

Journey to Horseshoe Bend – cantata for actors, singers, choruses and orchestra (based on the novel by T.G.H. Strehlow)

Hermannsburg
Idracowra
Horseshoe Bend

World premiere

Music: Andrew Schultz (born 1960)
Libretto: Gordon Kalton Williams (born 1956)
Producer: Alexandra Cameron
Director: John Wregg

Cast in order of appearance:

T.G.H. (T.G.H. Strehlow), speaking part – John Stanton
Carl (the Rev. Carl Strehlow), bass-baritone – Rodney Macann
Njitiaka, speaking part – Aaron Pedersen
Theo (the young T.G.H., son of Carl), boy soprano – David Bruce, Sydney Children’s Choir
(Coach: Lyn Williams)
Ntaria Ladies Choir (Chorusmaster: David Roennfeldt)
Sydney Philharmonia Motet Choir, covering the characters of Frieda, Pastoralists, Mrs Elliott,
Men at The Bend and Gus Elliott (Chorusmaster: Brett Weymark)

T.G.H. Strehlow’s autobiographical novel *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* tells of the mortally-ill missionary Carl Strehlow’s desperate 12-day journey down the dry bed of the Finke River, Central Australia to reach the Adelaide-bound train at Oodnadatta in 1922. It tells of Strehlow’s death at the hotel at Horseshoe Bend (at least 270 kilometres short of his destination); of Theo (T.G.H. Strehlow), Carl’s newly-confirmed 14-year-old son, travelling behind his parents in the van with their friends Njitiaka, Lornie and Jakobus; and of Theo’s awakening to the storied landscape of the Aboriginal people as his father struggles with the Christian faith which has sustained him for 28 years as superintendent at Hermannsburg Mission, west of Alice Springs. Early in the novel Pastor Strehlow is brought from his house for the last time. As he is lifted into the buggy that will take him to Ellery Creek and then down the Finke, the mission people burst into song: the great Lutheran hymn ‘Wachet auf’ (Sleepers, wake!) or ‘Kaarrerrai worlamparinyai’, as it is known in Strehlow’s translation. This hymn, or chorale, was set by J.S. Bach, and used by him in Cantata No.140. This was the scene which sparked the musical version of the novel that Andrew Schultz and I have written for the Sydney Symphony. What more appropriate vignette could there be linking European repertoire with Australia? Here in the heart of Australia, Aranda people (to use Strehlow’s orthography) were singing Bach.

In June 1999 I pitched the idea of a musical work based on this story to the Sydney Symphony, and to Brett Galt-Smith, Research Director at the Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs. It seemed like an appropriate project for Symphony Australia to develop, following the success of *Music is our Culture*, the first work for symphony orchestra by indigenous Australians, produced in association with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in 1998. It was also seen as a most

welcome next project by Andrew Schultz when I spoke to him about it in 2000, when he was planning Brisbane performances of his opera *Going into Shadows*. This would not be the first time Andrew had worked with Aboriginal themes. The opera *Black River* dealt with black deaths in custody. Not long after starting work on *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, he was asked by Luciano Berio to orchestrate one of the fugues from Bach's *Art of Fugue* for a performance to mark the 250th anniversary of Bach's death. *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* seemed the perfect fulcrum through which to bring together two Australian heritages in a way which said something about Australian culture.

The novel *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is a rich and weighty book. T.G.H. Strehlow wrote it from a hospital bed while recovering from an emergency appendectomy. Judging from the manuscript, he wrote the book in a single stream of consciousness: the manuscript shows relatively few rearrangements of text or scratchings out or insertions. The writing of it must have been a stupendous intellectual and physical effort. Clearly much has been edited out in making a musical adaptation. My initial method was simply to shut the book and write down what struck me, reducing the Bible references basically to the *Book of Job* and placing in starker juxtaposition what, in the novel, was more continual and evolving struggle on the part of Carl and gradual awakening on the part of Theo. This resulted in nine scenes (two of them telescoped in Andrew's final score).

Towards the end of his career, T.G.H., by then Professor, Strehlow described himself as an *urumbulak' ingkata* (ceremonial chief of ceremonial chiefs). He had written his magnum opus *Songs of Central Australia*, a massive study of Central Australian chant, but at the same time translated the New Testament into Aranda in collaboration with Nathanael Rauwiraka, Moses Tjalkabota, Conrad Raberaba and others. He worked in two languages but his claims to straddle two cultures invited some controversy, as anybody who has read Barry Hill's recent book *Broken Song*, or remembers newspaper stories of the late 1970s will have learnt. The novel, dating from 1969, has been seen as an attempt by T.G.H. Strehlow to centre himself in Aranda culture and provide authority for his life's work: an attempt to head off controversy as a newly politicised generation of indigenous Australians rose to prominence in their own affairs. This journey, though, begins and ends in 1922. It is a story of the promise of two cultures intermixing – Strehlow interweaves Bible stories and pastoral history with the traditional Aboriginal mythology behind the country through which he and Njitiaka travelled. The promise is not entirely unfulfilled. Aranda people at Hermannsburg practise a unique blend of European and Aranda culture; they call it Two Ways.

Our work tells this story as a cantata, that form of unstaged mini-opera that the Lutheran Bach wrote to illustrate the scriptural theme of Sunday church services mostly in the 1720s during his time at St Thomas' Church, Leipzig. Cantatas often ended with a chorale, a hymn which the congregation could easily sing in an expression of understanding of the day's message. (So too does ours; 'This land is from Altjira' is one of two original chorale melodies by Andrew in the piece. The other – 'But God cannot be known' – occurs in the middle of part II.) Andrew, however, also threads 'Wachet auf' through our cantata, using it as source for an almost symphonic development of music. 'Wachet auf' also contains melodic figures and cadential formulas familiar from other Western European classical repertoire, allowing Andrew to compose music which portrays a once-forbidding landscape as 'home'.

Though Bach's chorale suggested that the format of our work should be a cantata, at times we were tempted to go all the way and make it an opera. There is already an element of theatre in Andrew's very specific orchestral layout. Winds and brass form parallel ridges on either side of a lower plain of strings, marimba and organ, rather like the cliff walls of the Finke or Ellery Gorges abutting their respective watercourses. Percussion at four points of the stage denote, amongst other things, distant sites in the ranges. On a roomy stage the singers would move from upstage right to downstage left replicating the course of the journey from northwest to southeast. The missionaries' sense of Central Australia as home is denoted by the warmth of the sounds emanating from the centre of stage, while the raucous nasal-reedy sounds of the ridges reflect both the rawness of the landscape, as well as (if faintly) Baroque orchestration. There is clearly a nod to Baroque influence in the antiphonal layout of facing ridges, but more so in the presence of a sort of *concertino* group amongst the strings in the middle. The solo trumpet here almost becomes Carl's doppelgänger as the piece proceeds. It should be noted that the ridge-based music often rises up as if in prayer, and the layout of the orchestra is somewhat like a chancel. The musical symbolism, like the words of an Aboriginal language, is polysemous – many-meaning.

I made a number of dramaturgical decisions early on, deciding to render the story in first person, and to show rather than tell. We see and hear Carl Strehlow struggle with *Job*. We witness, rather than are told about, Njitiaka upbraiding Theo for using the 'wrong' word for moon. The chorus undertakes a number of roles and functions, at times assuming characters (Frieda, for example, is represented by the Lord's Prayer – 'Vater unser...'); or commenting reflectively, as in scene iv. Cantata form provided a clue as to how we could distil a 200-page novel into arias, duets and choruses. Musical conventions helped convey the novelist's detail more quickly. We do not need to recount tales of Carl Strehlow's superhuman endurance or authority, how he stood up to a bunch of angry Kukatja men or kicked Constable Wurmbrand off the mission property. Carl is a bass-baritone, and that immediately carries the connotation of all the great bass-baritone roles in history: a Wotan, or Boris Godunov. The bass-baritone literally has to struggle through consonant-thick text in his great struggle with Job, and lends his authoritative voice to Andrew's depiction of a heroic death, and, even, apotheosis. It was the Sunday service out at Hermannsburg that gave Andrew the idea of framing Carl's death with a refrain from the Ntaria order of service – 'Kaartai, nurnanha wurlathanai' (Lord, hear our prayer).

We step out of musical genre however with the use of actor/narrators. At one stage we wondered whether T.G.H. should be sung in recitative, rather like the Evangelist in a Bach passion, but came back to narration as a link with the non-opera-going audience, an audience to whom, largely, this work is meant to speak. The music is often foreground and dominant, as in opera, but occasionally drops to underscoring (nothing new to an audience familiar with movie soundtracks).

Our work, novelly, blends classical European musical language with spoken and sung Aranda (perhaps the first time that this Central Australian language has been heard on a Sydney stage). I make use of the three languages of the Hermannsburg region – Aranda, English and German. The text is meant to be audible and comprehensible (I even aimed for it to be self-translating). At key points we hear Strehlow's own words. Our German is generally limited to quotes from

Luther's Bible and the Lord's Prayer. The Aranda acknowledges the dialectical differences of the region reflected in their different spellings – Western Arrarnta (at Hermannsburg), Southern Arrernte (as spoken by Njitiaka), and Eastern/Central Arrernte of the Alice Springs district. Andrew's use of percussion reflects a response to the landscape as well as key events in the piece: corrugated iron (hail and rain), small bells (donkeys), sizzle cymbals with brushes (wind-carried desert sounds, or crunching through gravel), and Peking opera gongs (the overland telegraph). There are no didgeridus. They're not traditional to Central Australia.

Journey to Horseshoe Bend, the novel, ends in a knot of symbolic events. Pastor Strehlow dies, but stormclouds open over the land of fire and the country is drenched in a downpour of rejuvenating rain. Academic John Morton once commented on this paradoxical portrayal of life-through-extinguishment. Our intention is, like Strehlow's, unequivocally life-affirming. At first glance it may seem strange to set the joyous expression of Strehlow's translation of the *Song of Mborawatna* to a chorale fugue, but it is an expression of the thoroughness with which we see European-derived musical language telling a story of these figures in this landscape.

In T.G.H. Strehlow's (and our) hands, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is an artistic re-telling. But aspects of it are a matter of reminiscence and family lore up north. The Malbunka family still talk about their forebear Hesekiel's 80 mile run to Alice Springs in three days to deliver a telegram for help when Pastor Strehlow first got sick. Doug Abbott still chuckles over the way Theo was told off by his great-grandfather Njitiaka for using the Western Arrarnta word for moon in Southern Arrernte country. Leo Murphy shows you a 300ft sandhill on his property and commiserates with 'those poor people' who had to travel in the heat of October through that incredibly hard country, and the Morphetts take the occasional modern-day visitor to see Strehlow's grave out behind their house at Horseshoe Bend. We are grateful to Symphony Australia and the Sydney Symphony for funding our researches; to the Strehlow Research Centre and the NT Cattlemen's Association for facilitating our fruitful visits. Andrew, Alexandra Cameron and I have all visited the area. Andrew and I got a glimpse of the whole terrain when we travelled down the Finke in a three-hour helicopter journey in 2001.

Australian practitioners of classical music are often dealing with a culture rooted far from our life and experiences here, but Doug Abbott and Strehlows John, Ted and Shirley Crawley sit with us in the hall at this first performance. It is sobering to realise we have made an adaptation of something they call 'Dad's book'. Here is a work which speaks not only to this country but to its reachable history. In October 1922, Pastor Carl Strehlow had wanted to go back to the country of his birth, to Germany, but how much more appropriate, said his son, T.G.H., that his body should lie at Horseshoe Bend 'in open country unconfined by cemetery walls yet sheltered by the windbreak ridge of the ntjira sisters of Pot'Arugutja'. A culture came from Europe and was grounded in Central Australia.

Synopsis

Hermannsburg

i

Dawn. We learn of Strehlow, his illness, his need to get down to Adelaide. We learn of his church: *Kaarrerrai worlamparinyai*. Theo is told that he will one day return. 'The buggy and van

set off.’ The family passes places of significance in Aranda mythology. At Iltjanmalitnjaka Theo emerges into unfamiliar country.

ii

At Henbury Station, the Henbury pastoralists tell the travelling party that their horses are exhausted, and to use their donkeys instead. Strehlow reflects on the kindness of sinners. He and his wife set off ahead of Theo to try to get through the sandhills before next morning. *Zion-ala marra wuma...* (Sion hears the watchman shout)

iii

Theo is wakened by Njitiaka at 2am and they set off into ‘the moonlit, sandhill silence’. Njitiaka tells Theo about his country and corrects him in Southern Arrernte. They reach Idracowra Station.

Idracowra

iv

While Theo looks over Idracowra Station, Strehlow, in pain, struggles to understand the meaning of suffering as described in the Bible’s *Book of Job*, and finally Theo becomes aware of his father’s anguish. Mrs Elliott arrives from Horseshoe Bend with bad news. A second car that was being sent up for Strehlow has broken down on the way. She says, ‘Come to The Bend,’ where you’ll be able to get medical aid by telegraph. Once again Theo’s parents set off ahead of him.

v

Next morning Theo and Njitiaka pass the sacred rain site of Mborawatna. The weather is changing significantly. Hot winds have picked up. As Njitiaka continues to point out the eternal country, Theo struggles to comprehend his father’s suffering. They arrive at Horseshoe Bend.

Horseshoe Bend

vi

Fire Country. Strehlow dreads his lack of preparedness to meet his God. He makes final arrangements for his family but silences his wife when she begins to pray. Njitiaka breaks the news of his father’s death to Theo.

vii

Strehlow is buried in the hard ground and the people at The Bend sing ‘Rock of Ages’. Strehlow is remembered in toasts.

viii

‘The dull dawn of a listless morning breaks over the stony landscape.’ Theo seeks solitude and reflection in the dry bed of the Finke River, last connection with his place of birth. A storm that had been building for days breaks as if re-enacting the stories Njitiaka had told him of the beginning of time. Theo realises his father is buried in the land of Altjira (eternity), the land to which he gave his life. *Gloria lyarta unkwanga...*

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