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'Harping On'

MARSHALL MCGUIRE
Musings on New Music**NEW!** [Log In to Have Your Say](#) about this article**Medical music - food for the soul!**by [Marshall McGuire](#)[Arts Hub Australia](#)
Friday, July 02, 2004

Two remarkable music projects have recently been completed involving patients, staff and families associated with music therapy in the oncology department at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. *Living Soul*, a triple CD of original songs (released in April this year), and, last Sunday, Melbourne's More Than Opera presented a new opera *C is for.... Journeys*, which is based on five true stories of cancer and the human experience.

Living Soul

This project was led by music therapist, Emma O'Brien, who set up the music therapy department at the RMH several years ago. Emma works with the patients, their families and friends, by using music as a creative tool in the healing process, rather than simply as a therapeutic treatment. People are guided through the craft of writing a song as a way of expressing their pain and fears and anger and relief and thanks and so on. And you can imagine how many different styles of music are represented. Hundreds of songs have been written in music therapy, and Emma decided that the best way to preserve these original songs was to make a CD.

So over a period of nine months *Living Soul* was put together, containing original songs of inspiration, hope, love, laughter, courage, peace and the will to live, written by people whose lives have been touched by cancer. In association with the dedicated and talented Nigel Derricks from Bakehouse Studios in Fitzroy, Emma

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assembled a diverse group of musos who gave their time and talents for free. There are ballads, some folk, blues, rock n roll, jazz, funk, gospel, some pop - something for everyone. Cos when you think about it, music is one of those things that remains in our memories for ever, conjuring up emotions and feelings about experiences and places and people as vividly as if we were experiencing the events again. We draw on music to shore up our souls when times get tough, and most of these new songwriters were having tough times. Sadly, many of the songwriters passed away before their songs were recorded, so their families were invited to the studio to hear their music come alive again, as a legacy. It was a very powerful experience.

None of the people who contributed to these CDs had written songs before. Who has? But with Emma's talent and patience and guidance, they all produced amazing little gems, succinctly expressing their feelings and thoughts in a style that meant something - everything - to them and their friends and families. The pre-release launch at the San Remo Ballroom last year was incredible there must have been 650 people there, and the night finished well after midnight, the songs just kept coming and doctors and patients and families and friends were swept along on this wave of emotion and joy and sadness.

I played on some of the ballads and performed at the pre-release launch. It's especially rewarding for this tired old muso, who sometimes gets a bit cynical about the purpose of our publicly-funded arts companies who do their best to try to move us and stimulate audiences, often leaving people feeling that they've experienced something worthy but not all that vital. I was at the Sydney Opera House last night, and had exactly that feeling. That we were dutifully having a cultural experience, that it was a good thing to do, that we need opera, but feeling less than satisfied with the art part of it. Nothing to move the spirit.

That's why More Than Opera's *C is for...Journeys* was such a revelation.

C is for...Journeys

This is an opera as we know it - arias and duets and trios and choruses and scene changes. The only difference was that it was written not as some great cultural milestone experience, but as a collection of real stories of cancer and the human experience. Mary, Lisa, Diane, and Bruce worked with music therapist, Emma, brainstorming ideas and their stories, drawing together common themes and finally forming a libretto.

From the libretto Emma set each story to music with the patients at her side by the piano, ensuring that the music was a true expression of their emotions and experiences. Each participant was guided towards musically expressing their own 'cancer chord'. These personal chords formed the harmonic basis and *leitmotif* for each scene. Some arias were written spontaneously, other parts of the opera were written through a drawn out process. It is important to note that the More Than Opera team did not take their stories and make a work, each participant was fully involved in every step, even the staging of their story.

This is a unique project, not only for music therapy but also for creating an opera. The opera was performed by six opera singers and a piano, harp, violin, cello, using an ambient soundscape. Bruce, Mary, Lisa and Dianne also performed in the piece, guiding each stage of the opera.

C is for... Journeys had everyone in the audience quietly sobbing at the end and yet marveling at the energy and joy and power of the lives of the writers. I was

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astonished at the generosity of these people, allowing us a glimpse into their lives, and the lives of those close to them, and also astonished at the quality of the music.

Sadly, due to funding restraints, *C is for...Journeys* had only one performance, but deserves many more. It could serve as a model for a resurgence in meaningful opera production in this country, at a time when commentators are lamenting the decline of opera and the audience it attracts.

There's nothing wrong with opera, it's just got to tell the right stories to the right people, and be presented by people who really care about the emotion underlying the whole enterprise. All credit to David Kram and his team at More Than Opera for presenting opera in this engaging and vital new way.

Emma O'Brien and her amazing team have shown again that music has great healing qualities, a great spiritual dimension that we must never lose sight of. There's no doubt at all that music still has the capacity to change people's lives.

Living Soul can be purchased online through www.mh.org.au or at ABC Shops nationwide. All proceeds go towards supporting Music Therapy at The Royal Melbourne Hospital.

More Than Opera can be contacted at mto@vicnet.net.au



Marshall McGuire

Marshall McGuire studied at the Victorian College of the Arts, Paris Conservatoire and Royal College of Music London. He has been a member of acclaimed contemporary music ensemble ELISION since 1988, and has commissioned over 30 new works for harp. He received the 1996 Australian Music Centre award for most distinguished contribution to the presentation of Australian music, and was curator of the Twilight Chamber Music Series for the Sydney Festival from 1999-2001. This year he was awarded an inaugural Creative Fellowship from the State Library of Victoria, and received his third ARIA award nomination, for his CD *the twentieth century harp*. Marshall is president of the New Music Network, Chair of the music committee at the NSW Ministry for the Arts, and a member of the Australian Youth Orchestra's arts advisory committee. Marshall's solo CDs cover everything from early 17th century Italian songs, to romantic love songs, to his first CD *Awakening* featuring all-Australian repertoire, and a couple of CDs containing harp music of the 20th century, much of it written specially for Marshall. More information at www.marshallmcguire.com - CDs can be ordered on line or at www.buywell.com - click on Australian/NZ artists in the LH column.

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