

*An all-day long symphony of discord rang out, and through it all strode Simpson, walking along next to his donkey, forever singing and whistling as he held on to his passenger, scorning the danger, in sweet defiance of all the explosions, the barking of rifle fire and the harsh machine-gun chatter, clutching on to one small piece of reality, of nature [his donkey], in a mechanised world gone mad all around him.*

- Tom Curran, *Across the Bar*

### Proposal for *Simpson and His Donkey* - Andrew Schultz and Gordon Kalton Williams

Simpson is Australia's 'common soldier'. His story is recounted to unite Australians in a common appreciation of the sacrifices made by our past generations of soldiers. But there are some odd facts that confound the two-dimensional portrait presented to the public – Simpson was English; he was a non-combatant (Field Ambulance), and he lit on using donkeys in the field because, admittedly, they ran out of stretchers on the first day of the landing at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli. But donkeys probably reminded him of summer holidays as a donkey boy on South Shields beach back in the UK. In the terror of war Simpson reached back to childhood. So there are richer aspects to the Simpson story than are apparent in the bowdlerisation of a national myth – and let's not forget: Australians invaded Turkey; *Kaba Türkçe* was spoken in the trenches opposite.

The sad fact is that Simpson's heroic deeds were eventually dragooned to serve belligerent and tub-thumping ends, and may in fact undermine his true heroism, which was, in Inga Clendinnen's words: 'staunchly maintaining civilian virtues in the face of war.'

We'd like to explore that full tragedy of his portrayal in another symphonic cantata, following-up *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* in scale and prospect, this time comprising orchestra and *children's* chorus (and possibly soloists). Once again, we would envisage some elements of staging and surtitles.

This proposal came out of Andrew's idea for a children's song cycle-cum-opera on Simpson and His Donkey. The inclusion of a children's choir would bring up instant opposites: innocence hitting the hard experience of war; metal vs flesh - but also bowdlerisation vs fact. The subject suggests a surprising sonority of war. Simpson died on the morning of the Turkish offensive, 19 May 1915 (in fact, just after!). That morning a band had been heard in the Turkish trenches playing The Turkish March from Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens*! What musical suggestion there is in that!

We're suggesting a work which traces Simpson's career both in the three weeks he served on Gallipoli and in a public afterlife, framed by the expression of children's views. We're saying something about innocence, pressure, spin, good humour, civilian virtues, military juggernauts, great odds. We'll draw on a variety of sources (including Simpson's own letters), keeping to a dramatic sequence, though maintaining some of the original idea of a song-cycle. Children's story-telling may encourage the use of pungent nursery rhymes.

No War Requiem, the emotional complex will consist of caustic scrutiny of mythmaking, while at the same time telling a tragic tale of a loveable larrikin. That said, we want a full gamut of emotions: tears through laughter and laughter through tears – and not just for us. '*Gözyaşlarınızı dindiriniz.*' Even Turks wept when Atatürk told ANZAC mothers to dry their tears, for their sons now slept in the soil of a friendly country.

Gordon Kalton Williams © 2008/2010