - for an occasional trip interstate - from Areyonga and as far afield as Mt. Liebig. The make-up of the Choir is fairly flexible, and the choir, in that wonderful practical Centralian way, makes do with the situations that turn up. The women generally sing soprano and alto. If there are enough women any given Sunday, someone may sing tenor as well. Many of the songs are in the choristers' language of Western Arrarnta (the

modern orthography) and they occasionally sing in other Central Australian languages and English. Most importantly, for our purposes, they still sing *Wachet auf*.

We were told that the best way to catch the Choir, basically the women who sing in church, was after the service on a Sunday. Funnily, I could follow the service by catching the odd Aranda word; Andrew, the son of a Lutheran pastor, could follow the liturgy; I was more at sea in my own culture than the Ntaria mob. After the service Andrew and I spoke to the Choir. In the early days of the project, we had thought that we could produce a version of the cantata that could be used in church services as a gift to the Ntaria community. This became impractical – trying to write a piece which serves two functions at the same time - but Andrew came up with a chorus which we could offer the Choir to put into their repertoire. That morning we both stood outside the church, squinting at the manuscript paper almost pure white in the dazzling Centralian midday sun, and sang it for the women, glossing Strehlow's final thoughts: 'Pmara nhanha Altjirra (This land is from Eternity).'

We talked about Sydney and the Opera House. Some of the women have been down south a number of times. Some of them are well-known potters. But rarely do they get to the eastern seaboard. In order to have the Choir sing with the Sydney Symphony, a number of logistical problems have to be overcome. Rain has already brought up some of the Centralian creeks so mailing the vocal scores became a bit of a gamble. In the end the Sydney Symphony couriered the package to David Roennfeldt care of the school, since the settlement has no house numbers or street names. Symphony Australia has provided funding for Brett Weymark, Sydney Philharmonia's Musical Director, to go out to Central Australia for rehearsals. The women also like to take part in culture sharing activities when touring, and through the Sydney Opera House's Message Sticks Festival, the Symphony has undertaken to organise sessions with local indigenous communities.

The premiere of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* will see a unique meeting across cultures on the concert hall stage. The Sydney Symphony scheduled the premiere in National Reconciliation Week, in conjunction with Message Sticks. It is odd to think that with a Bach chorale we are being faithful to the unique culture that is Hermannsburg. At one stage we were asked if we were going to use didgeridoos. Well, no, they're not Central Australian. What we're doing has its own place in history.

In the early 1930s, the 23-year old Ted Strehlow returned to Central Australia. He withstood the heat and vast distances, and the intolerance of European settlers, to record the ceremonies and myths old Aranda men asked him to record. In the 1950s when he came to write his magnum opus *Songs of Central Australia*, he was engaged in a simultaneous task, with Moses Tjalkabota, Nathanael Rauwiraka, Conrad Raberaba and others, to translate the New Testament into Aranda. His life's work was a parallel project. Similarly Hermannsburg reflects two parallel streams. The Aranda never asked the Europeans to come; they've been obliged to make adjustments to European incursion. But over the years they've come up with a blend of culture, which to me seems to say, we know these cultures are not completely compatible, but we're prepared to live with the contradictions. We sing a Bach chorale in Aranda as part of *Both Ways*.

When the Hermannsburg people sang that hymn for Pastor Strehlow in 1922, most of the people, according to T.G.H. Strehlow 'had begun to sob long before the end of the third verse had been reached...the hymn had come to seem like a prophecy of doom.' That can hardly be the case now.

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