

**THE POETICS OF LIBRETTI:  
READING THE OPERA WORKS OF GWEN  
HARWOOD AND LARRY SITSKY**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>DECLARATION.....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 The Harwood/Sitsky Collaboration.....	2
1.2 Harwood and the Critics.....	3
1.3 On Interpreting Libretti.....	4
1.4 Reading Harwood.....	6
<b>2 LIBRETTI IN CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 A Brief History of Libretti.....	9
2.2 Libretti, Musicology and the New Interdisciplinary Opera Studies.....	12
2.2.1 <i>What Kind of Text?</i> .....	15
2.2.2 <i>Reading Libretti</i> .....	16
2.3 Harwood’s Libretti – Methodological Platforms.....	18
<b>3 ‘MUSIC, MY JOY, MY FULL SCALE GOD’: HARWOOD’S SINGABLE LINES.....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Writing under the influence: Music and Harwood.....	22
3.2 How to Write a Singable Line.....	26
3.2.1 <i>Questions of Compatibility: Poetic and Musical Rhythms</i> .....	27
3.2.2 <i>Language, Texture and Dramatic Clarity</i> .....	29
3.2.3 <i>Intertextuality and Textual Transformation</i> .....	33
<b>4 SIGHT AND SOUND: LIBRETTI ON STAGE.....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Negotiating Dramatic Effect.....	39
4.2 Operatic Drama: Singing Characters, Truncated Stories.....	42
4.3 Writing for the Visual.....	47
4.4 Visual Transformations: Oscar Wilde’s <i>De Profundis</i> .....	51
<b>5 ON COLLABORATION: PLATFORMS AND PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 Platforms for Collaboration.....	57
5.2 Harwood’s Operatic Persona.....	64
5.3 Singular Texts: Plural Authors.....	66
<b>6 CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>71</b>
6.1 Harwood’s Libretti and the Critical Context.....	71
6.2 Harwood and Literary Considerations.....	73
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHIES.....</b>	<b>75</b>
References.....	75
Gwen Harwood: A Select Bibliography.....	88
<i>Poetry</i> .....	88
<i>Words for Music</i> .....	88
<i>Poems Set to Music</i> .....	89
<i>Short Stories</i> .....	90
<i>Articles and Miscellaneous Works</i> .....	90
<i>Papers and Correspondence</i> .....	90
<i>Interviews and Sound Recordings</i> .....	91
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>93</b>
Appendix A: Textual Notes for the Harwood and Sitsky Operas.....	93
A.1 <i>The Fall of the House of Usher</i> (1965).....	94

A.2 <i>Lenz</i> (1970).....	100
A.3 <i>Fieery Tales: A Comic Opera in One Act</i> (1975).....	113
A.4 <i>Voices in Limbo: A Radiophonic Opera</i> (1977).....	126
A.5 <i>The Golem</i> (1980; performed 1993).....	133
A.6 <i>De Profundis (A Monodrama)</i> (1982).....	153
Appendix B: Additional Material: <i>The Fall of the House of Usher</i> .....	156
Appendix C: Score Excerpts: <i>Voices in Limbo</i> .....	158
Appendix D: Selected Vocal Works by Larry Sitsky, and published extracts from <i>The Golem</i> .....	161
<i>Vocal Works</i> .....	161
<i>Choral Works</i> .....	161
<i>Published Extracts from The Golem</i> .....	162

## Errata Sheet

For the digital version of a thesis for the Master of Arts

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GWEN HARWOOD AND LARRY SITSKY

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2008

The following third party copyright material is to be removed from this thesis (all of the material is contained in Appendix A):

- Libretto, *Fall of the House of Usher*, pages 95-99
- Libretto, *Lenz*, pages 101-112
- Libretto, *Fiery Tales: A Comic Opera in One Act*, pages 114-125
- Libretto, *Voices in Limbo*, pages 127-132
- Libretto, *The Golem: A Grand Opera in Three Acts*, beginning page 134-152
- Libretto, *De Profundis*, pages 154-155

Other third party copyright material within this thesis is included with permission.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 <i>Voices in Limbo</i> , composer's autograph, p2, line 1	29
Figure 3.2 <i>Voices in Limbo</i> , composer's autograph, p2, line 2	29
Figure 4.1. <i>De Profundis</i> , composer's autograph p3, Sitsky's instructions on staging,	55
Figure 4.2. <i>De Profundis</i> , composer's autograph, opening bars	55

## ABSTRACT

Gwen Harwood is one of Australia's most celebrated poets. Her longstanding collaboration with composer Larry Sitsky produced six substantial operas between 1963 and 1982; *Fall of the House of Usher* (1965); *Lenz* (1970); *Fiery Tales* (1975, based on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and excerpts from Boccaccio's *Decameron*); *Voices in Limbo* (1977); *The Golem* (1980, first performed in 1993); and *De Profundis* (1982, a setting of Oscar Wilde's letters). Both Harwood and her critics acknowledge the libretti as some of her best writing (Harwood cites her libretto for *Lenz* as her 'selected poem'); to date, there has been no major study of these works.

This thesis engages with Harwood's opera texts, arguing for readings that are neither atomist nor reductive but jointly focused on both the effect of the text and the mechanics of its production. It begins by outlining the theoretical terrain of words and music studies and establishes an approach to Harwood and Sitsky's operas based on the idea that opera's textual exaggeration is a function of its multiple critical components; that is, the intersection of words and music, collaborative authorship, and dramatic language.

The thesis then offers focused studies of each of these aspects in Harwood and Sitsky's works, constructing a literary picture of the opera texts. Primary sources include the scores of the operas (usually copies of the composer's autograph), selected correspondence between Sitsky and Harwood, drafts and typescripts of the libretti (held in the National Library, Canberra, and the Fryer Library, University of Queensland), and selected essays by Harwood on her words for music.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university of tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Discipline of English at the University of Adelaide has allowed me the privilege of developing the ideas in this work through seminar presentations and papers; thanks particularly to Dr Phillip Butters, Associate Professor Tom Burton, Dr Dianne Schwerdt and Dr Lawrence Warner. I am also indebted to Mr Paul Wilkins, Deputy Librarian and Mr Ray Choate, Librarian, University of Adelaide, for our many lively conversations about Gwen Harwood.

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Parts of this thesis have appeared in conference papers: 'Uneasy Libretti: Gwen Harwood and the Operas of Larry Sitsky' (*Symposium of the International Musicological Society*, Melbourne July 2004); 'Is this your Golem?: Retelling Textual History in the Operas of Larry Sitsky and Gwen Harwood' (*Writing Across Cultures: Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Adelaide July 2005); 'From Libretto to Score: Textual Transformations in *Voices in Limbo*' (*Multimodal Texts: Engaging Sign Systems*, Portsmouth, UK, October 2005); 'Opera Crafting and the Manuscripts of Gwen Harwood and Larry Sitsky' (*Bibliographic Society of Australia and New Zealand*, Adelaide, October 2006).

Material contained in Chapter Three has been published as 'Operatic Narratives: Textual Transformations in Gwen Harwood and Larry Sitsky's *Golem* and *Lenz*'. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 5 (2006) 179-191.



For Alison Gent, Douglas Muecke, Kevin Magarey,  
Graham Nerlich and Barbara Wall,  
who very kindly let me read poetry with them.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to wonder why any good writer might bother with opera, or indeed with writing any words for music... The words are at the mercy of singers, or composers who stretch or contort them out of recognition. The drama will suffer from 'actors' who can't act, and composers with no dramatic sense. The finished product will be judged by opera (or music) critics, a species happy to accept the idea of people singing conversations to each other, but seemingly unable to fathom even the simplest theatrical metaphor. And if the thing is a success, it's the composer's triumph.

Graham Topping<sup>1</sup>

I think if I could keep one Selected Poem it would be the libretto of *Lenz*: but it is indissolubly wedded to the music, and rightly belongs to Larry.

Gwen Harwood<sup>2</sup>

This thesis offers a reading of the libretti written by Gwen Harwood for Australian composer Larry Sitsky between 1963 and 1982. These texts, whilst at the core of Harwood's oeuvre and the subject of some critical notice, have until now remained relatively unexamined. The following discussion sets out to engage with these texts, the poetic imagination that inspired them, the processes by which they were written and Harwood's role as a librettist.

Gwen Harwood's collection of words for music is one of the most prodigious and dynamic oeuvres in twentieth century Australian literature. Spanning thirty-five years, her collaborations with composers produced several texts represented in diverse musical forms: opera libretto, cantata, song cycle, string quartet with voice and children's opera. There are also nine substantial works setting her poetry to music by composers including Moya Henderson, Andrew Ford and Larry Sitsky. Of the sixteen completed works for music, six were operas written with Russian-born Australian composer Larry Sitsky.<sup>3</sup>

In 1963 Rex Hobcroft introduced the emerging poet Harwood to Larry Sitsky, a young avant-garde composer then teaching piano studies at the University of Queensland. A collaborative relationship between poet and composer began, leading to a one-act opera based on Poe's short story, *Fall of the House of Usher: One Act Opera after Edgar Allan Poe* (1965). By 1992 Harwood and Sitsky had produced five more operas: *Lenz: An Opera in One Act, after Büchner's Story* (1970), *Fiery Tales: A Comic Opera in One Act* (1975), *Voices in Limbo: A Radiophonic Opera* (1977), *The Golem: A Grand Opera in Three Acts* (1980, performed 1993) and *De Profundis* (1982), and had begun drafts for several more.<sup>4</sup> Their collaborative work ceased only when Harwood became too ill to write (she died in December 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Writing to Music'. *Oxford Today* 17.3 Trinity (2005) Accessed 12 Nov 2006 <<http://www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/2004-05/v17n3/11.shtml>>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Lamplit Presences' (1980) 251.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete list of Harwood's words written for music (and a list of her poems set to music) refer to the appended 'Gwen Harwood: A Select Bibliography'.

<sup>4</sup> Including Kafka's *The Trial* (1968/9); *A Bicentennial Opera* (1988); Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1992); and Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest* (incomplete at the time of Harwood's death).

Received with both critical acclaim and some controversy, Harwood and Sitsky's six substantial operas represent a long and productive collaboration, a collaboration that in Gregory Kratzmann's words had 'prime significance' for Australian arts and literature (*Southerly* 1996 184). John Cargher describes Harwood and Sitsky's *Fall of the House of Usher* as the 'most successful modern Australian Opera' (101); Sitsky, the closest contender to becoming the 'Tippet of Australia' (102); and *Lenz* the 'first native [Australian] work which can truthfully be described as a proper opera' (103). In a period that produced David Malouf and Richard Meale's *Voss* and *Mer de Glace*; Nigel Butterley and James McDonald's *Lawrence Hargrave Flying Alone*; and Peter Goldsworthy and Richard Mills' *Batavia*, along with the substantial output of composers James Penberthy and Margaret Sutherland, Harwood and Sitsky's works are critical examples of the Australian craft of opera making during the latter part of the twentieth century.

## 1.1 The Harwood/Sitsky Collaboration

Harwood did collaborate with several composers other than Sitsky, writing texts for Don Kay (*Songs and Interludes from the Golden Crane* (1988), and *Northward the Strait*); Ian Cugley (*Sea Changes* (circa 1978), Cugley's commission from the Hobart Boy's Choir); and James Penberthy (*Southland Cantata* (1991), the *Eight Songs of Eve* song cycle (1988-90), and *Commentaries on Living*). Collaboration with composers was another facet of Harwood's commitment to enduring, enlivening friendships and the professional reflection of a deeply held belief in aesthetic cooperation. Her collaboration with Sitsky, however, features most prominently in her interviews and essays and was certainly the most productive. In addition to the completed operas, Harwood and Sitsky made plans (and sometimes drafts) for several other works. During 1968-9 a version of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* was substantially drafted but, due to copyright issues with publishers in the USA, was abandoned.<sup>5</sup> In 1988 Harwood and Sitsky agreed to produce a commissioned piece for the Australian Bicentennial Authority: Harwood completed a draft of the libretto but Sitsky did not write the music for various reasons associated with the politics of the opera's production. Other projects started but not fully realised include a version of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* and a treatment of *Maurice Guest* (unfinished at the time of Harwood's death in 1995).<sup>6</sup>

There are also references to several other works considered but not begun. Around the time of writing *Lenz* Harwood and Sitsky were also considering both *Orpheus* and *Undine* as narrative sources, noted by Harwood in a letter to Norman Talbot:

...Larry and I were considering an Orpheus years ago, and even got as far as getting advice on the singing head (John Clark of NIDA said he could easily do us a singing head); I also wanted to do *Undine* but Larry wouldn't have any of that water music. (9.7.84 A *Steady Storm* 371)

<sup>5</sup> Harwood destroyed her copies of the drafts: those she sent to Sitsky are held in his papers in the National Library of Australia (Sitsky Papers, MS 5630).

<sup>6</sup> Harwood notes in a letter to Gregory Kratzmann; 'I'm not putting a finger to the noisy machine about Faust until I see the contract, but yes I have done a lot of work on it' (25.2.92 A *Steady Storm* 438). See Gregory Kratzmann's recent essay 'Gwen Harwood: Words and Music' for an overview of Harwood's incomplete libretti for the "Bicentennial piece" and *Maurice Guest* (in *Reflected Light: La Trobe Essays*, Melbourne 2006, 285-301).

Additional suggestions from Harwood, noted in a letter to Sitsky dated 20 May 1974, include *Savonarola* and *The Inspector General*.<sup>7</sup> In the same letter Harwood also included a draft outline for a ballet, 'Phaedra', noting that she 'would love to do a libretto on the Phaedrus myth sometime'. Such energy remains impressive, even if several of the planned operas did not eventuate.

## 1.2 Harwood and the Critics

In this thesis I focus exclusively on the works produced in this most prominent, sustained and complex collaboration. Most critical works concerned with Harwood deal with her biography, her literary identity, her poetry and poetics, the psychological constructs of her pseudonyms and her famous Bulletin hoax of 1960.<sup>8</sup> Her libretti, however, are relatively under-represented in critical terms, despite the acclaim with which they were received. Stephanie Trigg's volume *Gwen Harwood* (1994), for example, presents a compelling case for reading Harwood's poetry in the light of feminist studies in poetics, particularly concerning a poet's relationship to the poetic traditions of the past, but omits the important libretti work, the collaborative relationships Harwood developed and the significance of the resulting works.

Jennifer Strauss, Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann have each pointed to the significance of the libretti in Harwood's oeuvre, simultaneously noting the difficulties attached to engaging with the texts. Introducing her monograph *Boundary Conditions: The Poetry of Gwen Harwood* (1992), Jennifer Strauss observes that the libretti demand an approach quite different to that of literary analysis:

I have abandoned an early intention to spend some time discussing her work as a librettist, because it seems that in this situation the words do not exist independently as poetry, but in a special relationship to music and musical ideas. Their discussion would require a different set of analytic terms, and a competence in applying them to which I can lay no claim. (4)

Alison Hoddinott, in her monograph *Gwen Harwood; The Real and Imagined World*, also gestures towards the works for music referring first to Harwood's fascination with music; 'she spoke of her delight in the traditional forms of metre and rhyme, particularly those with a "rhythmic pulse" suggesting that of song' (166, referring to an interview with John Beston, 1975); and later discussing Harwood's poem 'New Music', dedicated to Larry Sitsky.<sup>9</sup> In this instance, Harwood's music, musicality and collaboration are hinted at but not fully developed within the discussion.

Robyn Holmes, Patricia Shaw and Peter Campbell, in their book *Larry Sitsky: a bio-bibliography* (1997), devote several pages to Harwood and Sitsky operas, paying close attention to the libretti and outlining the form of Harwood and Sitsky's collaborative relationship. The most comprehensive introduction to Harwood's libretti, however, is found in Gregory Kratzmann's recent essay 'Gwen

<sup>7</sup> Most likely referring to Giroloma Savonarola (fifteenth century monk and one of the forerunners of the Reformation) and Gogol's 1836 short story, respectively. Letter dated 20.5.74. Sitsky Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 5630. Box 1 Folder 2. Letters from Gwen Harwood. Cited with permission.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to the Select Bibliography for a list of critical works.

<sup>9</sup> In the chapter 'Language, the Mirror of the World' (167).

Harwood: Words and Music'.<sup>10</sup> He notes that whilst '[c]ritics of Gwen Harwood's poetry habitually gesture towards the librettos' (285) we do not actually know the works as we do her poetry; Kratzmann invites scholars to engage with works that, in his words, have such a 'strong dramatic resonance when we encounter them as poems on the printed page' (287).

### 1.3 On Interpreting Libretti

Despite the interest in, and knowledge of, Harwood's libretti, readers and critics tend to shy away from these works, Kratzmann's essay notwithstanding. Emerging in stark relief, then, is a set of texts central to Harwood's poetic oeuvre and persona that are relatively unexamined, relatively unread and mysterious in their textual, collaborative and dramatic characteristics. Such a situation is perhaps explained by the fact that reading libretti is complicated by our uncertainty as to what sort of text they really are, what we should do with them, how we should read them and how we should envision them in the environment of operatic performance.

Reading opera texts depends on how one views the relationships between its elements, in this case the intersections of words and music; the relationships between musical, visual and dramatic elements, and the complex nature of collaborative authorship. Intrinsically, libretti are troublesome texts to deal with. Found somewhere between drama and poetry, these multifaceted texts are embedded within complex performance and authorial situations. As poet and librettist Alison Crogan notes, a libretto is an 'uneasy text...because it exists as a blueprint for a score as well as a performance' (in Kinsella 2000, 65). If read as poetry libretti appear fragmentary, dull, declamative and, most obviously, constrained by the demands of delivery. If considered as music-drama they are subsumed by the dramatic potential of music as a primary carrier of plot, character and emotive meaning. Indissolubly wedded to the music, libretti are context specific texts, embedded within the exaggerated, spectacular performance space of opera.

As readers we are simultaneously caught up in the spectacle of performance and limited by the textual nature of the form before us. The spectacle of image, sound and excess is both the core attraction and the source of interpretative challenge. As Edward Said suggests, it is the allure of musical virtuosity, and the increasing distance between the highly professionalised world of a performer and an amateur, that creates both pleasure and pain (3). The loss of music from the assumed philosophical platforms engaged with in education and the numerous supporting agencies and industries around musical works (ticket selling, recordings, concert series), coupled with the intense competition between music as a private and public experience, produce in the listener a 'poignant speechlessness as he/she faces an onslaught of such refinement, articulation, and technique as almost to constitute a sadomasochistic experience' (Said 3). In Said's terms a musical performance is the 'Extreme Occasion' (3).

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<sup>10</sup> Kratzmann deals with Harwood's works for Ian Cugley, Don Kay and James Penberthy and Sitsky (including two unfinished texts, *Maurice Guest* and a bicentennial piece, referred to as 'BC').

Within this environment operatic language is both simultaneously exaggerated and constrained, occasionally difficult to decipher, sometimes of uncertain authorial origin, and almost impossible to separate from its musical setting. Despite these difficulties, the fascination with opera and with libretti remains: ‘... there are compelling reasons for an interest in libretti, not the least of which are the long standing prejudice against them and the scholarly tradition that has, until recently, reiterated it’ (Groos and Parker 1). The fields of opera and libretto studies have broadened considerably during the last decades, from primarily musicological inquiry to research reflecting the spectrum of literary and cultural studies. The interdisciplinary field of librettology,<sup>11</sup> however, is still fraught with its own methodological anxieties, working to settle itself into the domains of musicology, literary studies and cultural theory. The extensive debates on reading opera texts tend to pivot on the problems of interpretation and of textual type, on the social function of opera (and its writers), or on word/music intersections.

Complicating the study of Harwood’s libretti are her views on the status and function of the texts. In 1975 she wrote:

I’m just glad they [the libretti] have given the composers the occasion to write such splendid music...I shouldn’t think they could stand apart, they would be of little interest without the music. I can’t imagine I [sic] would ever wish to publish them separately. (Beston, 1975, 87, square brackets my insertion).

In 1980, however, Harwood claimed *Lenz* for her ‘Selected Poem’, whilst reinforcing its embedded relationship to the score: ‘I think if I could keep one Selected Poem it would be the libretto of *Lenz*: but it is indissolubly wedded to the music, and rightly belongs to Larry’ (‘Lamplit Presences’ 251). Six years later she restated her original notion that the libretti should exist beyond literary analysis: ‘My texts for opera are not published separately; rightly they belong to the composer and they are his. They are not meant to be studied. Their life is with the music’ (‘Words and Music’ 376). This tension has both troubled and excited attention toward her libretti as complex, operatic texts. On the surface, Harwood both rejects and claims her libretti as significant parts of her literary output. On the one hand she ascribed copyright to Sitsky and argued for the texts’ deeply embedded relationship to the music; on the other she highlighted the literary significance of the libretti within her oeuvre. The academic community has, on the whole, taken up the first of these perspectives and overlooked the second.

Harwood’s claim for the libretti’s indissoluble relationship to the music, and her view that they not be published separately, has meant that critics and readers face substantial difficulty in accessing these texts. In their introduction to the 2003 edition of Harwood’s *Collected Poems* Greg Kratzmann and Alison Hoddinott note the ‘contentious exclusion’ (xxv) of Harwood’s several libretti from the collection:

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<sup>11</sup> A term made famous by historian and critic, Ulrich Weisstein. See ‘Librettology: The Fine Art of Coping with a Chinese Twin’. *KomparaHistorische Hefte* 5/6 (1982): 23-42.

These, particularly the Sitsky librettos, she regarded as some of her best work; this is hardly surprising given her musical training and the strong place which music occupies in her system of belief. She regarded the music, however, as an indispensable accompaniment to the words. This view commands respect, but it has to be added that some of her words for music add a valuable dimension to an understanding of her non-operatic poetry. (Hoddinott and Kratzmann xxv)

Thus far, most of Harwood's libretti remain unpublished, available only within the opera scores or her typescript drafts. There are snippets of the texts in a few of Harwood's published letters, including excerpts from *Lenz* (Tony Riddell 19.8.75 *A Steady Storm* 302-4) and a witty spoof of *Usher* (Sitsky 14.11.64 *A Steady Storm* 196). *The Golem* libretto has been published by Opera Australia and ABC Classics, accompanying a recording of the 1993 production, released in 2003. Generally, however, any reader hoping to engage with both the content and shape of the texts must be able to read music, interpret scores and understand the peculiar characteristics of operatic and vocal music. Additionally, most of the Sitsky/Harwood operas have been performed for single seasons only. Furthermore, they are generally not straightforward productions to perform.

Given the critical dilemmas of both method and scope, the problems of access, the rarity of performance, and Harwood's views on the libretti's indissoluble link with musical context, I propose to examine the following questions. Fundamentally, what sort of texts are these? How do they function, poetically, dramatically, and musically? How might the questions of the intersection between words and music, between the dramatic and the visual, between composer and librettist, be best engaged with? Finally, what will a reading of the libretti reveal about the literary imagination and persona that produced them? Addressing such questions demands a multi-faceted critical approach, coupled with a reasonable facility in musical analysis. Whilst a complete experience of an opera ultimately requires the sound, sight and movement of a performance, the literary and poetic functions of Harwood's libretti can be explored as they exist on the page; most effectively through evidence in the archive of letters and drafts, through exploring Harwood's compositional and aesthetic frameworks and, of course, in the light of the dual aesthetics that guided their production. This invariably entails exploring Sitsky's aesthetic and practice of working, for as much as the libretti have their own literary identities, they must simultaneously be understood as one component of a complicated operatic milieu.

## 1.4 Reading Harwood

Harwood's insistence that the libretti be excluded from literary readings of her work also requires consideration, particularly in its reflections of her private and public perspectives of the works. The libretti are another facet of Harwood's complex poetic identity, an identity famous for its hoaxes, pseudonyms and playfulness. In an issue of *Australian Book Review* dedicated to Harwood, Stephanie Trigg wrote: 'Who is the "Gwen Harwood" to whom I refer when I write about the poetry of a woman who in recent years has become increasingly public, celebrated and accessible?' (1992, 40).<sup>12</sup> Examining Harwood's libretti invites an investigation of her role as a librettist, a role that, in Gregory

<sup>12</sup> The subject of this article was extended in Trigg's book *Gwen Harwood* (1994).

Kratzmann's words, 'needs to be appraised in more positive terms than she was prepared to allow' (2006, 287).

In these circumstances the 'hermeneutic circle' of the texts (Beer 5), their production, first readers and critics are as important as any concept of the musico-dramatic form. This act of reading requires genuine attention to both the historical landscape of Harwood's writing, as recent as that is, and the type of textual demands our reading might assume before the process has even begun: assumptions of textual type or complexity; assumptions about Harwood's role as librettist; perspectives on her personae as understood during the past thirty years; and, perhaps, our ideas of Australian opera and its place in the literary environment.

In the following chapters I offer an approach to Harwood's libretti that is not restricted to an either/or approach – either words or music, text or performance, one author or the other – but rather examines the libretti texts without entirely removing them from the musical and authorial contexts. I begin with a substantial discussion of contemporary approaches to words and music, working towards a model built on existing interdisciplinary readings of opera that jointly focuses on both the operatic effect of the libretti and the mechanics of their production. I do this for two reasons: first, because the majority of references to Harwood's libretti also include a reference to the technical difficulties surrounding their analysis, it is appropriate to map the terrain of contemporary literary approaches to libretti. Second, such a background serves to locate Harwood's libretti within the broad fields of words and music studies, interdisciplinary opera studies, and collaborative writing.

Chapter two is followed by a systematic reading of Harwood and Sitsky's six completed operas, with reference to their correspondence, Harwood's drafts (sometimes annotated by Sitsky), copies of Sitsky's autograph scores, a performance source book and recordings of the operas. In chapter three I examine Harwood's mechanics for writing words and music, offering an analysis of her compositional methods and developing a poetic and intertextual picture of the libretti. In chapter four I explore the significant visual and dramatic elements within the texts, examining the writing strategies Harwood utilised to produce such 'visual' works and arguing that considerations of performance, staging and drama shaped her libretti writing from the outset. In chapter five I investigate the collaborative aspects of Harwood's authorship, exploring the dynamic of her working relationship with Sitsky and its influence upon the libretti texts.

I have included transcriptions of the libretti (Appendix A: Textual Notes) to facilitate access to the texts and to encourage engagement with them on the page. The transcriptions produced here are based on Sitsky's scores, available in some Australian university libraries and at the Australian Music Centre, and Harwood's typescript drafts. In one case I have transcribed the libretto directly from an existing source, a version found in Sitsky's autograph score (*De Profundis*).<sup>13</sup> In the case of *The Golem*, published by Opera Australia and ABC Classics (2003) I have worked from Harwood's final typescript

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<sup>13</sup> References and sources for each libretto are also outlined in the Textual Notes (Appendix A).



draft as much as possible (the differences between the two versions are slight). I should make it clear that the transcripts are not editions of Harwood's words for music but simply a tool for reference.

Within this discussion I usually refer to Harwood's libretti as such but will occasionally employ the phrase 'words for music' or 'musico-poetic work', particularly in the chapter concerned with the interrelationship between language and music in opera. The operas are also sometime referred to as 'opera texts' and in some of the theoretical discussions 'musico-dramatic' works. I maintain this collection of terms throughout the thesis to both reflect the terminology currently in use within the field, and to highlight the vastly different ways of viewing these kinds of texts. The term libretti is most often used, however, contributing to a catholic image for Harwood's texts (neither poetry nor drama but completely themselves). I should also clarify the distinction between 'opera-text' and 'opera-as-performance': here, *opera-text* refers to scores and libretti and in some cases drafts, whilst *opera-as-performance* refers to an in time and space text, including sound recordings. For the sake of clarity these terms offer superficial yet useful boundaries for discussion. I also refer to Harwood and 'Harwood and Sitsky' throughout the thesis, as in some cases their specific authorial identities are indeterminable.

Echoing the recent critical turn towards Harwood's words for music, this multifaceted reading of Harwood's libretti seeks to illuminate texts at the centre of her oeuvre, texts that have over the years invited and resisted critical attention. It suggests new understandings of the inflections in Harwood's other poetry and the concerns underpinning her writings, reflected by her enthusiasm for the Australian avant-garde or in the way the libretti prefigure forms and preoccupations of later poetry. Embedded within this view is an engagement with Harwood's poetic and aesthetic identity, her conceptualisations of her role as a librettist, her understanding of the libretto form, and the mechanics of production she employed throughout her career.

## 2 LIBRETTI IN CONTEXT

...the attitude toward libretti as something sub-literary and intrinsically uninteresting is a phenomenon with which scholarship has only begun to come to terms.

Arthur Groos and Roger Parker<sup>1</sup>

Whilst scholarly perspectives on libretti have shifted substantially over the years, anxieties regarding textuality, authorship and methodological imperatives have remained recurring themes. What sort of texts are libretti? How are the roles of composer and librettist defined and outworked? How is a libretto read off stage? Should a libretto be read off stage? Although the quality of both critical and production practices have changed for the better over the years, reflected particularly in the diverse set of apparatus utilised to both produce and understand libretti, most twentieth century critical enquiry has tended to focus on the musicality of opera, as Groos and Parker aptly point out. It might seem paradoxical in this context to note then that the earliest operas were dominated not by music, but by language. Poetry *and* music occupied the imagination of the earliest opera writers and critics. The critical shift to music then represented a significant change in the ways opera was written and received, a shift that has slowly but surely begun to reverse. In the following section I will briefly outline the trajectory of words/music intersections in opera, tracing the development of the modern libretto before moving to a discussion of current approaches to musico-poetic texts and the methods most appropriate for reading Harwood's libretti.

### 2.1 A Brief History of Libretti

The modern operatic form emerged around 1600 when a group of writers, now referred to as the *Florentine Camerata*, merged dramatic works with musical forms, particularly the intermezzo, spectacle and the pastoral. Extending longstanding Bardic, dramatic and liturgical traditions, the Florentine experiment was unusual in that whilst language was still the primary expressive tool, music became integral to performance rather than simply its accompaniment (for example, Corsi and Jacopo Peri's *Daphne* or Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*).<sup>2</sup> Here, music was an apparatus with which to heighten the pleasure of the experience and the meaning of the text (Lindenberger 30).

As Ethan Mordden notes, it was 'logos, the Word' that was at the core of early seventeenth century works, across the genres of both serious and comic opera (5). Simon Worsthorpe, in *Venetian Opera in the Seventeenth Century* (1954), argues that at this time the 'newly recognised power of music to extract a deeper meaning' from texts served to highlight the role of libretti, as music's dramatic role was to enhance the expressive capacity of words (117). Few opera manuscripts of this period directly named the composer, for example, but nearly all named the librettist (and the machine maker, engineer and/or producer). The libretti were usually published (the librettist derived significant income from

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Opera* (1988) 1

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Lindenberger's *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (1984) and *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*, edited by Roger Parker (1994), both offer a comprehensive, accessible history of European opera. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (in four volumes) is also a useful reference.

the sales) whilst in most cases the music was not published at all. Furthermore, the librettist generally decided which patron the play should be dedicated to, arranged for publication of the work and often directed the spectacle, machinery and staging; in Worsthorne's words 'the composer therefore became the handmaid, to some extent, to the poet' (117).

There were some exceptions to this rule of relationship: Monteverdi apparently argued strongly for the rights of musicians to direct the shape of the work (Worsthorne 119) and at least one of his librettists, Count Badovero, realised the need to adapt poetic language to the specific context of opera performance. As opera music increased in both complexity and instrumentation, the form of libretti also changed, from distinct poetry to malleable forms suited to the needs of composers. Composers also began to be named on scores and programs. Performances became dominated by more elaborate sets, staging and the effects of machines (some reported to be grossly out of proportion); and, of course, by the celebrity singers that appeared on stage. Benedetto Marcello, in his opera handbook, *Il teatro alla moda* (1720) wittily wrote:

The modern virtuoso should never have practiced solfeggio during his student days or later on in his career; there would be too much danger that he might finish his notes properly, or that he might sing in tune and in time...To become a virtuoso a singer need not be able to read or write, or to pronounce correctly vowels and diphthongs. He must be an expert, however, at disregarding sense and at mixing up letters and syllables in order to show off flashy passages, trills, appoggiaturas, endless cadenzas, etc... (cited in Lippman 148)

Marcello's satire might be merrily apparent to modern ears but his observation also points to an early shift in performance practice from clarity of language to titillating vocal styles.

Worsthorne (along with Patrick Smith) notes that when the form of the libretto began to change from recitative, suited to complex poetic forms and dense structures, to the declamative aria, far more likely to be dominated by the music, so too the attention shifted from poetry to music: '[a]s the love for arias grew the audience turned more and more to the composer and with him the singer, as the principal instruments for their pleasure' (120). Worsthorne is careful to note that this shift in attitude was not entirely about audience's interest in music; for it was also the increasing popularity of melodrama – including inserting solo songs into the dramatic line of an opera - and the power of a particular singer to inhabit a role that drove the interest towards singers and, as a consequence, music (119-121).

This shift in aesthetic preference (also tied to the emerging Romantic models for music, artistry and poetry) signalled a significant change in the various balance between words and music, and for that matter, the function and form of opera. Music's evocative powers were no longer supporting language but overwhelming it; in this context music was 'considered on its own terms, as an autonomous structure in sound, rather than as an adjunct to dancing or liturgy, or to lyric or dramatic texts' (Kerman 65). Kerman goes on to observe that this increasing fascination with music as the principal mode in opera is linked to a growing interest in art as a transcendent vehicle: 'music was

valued not (or not only) because it was pleasing and moving, but because it was felt to offer presentiments of the sublime' (Kerman 65).

Nineteenth century opera, whilst still continuing to prefer vocal prowess to poetic form, also produced a new set of musical and poetic languages, loosening the connections and intersections between musical setting and poetry. The increasing utility and popularity of the lyrical mode suggested music larger in its gestures and orchestration. David Hertz, in his book *Tuning of the Word*, also notes the connections between changing poetic and musical syntax at the end of this century: 'When the strong tendency towards periodicity and closure was removed from both poetry and music, syntactic structures tended to allow for a high degree of metonymy' (Hertz 21), both structurally and literally. Hertz describes the shift from syntactical hypotaxis to parataxis; that is, elements previously set underneath each other, reflecting a clear and hierarchical order of events, were now placed side by side, without the expected points of coordination (22). This kind of change in relationship established a platform for the later blended styles that would characterise opera writing in the early and mid-twentieth centuries, a platform based on unity of form and function, but also concerned with the blurring of modal boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

In this changing contexts, the production of libretti, in both performance and published formats, remained a substantial part of the opera business. The term libretto (meaning 'little book') originated in the late seventeenth century, referring to the small, Italian editions of printed opera texts designed to be read in a lit auditorium during a performance. Variants of the technical term include *libriccino* or *libricciuolo*, suggestive of the printed booklet usually duodecimo or quarto size.<sup>4</sup> Seventeenth century published libretti were usually one of two forms: the most common, the *cernei* libretti (or libretti meant to be read by candlelight), were cheap productions on sale just prior to a performance and intended for use in the theatre (this form was maintained well into the nineteenth century). The other, the *argomento*, was often printed in two portions and became popular towards the end of the century. The first portion contained biographical and production information, narrative precedent and sometimes, if the opera contained pagan wordings or references, an affirmation of the author's belief in the Catholic Church (Smith 17). The second section contained the full libretto (including any scenes that may have been cut) along with available variations on the text and options for aria and scene substitutions. In these instances, the term libretto referred to both the words of an opera and the printed matter available at a performance.

Typically, a printed libretto also included information about the date and type of production, the cast list, the size and composition of the orchestra, the poet, the singers and their biographies, and the composer; as a publication it was not so different from the programs published for contemporary performances. In this period librettos were cheap productions; '...usually pocket-sized, printed on

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Three for a brief discussion of contemporary approaches to words and music.

<sup>4</sup> See Patrick Smith's *The Tenth Muse* (1990) and David Charlton's 'L'art dramatica-musical' p229-262 in *Music and Theatre: Essays in Honour of Winton Dean*. Ed. Nigel Fortune (1987).

cheap paper, sewn into wrappers and rife with typographical errors: ephemeral objects, quickly redundant' (Macnutt, 'Libretto' *Grove Music Online*).<sup>5</sup>

Not until the late nineteenth century, with Wagner's monumental opera productions and publications, did the term libretto begin to refer to a work published as separate from the opera performance. Wagner's experimental performance practice prompted a substantial change in libretto forms and revolutionised the audience/stage relationship. Both *The Flying Dutchman* and *Lohengrin* were published as verse works several years before the operas were completed. Further, Wagner's custom-built Bayreuth theatre was designed specifically for performances in a darkened auditorium (an innovation made possible by the new electric stage lighting). For the first time audiences were not reading the text whilst it was being sung. A printed libretto was now designed to be studied away from a performance: at home, prior to attending the theatre, as a reference for scholars and students and, later, in conjunction with a recording. Today's printed programmes for opera performances sometimes include a complete libretto. More likely is the presence of the libretto in a CD liner note designed to be read away from a staged performance, suggesting at least a functional role for the libretto as a distinct entity.

## 2.2 Libretti, Musicology and the New Interdisciplinary Opera Studies

Many twentieth century opera scholars have either been musicians and hence 'composer centric' or poetry and drama specialists with a verse-only perspective of opera that is, perhaps, weak and uninteresting (Smith, *The Tenth Muse* xi). This scholarly tradition, engendered by a post-romantic understanding of music, has largely encouraged greater attentiveness to composers than to librettists, producing a far more robust archive of knowledge about music rather than about words written for music. The tradition has also been sustained by the technical challenges that surround interpretation of musico-dramatic works. Edward Said succinctly describes musicology's penchant for insularity, noting that:

because music's autonomy from the social world has been taken for granted for at least a century, and because the technical requirements imposed by musical analysis are so separate and severe, there is a putative, or ascribed, fullness to self-sufficient musicological work... (*Musical Elaborations* xvi)

This in part explains both the fascination with music in opera studies and, until quite recently, the reputed absence of musicologists' engagement with other related fields of research.

Opera studies has, however, changed substantially during the past thirty years. Music, and opera, is now understood in its relation to culture, and interpretations of musical works are influenced by other areas of 'humanistic interpretation' (Said, *Musical Elaborations* xiv-xv). The impact of Adorno's work on social structure and music, and on music and aesthetics, has directed attention towards the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Libretto' *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *Grove Music Online*. *Grove Online* includes the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Ed. L. Macy (Accessed 14 March 2007) <[www.grovemusic.com/index/html](http://www.grovemusic.com/index/html)>. All future references in this thesis to these dictionaries will be cited as *Grove Music Online*.

intricacies of meaning bound up in the production (and performance) of musical works.<sup>6</sup> Following the work of Barthes, Foucault, Fish and others a comprehensive set of strategies can be brought to bear on readings of texts and textuality (Said xv). Similarly, feminist and postcolonial scholars have encouraged greater investigations into the nature of power and voice that influence cultural expression and the attendant relationships to value, social engagement and criticism.

In Steven Paul Scher's view, postmodern and other related theories of literature have served to open up the field of words and music to new methods of enquiry: people in literary studies undertaking opera studies, for example, or musicologists with literary training engaging with narrative in music (Scher 1999, 13). Scher, Ulrich Weisstein, Calvin S Brown, Arthur Gross and Roger Parker and Lawrence Kramer have, with others, led a renaissance in opera studies during the past thirty years.<sup>7</sup> Their shared thesis - that opera is a hybrid text and as such requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to be fully understood - has worked to establish a robust platform for the range of enquiry now evident across the spectrum of literary and cultural studies.<sup>8</sup> Whilst the field is still coming to terms with central questions of methodology and terminology, and managing its own, mixed, scholarly traditions, the central debates of text and method are now diversely and invigoratingly attended to.

The new field of interdisciplinary opera studies has produced an array of cultural and literary approaches linking theories of reading and production to opera. Issues of intertextuality, notions of the social text and discussions of spectacle informed by audience studies have all been introduced. This kind of work has helped to bring libretti back into the centre of operatic focus, rather than in its usual peripheral sphere. In a review article for *PMLA* ('Interdisciplinary Opera Studies' 2006) Linda Hutcheon presents a thorough map of the dominant questions and forums that have contributed to the changing environment. She notes the significant changes in the traditional domain for opera criticism (musicology) as scholars such as Carolyn Abbate and Jean-Jacques Nattiez have 'challenged the dominant positivistic historicism and formalism of their discipline' (802). Hutcheon also maps the equally influential attention of scholars working in other fields (literary theory, history, politics, and gender studies) on the knowledge of form, function and culture of opera production, criticism and reception. That the project of Patrick Smith and many others has been realised is evident in her statement: 'it is clear now that the new interdisciplinary opera studies see the art form as a complex multimedia mixture to which no single discipline or single approach can do justice' (Hutcheon, 807).

Along with Kramer and Scher, critics Hermann Danuser, Herbert Lindenberger, Peter Kivy and Sandra Corse have each explored opera in terms of its intersection with other domains, examining the connections between music and, respectively, literary theory and text, cultural and historical

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert Witkin's *Adorno on Music* (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Scher, S.P. *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Literature and Music (1967-2004)* (2004); Weisstein, U. *Selected Essays on Opera by Ulrich Weisstein* (2006); Brown, C.S. *Music and Literature; a Comparison of the Arts* (1948); Gross, A. and Parker, R. *Reading Opera* (1988); Kramer, L. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (1995) and *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Scher was amongst the first to suggest an integrated consideration of word and music relationships, offering a three-tiered system of analysis: 1. Word music (or words imitating music) 2. Musical strategies (for example, in narrative structure) and 3. Verbal music, or poetry based on musical theme.

knowledge, philosophy, and language.<sup>9</sup> Several scholars have considered the transformation of textual forms into opera (Walter Bernhart and Michael Halliwell's *The Opera as Novel*); and developed schemata mapping musical elements within fiction (Werner Wolf's *Musicalization of Fiction*). Others have argued for political or feminist readings of both opera and its production history (for example, Ellen Rosand's recent work on opera and madness; and Linda and Michael Hutcheon's three monographs on medical models and operatic narratives).<sup>10</sup> Still others have engaged with opera as a site for powerful psychoanalytic analysis: Slavoj Žižek's analysis of popular desire for a supposedly dead genre in *Opera's Second Death* (2004) and Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993), a study of homosexuality and the erotics of opera performance, are both comprehensive examples. From this perspective opera is now recognised as a site of important political and social work; accordingly, libretti are read with cultural and social concerns foremost. Whilst questions of authorial intent might emerge, the more popular sphere of inquiry is that of audience reception and the discernable social/cultural apparatus of meaning making at work.

Some of the recent research on opera, however, does touch on the nature of libretti, attempting to deal with the fundamental questions of textual type and methods for interpretation. Sandra Corse dedicates her book *Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi and Britten* to this subject. Albert Gier has also written extensively on the literary and poetic characteristics of libretti, tracing the history of libretti as text.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have traced the development of libretti throughout particular language or genre traditions (for example, David Charlton's work on eighteenth century French opera referred to above). Hans Busch's study of Verdi's *Othello* examines the development of the opera with some attention on the libretto and its author, Boito. Nancy Chamness' *The Libretto as Literature: 'Doktor Faust' by Ferruccio Busoni* (2001) offers a comprehensive study of the genesis, textuality and dramatic function of this Busoni's libretti. Not least, composer Virgil Thompson has gone to some effort to produce a book on writing words for music, providing a technical schema for producing a successful libretto.<sup>12</sup> There are also several studies of word setting in musico-dramatic works as diverse as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (Robert Fink) and Michael Berkeley and David Malouf's setting of *Jungle Book* (Stephen Benson).<sup>13</sup>

The diversity and complexity within opera studies, and the debates that inform it, reflect a growing interest in the textuality and function of opera. What is also evident is a degree of uncertainty and experimentation regarding accepted terminology and methodology: whilst diverse, the field is

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<sup>9</sup> Danuser, H. and Plebuch, T, Eds. *Musik als Text* (1998); Lindenberger, H. *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (1984); Corse, S. *Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi and Britten* (1987); Kivy, P. *Osmín's Rage: Philosophical Reflections on Opera, Drama and Text* (1988).

<sup>10</sup> Rosand, E. 'Operatic Madness: A Challenge to Convention'. *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*. Ed. Steven Scher. (1992) 241-287. Hutcheon, Linda, and Michael Hutcheon. *Opera: Desire, Disease, and Death*. Lincoln (1996); *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (2000) and *The Art of Dying* (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Gier, A. *Das Libretto: Theorie und Geschichte einer Musikliterarischen Gattung*. (The Libretto: Theory and History of a Musical Literary Genre) (1998).

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, V. *Music with Words: A Composer's View* (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Fink, R. 'Rhythm and Text Setting in the Mikado.' *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* (1990); and Benson, S. 'Kipling's Singing Voice: Setting the Jungle Books'. *Critical Survey* (2001).

relatively developmental as it strives for agreement on reading practice and systems of approach, particularly regarding librettology.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, there are many calls for the closer study of libretti, but few examples of specific engagement.<sup>15</sup> Some of the challenges to this have been already discussed, not least the combination of musical, dramatic and literary analysis required. It is the twin anxieties of textual type and methodology, however, which remain principal challenges for opera scholars.

### 2.2.1 What Kind of Text?

Ulrich Weisstein was one of the first twentieth century critics to pursue librettology as a field of study in its own right (Bernhart, vii). In his 1961 essay, “Libretto as Literature’ Weisstein suggests that if the study of libretti is avoided, then ‘by the same token we would deprive ourselves the pleasure of studying sketches for a painting, the *bozetto* of a sculpture, the plans for a building, or a film script’ (15). He does go on to note that some work is inevitably required to separate the grain from the chaff (opera’s occasional textual shortcomings being well observed) but that it is on the whole a worthwhile endeavour. In Weisstein’s view, libretti form part of the supporting structure for an opera and as such deserve scrutiny.

Identifying the object of scrutiny, however, offers its own challenges. Alessandro Roccatagliati notes that operatic projection, the dominance of the musical over the verbal and the techniques of pronunciation (declamative singing styles, over-articulation, and stresses placed on vowels rather than consonants) all work to obscure the literary form of the vocal text. This produces a libretto that ‘usually comes across disjointedly as part of the operatic amalgam on the stage’ (82). Roccatagliati’s term ‘text-spectacle’ aptly describes this interplay of multiple factors in opera:

The fused hearing/seeing of an opera...represents instead the immediate, natural, and intrinsic access to the artistic object “opera”. In this case the texts that interact lose their autonomy completely and evade their non-self-sufficiency: they occur together (along with the visual elements) to make up the combined ‘text-spectacle’. (82)

Opera-poets (Roccatagliati’s term) produce poetry that is of a certain, singable, quality, reflecting the concerns, conventions and styles of their time:

It is...certain that the librettist’s procedures will be strongly conditioned by the compositional conventions of the operatic milieu in which he lives....In the face of musical requirement only an outstanding poet will be able to exercise some influence, becoming a channel that creates what amounts to a new ‘tradition’. (Roccatagliati 83)

In this instance, libretti must follow, or contest, specific social and technical rules, functioning within particular metric, stylistic and dramatic constraints. The fashion in eighteenth century Italy, for

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<sup>14</sup> At the tenth anniversary meeting of The International Word Music Association (WMA) in Edinburgh (2007), it was clear that scholarly opinion is still divided and uncertain on preferred terminology, techniques, and theoretical frameworks for examining word/music texts.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Halliwell’s “‘Singing the Nation’: Word/Music Tension in the Opera *Voss*” (text adapted by David Malouf, music by Richard Meale) is one of the only studies of a modern Australian opera dealing specifically with libretti. In *Word and Music Studies: Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field* (2001), 25-48.



example, was a tendency for rhyming verse structure in arias; later, Puccini often set predetermined verse metres for his librettists to fill in.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary opera favours far more open speech rhythms, sometimes to accompany an atonal musical setting or to work with pre-recorded elements layered over a real-time performance.

Sandra Corse, critic and historian, prefers a structuralist framework for defining the libretto form. Highlighting the language centric origins of opera she notes that metaphor, irony and drama perform together within in a multi-layered text. In this case, however, literary language is musical. Utilising a binary system of linguistic analysis Corse draws on Jakobson's theories of language, distinguishing between language as literature (ambiguous, metaphorical, slippery) and language as communication (functional, and relatively stable) (13). Whilst a libretto will sometimes encompass both of these forms the genre of opera tends to favour the second over the first. For Corse, operatic language is not about poetry, symmetry, phonics or images, but rather about objects and subjects, about what will (or will not) happen next (13). As such, libretti are a kind of 'stripped-bare' literature, a form that exists on the edges of literary language and emphasises the communicative rather than aesthetic functions of language (14). Here the aesthetic strength of opera lies less in the libretto than it does in its relationship to music, and even more so in its various intersections with staging and audience perceptions (15). Music, like literary language, tends towards indefiniteness and ambiguity, and musical meanings may hence serve to restore 'openness' and 'literariness' to operas. Corse concludes that whilst libretti are not strictly literature, they are sub-literary, simplified texts restored to complexity by their relationship to a 'literary' musical form, i.e. a form with its own language and signification system.

This model contextualises the aesthetic and linguistic function of a libretto within a structuralist setting. It also reinforces the notion that if opera is a hybrid text, and its parts in dynamic, transformative tension, then it is the moments of intersection that not only frame the form of textuality but also demand attention. Corse's model, however, does present a rather restrictive view: its definition of libretti as 'sub-literary' serves to evoke a sense of competition and resolution between dominant and subordinate elements within opera. Instead, terms such as intermedial, or multimedial, might better describe the textual form of a libretto, pointing towards the many facets of its dramatic and structural functions.

### 2.2.2 Reading Libretti

Within the many models of textuality just discussed, the problem of engagement still remains. Peter Stacey, in his essay 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition' argues that the first task of the analyst is to determine the type of text (prose/poetic; form, sound, meaning) and then establish its condition (prime or fragmented). Stacey then shifts attention to musical elements of the setting - that is, vocal style, the intelligibility of the text and the 'techniques of relating music and text', whether arbitrary, direct or incidental (22) - enabling the 'relative status of the media' to be mapped (18-25). His discussion also takes into account the various

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<sup>16</sup> Refer to Jürgen Maedher's essay 'The Origins of Italian *Literaturoper*' (Groos and Parker's *Reading Opera* 92-128).

forms of language texts might comprise, and the musical idiosyncrasies of an individual composer. Stacey's analytical framework offers some very good questions to ask when dealing with words and music; and as far as formalist, musicological techniques go, his is certainly robust. What this methodology does not offer, however, is a way to ascertain and value other characteristics of libretti, particularly their textuality in relation to drama and performance or the influence collaborative authoring practice between composer and librettist might have on the text.

An alternative approach is to consider music through the lens of narrative theory and structures within fiction. The notion of intermediality, for example, has been employed in an attempt to create a taxonomy of characteristics shared by musical and literary works. Originally concerned with literature and the visual arts, intermedial approaches examine the moments of boundary transgressions when two or more art forms combine in the same, single work. German critic Werner Wolf's *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (1999) is one of the few works to examine music and fiction within this framework. For Wolf, 'intermediality' is a means of distinguishing between the practice of overlaying one, usually privileged, art form onto another (multimediality) and the relationships *across* those forms within the same work (intermediality). Akin to intertextuality Wolf's intermediality offers a method for observing structural similarities between disparate elements of the same text. It is concerned with modes of reference rather than textuality, and is best applied in taxonomic terms to musical or literary works. Carol Motta's comments on Wolf's theory are useful here:

As in intertextuality, the critic probes relationships between one artistic medium and another, which the reader picks up as allusions to two histories, reflexive of each other... Based on pre-modern musical gestures, the theory does not experiment with new meaning, but rather with the old-fashioned idea of function following form. (Motta 87)

That is, intermedial readings seek common expressive points in both art forms and finds ways to link them together. As Motta points out this strategy implies that textual function follows form; dissimilar art forms in the same work are compared and linked by their structural similarities. Libretti, however, are often fashioned by functional requirements (they must be singable, concise and clear) and as such are often structurally at cross-purposes with the operatic spectacle. Here art forms within an art form clash, merge, and obscure. So, whilst the notion of intermediality is certainly useful it provides only some of the apparatus required to encompass a literary study of libretti. As the musicologist Carolyn Abbate notes, the pressing problem of opera analysis 'remains the necessity to cope with an art that mixes various languages (visual, verbal, musical)', particularly when that form of analysis 'deals monophonically with what in performance is a visual-textual-musical polyphony' ('Analysis' *Grove Music Online*).

For libretti are also musico-dramatic and visually oriented works. In American composer Virgil Thomson's words they are 'poetic-theatre' (66) working to 'accommodate musico-emotional timings',

embedded within the complexity of musical reception and our responses to it.<sup>17</sup> It is the libretto that drives narrative function, provides character and determines the order and intensity of action. The librettist, therefore, is as much dramatist as poet, a writer who, to cite Patrick Smith:

...[is] at once a dramatist, a creator of word, verse, situation, scene, and character, and - this is of vital importance - an artist who, by dint of...training, can often visualise the work as a totality more accurately than the composer. (Smith 1970 xix)

In other words, a librettist must be a skilled dramaturge, able to effectively collaborate with a composer and be fluent in all the arts of operatic production, including the means of spectacular presentation, technical effects and staging.

### 2.3 Harwood's Libretti – Methodological Platforms

Significant methodological tensions, then, emerge between two simultaneous and equally satisfying interpretations of libretti: first, that a well wrought libretto is worth examining in its own right, and second, that it is somewhat incomplete and unfulfilled without its musical and visual settings. To refer to Abbate again:

...the plea of librettology that librettos merit discussion in their own right paradoxically wishes to create a full art-form from one whose claim on our intellectual energies is powerful only because that art form - as one part of an opera - is inevitably incomplete. ('Analysis' *Grove Music Online*)

That is, the appeal of libretti lie precisely in their ambiguous, uncertain status. It follows that useful interpretations must acknowledge such slipperiness whilst bringing to bear reading approaches able to deal with opera's various elements. In his essay 'Grimes and Lucretia'<sup>18</sup>, Philip Brett employs a multi-pronged, author centric strategy to deal with this challenge. Brett's essay analyses and compares Britten's consecutive operas, *Peter Grimes* (libretto by Montague Slater) and *The Rape of Lucretia* (adapted by Ronald Duncan). It first acknowledges the significance of Britten's word setting and then proceeds to explore musical and literary metaphor in each opera. Working from the argument that literary devices, such as narrative, dramatic attitude and 'argument' are framed in musical terms, Brett embarks upon a discussion of metaphor and symbolism in the libretto that is linked to tonality and orchestration within the work. He surveys the opera's textual sources (for example, Shakespeare's *Lucrece* and the political background of the story) mapping the opera's intertextuality to the narrative. In this particular instance, the libretti are illuminated in the context of Britten, his music and the narrative histories of the two works.

For libretti cannot only be assessed in any single discrete form but must also be considered within the context of score, performance and authorial collaboration. Given the complexity of the issues

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<sup>17</sup> See Robert Jourdain's *Music, The Brain and Ecstasy: How Music Captures our Imagination* (1997) for a comprehensive discussion mapping neurological function and musical interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> In *Music and Theatre: Essays in Honour of Winton Dean*. Ed. Nigel Fortune (1987). Also published in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*. Ed. George Haggerty (2006).

surrounding libretti, that is, the interdisciplinary context of both opera and its critical scholarly tradition, and the shifting emphases throughout that tradition, a synthesis of contemporary reading methods is required in order to read Harwood's works for music in their context. Harwood's works are clearly of interest to readers of her poetry, as an important part of her oeuvre, and as dramatic works in their own right. Her own comments about the texts and their significance also require some consideration, as do the political and feminist concerns that might be brought to bear on her writing. Finally, her collaboration with Sitsky, one of the most productive Australian opera partnerships of the twentieth century, also requires careful analysis.

Many of the techniques and frameworks required to thoughtfully read libretti in a literary context are now being established. There is agreement that the intersection of words and music is complicated but understandable, and that libretti are specific kinds of texts, whether sub-literary, musico-dramatic or embedded. Scholars also agree that libretti must be read in their hybrid, performance context, and that dramatic and visual influences should be considered; the rewards of multiperspectival considerations of libretti are clearly apparent. Effective reading methods are, firstly, broadly textual, examining intertextuality, musical setting and narrative; and secondly, case specific, exploring the authorial, cultural and political context for a particular collaboration or narrative. In this way readings are sensitive to both the intersection of opera's multiple textual parts and the motivating factors and processes framing its production. Reading, in this instance, is as much about locating the text in a functional sense as it is about interpretation.

This methodological framework is augmented by opera's exaggerated form. Libretti are hybrid texts in both genesis and performance. Their effect is usually collaboratively produced and their function intermedial, multimedial and complex.<sup>19</sup> This complex set of intersections within opera works to produce a heady, formal exaggeration where the normally regulated modes of language are reframed by their interrelationships with music and space, producing an exaggeration within the economy of perception, an 'eruption in the economy of consciousness' (Stewart 173). In this sense opera is truly an exaggerated, extravagant genre. Each element collides, blends or blurs to produce a formal exaggeration that amplifies available expressive tools. This in turn does not simply translate a given narrative but transforms its expressive capacity via the blurring of categories, the spectacle of performance and the effect that collaborative authorship brings to a work. Exaggeration increases the power of performance; it heightens the points of intersection of categories, amplifies their function and reveals small fissures between rhetoric and eventual textual form. In turn, these boundary crossings and moments of intersection offer a way to explore both the parts and their sum within a balanced interpretative schema. Opera's grand scale also means that the artefacts of production - letters, drafts,

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<sup>19</sup> The model of hybridity used in this thesis refers obliquely to Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity. Whilst acknowledging the framework that Bhabha establishes (that is, the significance of points of intersection; the possibility of moving beyond binary systems of definition; and the desire to 'open up' spaces of intercultural discourse) I am using the term to loosely describe the collection of parts within opera. In this context, Bhabha's hybridity paradigm enables us to avoid polarising our analysis of words and music.

production notes, and textual sources - are often available to complement the picture of the texts that are developed, providing further evidence for a libretto's function, genesis and context.

Three elements best reflect the textual work and authorial process in Harwood and Sitsky's operas, particularly given the archival materials available: the relationship of words and music; the dramatic and visual elements envisaged for performance; and the collaborative nature of their creative relationship. Each domain highlights authorial, cultural, textual and dramatic nuances within and around Harwood's libretti. Each domain is elevated by the exaggerated style of the genre. And each domain is relevant to both the libretti texts and their extra-textual material. It is to a reading of Harwood's libretti from each of these perspectives that I now turn.

### 3 ‘MUSIC, MY JOY, MY FULL SCALE GOD’: HARWOOD’S SINGABLE LINES

What figures Bach, enchanting architect,  
 conjures from air to bridge the cryptic spaces  
 between us and the peace-giving solution  
 to what our nature is, how the world’s made;  
 what tunes to show, through all our imperfection,  
 that our familiar world is one of substance  
 with music nobly written, rightly played.

Gwen Harwood. ‘Divertimento. IV. Postlude: Listening to Bach’<sup>1</sup>

Opera is a particularly assertive medium, simultaneously exaggerating and constraining the already complicated path of language interpretation and reception. Bakhtin notes that ‘language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions’ (294). In the spectacular environment of opera, language is further transformed: the additional effect of collaborative authorship, along with opportunity for spectacular expression, can complicate relatively simple narrative devices into grand theatricals. Operatic performance can also distort both music and language, through either stylistic idiosyncrasy or performance demands, changing the platform for interpretation. For in opera music and language are indissolubly linked, working together across domains to reinforce particular dramatic tensions and narrative devices. Thus language is constrained by the realities of performance (such as the length of time required to sing a line, as opposed to speak it) and by the frames established by conventions of production, performance and pleasure.

Despite such practical considerations Harwood displayed a remarkable capacity for producing dramatic and sophisticated texts for opera, developed first during the writing of early works of *Usher* and *Lenz* and culminating in the virtuosic density of *The Golem*. Whilst they undoubtedly reflect her poetic demeanour, the libretti hinge upon entirely different approaches to language than those evident in her other writing. In Harwood’s words the opera texts are “‘looser in texture” than poetry...shot through with holes which the music fills up’ (Beston 1974, 85). They are simultaneously dramatic texts on the page, and workable, singable, concise words for music.

What then are the apparatuses – technical, poetic, philosophical – underpinning such musico-poetic virtuosity? The mechanics of Harwood’s libretto writing, beginning with the development of her musical poetics, are critical to understanding the poetic strategies that underpin her ‘singable lines’. Her careful handling of rhythm and language texture; her approach to textual transformation and dramatic clarity; and her capacity for introducing myriad intertextual references that locate the texts within a rich narrative tradition, all point to the complex textuality of her libretti. They also offer further insights into the literary imagination that produced them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Collected Poems*, 379. The line ‘Music, my joy, my full scale God’ is from Harwood’s poem ‘A Scattering of Ashes’, *Collected Poems*, 352.

### 3.1 Writing under the influence: Music and Harwood

Lulled into comfort by the glib  
 diminished-seventh-change of key  
 while time, smooth-jointed, modulates  
 through all the tenses of *to be*  
 scoring its enharmonic change  
 on human features, will my ear  
 endure the untempered interval  
 of *is* and *is not*, when the austere  
 organum of death transcends  
 being's chromatic harmony?  
 (Excerpt from 'Of Music' *Collected Poems*)

Harwood's fascination with music was longstanding. Her *Collected Poems* (2003) reveals a rather high proportion of poems directly about, or informed by, music, from the early poem 'Beethoven 1798' to the complex later piece 'Divertimento', with its structural echoes of musical form and musical metaphors. Harwood notes that it was Rex Hobcroft's performance of the Beethoven sonatas that inspired her to write poems about music: 'Rex...came to Hobart and played the Beethoven sonatas in a series of recitals...[his] fine interpretation and his spoken exposition showed me what I needed to learn' (*Lamplit Presences*' 251).<sup>2</sup> She goes on to cite 'Beethoven 1798', 'Waldstein', 'Past and Present' and 'Littoral' as poems that show this new and, according to Harwood, much desired poetic direction. Some of her poems take music and performance directly as their subject ('Beethoven in a Shabby Room', 'At the Arts Club', 'Critic's Nightwatch', 'To Music'). Some use musical references to evoke particular kinds of memories or feelings ('A Magyar Air', 'Alla Siciliana', 'Rite of Spring' and 'Carnival of Venice' based on the form of Paganini's setting of the same name), whilst others explore the transforming capacity of music, 'music that lights in shabby flesh/heroic planes of breast and thigh' ('Of Music') and the overlaps between the discipline of writing and the practice of playing ('The Waldstein', 'A Simple Story', 'The Magic Land of Music'). Music also functions as the anchor point for the Kröte series of poems, allowing explorations of character, desire, tragedy, ambition to pivot around the exterior life of a musician.

Music dominated Harwood's childhood and early career. She earned her A.Mus.A in piano performance, gained her music-teaching diploma and later studied with prominent Brisbane musician Dr Robert Dalley-Scarlet, becoming a member of his Handel Society and serving as assistant arranger and accompanist. She also became his deputy organist and, later, organist at the Anglican Church of All Saints, Wickham Terrace, Brisbane. A proficient technician, she was once taken to play for the eminent pianist Artur Schnabel:

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<sup>2</sup> Also cited in a note on 'Beethoven, 1798' in Kratzmann and Hoddinott's edition of Harwood's *Collected Poems*, 575.

Well on into the Chromatic Fantasy I saw him yawn with boredom and look at his watch: though he listened politely to the Fugue I knew I was never going to be out there in the glorious dresses I used to design in secret, and resigned that ambition. Music, in a sense, was still asleep. (Harwood 'Words and Music' 371)

It was not until much later that Harwood's musicality became visible at a professional level. In her early twenties Harwood's musical life comprised playing for services at All Saints and accompanying local singers. She was, however, an avid listener and critic of music developing sympathy for the realities of performance and technical mastery, and for the mechanics of form and compositional structure. Writing to Tony Riddell in July 1943 she notes:

You asked me once before if I like Wagner – well, I've never seen him performed (remember what sort of town I live in) but he strikes me as being a bit Hesperussy, though on a grand scale. I find the music pretentious and devoid of content, but I should very much like to see how it appeals to me in connection with the stage setting'. (Saturday 1943 [3 July] *Blessed City* 203)

Harwood's distinction between the on-stage and off-stage functions of operatic music point to her certain, if perhaps naïve, views on opera's multifaceted form.<sup>3</sup> Other letters to Riddell (collected and edited in *Blessed City*) are also weighty with reviews of new records acquired or borrowed; confessions of attempted mastery of certain pieces; and descriptions of local musical events:

'If I have to accompany singers, God help them, I shall eat enormous quantities of home made afternoon tea, particularly pikelets, to comfort me for being the only one of my generation in a stuffy gathering. Very often I wish I were a young man, because then I could get gloriously drunk before playing...' (5.7.43 *Blessed City* 107)

Her humour and, we suspect, her exasperation are evident.<sup>4</sup>

Several of Harwood's friends were musicians and performers and her poetry frequently includes dedications to them and their art: 'Four Impromptus' is dedicated to Rex Hobcroft; the 'Divertimento' series (Notturmo, Affetuoso, Scherzo and Postlude; Listening to Bach) is dedicated to Jan Sedivka, commemorating his retirement as Director of the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music; and 'In Memoriam Sela Trau' was read at a memorial concert for this well known Australian-based cellist.<sup>5</sup>

Harwood also consciously linked her method of writing and thinking to music, perhaps a method for publicly demonstrating her awareness of the structural relationships between and across the domains of words and music, and verifying her expertise:

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Alison Hoddinott (1988) Harwood noted that she had not really understood 'what an opera might be' until she had seen one. (Interview transcript 6), also referred to in section 4.3.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Affetuoso' (the second of four in the 'Divertimento' suite, published in *Bone Scan* (1988) and dedicated to Jan Sedivka) and the many Kröte poems for depictions of such suburban musical afternoons.

<sup>5</sup> See Alison Hoddinott's *Gwen Harwood: The Real and Imagined World. A Critical Analysis* (181-185) for an insightful discussion on the 'Divertimento' series and its various musical references - structural, philosophical and aesthetic.



When my brain is idling it is full of music not words. A phrase of music can call up the past in particular detail (in the manner of those electric probings which make the past seem presently real). Sometimes I am haunted by rhythms which need the right words...('Lamplit Presences' 252)

References to the fugue, sonata and counterpoint are threaded throughout her poetry, sometimes as subject, but mostly as an organising tool for a particular poem or suite of poems.<sup>6</sup> It is the fugue, however, that seems to dominate. Jennifer Strauss observes that the 'manner in which Harwood's art approaches most closely the condition of music...is structural... the art of fugue' (*Boundary Conditions* 197). As a 'piece of music based on canonic imitation (i.e. one voice 'chasing' another...)' (Walker, 'Fugue'. *Grove Online*) the fugue in Harwood's poetry refers both to form and a process for the development of ideas. Harwood once said that she wanted her poems to 'appear to be a seamless flow of the voice. Like a fugue, where you have the voices totally interwoven and you don't need to *bang out* the subject to make people aware of it. It's part of a greater texture' (Williams 55, emphasis in original text). Harwood, as Strauss notes, weaves such voices both within and across her poems (198), establishing a paradigm in one poem only to break it down in another. On a technical level, she might set up a particular voice, only to suddenly insert an unexpected change of register, or of character, playing with what we assume will happen next (such as in the poem 'O Could One Write as One Makes Love'). Harwood's poems also reflect her interest in subject and development (throughout the four poems of 'Divertimento', for example); and the contrapuntal setting of rhythmic or thematic voices (such as the various stanza types in 'The Present Tense' or the recurring images in the three poems of 'Let Sappho Have the Singing Head'). Whilst her propensity for interweaving voices did occasionally backfire (Sitsky objected to the vagaries of the *Voices in Limbo* characters, for example, discussed in section 4.1) the fugal motif generally functions as a useful metaphor for both Harwood's approach to writing and the forms she chooses.

Harwood developed considerable metrical and formal complexity in her later works. 'Mappings of the Plane', for example, contains five different stanzaic and metrical forms that utilise very little rhyme, producing a rhythmically beautiful poem which mirrors its subject, the transition through life from stage to stage, in its form (Hoddinott 167). Similarly, 'New Music', dedicated to Sitsky, refers to the discordant sounds of new compositions through the unconventional use of stanzaic form. It contains sparring half rhymes and continually breaks free from its four stress line form (Hoddinott 168-9), producing an unusual stanzaic structure where form deftly echoes subject:

wakeful with questioning,  
 some mind beats on necessity,  
 and being unanswered learns to bear  
 emptiness like a wound that no

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<sup>6</sup> In his book *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*, Calvin S. Brown maps the technical similarities between the two forms: shared characteristics include rhythm, timbre, harmony and counterpoint, and dramatic settings. He succinctly describes the very different sound worlds of words and music. 'Broadly speaking, music is an art of sound in and for itself, of sound qua sound. Its tones have intricate relationships among themselves, but no relationship to anything outside the musical composition.... Literature, on the other hand, is an art employing sounds to which external significance has been attached' (11).

word but its own can mend; and finds  
 a new imperative to summon  
 a world out of unmeasured darkness  
 pierced by brilliant nerve of sound.

(Excerpt from 'New Music' *Collected Poems*)

The subject moves from the chaos of new aural experience to cognition, hinting at the suffering attached to aesthetic development. Subject and imagery, in particular the precise evocations of the senses, are embedded within an unevenly hinged rhythm. It is a musically sensitive poem, both rhythmically and metaphorically, that explores the sensitivity of music reception across its own domains.

Linking form to subject to image is at the core of Harwood's libretti writing. Fugal structures are rare in operas and yet throughout Harwood's libretti the fugal structure appears, from the simple imagery repeated and developed by multiple voices in *Usher* to the literary and musical interplay occurring around subject and theme development in *The Golem*. The structure of *Voices in Limbo* also echoes fugal form. An experimental work, *Voices* is a 'radiophonic' opera for voices and electronic instruments, to be performed without the usual apparatus of opera staging:

...we had a request for a radio opera using only sound: FM radio and whatever electronic resources the composer could summon....Larry decided to write an opera using no scenery, that is no imagined scenery, since it was for radio alone. Since the opera had to be set in a non-material world he chose limbo, and we called the work *Voices in Limbo*. The story, which we worked out together, is of a man and a woman falling asleep and waking to find themselves in another dimension. ('Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 8)

Both characters struggle to locate themselves, spatially and spiritually, meeting angels and demons as they talk: themes of death and disembodiment dominate. The libretto then moves into an almost comic interlude, laden with symbolic references to notions of time, death and eternity, before returning to the voices of the dying man and woman accompanied by demons, angels and the multitudinous voices of children who have died through the ages. What makes this more than a simple ABA form is that the subject develops by a series of inversions and loops: various 'voices' (thematic and characterized) return to pursue one another throughout the opera, occurring in sequence and continually developing the narrative subject.

Other musico-poetic structures – counterpoint (of character as well of themes and subjects), theme and variation, rhythm, and repetition – also appear as essential frameworks within the libretto. Harwood creates a miniature theme and variations, seen in this section towards the end of the *Voices* opera:

Demons:	You are dying.
Man:	I am choking.
	The world is pressing down on me.
Demons:	You are dying.

Earth is sinking into water.

Man: I am cold, cold.  
The chill wind numbs my flesh.

Demons: You are dying.  
Water is sinking into fire.

Man: I am torn apart.  
My bones cannot hold together.

Demons: You are dying.  
Fire is sinking into air.

(cf. Appendix A.4)

The line ‘You are dying’ reoccurs with slight musical variations each time: the Man’s responses are of similar rhythmic structure, and contain the same subject (the ending of his life). The development of the subject, the Man’s inexorable progress towards death, is literally played out as these voices chase each other through the subject of death.

### 3.2 How to Write a Singable Line

In ‘Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist’ Harwood observes that ‘by themselves my words would have no particular power, but wedded to the music they become part of the magic that, in opera, is quite beyond the sum of all the parts’ (7-8). Later in the same essay she notes: ‘None of the texts I prepare for the composers is like my poetry, which is often polished and formal. My task as a librettist...is to give the composer what he needs’ (10). These statements indicate a fundamentally different approach to the use of language within her libretti than in her poetry. David Charlton identifies three points of tension within the words/music nexus: ‘the declamatory approach to words-setting, the problems created by the language, and the problem of the length of texts’ (252). He notes that for most forms of opera intelligibility (grammatically, poetically and musically) is the most pertinent issue. The combined effects of music, staging and movement can both enhance and confuse dramatic meaning. A further constraint on language in opera is the intersection of speech and musical rhythms. Musical rhythm, as Robert Fink suggests, ‘...can do more than interact with the innate rhythm of speech; sensitively used, it can change the way we comprehend words – actually adding new elements of meaning to a phrase as it is sung’ (37). In spoken language meaning is not inherent exclusively in its grouping of phonemes because non-phonetic factors such as vocal intonation, stress, and tempo also influence our semantic interpretations. Music changes these facets, and thus our reception of language: certain sounds are greatly intensified, such as vowels elongated by singing styles, whilst others are minimised, notably many of the consonants crucial for whole word recognition (Fink 40).

The shape of language on the tongue can also complicate matters for opera writers: the cadences and word endings of English do not always lend themselves to the sung form. Paul Zweifel notes that English does not share the same linguistic ‘flexibility’ of French or Italian, a flexibility that ‘enhances their rhythmic integrity and greatly improves their beauty when sung’ (11). The nature of English word endings, compared to French or Italian, can create a harshness and rigidity to the actual sound

of the words; as a result it can be extremely difficult to write a simultaneously literate and beautiful sounding libretto.

Even with a firmly established musical sense, the issue of singability in performance can still dominate a libretto: are there too many words? Not enough words? Where are the vowels? How does the text move from one character to another? Perhaps more than in any other poetic form, the constraints of opera shape the possibilities of the text, dictating the kind of language employed by the librettist and framing the techniques of narrative crafting that underpin dramatic affect; here, the words/music amalgam meets the demands of dramaturgy.

### 3.2.1 Questions of Compatibility: Poetic and Musical Rhythms

Chester Kallman, co-writer with W.H. Auden for many of Benjamin Britten's operas, notes that a librettist's 'first duty' is to 'write verses which excite the musical imagination of the composer' (Auden and Kallman 614).<sup>7</sup> In Kallman's view a poet should not aim for 'poetic merit' but, rather, produce an uncomplicated text: '...if these verses should also possess poetic merit in themselves, so much the better, but such merit is a secondary consideration...simple ejaculatory phrases, which look shy-making on the page, can be lifted into glory by notes' (614). Kallman's words might not appear to offer a librettist much creative freedom but he does, in fact, identify the nub of the problem for an aspiring dramaturge. Singing style means a different capacity for enunciation: there is less scope for density and complex allusions as even the relationship of one line to another is substantially altered in the realm of words and music. Sung words also take much longer to get through than the spoken sort.

As a poet and musician Harwood was deeply aware of the complexities of word setting, acknowledging that the physical capacity of singers to create sounds, and their pace of singing, had a substantial impact on the rendering of language:

Generally I rely on my inner ear to tell me what is or is not singable; sometimes I try out the words (in the woodshed or fowl house - I would not want the odd visitor to hear me fortissimo). (Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 7)

Along with such musical and intuitive strategies Harwood and Sitsky's collaborative approach to writing also helped to clarify questions of singability and setting. Robyn Holmes notes that Harwood adopted a style to suit Sitsky's music, producing libretti that she did not necessarily consider good on the page but would work as sung texts to music (Holmes et al, 26). Harwood sometimes redrafted her libretti for Sitsky four or five times before the structure, shape and language of the text were right. In a letter to Tony Riddell Harwood wrote, 'The form of the libretto will depend on what the composer wants - Larry Sitsky for instance doesn't like setting strophic songs' (9.10.68 *A Steady Storm*, 222). In practical terms, a libretto that suited his preferred musical framework (rhythmically, metaphorically and dramatically) was vital.

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<sup>7</sup> From an article on *The Rake's Progress* written for the *New York Herald Tribune* (8 Feb 1953). In Auden, W.H. and Kallman, Chester. *Libretti and other Dramatic Writings by W.H. Auden*. Ed. Edward Mendelson (1993).

In the opening of *Voices in Limbo* this kind of compatibility is evident. Harwood places asymmetrical and symmetrical rhythms against each other, evoking the destabilised, other-worldly space central to the opera and its themes of knowledge, identity and eternity. The opening lines of the opera set out the visual space of the narrative and establish the two main characters through dialogue:

Woman: Sleep of sleep, sleep of sleep after love, after death.  
 There is the word love, and there is love.  
 There is the word death and there is death itself,  
 the original dream.

Man: Are we waking or dreaming, we lay down together,

Woman: We shed our dress of daylight,  
 we lie in the sphere of the moon.  
 We are alone, and everywhere,  
 boundless and weightless.  
 Where is the past and where is the future?

Man: Our voices flow over images face to face in the dark mirror.

(cf. Appendix A.4)

Word repetition is used asymmetrically and the subtle effect of the repeated sounds is embedded in a slightly uneven rhythm ('Sleep of sleep; sleep of sleep after love'). The word sleep is repeated (note that the elongated 'ee' sound is quite lovely to sing) to reinforce the dramatic context, whilst the rhythmic balance of the line gently shifts to create a destabilizing effect. This interplay continues throughout the piece; here a symmetrical, quadruple rhythm is sandwiched between a double triplet:

We shed our dress of daylight  
 We lie in the sphere of the moon  
 We are alone, and everywhere

Following on, however, is this next section of the stanza, hinting at simple triple time:

boundless and weightless.  
Where is the past and where is the future?

The rhythms can be described in both musical and poetic literary terms: and their development similarly described in musical or literary terms.

Sitsky at first works with the syllabic rhythm of the libretto: the first line, 'sleep of sleep', rolls gently on its axis and the triplet of 'after love' is not too far removed from spoken scansion.<sup>8</sup> The second line, however, offers a vastly different pace: the phrase 'there is the word' is sung at double speed (in context, still relatively slowly) and the word 'love' is given a long note, emphasising its vowel sound. He does sometimes work with the spoken rhythm of the language: 'We shed our dress of daylight', for example, is relatively even in pace with the accents of the line, outlined above, still in place (fig. 3.1).

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C for the first three pages of the *Voices in Limbo* score (composer's autograph).

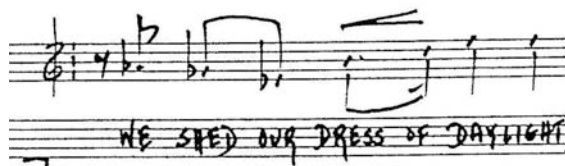


Figure 3.1 *Voices in Limbo*, composer's autograph, p2, line 1

'We lie in the sphere of the moon/ We are alone, and everywhere' however, are sung in triplet driven rhythm (fig 3.2).

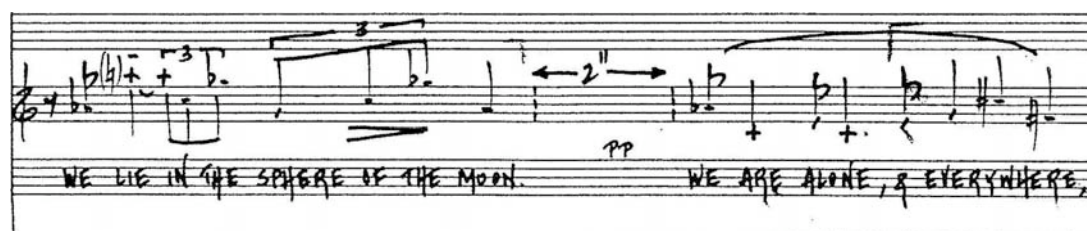


Figure 3.2 *Voices in Limbo*, composer's autograph, p2, line 2

The sung rhythm lends weight to the word 'lie' (due to both note length and pitch, a high A, a note towards the more penetrating end of the soprano range) before returning via triplet quavers to a solid crotchet on 'moon'. By the end of this section the singing speed has changed, produced by increasing rhythmic complexity and a tempo change marked 'moving a little, now'. Pre-recorded tape reels accompany this section (notation and schemata for the electronic components are included in the score). This rhythmic pattern is typical of the sort Sitsky uses, as is the harmonic structure. Here, Sitsky's setting works with the rhythm of Harwood's lines, highlighting their poetic structure and working with their musicality whilst simultaneously embedding them in a musical framework. This type of intersection is characteristic of Sitsky and Harwood. It suggests that Harwood's lines display a strong internal rhythmic and narrative structure held in tension with the spaciousness and flex required for modernist musical setting.

### 3.2.2 Language, Texture and Dramatic Clarity

Harwood's libretti are also shaped by her penchant for occasional verses and the discursive styles of her letters and essays. She is noted for her occasional verses written for birthdays, award ceremonies, and greetings, and several anecdotal, informal verses are now available via the *Collected Poems* (2003). Greg Kratzmann notes that this ability to produce 'plain, discursive speaking in verse' (along with her years of musical training) enabled her to write language 'so different from the close-textured, strongly metaphorical mode of her published work' (Kratzmann *Meridian* 1996 5). When invited to write for the Tasmanian Peace Trust, she delivered an unrhymed 227-line lecture in hexameters, 'Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell':

So let us look at the living world with a kind of Socratic pleasure:  
discover again and again the need for a calm and merciful vision  
of what has been, and what is now, and what might be in the future;

and fight, if we must fight, for truth “and stand among the foremost  
fighters, and endure our share of the blaze of battle.”

(*Collected Poems* 501)

As Kratzmann rightly suggests this is not in the ‘strongly metaphorical mode’ of her poetry (1996, 5). It is, however, an example of careful, measured pace and relatively simple language sustained over a significant number of lines, written to be read in a public space.

Harwood’s substantial correspondence reflects her talent for telling stories and conveying events and conversations, crucial to an opera libretto. The letters reveal a certain pleasure in the task of telling, most particularly in the craft required: of her poetry she noted, ‘I...wouldn’t write anything...grammatically elaborate unless I would say it in ordinary speech’ (Williams 55). Harwood also took a great deal of interest in modern folk and rock music. The poet and friend of Harwood, Stephen Edgar, recalls:

My friend Andrew Sant has told me of an occasion when, in conversation with Gwen, he happened to make mention of the singer Neil Young and referred to one of his songs. Now Neil Young was not a singer, Andrew thought, that a woman of Gwen's generation might be expected to know about. Gwen knew about him. Not only that, she knew the song. Not only that, she proceeded to recite to Andrew all of its lyrics, word-perfect, on the spot. (‘Stephen Edgar Remembers Gwen Harwood’)

Nicholas’ declaration of love to Alison in Scene II of *Fierce Tales*, might almost be a modern folk song, the poetry redolent of popular lyrics and the imagery sweetly simple:

O Alison, so soft and slender,  
my pretty weasel, my doll, my pet,  
softer than wool, so fair and tender  
with your milky skin and eyes black as jet,  
you make me think of every creature  
that’s young, and quick, and eager by nature,  
and the cherry-tree with its snowy blossom –  
I’m even in love with the clothes you wear,  
and your little purse with its silken tassel,  
nothing about you that doesn’t please me –  
so why do you tease me, tease me, tease me?

(cf. Appendix A.3 Scene II)

This is an atypical operatic declaration that highlights the slightly odd nature of the praise (‘I’m even in love with the clothes you wear’). It is a witty and slightly tongue in cheek lyric, reflecting the bawdy nature of the *Fierce Tales* opera. The narrative hinges around witticism, tricks and word play (such as these lines in a merry drinking song (Scene III): ‘Drink to all virgins in fancy or fact/Heaven preserve them and keep them intact’).

Between draft two of the *Lenz* libretto and the performance version, Harwood made some substantial changes to the register and language of the text.<sup>9</sup> Lenz's sermon, for example (offered just after his arrival in Oberlin's village) is changed from a benign mystery and blessing tale to a bitter picture of Lenz himself. The sermon is, in early drafts, stately, moderately optimistic and dense with images of resurrection and restoration: Lenz promises he will walk and rise like Lazarus; and that the 'sap shall run young in my bones'. His congregational address opens:

My friends, my brothers, hear:  
 Do not regard me sadly,  
 the candles burn with silent life  
 as I burn with belief.  
 I preach the mystery of earth,  
 for which I burn, as the flame rises.  
 Among the gravestones, flowers like stars  
 gleam out, precious and beautiful,  
 for our voluptuous delight.  
 (*Lenz* Draft Two, Part III)

In Harwood's later versions the sermon becomes a vigorous complaint against the cruelty of God and people, a parody of Oberlin's aria that precedes it. Unlike the sedate, naturalistic theology offered in the first draft this is a tirade, at once angry and moralising.

My friends, my brothers, hear me  
 I have written down the words you cannot read  
 Sit quiet. Your nakedness shall be uncovered...  
 My soul sits in my body like an eye,  
 like God's eye with its murderous compassion.  
 (cf. Appendix A.2 *Lenz* Part III)

The 'Mystery of earth' line from the earlier draft remains (occurring much later in the monologue) but the lines beginning with 'flowers like stars' have been cut, replaced by less forgiving representations of filth and error:

The winds gather together  
 Their fury finds him (a man) through years and miles  
 Hiding among the seeds  
 They tear away the black filth of his error  
 I see him there, pale as the bending reeds.  
 He is pure and naked  
 God's eye winks in terror.  
 (cf. Appendix A.2 *Lenz* Part III)

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<sup>9</sup> Harwood copied the libretto into a notebook for Tony Riddell, to accompany a cassette recording of the ABC radio broadcast of the opera, May 27 1982. Both the notebook and cassette recording are held in the papers of Tony Riddell, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, UQFL292. For a transcription of the performance version refer to Appendix A.2.



Such a shift in language clarifies our understanding of Lenz himself, the language illuminating the religious and psychological themes of the opera. We are caught up in the embarrassing fervour of an oration rich in images of vulnerability and violence. The greater impact, however, is achieved not through complex imagery or poetic schemes but through simplification. Short phrases, plain words, and rather stark pictures create a text able to be sung; set to music they do the required dramatic work, whilst still being succinct and commanding.

In *Lenz*, where the tension is almost unbearable, I tried to give the composer a series of linked themes and key words that would bind together Lenz's fragmentary experiences and make him a human character with whom the listener could have real sympathy. ('Memoirs' 7)

Harwood's *Lenz* libretto is also an exercise in conveying dense dramatic action within the confines of the operatic form: vivid imagery and repetition evoke the extreme sensations of suffering, damnation and dream-like notions of love central to the narrative. Harwood's sub-headings for each part read like a morality tale: from 'The Loss of Physical Love' via 'The Rejection of God' to 'The Rejection of Men' Lenz's journey is painfully mapped out. As an audience we don't see these headings but we do see Lenz's interminable progression towards hopeless madness, punctuated by moments of extreme expression and action. In this case, brevity exaggerates dramatic effect.

Consider the following lines from Büchner's story.<sup>10</sup> In this scene Lenz is now hopelessly lost in bipolar episodes of mad confidence and remorse. In both Büchner's tale and the opera this scene follows his failed attempt at resurrecting a child, whilst in a euphoric religious state:

Thus he arrived at the highest point of the mountains, and the uncertain light stretched down towards the white masses of stone, and the heavens were a stupid blue eye, and the moon, quite ludicrous, idiotic, stood in the midst. Lenz had to laugh loudly, and as he laughed atheism took root in him and possessed him utterly, steadily, calmly, relentlessly. He no longer knew what it was that had moved him so much before, he felt cold; he thought he would like to go to bed now, and went his way through the uncanny darkness, cold, unshakable - all was empty and hollow to him. (Büchner 81-2)

The moment of his disillusionment is clear; the narrative voice quietly distant, observational, and discreet; and the images of the moon, mountain and light politely framing the language. Harwood's lines from the *Lenz* libretto concerning the same scene are, in contrast, confrontational, immediate and overwhelming:

Monster, monster, you live in the filth of sores,  
in scabs, in holes, in the slime of black ravines.  
The graves praise you, earth sings with your hate,  
You swell with venom, madness is your joy...  
When the innocent child is ravished you are there,

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<sup>10</sup> From a translation by Michael Hamburger. It is not entirely clear which translation Harwood worked from; there is a possibility it may have been by Rees but I have not been able to confirm this. In this instance, Hamburger's translation offers a useful starting point.

in the death rattle, the death of putrefaction,  
 in pain, loss, torture, ruin, you are there.  
 I curse you as your bleak wings hunt me down.  
 You shall not have me, ghostly Spirit brooding on the rotting face of the deep.  
 Holy trinity, most cruel Father, festering son.  
 You shall not have me, trinity of nothing, nothing, nothing.  
 (cf. Appendix A.2 *Lenz* Part III) <sup>11</sup>

This dramatic rendering of Lenz's emotional state, articulated through a violent first person narration (a shift from Büchner's gentler third person narration) suggests an intensity of feeling not immediately present in Hamburger's translated text. Harwood's poetic brevity shifts the practical elements of mountain tops, tiredness, even surroundings, into the activities of production. The coldness gripping Lenz in Büchner's prose is now communicated via a dense imagery and framed by setting, vocalisation and gesture. The emphasis of the narrative is also altered from third person narration to first person declamation, from observation to dramatic exposition. Furthermore, Harwood offers image and vocalisation as interrelated elements within the performance context. The final lines of this excerpt, for example, rely as much on rhythmic repetition ('You shall not have me') as the play on the verbal trinity ('nothing, nothing, nothing'). The language is rhythmically varied, providing an interesting texture for the composer to play. Coupled with Sitsky's setting of an atonal, piercing melodic line and spare instrumentation, the operatic effect is one of sharp separation and of dissonance. Both the nature of opera and the designs of the librettist produce a recognisable Lenz-text that nevertheless is absolutely distinct from the prose form in its dramatic emphasis. Harwood and Sitsky's *Lenz* presents a lurid emotional landscape compared to the gentler, darker designs of Büchner.

### 3.2.3 Intertextuality and Textual Transformation

Harwood's libretti reflect an impressive ability for intertextual referencing and borrowing. A meticulous researcher, and an expert borrower of text, reference and images, Harwood dedicated substantial time to exploring the subject of her operas. As a result, her libretti are rich in references to source texts, associated imagery and, in some cases the relevant social and textual histories related to the narrative. *Usher*, for example, is not only based on Poe's short story: Usher's 'showpiece aria' is actually an earlier poem of Poe's, 'The Haunted House', quoted in full and extended by further quotations from Poe's poetry (in this case added by Sitsky). The libretto also directly uses the 'Ethelred' tale within Poe's original *Usher* story.

References to less specific but nevertheless pertinent sources also frequently feature in her words for music, particularly the poetry of the Authorised (King James) version of the Bible. *Voices in Limbo*, for example, includes a series of direct quotations sung halfway through the opera by a chorus of 'Old Testament Voices' (references inserted):

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<sup>11</sup> The second to last line does not appear in Harwood's handwritten copy of the libretti (Riddell papers, University of Queensland Library) nor does it appear in the excerpts she sent to Riddell in a letter dated 19.8.75 (*A Steady Storm* 302). See note 9.

He smote all the first born of Egypt,  
 The chief of all their strength. [Numbers 3.13; Exodus 12.29; Psalm 78.51; Psalm 105.36]<sup>12</sup>  
 The Lord God hath sworn by his holiness  
 That he will take you away with hooks,  
 And your prosperity with fishhooks. [Amos 4.2]  
 Thy sons and thy daughters shall fall by the sword. [Amos 7.17]  
 Happy shall be he, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones. [Psalm 137.9]  
 Yet she was carried away; she went into captivity;  
 her young also were dashed in pieces at the top of all the streets. [Nahum 3.10]  
 For death is come up into our windows,  
 and is entered into our palaces,  
 to cut off the children from without,  
 and the young men from the streets. [Jeremiah 9.21]  
 (cf. Appendix A.4)

Amos, Jeremiah, and Nahum are Minor Prophets whose works are, on the whole, lamentations on exile, loss and destruction. In this section the poetic references to an other-worldly, in this case biblical, landscape work to build on the themes of the opera (not surprisingly, also exile, loss and destruction) and refer to the conflict playing out between the spirit-like characters.

*The Golem* is Harwood's most virtuosic, intertextual and perhaps inter-referential opera. Performed in 1993 at the Sydney Opera House (directed by Barrie Kosky and later released as an audio recording on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Classics label in 2003) the opera is an immense work, written for nineteen character soloists, including nine tenors, a double chorus to sing the twenty demanding choral episodes, an augmented orchestra, double percussion and grand piano. As Antony Ernst notes in his sourcebook written for the 1993 production:

This is not some boy-meets-girl-proceeds-to-die-out-of-consumption sort of opera. This is a complex, modern work with a serious and involved intellectual basis and a production to match. It demands an effort on the part of the performer and the listener to come to terms with the world it constructs and the premises of that world. (1)<sup>13</sup>

The opera draws on a sixteenth century version of the ancient golem narrative, a legend that appeared in fourth century BCE Hebrew and Aramaic texts (as referred to in Psalm 139) and later in the Sefer Yezirah, the sixteenth century Jewish Book of Formation (Krause 113). In this story, a Rabbi uses divine language to animate a clay creature, commanding it to protect and serve a usually oppressed Jewish population. The created golem is eventually corrupted, however, by power (or in many of the modern stories, love) and must ultimately be destroyed. Modern versions of the narrative include George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*, German director Paul Wegener's *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt Kam* (The

<sup>12</sup> Also the subject of a vigorous choral piece in Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, a work Harwood was familiar with.

<sup>13</sup> *The Golem. A Dramaturgical Kit Prepared for the Australian Opera Winter Season 1993. Director Barrie Kosky.* By Antony Ernst. Used with the kind permission of the author and Opera Australia.

Golem: How he Came to be on the Earth) and several novels, including Gustav Meyrink's *Der Golem* and Abraham Rothberg's *The Sword of the Golem*.<sup>14</sup> It was a copy of this last novel (found by Sitsky in the fifty cent bargain basket at a local supermarket) that sparked first his, then Harwood's interest in the golem tale.<sup>15</sup>

Inspired by, but not based on, Rothberg's modern novel, Harwood and Sitsky's *Golem* includes references to ancient and Biblical texts, sixteenth century anti-Semitism and cycles of Jewish prayer. In several of her letters Harwood mentions that she was reading the Psalms, Genesis, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Scholem's book on the Kabbalah, the Lamentations of Jeremiah and John Senior's study of the occult in symbolist literature as sources for her writing.

I'm ready to write up the Golem any time; I've even read the lamentations of Jeremiah (not a funny book). The Golem is especially interesting as I'm reading a good deal on the philosophy of language....Apparently the legends linking the Rabbi Judah Low (Loew) of Prague are quite late. Anyway we aren't bothered with naturalism – we can only hope ours doesn't get loose in the orchestra pit. (Letter to Sitsky 26.11.74)<sup>16</sup>

In an interview with Sitsky, Ralph Lane described Harwood's libretto for *The Golem* as virtuosic: 'When I read Gwen's libretto for the first time, I was absolutely in awe at how powerful that prose was' (Lane 17). It is interesting to note that Lane refers to the libretto as 'prose', suggesting the non-poetic literary and dramatic qualities in the works. Lane went on to suggest to Sitsky: 'It must be thrilling for any composer to read something that imaginative and to take inspiration from it the way you so obviously did' (17). Sitsky replied by saying that 'working with someone like Gwen made the job a thousand times easier...Gwen was extraordinary not only because of the power of her language...but also because she was meticulous in her research' (17). He goes on to say 'it was absolutely accurate and in-depth, so I never had to worry about that side at all' (17-18).

Sitsky also noted Harwood's impressive capacity for seamlessly weaving biblical references into her writing:

Gwen regarded the Saint James [sic] version of the Bible as poetry and she could quote huge slabs of it from memory without any problem whatsoever....The stuff was there in her head and it simply...got woven into her own words. I know when Antony Ernst was preparing an in-house booklet to hand out to singers when he was researching the story and the libretto, he was astonished at the number of references in the libretto. They're huge!....Gwen didn't necessarily identify them because I sensed that she thought if you don't know them, it's either your problem or you're ignorant! (Lane 19).

<sup>14</sup> Other versions of the golem story include Albert Kovessy's Yiddish musical *Goylem* (1921); an opera by Abraham Ellstein (*The Golem*, commissioned by the Ford Foundation and premiered at New York City Opera, 1962); an opera by John Casken (*Golem*, commissioned by the Almeida International Festival of Contemporary Music London, 1989); and a four-act play by Halper Leivick (*Der Goylem*, first published 1921).

<sup>15</sup> Sitsky mentions the fifty cent find in an interview with Ralph Lane (13). Also see Harwood's letter to Sitsky (2.10.74) thanking him for sending a copy of the novel (*A Steady Storm* 292).

<sup>16</sup> Sitsky Papers MS 5630. Letters from Gwen Harwood. Box 1 Folder 2. Cited with permission.

Within the opera there are allusions to saints and prominent political figures of the late sixteenth century (the period of the opera setting) and even visual directions, from Harwood, for film images of refugees, gas chambers or characters portrayed in SS uniforms to be projected onto a backdrop at certain points (not all of which appeared in the final production).

Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Yiddish terms are used throughout. Harwood links quotations from the Torah and the Bible, particularly from the books of Genesis, Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Samuel, Job, Jeremiah and the Psalms, with references to magic and alchemy (the divine incantations around the seven words); Jewish folklore and rituals (Lilith); Sabbath prayers; Latin hymns (Ave Maria; the Hymn to The Virgin); the presence of the Tetragrammaton (the name of God that is not pronounced); the Kabbalah; and Solomonic Magic.<sup>17</sup> The result is a densely intertextual and evocative opera.

Characters are often given lines to sing that allude to Latin prayers, Hebrew sayings, saints, rituals and worship practices. The first scene of Act III, for example, (where Cardinal Silvester warns Rabbi Loew that a blood libel has been placed on one of the town's prominent Jews, Mordecai Meisel) contains eight Latin prayers or phrases ('Querem progressum divina gratia' or 'from which source comes divine grace'); five Hebrew sayings ('Yo-vo adir veyigolenu' or 'May the splendid one redeem us') and two Yiddish phrases (Ernst 48-49. See also Appendix A.5). These multiple images and references to ancient texts and rituals link the narrative to the weighty traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and to philosophies of language, without introducing complicated dialogue into the libretto.

Some of these references are near direct quotations, such as these lines from Psalm 139 (sung by the Rabbi at the end of Act I scene i):

My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lower parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect, and in thy book all my members were written, when as yet there were none of them.<sup>18</sup>

Other references are stylistic tropes, suggestive of epic narratives, or structural strategies that link the opera to a broader textual and spiritual tradition. Both Harwood and Sitsky decided that the dramatic structure of the opera, for example, would be built around the Ten Sephiroth (a prayer of progression from the world we live in, Malkuth, to the unknowable light, 'Kether Elyon'). Key words from the Tree of Sephiroth appear at significant transition points throughout the opera, generally at the beginning of an act or scene, under-girding the developing action and suggesting something of the character of the scene. Each phase of the Sephiroth also gestures towards aspects of the narrative.

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<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Antony Ernst's close reading of the libretto, outlined in his Opera Australia sourcebook (described in note 12). The sourcebook includes a literary history of the golem myth and the opera's plot; a brief history and description of Judaism; a précis of the opera's production and compositional background; and a substantial exegesis of the libretto, including a summary of intertextual (theological, social and biblical) references and translations (or explanations) of Yiddish and Latin phrases.

<sup>18</sup> 'My substance was not hid from thee when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth./ Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect, and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.' Psalm 139. 15-16. King James Version.

Hesed, or 'Love', prefaces the tender attachment and separation of the Golem and Rachel in Act II, scene v; and Yesod, or 'Foundation' prefaces the scene of the Golem's creation in Act I. The opera ends with a version of a prayer sent to Sitsky by the Rabbi of Prague's Old-New Synagogue (Lane 20) which is sung each week at the synagogue in memory of Rabbi Loew.

Still other references and metaphors are *intra-textual*, working from the dominant images of the opera to explicate dramatic action. Themes of earth, the body, power and hatred are interwoven across contexts and dialogues, such as in this climactic finale to Act II (scene v). Here the Golem realises his love for the Rabbi's daughter, Rachel, is doomed to be unrealised. His desolation and suffering, made the more potent by his experiences of love, underpin the remaining action within the opera. In this aria Harwood's imagery resonates both narratively and thematically:

Let my body return to earth.  
 I have tasted love, I have drunk my death.  
 Earth, my mother, to whom all creatures are equal,  
 You know whom I love, she is set on my heart as a seal.  
 Give her to me in the brightness of her body.  
 Immensity of the starry space, give me the darkness of her thighs.  
 Vineyards of the hills, give me her breasts ripening with desire.  
 Spring rain on the snowy blossom, give me her nakedness.  
 O tear from my forehead the word of Truth, and leave me death;  
 Dissolve me, return me to the elements, let my tongue whisper again among the grasses,  
 Let me be as in the whirlwind, water streaming from the fountain mouth.

*(The Golem weeps.)*

(cf. Appendix A.5 Act II scene 5)

These are tactile, sensual images of the body, and the Golem's link to earth. Key words such as 'seal', 'earth' and 'body' appear throughout each act (culminating in this aria), highlighting narrative and musical significance; the nakedness of the golem, spiritually, biologically, socially, is reflected in the naturalistic images of longing used here. Harwood also reminds us of the central narrative at this point, allowing the golem to speak plainly of the word of truth on his forehead and his desire to dissolve back into the elements from which he is made.

Harwood's approach to her libretto was a critical part of the platform she established for Sitsky's music. *The Golem* is musically based on one of Sitsky's earlier works, *The Ten Sephiroth of the Kabbalah* for solo choir and percussion (1974). It relies on a complicated mapping derived from the Jewish mystical system of Gematria, where Hebrew letters are linked to particular numbers used to decipher hidden esoteric meanings within language.<sup>19</sup> In this case, the Gematrian numbers are assigned to certain notes, note series or rhythmic patterns and then mapped onto the words. Harwood ensured that recurring

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<sup>19</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Sitsky's harmonic language in *The Golem* refer to Judith Crispin's essay 'The Nuctemeron of Sitsky', also published in her monograph *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni and Its Reinvigoration in the Music of Larry Sitsky: The Operas Doktor Faust and The Golem* (2007).

words (such as earth, fire, wind, water, seal, Israel) appeared throughout the libretto, acting as musical trigger points for Sitsky's mapping schema. Ralph Lane observes that Sitsky unified the drama by using 'recurring leitmotifs' and 'musical gestures representative of certain words or elements' (Lane 16); 'Earth', for instance, is always accompanied by a string figure; 'seal' a woodwind motif; 'Israel' a quadruple patten; and 'naked', 'monster' and 'hell' are always sung high-pitched.<sup>20</sup>

The result is a linguistically and musically encoded relationship between the esoteric concerns of the opera, the harmonic language Sitsky employs and Harwood's thoughtful libretto. In this instance words do not behave precisely as expected, reworked as they are to de-stabilise conventional points of emphasis. When, at a moment of intense grief and horror following the death of Rachel, the tenor voice of Golem sings 'hell' at an extraordinarily high pitch against a counter-pointed rhythm, the possible literary interpretations and experience of dramatic affect are simultaneously both cerebral (recognising that the music is being composed along strict mystico-theoretical lines) and poignant. From Harwood's initial translation of the folktale we see a libretto written with complexities of Sitsky's word setting in mind, a libretto that repositions the evoked and literal interpretations of the dramatic action through vigorous inter and intra textual references.

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the Gematrian numbers are marked on the third and fourth versions of the libretto drafts. Sitsky has also circled key words and phrases on both of these drafts (held in the Sitsky Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 5630).

## 4 SIGHT AND SOUND: LIBRETTI ON STAGE

Opera, let us understand this right off, is not light entertainment. It is drama at its most serious and most complete. It is also the most complex operation in music and the most complex in stage production. Even a circus is easier to mount.

Virgil Thomson<sup>1</sup>

American composer Virgil Thomson describes opera as ‘a dramatic action involving impersonation, words and music’ (64). Without each of these elements in balance the work is something else – a cantata, a mime, a play, perhaps – but not an opera. Operatic dramatic action, as Thompson rightly points out, is shared between the stage, words, and music. How then, does one create an effective, interesting libretto for this context? How must it be written to provide adequate dramatic impetus within the spectacle of music and movement?

This chapter explores the characteristics of Harwood’s libretti within such a context. That is, how she envisaged and crafted the texts as dramatic pieces; and how she negotiated and collaborated with Sitsky to produce a balance between staging, word and music. Of particular interest is how her dramatic sensibilities, evident throughout her career, were translated into the opera texts. The following discussion has been divided into four sections. The first three address Harwood’s engagement with various problems encountered in opera writing, that is, negotiating dramatic effect; the problem of character; and writing for the stage, respectively. The final section offers a case study of Harwood and Sitsky’s dramatic practices in the adaptation of Wilde’s *De Profundis*.

### 4.1 Negotiating Dramatic Effect

In various essays about her writing (‘Words and Music’, ‘Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist’ and ‘Lamplit Presences’), Harwood returns to the recurring problems faced by librettists. She discusses the need to condense textual sources and deal with complex characters or narrative settings within the bounds of opera. She touches on the art of producing succinct, short phrases with as many easy vowels as possible (in her words, the art of ‘singability’), and deals with the distinct possibility that all the words will not actually be heard. As a genre opera is often expected to offer greater dramatic intensity than other forms. As Herbert Lindenberger observes there is a ‘perception on the part of composers that the subjects they set must be capable of a higher and more sustained level of intensity than those of non-musical drama’ (Lindenberger 53), suggesting that the malleable language of music must bear a substantial degree of the dramatic weight inherited by a formidable story line.

Harwood’s ability to write singable lines certainly provides a good platform for building useable dramatic material, as does her consistent attention to the obvious boundaries of performance time and setting. The seemingly infinite combinations of various musical settings available to an avant-garde composer like Sitsky, however, along with the essential questions of staging, movement and dramatic

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<sup>1</sup> *Music with Words: A Composer’s View*, 59.



structure are another set of questions. Referring again to Lindenberger's observations, the combined effect of operatic elements produces continual movement between 'dramatic emphasis' on one hand (with attention to lyric and the predominance of language) and 'performance' on the other, focussing on spectacular sets, vocal virtuosity and musical complication (56). Harwood's libretti consistently deal with such flux, as they offer both dramatic intensity and narrative coherence (elements both she and Sitsky strived for in the opera works) within their projected performance context.

Attached to each of the operas is an often comprehensive set of discussions in Harwood and Sitsky's correspondence, canvassing questions of atmospheric effect, length, the order of the acts, stage settings, and the interplay of musical and narrative strategies in structuring the works. Despite their reputations for aesthetic experimentation both Harwood and Sitsky were also extremely pragmatic when it came to their operas. The process of drafting *Voices in Limbo* is a helpful case in point. Early in the writing process Sitsky suggested the Tibetan Book of the Dead; *The Ultimate Elsewhere* by JH Brennan; and *Journeys out of the Body* by RA Monroe as possible inspirations for the opera:<sup>2</sup>

It's this sort of area I think we could explore. Communication between other beings and ourselves? Between other beings? da Vinci defined music as 'giving form to the invisible'. I wanted an opera that would fit such a definition. what do you think? (Letter to Harwood 25.2.76)<sup>3</sup>

The abstract quality of the *Voices* narrative combined with the idea of writing a non-staged opera, created substantially different demands for Harwood's libretto writing. This work demanded a text that both explored the esoteric concepts envisaged by Sitsky and evoked a real enough sense of character and narrative progression to provide coherence in performance.

Harwood first sent Sitsky a partial draft in February 1976 (*A Steady Storm*, 308):

I enclose a draft of Part I of *Voices*; two unborn children in the waters of the womb are getting snatches of the world from the elements and human voices. I shall have fire (and light) then earth, then the breath of air. The unborn hear the voices of children, lovers, water itself. In the end the voices of the elements will mingle with history.

Could you ever set something like this? If not, I'll try again (ever your servant). Would you like to see it all first? (Letter from Harwood to Sitsky 13.2.76 *A Steady Storm* 308)

Given the ensuing correspondence, it is likely that Harwood sent another draft to Sitsky sometime between the date of this letter and July when a full libretto draft had been completed. Here is Sitsky's response to Harwood, dated July 26 1976.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>JH or 'Herbie' Brennan; novelist, occultist and Kabbalist. *The Ultimate Elsewhere* was published by Signet in 1975. Robert Monroe's *Journeys Out of the Body* was published by Doubleday in 1971.

<sup>3</sup>Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630, Box 1 Folder 2, Letters from Gwen Harwood. Cited with permission.

<sup>4</sup>See note 3, above.

Generally, it's definitely on the correct wavelength. BUT, 1. too long/ 2. sometimes too documentary/ 3. too much attempt at atmosphere: I'll lay that on thick with electronics and etc/ 4. we need, I feel, a more dramatic and direct 'story' line/ 5. don't forget that the listener must be able to identify voices, if not accurately, then at least intuitively...Some fab lines Mrs Harwood.

At this early stage of drafting, questions of balance, both musical and dramatic, were already at the forefront. Atmosphere, for example, can be evoked by both language and music: too much of either at the same time, however, can create a confusing dramatic cacophony. In *Voices*, electrotonica and the multiple phased sounds available via tape reels was to be dominant. The exchange is reminiscent of the eighteenth century debates regarding the proper function of words and music (outlined in section 2.1) and, importantly, demonstrates Harwood and Sitsky's pursuit of unity across the elements, a unity embedded not only within the structure of the opera but within the writing process, expressed in late modern, experimental forms.

A few weeks later Sitsky wrote:

Great apologies re VOICES IN LIMBO; the trouble is that I haven't as yet got a clear idea if what I want myself; various things in Draft 1 got me going, and I am hoping you will use it as a basis. The dream-phantasmagoria bit is fine, but I was a little worried that lack of a line might make the final piece meander too much. I hope I've given you some guidelines now....Unlike the operas, where I tend to visualise an enormous amount, here the problem is much more abstract, and yet I don't want a purely abstract result, but a dramatic one. As I said an opera for voices alone.

We have a lovely new computer to produce electronic music, and I plan to make good use of it for this work. (Letter to Harwood 2.8.76)<sup>5</sup>

Sitsky's letter suggests that whilst he considered the work to be unlike the operas, he was simultaneously aiming for a far more concrete version of the concept – exploring the idea of a bodiless existence in an embodied, corporeal context – than Harwood's initial vision.

Harwood's response, whilst reassuring Sitsky that the 'promised Crazy Voices' was on its way (*A Steady Storm*, 316), was to build a libretto that attached the imagery of esotericism to the mechanism of conversation, as seen in the opera's opening phantasmagorical sequence (discussed in 3.2.1):

Man: Are we waking or dreaming, we lay down together,  
 Woman: We shed our dress of daylight,  
           we lie in the sphere of the moon.  
           We are alone, and everywhere,  
           boundless and weightless.  
           Where is the past and where is the future?  
 Man: Our voices flow over images face to face in the dark mirror.  
 (cf. Appendix A.4)

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<sup>5</sup> See note 3, above.

This is followed by a series of exchanges between the characters (who are voices only); first between the man and woman, then with both and a guide; then villagers and their vicar, and then the man, woman, some demons, and children; and so on until the voices of the man and woman return, this time with angels and demons. This progression is held together by the occasional voice of a narrator.

In this radiophonic opera, the characters are not built on the apparatus of the theatre – sets, costume, and movement – in order to function. There is little dramatic action and there are no scene breaks. Tension, however, is built through the gradual progression of conversations and the steady movement towards a climactic scene between children (and innocence) and death (in the shape of demons). The sequence is alternately spoken by a chorus of children, and sung by ‘demons’ (a bass baritone).

Children: Mother and Goddess, bear us again, give us life.  
 Goddess and Mother, feed us.  
*Demons: Granary of death, feed us.*  
 Children: Goddess and Mother, play with us.  
*Demons: Death of the suburbs, stifle us.*  
 Children: Mother of the shining breast, teach us.  
*Demons: Death of the schoolroom and daily habit, extinguish us.*  
 Children: Mother of Mothers, shelter us.  
 Demons: Death of cities, death of hopelessness, bear us away.  
 (cf. Appendix A.4, emphasis mine)

Harwood takes the ceremonial function of repetition, explored in *Usher* and *Lenz*, a step further in this particular evocation of religious ritual. Here the rhythm swings between the two sets of voices, similar to the liturgical pattern of versical and response. The context and text, however, make this a slightly dark reference to religious ritual rather than a devout imitation. In this form, the recurring motifs of dreams, death and fear provide enough substance for Sitsky’s setting, and the desired dramatic line, without meandering, or crowding the aural space.

## 4.2 Operatic Drama: Singing Characters, Truncated Stories

Librettists must employ a subtly different range of literary devices – inference, rhythm, imagery, repetition – to those used in other dramatic forms. They must often satisfy multiple demands and offer multiple, concurrent dramatic threads. These difficulties are most visible when it comes to the creation of operatic characters. Chester Kallman observed that writing operatic characters is ‘rather like writing a series of ground-basses....to say that they are successful as characters and situations is merely to say that the composer has found them a convenient basis for a convincing song’ (Auden and Kallman 618-19). That is, operatic characters must function within that heady mix of words, music and movement.

Musicologist Fritz Noske notes that whilst drama on the stage allows for complex characters and the opportunity for audiences to share narrative memories and experiences, the abbreviated space of opera often allows only for a rather abstract apprehension of literary devices. He cites Verdi’s opera

version of Shakespeare's *Othello* as an excellent example of such truncated drama (134-135). In the first act of Shakespeare's play Othello's great courage in defending himself against Brabantio's accusations is visible: we see a complex history and view Othello's struggles, sharing his later moments of memory and despair. In Verdi's opera, however, such events are described as a summary of unseen action, and so a different kind of response occurs. This condensed, albeit musically augmented drama produces a rather more abstract knowledge of character and history. Because of this, Noske argues, the emphasis is on situations rather than characterisation or plot, and dramatic structure is derived from situational sequences and musical expressions of mood. Noske goes on to suggest that in opera 'lyricism and dramatic action do not exclude each other: "outer" or "inner" action (or both) proceed during scenes dominated by the expression of feelings' (Noske 135). That is, we read by inference and evocation as much as by the straightforward narration of plain drama.

When developing the libretto for *Usher* Harwood was compelled not only to deal with the problem of condensing Poe's drama into a one act piece but also to grapple with the significant dramatic problems that arise when the work comprises, in Harwood's words, '[t]hree main characters: one apparently dead, one not at all well, one helplessly recounting it all' ('Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 5). There were other limitations too, of performance time (under one hour) and the number of singers and players available. One way of dealing with the problem was to write a relatively short libretto and either layer each scene with dense imagery or limit the language to dialogue. *Usher* is, in fact, a sequence of set pieces – arias, recitatives, duets, and interludes – bounded by a prologue and epilogue. Much of the narrative is implied in the progression of these pieces and in soliloquy, and key moments of the story are also presented through mimed action occurring concurrently with some of the principal arias.

Usher's principal aria (citing Poe's poem) neatly summarises the evocative grist of the tale. It begins:

In the greenest of our valleys  
By good angels tenanted,  
once a fair and stately palace -  
radiant palace - reared its head.  
(cf. Appendix A.1. Part VI)

Whilst Usher sings, the death of Madeline is enacted, utilising mime, scrim curtaining and dim lighting. The aria ends with words of Harwood's own:

My sister is dead.  
O that exquisite eye in its cradle of bone was blind,  
but her ravishing cheek and breast glowed  
with the mockery of blush,  
as she lay in her deathbed  
and terrible in death  
her lips still curved in a lingering smile....  
(cf. Appendix A.1. Part VI)

Harwood's suffixed stanza (*My sister is dead*) shifts attention to the body of Madeline as the death scene is enacted. Poe's rhythmic repetition (*once a fair and stately palace/radiant palace*), a common pattern of poets seeking to elicit memories of happier, innocent times, underpins the dramatic sweep of the narrative. These simple enough strategies of visually evocative language and tight, rhythmic forms, keep a potentially wild work in check.

Herbert Lindenberger suggests that the soliloquy is one of the most potent forms available within opera because '...with the addition of the orchestra the singer's words are variously stressed, questioned, commented upon ...[and] the musical accompaniment lends [it] a ceremonial dimension that would otherwise be missing' (Lindenberger 34). This monologue is properly a soliloquy, revealing, confessional and summary, and its place in the opera, separated from the action and occurring at the two-thirds climax point of the narrative, does elicit a ceremonial aspect. For Sitsky, Usher's soliloquy was intensified by the enactment of the death of Madeleine: 'Usher's long aria will be accompanied by action which will drive home to the audience exactly what has happened' (Sitsky to Harwood, cited in Harwood's letter to Riddell, 12.5.65, *A Steady Storm* 199). Harwood's choice to place Poe's poem alongside the enactment of Madeline's death is deft. The vivid imagery and varying rhythm of Poe's language provides balance to Sitsky's envisaged staging (and setting), whilst offsetting the restrained narrative style of other parts of the piece.

Harwood writes that when crafting *Usher* 'Larry and I had to compress and not expand the story' ('Memoirs' 5). 'He [Larry] wanted to keep an atmosphere of tense and haunting evil from beginning to end. There is no comic relief' (5). This is in part achieved in the clever use of Poe's poem and the formal structures discussed previously. Harwood also utilised other textual connections within and around Poe's *Usher*. Toward the end of the opera, the narrator reads a substantial extract from 'The Mad Trist' (Poe's medieval romance story within the story of *Usher*, by the fictitious Sir Launcelot Canning). The extract narrates the story of 'Ethelred and the Dragon', describing a terrible, gripping battle scene between the noble hero and his fearful opponent. Usher's ensuing monologue is as follows:

We have put her living in the tomb!  
 said I not that my senses were acute?  
 I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin.  
 I heard them, many, many, many days ago  
 Yet I dared not  
 I dared not speak!  
 And now, tonight Ethelred!  
 Ha! Ha!  
 The breaking of the hermit's door,  
 the death cry of the dragon,  
 the clangour of the shield say,  
 rather the rending of her coffin,

the grating of the iron hinges of her prison  
 her struggles,  
 her struggles within the coppered archway of her vault!  
 (cf. Appendix A.1. Part IX)

Usher's summary of the narrative is linked, via the images of Ethelred and his dragon, with the gritty, bloody action occurring at the close of the opera. (Harwood instructs that the narrator's section be read, not sung, presumably for reasons of both clarity and brevity.) The chivalric images of swordplay and daring reflect the gothic horror within Poe's narrative and remind us of tropes not necessarily apparent in the narrative alone. Intertextual references and the use of both prose and poetic forms, allow the libretto to communicate an intense, complex drama whilst maintaining brevity and lean verbal lines.

Harwood and Sitsky's preference for narrative complexity continued to pose other structural and conceptual problems. Writing about the narrative shape of *Lenz*, Harwood notes:

The libretto presented some formidable difficulties. Lenz suffers his madness in a small mountain village where he is befriended by a pastor of simple, radiant faith. How can one represent the phantasmal Friedericke on stage when she is present in Lenz's mind? How can one make blasphemy credible as a mortal sin to modern audiences? The figure of Lenz himself, the mortally sensitive outsider, presented the greatest challenge. He veers between lucidity and madness. How can dramatic power be sustained in a story with the real action taking place on the frontiers of the mind? (Harwood 'Words and Music' 376)

In some ways, conveying internal action is simplified within the operatic apparatus (the soliloquy or aria, for example). The necessary work convincing modern audiences of any mortal sin, however, poses difficulties enough in prose; on stage, one must rely on the evocative effect of movements, expression and sound to reinforce such subtle narrative messages.

In an attempt to craft a compelling case for 'interior action', Harwood's first draft begins immediately with a fearful, anguished Lenz describing his torments. The scene is Pastor Oberlin's house in the small village of Waldbach. It is sunset and alpine scenery is beyond the window. Lenz sings:

Earth and sky are melting together  
 I am face to face with night and silence,  
 With the terrible silence of earth and stone,  
 And over the paths my feet have taken –  
 So long, so far! I must have rest –  
 Something is following, something comes closer,  
 It mocks my mind and hunts me down.  
 (Scene I. Draft I, p1)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In later versions of the libretto 'Scenes' are reworked and relabelled 'Parts'.

This opening launches the audience into the heart of the psychological drama, tracing the mental collapse of the poet and establishing a platform for the out-workings of Lenz's illness, to be witnessed over the next sixty minutes or so. Whilst the action is anchored in the village setting, the picture of Lenz's mental world is not grounded. Next to this scene description Sitsky has written 'dramatically not strong – conventional' on Harwood's typescript.<sup>7</sup> (Lenz's opening lines were abandoned altogether, but the scene setting – that is sunset, seen from Oberlin's house, remained, transferred to a later scene in the opera).

Harwood's second draft is a very different text. It begins with a church service and a choir singing a hymn of praise:

For the grave cannot praise thee.  
 death cannot celebrate thee  
 they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.  
 The living, the living shall praise thee,  
 As we do this day.  
 (Scene I. Draft II, p1)

This is followed by Oberlin's exhortation to his congregation, encouraging greater thankfulness to God and acts of generosity. This shift creates a more vivid, concrete, platform for Lenz's arrival in the small village and immediately directs our attention to the supporting cast and context. The opening reference to liturgy moves the audience directly to a suite of intertextual references and associated images that work well to highlight the spiritual aspects of Lenz's dilemma.

The Lenz character is complex in both narrative and symbolic terms: his language is quite open, sometimes repetitive. Although it was Sitsky who ultimately chose the precise rhythmical setting for the words, Harwood's application of relevant imagery and speech rhythms was crucial. In this libretto Harwood uses the outward moments of Lenz's madness to frame his interior anguish, tracing his decline through monologues linked to pivotal moments of dramatic development: arriving in the village; attempting to drown himself in the village fountain; endeavouring to raise a girl from the dead; swimming in the village fountain.

Harwood also uses rhythm to capture the frenzied, disconnected mental state of Lenz. The libretto is quite forceful on the page, but even more so in its sung context (refer to section 3.2.2). The repetition of imagery throughout the work (blackness; darkness; sleep, either of souls or natural spaces; and the links between mental state and the seasons) provides a series of visual themes, giving Sitsky a robust series of anchor words on which to hinge his setting. The libretto, combined with the 'mix of jaggedness and lyricism in Sitsky's vocal lines' (Holmes et al 27) works to create a compelling picture of the poet's descent into madness.

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<sup>7</sup> Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630, Box 1 Folder 2, Letters from Gwen Harwood. Cited with permission.

*Lenz* was certainly a success; and Harwood did manage to solve the structural problems she encountered.

When I finally heard the opera in the Sydney Opera House I had no feeling at all of the words I had written being separate from action, music, gesture, the stage setting and the dramatic flow of the story. ...The visualization of *Lenz* on the stage was incredibly close to my imagined opera: by themselves my words would have no particular power, but wedded to the music they become part of the magic that, in opera, is quite beyond the sum of all the parts. (Harwood 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 7-8)

Her work is deft and tightly woven, drawing on the contrast of internal and external action and the vigorousness of her language to illuminate the madness of a relatively complicated and multi faceted character.

### 4.3 Writing for the Visual

In the mid eighteenth century French poet Marmontel wrote to his opera collaborator, the composer Grétry, '...it is therefore the poet's duty, as chief engineer of the undertaking, to give directions to the dancers, the machinists, the painters....The poet is to carry in his mind a comprehensive view of the whole of the drama' (Charlton 235).<sup>8</sup> For Marmontel the mantles of librettist and dramaturge were consubstantial, as the poet both shaped an opera's dramatic trajectory through the libretto and, as chief engineer, also provided a vision for the performance, effectively becoming a proto-director.

Whilst opera production techniques and expectations have significantly changed since Marmontel wrote his explanatory letter, the capacity to envisage a dramatic whole still remains an essential task for opera writers. Coupled with a strong sense of the visual, is Harwood's sense of dialogue and the type of line that might look bald on the page but in performance, and in conjunction with music, works extremely well. This is, however, an extremely difficult thing to achieve. American composer Virgil Thomson's particularly pessimistic view outlines the problem:

How do you go about procuring a libretto? My own way is to address myself to a poet. This is dangerous because English-language poets have over the last century and a half been most of them quite clumsy at handling dramatic action. They can't avoid talking in their own person, [and] seem unable to write dialogue objectively. But I think there is no way around that. The poets must simply educate themselves if they are at all stagestruck. (Thomson, 1989, 65)

In an interview with Alison Hoddinott, Harwood commented that until she had seen opera she had no real concept of what it was: 'the resonance of opera is something I didn't understand when I listened simply to records, indeed, in those days, I didn't know what an opera might be' (Interview

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<sup>8</sup> Citing Francesco *Algarotti's Saggio Sopra l'Opera in musica* (1755) from the English translation in Oliver Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History* (1952) 657-8.



transcript, 1988, 6). Fortunately, she did acquire a comprehensive, complex view of the operatic genre. In the same interview with Hoddinott, Harwood glories in the sheer physicality of the genre:

I love opera because of its mystery...It's the only one of the arts that you can't perform in private. It needs a community, an operatic community...Very rare in ordinary life, the depths of feeling are probed in opera. The whole body is used...and a good operatic singer can make you feel that even his fingertips are involved, or that his feet are like the feet of a statue. (5-6)

Echoing Thomson's assertion that poets educate themselves in the specifics of opera drama, Harwood's approach is one of both imagination and immersion. 'As I am working on a text I imagine in detail the gestures or movements on stage that will accompany the words' ('Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 7). It is a precise poetic strategy, linking the literary modes of metaphor and imagery to the specific requirements of the stage.

The natural links between poetry, movement and image are amply displayed in Harwood's work. Much of her work is dense with rich visual descriptions where poems such as 'In Brisbane', 'All Souls', and 'Notturmo' appear to effortlessly weave complex metaphors and imagery with narrative movement. Furthermore, her capacity for linguistic play, evident in her Sappho post cards,<sup>9</sup> acrostics, occasional poetry and pseudonyms, might also be seen as another faculty of the dramatic. Jennifer Strauss terms this 'the operatic I' of Harwood's writing (to which I will return in section 5.1), that is, a dramatic, performance oriented approach to creating poetry. Other critics have also observed Harwood's capacity for creative play. Vincent Buckley comments that '...her impersonation of other poets was an outflow of creative energy in conceptual play. She was playing, as it were, with the concepts of other creative selves' (195; also cited in Strauss *Boundary Conditions* 24).

Translating this dramatic sensitivity to the sphere of performance, then, might not appear to be overly demanding. Nevertheless, Harwood did have her doubts about the transition from page to stage, not so much in terms of language but of context. In a letter to her friend, stage designer Tony Riddell, Harwood asks for advice on staging her first opera with Sitsky, *Usher*: '...he [Sitsky] asks for my views on settings; I have few, as I have no practical experience with theatre at all: I'd like to discuss it with you' (12.5.65 *A Steady Storm* 199). Sitsky set the substantial aria 'In the greenest of our valleys', a demanding solo appearing two thirds of the way through the opera, as Usher's 'show-piece'. He envisaged it being accompanied by an enactment of the Lady's death, accomplished by stand ins for Usher and Madeline, fancy lighting and an image of a vault, as outlined in a previous letter to Harwood. Kratzmann has reproduced Harwood's letter to Riddell in its entirety, including the excerpts from the libretto, some of Sitsky's comments on staging and his note regarding extra text

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<sup>9</sup> Harwood's famous 'Sappho' cards are 'handmade postcards, often featuring a woodcut from a Victorian ladies' magazine glued to a piece of card. Many are talkies, with balloon speech bubbles cut from her children's comic books' (Alison Hoddinott and Greg Kratzmann. 'Introduction'. *Gwen Harwood: Collected Poems* pxiii). See pages 13-15 of the photographic plates in *A Steady Storm* for reproductions of four Sappho cards.

inserted into the libretto.<sup>10</sup> Harwood writes: ‘I hope you can give me some idea of how this could be set up on a stage – could you give me some hope that it won’t be ludicrous?...I feel sure a practical man like you could solve this inoperable problem’ (12.5.65 *A Steady Storm* 199).

Puns aside, Harwood’s letter demonstrates the early formulations of her stage craft in a style of collaboration and writing that not only allowed but encouraged the marks of performance, setting and staging. Six months earlier, Harwood had provided a brief sketch for Sitsky on staging *Usher*:

Narrator on page 1 would be in front of the house curtain; after that the one room will do, with changes of lighting...I imagine a Poe-Gothic interior as you say in your letter: perhaps some armorial trappings with the edges eaten away; a simple bowl of bread pudding (Roddy’s last supper) perhaps; a divan, bed, or sofa...Madeline could pass slowly off the stage on page 3 after ‘Rakes my nerves’ or she could move off after the Big Aria. (14.11.64 *A Steady Storm* 196)

Even at that stage of writing Harwood’s concepts for the opera were already clear. Furthermore, her instincts were more than justified on seeing the opera realised on stage. As Sitsky’s bibliographer Robyn Holmes notes, it was hearing and seeing the performance of *Usher* that confirmed to Harwood her capacity as a librettist: ‘. . . that the staging managed to evoke for her [Harwood] exactly what her inner ear had conceived as the sounds of the words gave her enormous confidence in her ability. . .’ (Holmes et al 26). Furthermore, the libretto, with its range of subtleties and its intimate connection to the physical space of the opera, was also a success. The first opera had all the right elements and Harwood worked confidently across them, deftly incorporating visions of set, lighting and movement into both the process of collaboration and the shape of the libretto.

Whilst some productions of their operas did include a choreographer (Sonni Jose for the 1965 performance of *Usher*; and Tessa Bremnar for the 1976 Adelaide Festival of Arts performance of *Fieery Tales*), neither Harwood nor Sitsky dwelt long on complex plans for movement: action was usually linked to narrative necessity and described in simple terms. During the process of writing they did, however, make sufficient reference to key actions, shaping the structure of the libretto or score to highlight envisaged points of narrative turn via movement. And even though Harwood was not directly responsible for the staging of any of the opera productions, the imagined space of the performance had a significant impact on what she wrote.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter dated 12.5.65, *A Steady Storm* 197-200. See Appendix B for a copy of the source of the text inserted by Sitsky, Poe’s poem ‘The Conquering Worm’.

After the first performance of *Usher* in Hobart, August 1965, Harwood wrote to her friends Sybille and Vivian Smith:

The producer of Usher, Stephan Beinl, has some marvellous ideas. The stagings are terrific, really beyond anything I'd hoped for. A front gauze give a suitably mysterious and dim appearance to it all, and the lighting is used to show up various parts of the crumbly old House (a large gentleman's residence in disrepair) and its tenants. Norman Yenn, Usher, is a wonderful singer and actor and is terrifyingly mad. The scenes with Madeline are played molto incestuoso: Usher is practically on top of her while they sing. (18.8.65. *A Steady Storm* 201)

As her letter makes clear, Beinl's staging both worked with Harwood's expectations (in part built by Tony Riddell) and exceeded them.<sup>11</sup> For Harwood the physicality of opera was not merely an adjunct to language and music, but part of the fundamental concept of the operatic work held in tension throughout the drafting process with the practical demands of engaging with the narrative. Many years later, Harwood cited Sitsky's response to the first performance of the opera: 'What pleased me most was that instinctively the marriage of movement and music on stage, that is, the crucial question of timing, was visible' (Harwood, 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 6).

By the time she was writing *The Golem* in the late 1970's Harwood's capacity to work across the visual, linguistic and aural aspects of opera was embedded in her writing process. Her drafts and correspondence with Sitsky suggests deft handling of subtle visual cues and nuanced connections between the libretto and the envisaged performance. Just after completing the first draft Harwood wrote to Sitsky clarifying the incorporation of the Ten Sephiroth into the opera's structure (following a suggestion he made):

I can start on Draft 2 and see how you'd like the 10 Sephiroth incorporated. I imagine they would be associated with the characters, with the God>Sephiroth>Man link and contraction>breaking apart>mending in the action. (23.7.77 *A Steady Storm* 332)<sup>12</sup>

The letter ends with a tongue in cheek reference to staging: 'What about the colour symbolism of the Kabbala [sic]? Are we going to work with the designer or do we get medieval outdoor dunnies without notice?' (23.7.77 *A Steady Storm* 332). Despite the irony, Harwood's comments suggest that she was constructing her libretto with a unified whole in mind, addressing seemingly small visual details and envisaging the evocative possibilities of colour and texture linked to the broad structural form of the opera's narrative skeleton.

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<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Tony Riddell, written just after that first performance, Harwood notes that 'Usher was triumphantly successful. I wished for your presence, especially as I realised that I was looking at your conception; they had a scrim and then layers of interior screens...lit by imaginative colours; the sets I thought were not well painted, but they were adequate.' (20.8.65 *A Steady Storm* 202).

<sup>12</sup> *The Golem* was eventually set around the Ten Sephiroth of the Kabbalah, as outlined in section 3.2.3; each of the ten prayers of progression formed the beginning of a movement within the opera's three acts.

#### 4.4 Visual Transformations: Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*

Harwood and Sitsky's final collaborative work was a setting of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, commissioned by the Friends of the Canberra School of Music and completed in June 1982. Written for baritone, percussion and strings the work encases selected sections from Wilde's letters within a sparse musical setting. In the introduction to his autograph score of *De Profundis*, Sitsky notes that the idea of setting the work was first suggested to him by Australian musicologist Elizabeth Wood. Early versions of a libretto (by Wood) did not get past the first sketch and Sitsky later suggested the idea to Harwood.

Technically, *De Profundis* is a *monophony* (Sitsky's term), written to be performed as either a concert piece or staged performance:

I wanted to compose a work that could be presented as a concert piece at one end of the spectrum, to a totally produced work at the other, with all the possible shades of interpretation between these two extremes... Even a concert work should not deprive the audience of the opportunity of visualizing Oscar in prison dress, remembering his past glory and finding a new peace. To this end, the words are to be reproduced in any performance of the work. (Programme note in the composer's autograph score, *De Profundis*, 1)

Regardless of performance mode, Sitsky makes it clear that the theatricality of the work and its evocative, visual elements must be presented.

Sitsky and Harwood crafted their version of *De Profundis* to be performed with varying degrees of dramatic apparatus. Unlike *Voices in Limbo*, a radiophonic work that plays with the notions of dramatic effect, character and operatic performance within specific conditions, *De Profundis* is a far more flexible work, with various possible performance scenarios. This implies a different function for Harwood's libretto, compared to say that of *The Golem*, in conveying the visual sense she and Sitsky aspired to create. Here, the libretto must work entirely with music, instead of music, movement and staging, to carry the majority of the work's dramatic weight.

It is worth noting that this opera received little attention in Harwood and Sitsky's correspondence and the libretto was completed with minimal revisions. Given that projects were planned after the completion of this opera, such as *Maurice Guest* and a Bicentennial piece, it is likely that the absence of communication represented smooth working conditions and well-honed expertise, rather than fading enthusiasm. Harwood's single reference to the work in her libretti essays is perhaps less understandable. Certainly, the source material for this opera was unlike anything else she had worked with: '[u]sing only Wilde's own words, I prepared a libretto by lifting out sentences and rearranging them to make a dramatic whole, showing Wilde's bitterness changing to a new understanding' (Harwood, *Memoirs* 10). Nevertheless, Harwood expressed her attachment to the text and its subject. Whilst working on the text for *De Profundis*, she suffered an accident that 'kept her out of action for a while: I was virtually imprisoned' (*Memoirs* 10). Her isolation inspired an intense empathy with Wilde's writing and circumstances that, according to Harwood, improved the resulting libretto.

The early versions of Wilde's *De Profundis* paint an intimate picture of his philosophical and emotional journey which, unlike later editions, is unhindered by details of correspondence, court cases, money and protracted arguments. The 1905 truncated edition of Wilde's *De Profundis* was published posthumously by Robert Ross (with Methuen) as a heavily edited version of Wilde's many letters written to Lord Alfred Douglas whilst the former was in Reading Gaol.<sup>13</sup> The edited letters were also published later in 1908, along with 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', in *Wilde Vol II. Collection of British Authors*, published by Bernhard Tauchnitz. Wilde's letters in full were not published until 1949, however, mostly due to attempts by Lord Alfred Douglas to first destroy the manuscript and then suppress its publication.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, most of the biographical information (Wilde's blunt descriptions of Douglas's vanity, selfishness and excess) and the descriptions of the minutiae of a destructive, obsessive relationship (including comprehensive descriptions of Douglas' erratic behaviour and excessive spending) do not appear in any edition prior to 1949. Early editions focus on Wilde's bitterness, his musings on the nature of art, society and himself, and the perspectives that imprisonment has produced. It is, in all, an emotional survey rather than a description of events, in which careful editing has produced a work concerned with the essence of Wilde's letters; that is, aesthetics, redemption and the place of art in life.

Harwood seems to have followed this earlier editorial trend. Her arrangement of words already reworked into a truncated edition adds a further layer to the presentation of Wilde's story circulating as yet another *De Profundis*. Wilde's words are substantially reordered and re-contextualised. They do not necessarily appear in their full form and they rarely appear in the same order (syntactical or thematic) as those in the initial text. Harwood's libretto is a distillation, an editing, a rendering of what is perceived as Wilde's intent and, as Sitsky commented, an exploration of the dramatic elements of Wilde's spiritual journey: in this case, the motif of despair and resolution drives the operatic production.

In his instructions to Robert Ross regarding the publication of *De Profundis* (an extract is printed as a preface to the 1905 edition) Wilde writes; 'Whether or not the letter does good to narrow natures and hectic brains, to me it has done good. I have "cleansed my bosom of much perilous stuff"' (viii. fifth edition 1905, Methuen). He continues:

For nearly two years I have had within a growing burden of bitterness, of much which I have now got rid. On the other side of the prison wall there are some poor black soot-besmirched trees which are just breaking out into buds of an almost shrill green. I know quite well what they are going through. They are finding expression. (1905 fifth edition, Methuen, ix.)

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<sup>13</sup> Prisoners in Reading Gaol were allowed one sheet of prison issued writing paper at a time: new pieces of writing paper were only granted upon surrender of the previous page. Wilde's letters, therefore, were written with no capacity for referral to previous letters, save by memory.

<sup>14</sup> See Vyvyan Holland's preface to the 1949 edition for a discussion of the circumstances.

It was on this sense of progression and rejuvenation that Harwood focused her attention, working to bring into high relief some of Wilde's more intimate and revealing moments, most poignantly his reflections on his spiritual state.

The opera is divided into seven short movements (a device of Harwood and Sitsky's – none of the published editions contain section headings and Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol* is written in six sections) and traces Wilde's journey from initial bitterness and despair to resolution. Accompanied by two string quartets and percussion, a baritone sings through the seven movements:

- I. In the Bitterness of Disgrace
- II. The Letter
- III. Oscar Reflects on his Former Greatness
- IV. The Rebuke (Melodrama)
- V. New Understanding
- VI. Suffering: the other Half of Life
- VII. Resolution

This structure allows Harwood to create a succinct outline of the events leading to Wilde's imprisonment, present in the edited texts but scattered amongst the varied subjects of his reflections. The title of the second movement, 'The Letter', refers not only to the nature of the source text but also to the kind of pivotal evidence used against Wilde during his trial; that is, a letter he wrote to Douglas during the latter's Oxford days, asserting his care and willingness to help Douglas's writing career. (Letters had featured heavily in Douglas and Wilde's earlier friendship and underpinned the proceedings against Wilde.)

Harwood gathers key sentences into her libretto, providing occasional visual clues and collecting individual words to carefully balance imagery, narrative and the dramatic development of the character. Consider the treatment of the following passage from Wilde (words used in the libretto are underlined):

The plank {hard} bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame - each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. (*De Profundis*, 1905, fifth edition, Methuen, 34-35, bracketed text inserted).

The libretto section drawn from this passage reads: 'The hard bed, the loathsome food, the harsh orders, the dreadful dress, the solitude the shame' (I. In the Distress of Disgrace. cf. Appendix A.6). Retaining Wilde's language and trajectory of thought, Harwood includes just enough visual clues to provide authenticity to the voice of Wilde, whilst removing all other descriptors and abstract expressions. The spiritual experience Wilde refers to is implied, but not mentioned, in the libretto: sixty minutes of baritone anguish (attended by Douglas, prison keepers and others in the staged performance), accompanied by Sitsky's spare musical setting, is enough to convince an audience of Wilde's dilemma and subsequent spiritual journey.

That same sentence, ‘The hard bed...’, also appears in the final movement; other sentences are also repeated throughout the work; ‘Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone are shameful’ appears in both movements III and V; variations of ‘For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow’ appear three times in the work; and ‘The scraps of a banquet grow stale, the dregs of a bottle are bitter’ ends both movements III and V. In a work as brief as *De Profundis*, such repetitions not only provide Sitsky with useful musical triggers, which he utilised, but also create a clear language map of images and key terms for the listener. The conditions of prison, meeting the internal conditions of an imprisoned but eventually liberated soul, are profound.

Harwood’s bundling of the text also concentrates the emotional themes related to each of the seven movements; it distils the sentiments of the letters creating an intensity of force and feeling that, naturally enough, is diluted when in the context of both the extracts and the unabridged text. As Sitsky notes in the programme note written on the first page of the score:

Gwen’s realization of the project was to use Wilde’s words exclusively, but to lift them out of the context and arrange them into new coherence, to give clarity to that cleansing of the spirit that overcame Oscar Wilde during his prison years. (Programme Note, Composer’s Autograph, *De Profundis*)

The opening sentences of the opera include ‘It is always twilight in one’s cell, as it is always twilight in one’s heart’. The lines actually appear two to three pages into the *De Profundis* text; but Harwood’s indefatigable poetic sense brings them to the front, setting an unambiguous scene for the rest of the opera.

Whilst sin, forgiveness and redemption are the dominant themes in Harwood’s rendering, Wilde’s melancholia is given full voice. Movement IV ‘The Rebuke’ begins with this rather violent recollection:

Brightest of gilded snakes! Fleur de Lys! Your choice of names reveals you. In you, hate was always stronger than love. You forced your way into a life too large for you. You demanded without grace and received without thanks. . . I should have shaken you out of my life as a man shakes from his raiment a thing that has stung him. (cf Appendix A.6)

In less experienced hands these images might be risky to include in a libretto, quickly becoming twee, but in the context of the rest of the movement (following introspection in movement III and preceding an account of Wilde’s memory of events with Douglas in the next part of movement IV) they work to establish just how far Wilde has come, from bitterness to resolution. The absence of overt visual requirements provides ample space for language and music to evoke the both the emotion and imagery attendant to Wilde’s incarceration. In Sitsky’s score the movement just discussed (III) is spoken/sung by the baritone, surrounded by a strong string section, sometimes in unison.

Sitsky had strong views on staging this work: the instructions on page three of the *De Profundis* score read, ‘This work can be performed as a concert piece, or produced as a stage work. In either case, the “orchestra” is to be on stage, with the disposition of forces as given above.’

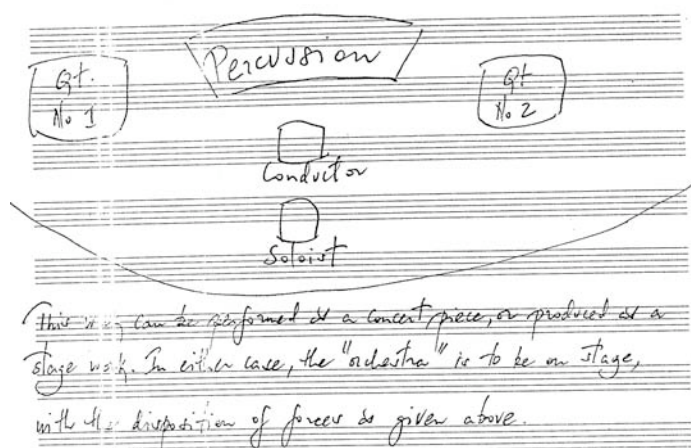


Figure 4.1. *De Profundis*, composer's autograph p3, Sitsky's instructions on staging following his program notes and Harwood's arranged libretto.

Sitsky's vision for the staging is in part to do with the complexity of interaction between the two quartets and percussionist (hence the presence of a conductor); it also highlights the soloistic nature of Wilde as a character (as well as the nature of the performance).

I will mention Sitsky's setting just briefly because in this instance it reflects the spaciousness within the libretto arrangement. The opera's opening bars work around A minor, with dissonance produced by a G# bass (cello, in quartet one).

Figure 4.2. *De Profundis*, composer's autograph, opening bars. Only the first quartet and baritone are scored at this point.

Here the rhythmic spacing of 'The day no less than the night' places subtle emphasis on 'day', and 'less'; and the strong E<sup>b</sup> minim for the last word of the phrase leaves no confusion about the strength of



the night. Later, the line 'motion is no more' is set to heavy crotchets, sung low. 'Humility. It is the thing in me' is sung very high at the top of tenor's range. In this instance, the words are framed within the string quartet setting, but are nevertheless the point of focus; compositional style and the positioning of language work across the three symbolic modes of opera.

*De Profundis* is a compelling piece of dramatic work, in both genesis and final form. Whilst in essence the words of Wilde, Harwood's arrangement balances dense, sing-able language and sometimes complex imagery with both the dramatic needed to sustain the work and the spaciousness required to leave room for music and movement: it succeeds dramatically both on the page and in performance.

## 5 ON COLLABORATION: PLATFORMS AND PRACTICE

...by themselves my words would have no particular power, but wedded to the music they become part of the magic that, in opera, is quite beyond the sum of all the parts.

Gwen Harwood<sup>1</sup>

Harwood and Sitsky's operas merge the textual and musical sensibilities of both composer and librettist. Many of the core duties of operatic collaboration, such as choosing narrative subjects, negotiating issues of structure, managing visual elements and dealing with the constraints of performance have already been discussed. In this chapter, I turn to the 'realities of exchange and influence' (Chadwick and de Courtivron 11) in Harwood and Sitsky's working relationship, a picture of which has started to emerge in the preceding chapters. Of the three elements of opera utilised to focus our attention on libretti – words and music, drama and image, and collaboration – it is this final aspect that offers the greatest opportunity to examine the dynamics of Harwood and Sitsky's creative partnership and, in turn, illuminate some of the intellectual platforms supporting Harwood libretti writing.

Shared aesthetics and creative ambitions might explain, in part, Harwood and Sitsky's choice to work together and the kind of collaborative practice they cultivated. How did the dynamics of their relationship, however, press upon writing processes and strategies? How did their collaborative working practice function? In the following discussion I consider these questions in the context of recent scholarship on collaboration, first exploring the platforms of Harwood and Sitsky's collaborative practice and then examining the outworking of that dynamic and its impact on the opera texts.

### 5.1 Platforms for Collaboration

When thinking on opera collaboration, some of the great partnerships come to mind: Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte; Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal; Verdi and Boito; Gilbert and Sullivan; and more recently Britten and Auden. Each of these collaborations produced a legacy of operas sympathetic to the unique capacities of both words and music; balanced, entrancing and enduring in their appeal to audiences and scholars. The success of each partnership, however, was dependent on the quality of relationship between composer and librettist, their aesthetic compatibility, and their respective capacities for cooperative effort.<sup>2</sup>

Harwood and Sitsky's first meeting at the Inaugural Australian Composers' Seminar in Hobart 1963, revealed immediate professional, personal and aesthetic sympathies.<sup>3</sup> Initiated by Kenneth

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<sup>1</sup> 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist' 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> See *Verdi's Othello and Simon Boccanegra (Revised Version) in Letters and Documents*. Ed. and Trans. by Hans Busch (1988); and David Charlton's 'L'art drammatico-musical' in *Music and Theatre: Essays in Honour of Winton Dean*. Ed. Nigel Fortune (1987), 229-262, for comprehensive discussions on composer/librettist relationships.

<sup>3</sup> Other composers and musicians represented at the seminar included Peter Sculthorpe, Miriam Hyde, John Anthill and Rex Hobcroft, foundation Director of the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music (1963-1971).

Brooks, then Director of Adult Education in Tasmania; the seminar was an unprecedented gathering of Australian composers and musicians, writers and producers and had a national impact, bringing together ‘a new breed of composers who perceived themselves to be the founders of professional, serious composition in Australia, devoted to working in an avant-garde style’ (Holmes et al 25). Sitsky’s offering at the seminar, *Woodwind Quartet*, attracted Harwood’s attention. Garnering scathing responses from Sitsky’s colleagues and critics (Woodward 191, Holmes 24) it was an aggressively experimental work. In his 1966 presentation at the 1966/7 Meeting of the Royal Music Association Professor Donald Peart noted: ‘Sitsky has the further distinction of having had one of his works hissed at a public concert. . . a Woodwind Quartet, a dense-textured, completely atonal work’ (‘The Australian Avant Garde’, 8). It is likely Sitsky also performed his *Fantasia No. 1* for prepared piano, the piece Harwood refers to in her poem ‘New Music’.<sup>4</sup>

Even if Harwood later described Sitsky’s music as ‘totally strange’ (letter to Tony Riddell 23.9.64 *A Steady Storm* 195) her immediate response to the seminar, and Sitsky, was enthusiastic: ‘We had a seminar of composers here and I kissed the ground they walked on; wonderful concerts, with music still dripping ink (or blood?); new sonatas from the uttermost parts of the mind’ (26.4.63 *A Steady Storm* 177). In her essay ‘Words and Music’ Harwood recalls one of their conversations:

We talked about formal problems in our work. Does the metaphor, in language, correspond to the chord in music? Is poetry a difficult art because it must use the language of ordinary discourse? What did Schoenberg mean when he said “how the music sounds” is not of aesthetic significance? . . . We were both drawn to the work of the German expressionists and to the same European writers and painters. (375)

Many of the writers and painters they discussed (including Büchner, Kafka and Trakl) subsequently became substantial influences in their works, collaborative and solo, just as questions of aesthetics and expression became, and remained, essential to their partnership. As Robyn Holmes notes, Harwood and Sitsky were throughout their collaborative career ‘as one in their desire to portray extremes of feeling, in cultivating a sense of “magic” in the theatre. . .’ (Holmes et al 26), working to illuminate the darker aspects of creative energies, such as the ecstatic madness of Lenz, or to articulate experiences of the mystical and sublime, as in Wilde’s journey through suffering linked to his philosophy of art. Within this context, discussions regarding an opera project developed: *Usher* was proposed in 1964 and completed in 1965. The work was Sitsky’s first opera and Harwood’s first major words for music project.

Both composer and librettist, however, already had a strong interest in the other’s domain. Sitsky had written poetry and was already setting text to music; including *Eight Oriental Love Songs*, for voice and piano (1960); and *Five improvisations*, for mixed chorus and piano, with words by Sitsky (after

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<sup>4</sup> A prepared piano is a ‘piano in which the pitches, timbres and dynamic responses of individual notes have been altered by means of bolts, screws, mutes, rubber erasers and/or other objects inserted at particular points between or placed on the strings’. Edwin. M. Ripin and Hugh Davies. ‘Prepared Piano’ *Grove Music Online*.

Heine), Shakespeare and Whitman (1961).<sup>5</sup> Three of his poems were also set by Colin Brumby in *Three Pastorales* for medium voice, flute/recorder, piano/harp (1961). Harwood, as previously noted, had years of musical training, listening and writing in hand. Both were also in similar professional situations: Harwood's first poetry collection was written but not yet published; Sitsky was teaching in Brisbane, recently returned from two years study in San Francisco with leading Russian pianist Egon Petri and still establishing himself as a composer.

Harwood and Sitsky were also similarly irreverent of institutional authority. Some years after the seminar, Sitsky revealed he had designed his *Woodwind Quartet* as an exercise in 'pot-stirring', working along purely mathematical, and in his view, non-musical, terms to create a work that would worry the establishment. It was a hoax committed 'in cold blood' (Holmes et al, citing a personal interview with Sitsky in 1989, 25). Harwood's own excellent contemporary record for literary trick-playing indicates some sympathy with Sitsky's position. By the time of Sitsky's experiment she was a veteran hoaxer (her now famous Bulletin hoax had been planned in 1959 and conducted, and publicly debated, in August 1961) and progenitor of multiple pseudonyms.<sup>6</sup>

Such points of commonality – aesthetic, technical and professional – formed the fabric Harwood and Sitsky's collaborative partnership; or, to use sociologist Michael Farrell's term, their 'instrumental intimacy'. Farrell describes the connection that occurs when collaborators begin to use the creative mind of another 'as if it were an extension of [their] own' (*Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*, 157). Discussing the literary partnership of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, he notes that collaboration offers a unique place for each partner to test out ideas and to extend their individual craft in a relatively safe yet critical environment. This kind of environment does, however, entail a certain level of trust in both the character and expertise of each collaborator. As W.H. Auden has observed, successful collaborators must 'surrender the selves they would be if they were writing separately and become one new author' (cited in Mendelson xxi).<sup>7</sup> That is, whilst certain lines or phrases may be written by one person, the 'censor-critic' (Auden's term) making the final decision is one, collaborative entity (xxi).

Underpinning such functional intimacy is friendship, a critical factor for many collaborative relationships. Friendships with composers (Sitsky, Penberthy, Kay, Cugley); with performers (particularly Rex Hobcroft and Jan Sedivka); and with other artists and writers (James McAuley, Vivian Smith, Edwin Tanner, Norman Talbot) was crucial to Harwood's poetic energy and development. Her substantial correspondence is testament to the esteem in which she held friendships

<sup>5</sup> For a selected list of vocal works by Sitsky, including his song cycle in memory of Harwood, refer to Appendix D of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Tony Riddell, two years prior to publishing the offending sonnets, Harwood discussed her desire to submit an acrostic poem 'FUCK ALL EDITORS': the letter includes two possible versions of the sonnets, titled 'The last of summer' and 'She bade me take life easy' (signed 'Hagendoor') along with a series of alternative acrostics (including CLOT CHRISTENSEN, then editor of *Meanjin*). In a later letter to Riddell Harwood described some of the events following publication, including press and industry reactions (17.8.61 *A Steady Storm* 131-135). Also refer to Cassandra Atherton's *Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair* (2006) 24-5 for a discussion of Harwood's 'Bulletin Hoax' and 'The Hoax that Misfired' *The Bulletin* 9 August (1961) 8.

<sup>7</sup> From 'Translating Opera Libretti', *The Dyers Hand* (1962). In W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman's *Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings by W.H. Auden, 1939-1973*. Ed. Edward Mendelson (1993) 483.

and the breadth of relationships she nurtured. Her early letters to Tony Riddell (published in *Blessed City*, edited by Hoddinott) reflect an intimacy crossing philosophical, domestic and social domains, as do her regular epistles to many correspondents, some represented in *A Steady Storm of Correspondence*. Responding to a question about the experience and suffering of love, Harwood replied, ‘There’s the love we don’t recognise when we don’t deserve it. Friendship, above all I prize [...] one of the privileges of living on this planet’ (Williams 53, ellipses in original text). Celebrations of conversational, spiritual and intellectual connection with others recur throughout Harwood’s poetry, evident in the several poems dedicated to friends (such as ‘Divertimento’ dedicated to Jan Sedivka or ‘A Quartet to Dorothy Hewett’) and volumes dedicated to Tony Riddell. As Alison Hoddinott notes:

The poems concerned with friendship with fellow poets, musicians and painters, formed since she started to publish poetry, celebrate the joy of conversing with artists who understand the problem of giving experience a permanent form in words, music or colour. (Hoddinott *The Real and Imagined World* 31)

Hoddinott goes on to note that such poems ‘combine both a public and private aspect’ (32) of Harwood’s outlook. They reflect the warmth, intellectual generosity and affection that characterised her friendships and favoured professional connections.

In Harwood and Sitsky’s case, an ease of friendship provided the necessary platform for collaboration, allowing honesty of exchange and confidence in shared aesthetics and ambitions. During the early stages of drafting *Usher* Harwood inserted this plot summary in a letter to Sitsky:

Usher’s residence was cracked  
 Usher was a noddy  
 Any sense his sister lacked  
 Wasn’t found in Roddy.  
 Madeline reported sick  
 Which she did too often.  
 Roddy nailed her double-quick  
 In a solid coffin.  
 First she woke and gave a shove  
 Then she started knocking.  
 Roddy, mooing round above,  
 Said his nerves where shocking.  
 When the nasty tempest blew  
 And the skies were clouded,  
 Somebody appeared (guess who)  
 Bloodily enshrouded.  
 Usher’s house, as you’d expect,  
 Flew to little bitsky.  
 Mrs Harwood writ the text,  
 Score by Larry Sitsky.  
 (14.11.64 *A Steady Storm* 196)

Its sparkling humour is certainly engaging, but it also neatly reveals that whilst taking her writing very seriously, Harwood was also approaching the libretto with her tongue firmly in cheek. Typically, her joke poems were usually written for close friends and her willingness to share the poem with Sitsky indicates both familiarity and shared humour. Four years later Harwood was writing the following to Sitsky:

...Would you let me know what you would like from me, mythologically speaking? I am ready to supply libretti, deathless imaginative schemes for ballets, postcards, (the fiddler on this one is swooning with ecstasy after having played a Sitsky tune), elegies, rhapsodies, what do you want? Would you like to set hexameters or do you consider them not musically attractive?... (Sappho card from Harwood 25.10.68)<sup>8</sup>

As a vehicle for the business at hand, wit facilitated a genial approach to their discussions. Informality allowed a kind of ‘conversational’ collaboration, enabling a freedom of exchange and the ability to sustain the partnership across several projects and years. Harwood’s correspondence with Sitsky suggests a functional, creative intimacy: her letters occasionally refer to family or personal matters but are, on the whole, far less personal than those to other writers (such as Edward Tanner or Tony Riddell) and are mostly to do with the genesis of the operas.

Occasionally Harwood did express frustration with Sitsky’s sometimes erratic manner of working (usually due to his hectic professional schedule and a propensity to frequently change the structure of the work during the drafting process). Several months after beginning a ‘Bicentennial Opera’ (known as the ‘B-C’, and later abandoned due to issues surrounding the use of indigenous music) work had stalled and Harwood wrote to Sitsky clarifying exactly what the work was to be, and what it was he wanted:

Why are you now calling the B-C piece an opera? The first time I heard of it as an opera was when Don Kay at your concert last year asked me, ‘What’s this opera you and Larry are doing?’ If you had said from the beginning you wanted an opera and given me a plot I’d have had it done long ago. What is the point of the B-C stuff when the B-C is over in 1988? *Why* is it being deferred?

...If you will tell me what you want I will do it.... I don’t feel it’s much use sending you ‘bits on spec’. You draw me up a menu and I’ll cook it, but at the moment I feel I’m hurling custard pies into the void...I’m sorry about the postponement... Do let me know *what next*. (5.2.88 *A Steady Storm* 406)

Harwood surrounds her perhaps justifiable frustration regarding the deferred project (and Sitsky’s apparent uncertainties about the subject, plot and scope of the work) with a professional equilibrium, a characteristic evident in some of her other collaborative relationships. Two years after the B-C opera project was abandoned, Harwood was working with James Penberthy on a song cycle, *Eight Songs of Eve*. In a postcard to the composer she wrote:

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<sup>8</sup> Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630. Letters from Gwen Harwood. Box 1 Folder 2. Cited with permission.

What a joy you are to work with (in contrast to Lazar Abramovich,<sup>9</sup> who never knows what he wants). I'll get onto it right away. Dietrich-Fischer-Diskau and Kiri te Kanawa should be fine. I leave the tune to you (no counter-tenors though, unless you have a part for an angel). (Postcard to Penberthy 1.5.90)<sup>10</sup>

Whilst the second comment typifies Harwood technically aware response to the problem of writing words for music, the first suggests a familiar (and perhaps resigned) understanding of the complexities and working styles inherent in her collaboration with Sitsky.

In an industry fraught with interpersonal ruptures, Harwood and Sitsky's relationship was socially and intellectually robust, evident not only in the partnership's longevity and productivity, but also in the amiable relations sustained in sometimes tense circumstances. Harwood, for example, maintained a generous relationship with Sitsky during the extended ruckus surrounding Opera Australia's production of *The Golem*.<sup>11</sup> Soon after the completion of the opera in 1980, Opera Australia approved *The Golem* in principle but decided against producing it, for reasons mostly to do with money. Antony Ernst explains that a change of management between the commissioning and completion of the work also complicated matters:

Sitsky says that if the management had simply said they couldn't afford to produce it, there would have been no problem. As it was the new Artistic Director criticised various aspects of the libretto, a libretto which his predecessor had approved. Needless to say, neither Harwood nor Sitsky took this particularly kindly and quite a ruckus broke out at the time. (40)

Some of the objections related to the accuracy of Harwood's research, which she rightly rejected (discussed by Sitsky in an interview with Ralph Lane, 17-18), and others to its length and suitability.

Within this maelstrom of arts administration politics Harwood's response shows a vigorous defence of her work, coupled with a commitment to her association with Sitsky and the work they were producing. (Sitsky was also vigorous in his defence of Harwood's research, as discussed in his interview with Ralph Lane, 17, referred to in section 3.2.3). During the first round of negotiations in 1979, when Opera Australia suggested that another writer modify the libretto to suit performance, Harwood wrote to Sitsky:

'I've never heard of a ménage a trois that didn't have internal problems. I was happy, you were happy, but Mr Lovejoy is not happy (is that his real name) so now nobody is happy...

If Robin Lovejoy is in a position to say my work is 'muddy and untidy' he must have the skill to rewrite it. I will gladly give him my opinion of his work. But if he touches a word of mine without my permission I'll have the ASA lawyers onto him like shit-hawks. (Whereas you, my darling, may sign anything you fancy with my name and I'll only murmur 'A Russian by direct descent, a poet by alliance/ Thou didst intone the mighty words that made despair a science' &c&c.).

<sup>9</sup> Lazar is the Russian version of Larry. Harwood once addressed a letter to Sitsky, "Geliebter Lazar" (12.7.91 *A Steady Storm* 428).

<sup>10</sup> Papers of James Penberthy, National Library of Australia, MS 9748.

<sup>11</sup> *The Golem* was commissioned in 1977 by Opera Australia and completed by Harwood and Sitsky in 1980.

Lovejoy's interference is only possible in a contemporary work: if we were both dead he'd just have to get on with whatever we'd written. If you're happy, don't let the bastard bully you; if you're not, tell me what you what and I'll re-draft until the end of time. (22.8.79 *A Steady Storm* 352-2)

Here, Harwood maintains an almost conspiratorial partnership with Sitsky, indicating her willingness to maintain their collaborative partnership. The final sentence of the extract echoes her sentiments of cooperation expressed in 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist': 'My task as a librettist...is to give the composer what he needs' (10). She does, however, object to a third party reworking the libretto, threatening legal action against Opera Australia if the libretto is modified.

Due to administrative changes within Opera Australia *The Golem* project proved to be too difficult and was temporarily abandoned. A few years later, discussions regarding the production of *The Golem* were renewed: again, another writer was proposed to 'fix' the libretto and, again, Harwood responded with equal vigour, if slightly less humour:

Reputation's blowflies! That's what Hal Porter called the hacks who lay their maggots in living reputations. Who are these mongrels? Why should anyone take any notice of unsigned mis-spelled comments? Who are they? Where are their works? I'm sorry you didn't have the confidence to say DROP DEAD.

The word is DRAMATURGE, with an E. It means simply PLAYWRIGHT. *What* playwright? Have you really agreed to work with a playwright you don't know?

I assigned you the copyright of my libretto *as it stands*. If it is altered in any way my name MUST NOT be associated with it. Nor may any parts of the libretto be used without my consent. I am serious about this. You are at liberty to throw away all my words and substitute others. But my name may be associated ONLY with the present libretto. If any 'dramaturge' alters it, I will have the lawyers of the Australian Society of Authors down on him/her like a flock of ravens. He/she may be utterly sure that the lawsuits will keep his/her alterations off the stage for the term of his/her natural life...What would have happened if Bizet had set to work altering Carmen?' (Letter to Sitsky 9.10.87 *A Steady Storm*. 401-2)

Harwood is understandably vigorous in asserting her rights as author of the libretto, going on to suggest other poets that Sitsky might work with (mentioning Tom Shapcott and Dorothy Porter) if the opera text is to be re-written (401). Her assertion that Sitsky has the copyright to the libretto as it stands, a useful inflection of her 'indissolubility' argument, works to highlight her careful position: it is the precise, negotiated, agreed form of *The Golem* libretto that is given to the composer, a libretto that is the result of a particular imaginative, scholarly and collaborative practice. Harwood's letters warn both Sitsky and Opera Australia that 'textual' misbehaviour will mean a retraction of any gifts of copyright she may have made. In this case, legal action might effectively embargo the opera: not a satisfying outcome for the composer or producer.

What is less apparent, but equally important, is Harwood's concern with the integrity of the opera work. On the surface both letters echo her earlier claims for the subservience of librettist to composer. Her language implies, however, that it is the integrity of the work that is under threat: the issue of



expertise is secondary to those of collaborative and aesthetic boundaries. Her comment, ‘What would have happened if Bizet had set to work altering Carmen?’ also suggests her concern that Sitsky might be crossing carefully negotiated boundaries of responsibility. These letters reveal a creative intimacy threatened by intrusion, revealing dismay at the potential, fundamental reduction of a jointly created work already drafted and redrafted several times.

The letters also reflect the esteem in which Harwood held her words for music, and her commitment to the proper use, attribution and management of her work, not unusual when situations went awry. Significantly the letters to Sitsky are relatively moderate epistles compared to other, angrier letters regarding the publication of her work. Her often mentioned dissatisfaction with Angus and Robertson’s publication of her first and subsequent volumes of poetry (issues included publication schedules, reviewing, contractual obligations and distribution) indicate her desires to ensure accurate representation of her works.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Stephen Edgar she describes Angus and Robertson (A&R) as ‘mongrels beyond hope’ (10.4.90 *A Steady Storm* 414). *Bone Scan* had just been awarded the John Bray Award for poetry at the Adelaide Festival of Arts and A&R were unable to supply copies for sale at the event:

Tom Thompson complained that in neither of my acceptance speeches did I refer to my publishers!  
NO BAND! ROT ANGER US.  
GONER! ABANDON TRUSS.  
GUANO BRANDER’S SNOT (*A Steady Storm* 414)

In true Harwood style, anagrammatic wit is a clever but nevertheless strident expression of her views on Angus and Robertson's apparent incompetence.

## 5.2 Harwood’s Operatic Persona

Harwood’s views that her libretti belong to the composer, and as such are ‘subservient’ to the compositional process, are well known.<sup>13</sup> Writing of the premiere of *Fall of the House of Usher* at the Festival of Contemporary Opera and Music<sup>14</sup> at the Theatre Royal in Hobart, August 1965, she notes:

I should have liked to be on stage giving a Miss Libretto of 1965 speech: Thanks to all you wonderful people out there who enjoyed our opera...for the wonderful applause, especially those who paid for their seats.

But that is not the lot of librettists. They disappear....They are at the mercy of translators...The librettist is the composer’s servant and I am happy to be that’. (‘Words and Music’ 376)

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<sup>12</sup> See Harwood’s letters to Tony Riddell (14.11.61 and 9.12.63; *A Steady Storm* 143, 184); Vincent Buckley (26.4.63, 176); and Alison and Bill Hoddinott 25.6.61, 124).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Lamplit Presences’ (1980), ‘Words and Music’ (1986), ‘Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist’ (1987).

<sup>14</sup> Harwood wrote of the Festival: ‘The principal aim of the festival...was to explore every aspect of opera production. Composers, librettists, conductors, designers, producers and singers buzzed round in a kind of meta-opera. A great deal of theory was raked over at the seminars...We had an *opera*. A success, something that worked!’ (‘Words and Music’ 375)

Harwood is clear on the status of the libretti: ‘My texts for opera are not published separately. Rightly they belong to the composer and are his [Sitsky’s]. They are not meant to be studied. Their life is with the music’ (‘Words and Music’ 376). In a letter to Father William Paton<sup>15</sup> Harwood confirmed her views expressed in her earlier essays on the role of the librettist: ‘It’s marvellous to be invited to have some part in it all; the librettist is like the concrete base of a fine building – covered up and never seen again’ (referring to *The Golem* 30.5.91 *A Steady Storm* 426). Later that year, responding to Greg Kratzmann’s proposal that he write her biography, Harwood demurred and suggested that he find another subject for the book. Alison Hoddinott’s comprehensive study of Harwood’s poetry and literary preoccupations had just been published and Harwood indicated that she did not feel the time was right for another book: ‘Any bits of life the poems might need have been told by Alison... The operas (I might very well be remembered if at all as a librettist) belong to the composers’ (26.9.91, *A Steady Storm* 436).<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, this approach was not unique to Harwood’s collaboration with Sitsky. Her correspondence with composer James Penberthy (from 1966 until the year she died) is in many ways similar to those dealt with in her letters to Sitsky: suggestions for a plot, an approach to characterisation, or reassurances that he should use the text in whatever way necessary. In a letter to Penberthy, discussing ‘Robbery Under Arms’ (an opera that was eventually abandoned), she wrote: ‘Do you prefer to set prose to verse, and if verse what kind, metrical or fairly free; or a mixture? I think composers should belt the hell out of librettists until they get what they want’ (7.7.66).<sup>17</sup> And again, two months later:

Please regard the stuff I sent you as the roughest of rough drafts; the pegboard on which we can hang our fancy display. I think the characters need longer stretches of singing. Also if the chorus are being paid by the night, they might as well bellow their way through a few more scenes. (28.9.66)<sup>18</sup>

Her words indicate the same willingness to work the libretto into whatever shape the composer required, presented in tandem with her own insightful suggestions for effective dramatisation and use of musical resources.

The seemingly paradoxical positions of intervention and subservience suggest a subtle position held by a skilled rhetorician. Holmes et al suggest that Harwood ‘never claimed credit for these works as a separately published part of her creative output...because she did not value the librettos independently as texts: their artistic merit for her came though marriage with music and stage action’ (26). Her behaviour would indicate, however, that she did value the texts as texts, albeit in precise contexts. Prizing her libretti, Harwood considered them not as discrete poetic texts but rather as deeply contextualised works. Her intentions that they not be published separately or, by extension, to be read in isolation from the opera score suggest her commitment to the collaborative, and performative,

<sup>15</sup> Retired rector of All Saints, Hobart.

<sup>16</sup> Kratzmann did start the biography, outlined in ‘Postcard Confessions’ *Australian Book Review* 143 (August 1992) 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> Papers of James Penberthy, National Library of Australia, MS 9748.

<sup>18</sup> See note 17, above.

nature of her authorship. Her gestures – giving the copyright of the libretti to Sitsky, referring to herself as his literary servant and reminding her biographers and readers that the libretti are supporting acts – are consistent reminders of the complex interrelationship within each opera between her libretto and Sitsky’s music.

Harwood’s rhetoric also points to another complicated facet of her independent authorial identity. She once described the ‘I’ of her poetry as an ‘operatic “I”’ (interview with Stephen Edgar 1986, 75), a description taken up by many critics interested in Harwood’s pseudonyms and hoaxes.<sup>19</sup> In the case of her operatic collaborations, however, this ‘operatic I’ might refer to something related to, but absolutely distinct from her many pseudonyms and literary hoaxes, representing an authorial persona that is not fictional but collaborative, the sum of many parts, and founded in the hybrid nature of opera. Harwood’s preoccupations with performance, authoring and images of authoring are evident throughout the operas (explorations of Lenz’s loss of inspiration: the notion of redemption through the act of writing in *De Profundis*; and to some extent the central figure of the Rabbi in *The Golem*). These types of narrative can also be found in her poetry (the Kröte series, ‘O Could One Write As One Makes Love’ or ‘Oyster Cove Pastorals’). In an operatic context, however, the connection to performance and hence a degree of authorial distance, is much greater. Harwood’s operatic “I” finds its expression in the performative opportunities attached to the operatic form. We see hints of such desires in ‘Words and Music’: ‘I should have liked to be on stage giving a Miss Libretto of 1965 speech’ (376) or in the ‘glorious dresses’ for recital giving she used to imagine as a young woman (ref. Chapter 3.1, 23). Whilst her comments on words and music may be subtle, they point to some of the tensions surrounding the collaborative, constructive and complicated space her libretto writing occupied.

### 5.3 Singular Texts: Plural Authors

In *Singular Texts; Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford suggest that all literary collaborative creativity is a type of social act, a form of exchange reliant on the rules of conversation and interpersonal engagement. Laura Brady builds on this idea in her discussion of types of collaboration in action, describing the process as either monologic/hierarchical; dialogic; or conversational (‘Collaboration as Conversation: Literary Examples’ in Leonard et al *Author-ity and Textuality* 149-168). She concludes that conversational collaboration, where the process of exchange occurs over some time and is continually modified as a result of each person’s input, is likely to produce the more sophisticated work given the multiplicity of influence and inspiration (167).

Sitsky once commented that an amiable cooperation between composer and librettist is vital for an opera’s dramatic and aesthetic success:

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<sup>19</sup> Strauss, J. *Boundary Conditions* (1992); Hoddinott, A. ‘Who Wrote These Poems?’ *Notes and Furphies* (2000) and ‘Timothy Kline: A Trans-Gendered Trans-Generational Impersonation’ *New England Review* (2000); Kratzmann, G. ‘Confessions of an Editor: Gwen Harwood as Alan Carvosso’ *Meanjin* (2004); and Atherton, C. *Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair: A Reading of Gwen Harwood’s Pseudonymous Poetry* (2006).

I remember a disastrous association between a writer and a composer....It didn't work, needless to say, because they were both highly protective of their own roles and there wasn't going to be any meshing of any kind. Very strict boundaries were drawn. You can't work that way...it worked with Gwen Harwood for the simple reason that she always regarded the libretto as subservient to the music and if I said, 'Can I have another few lines here?' or 'This is too long', or 'Do you mind if I change this word?' there was never any trouble....She also played the piano and the organ so there was an association with music and she loved it passionately. She also had a quirky sense of humour which allowed us to get along quite well. We didn't take ourselves very seriously and could always poke fun at the most sacred cow imaginable. (Sitsky, interview with Jim Cotter 82)

Harwood and Sitsky negotiated shared responsibilities across technically separate domains, each expressing views on textual sources, structure, staging and characterisation; even the predominantly sole-authored aspects of the work (libretto text, composition) were sometimes the subjects of their exchanges.<sup>20</sup> Their collaboration was, at its core, a conversational process, allowing a continual negotiation of working practice and the ongoing discovery of ideas. In Harwood's case this occasionally meant agreeing to Sitsky's additions to the libretto and his views on dramatic structure. Harwood's first libretto, for example, required several attempts; she notes that after the composer's seminar in Hobart:

...I closeted myself with the story, and thought about it. Larry had, by this time, returned to Queensland and I used to sent [sic] him bits of the libretto up through the post, and he'd tear them up, or scratch them out, and say, 'try again'.

And finally, I began to write what he felt he could set, and he told me that once I'd sort of got on to his wave-length, the music almost set itself. And this was the thing I've enjoyed doing most, working with Larry Sitsky. (Interview with Suzanne Walker, 10-11)

Sitsky's influence on the libretti was evident throughout the collaboration. In the interests of dramatic sensibility, for example, he suggested adjusting the narrative flow of *Fairy Tales* (based on Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* and Boccaccio's story of bed swapping in a small village inn) after reading Harwood's third draft. The opera first narrated one story then the other, linked by co-locating the two tales in the same village. Sitsky wrote to Harwood:

I think what would be more effective would be to interweave the two stories, so that we could proceed on both sides of the stage chapter by chapter. This does not necessitate any re-writing on your part, merely deciding at what point to interrupt each narrative...The events could appear to take all night, and the finale could be done to sunrise. (21.3.75)<sup>21</sup>

Harwood responded, as requested. Between drafts three and four of the libretto, scene ix (Absalom kissing Alison at her window) is both condensed and then split, book-ending the final bed-swapping scene between Adrian and Molly, and Allan and Nicola at the inn (end of scene ix). Absalom's visit to

<sup>20</sup> As outlined in section 4.3.

<sup>21</sup> Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630 Box 1 Folder 4. Cited with permission.

Gervase (the blacksmith) in this scene is also shifted to directly follow the bed swapping scene (previously in draft three it followed directly from the window ‘kissing’ scene, preceding the Boccaccio tale’s climatic scene (x)). These few structural changes produced a far smoother narrative flow and removed two awkward scene changes involving the same characters. As Sitsky intended, they also enhanced the interrelationships between the two narrative strands. Similarly, *Lenz* was also substantially reworked; most of the first four pages of drafts one and two of the libretto are nothing alike (two small passages survived and were shifted to other parts of the work). Oberlin’s greeting, Lenz’s preaching scene, and the construction of his first fantasy conversation with Friedericke were all rewritten. A few notes from Sitsky are evident in the margin of draft one of the libretto, such as ‘dramatically not strong, conventional’ (Draft 1. p1).

Sometimes he requested a few more ‘Gwen words’ to fill in a gap<sup>22</sup> and very occasionally added to and changed the libretto, usually repeating phrases or words already present but in some cases inserting entirely new lines. In a letter to Harwood, Sitsky notes, ‘At the end of Usher’s aria, I have tacked on a few lines from another Poe poem about the Tragedy Man and Comedy Worm’ (*A Steady Storm*, 199, cited in a letter to Tom Riddell). These few lines were from Poe’s poem ‘The Conqueror Worm’ (from *Poems of Manhood*, 1838):

Out - out are the lights - out all!  
 And, over each quivering form,  
 The curtain, a funeral pall,  
 Comes down with the rush of a storm

Figure 5.1 Excerpt from Usher’s Aria, *Fall of the House of Usher*

It was usually Sitsky who finalised the length, shape and character set of the operas, and it was generally Sitsky who negotiated performances and commissions. His markings on the libretto typescripts include suggestions for structural changes and notes on visual settings: in the case of *The Golem*, he used the libretto as a base for his compositional approach (see Chapter 3.2.3 for a discussion on his utilisation of the Gematria). When speaking of writing *The Golem*, Sitsky noted that:

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with the composer at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society (SIMS), Melbourne July 2004.

Of course, we went through a number of drafts shaping each scene, then shaping each act and finally shaping the whole opera. For me, that's absolutely critical: I can't begin to compose the music until the libretto is in its correct place and order and duration. It is inevitable for someone like myself that if those elements aren't in place, the music won't work either. So Gwen and I spent a lot of time getting that right, and it was only when the libretto was in its final form that I sat down and began to work on the music. Of course, even after reading the first draft, sounds began to shape themselves in your head, and that was certainly the case here. However, I wouldn't dream of putting them into any final or definitive shape until all this other stuff has happened and Gwen was an absolute master at that. (Interview with Ralph Lane, 18)

Here Sitsky's contribution to the base-work of *The Golem* links directly to the ensuing musical landscape. Rather than diminishing Harwood's authorial contribution, Sitsky's influence in the early stages of the libretto firmly links her text to the compositional, musical, skeleton of each opera.

As confidence in each other's work grew, so did the scope of shared responsibilities and negotiations. Several years after *Fiery Tales* was completed, Sitsky responded to one of Harwood's early outlines for *The Golem*:

[I] think the preliminary outline has too much drama compressed into the third act; not enough in the other two. Also, we must pay special attention to the shape of each individual act: the ending in particular must have a satisfying feel, yet leave tension and suspense to go on the next level. (Letter to Harwood 5.2.76)<sup>23</sup>

By this stage of the collaboration, Sitsky's comments were directed at structural rather than technical issues, a subtle but significant shift in dynamic. Similarly, in 1984 when Harwood and Sitsky were hunting for their next opera subject, Harwood expressed her concerns about a proposed subject, normally Sitsky's domain:

Larry, I've been looking at Truganini, and think it's not a good subject; the story is pathetic, not dramatic. It is the kind of story you can tell in a poem but I don't see it as a full-length gripper. I've been looking again at Maurice Guest (Henry Handel Richardson) first published 1908 – a gorgeous Nietzschean novel. Would you like a copy? ... (Card to Sitsky 19.9.84)<sup>24</sup>

Harwood was also influencing Sitsky's compositional practice: as he notes in an interview with Jim Cotter:

... she [Harwood] had the kind of imagery and language I responded to. And after a while she was sneaky – she knew certain words and certain imagery would trigger music. After a long association she was playing me. She had me on a string and she knew the kind of words I would respond to. But it was great. (81-2)

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<sup>23</sup> Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630, Box 1 Folder 2. Cited with permission.

<sup>24</sup> Papers of Larry Sitsky, National Library of Australia, MS 5630, Box 34 Folder 260. Cited with permission.

Harwood's libretti then are, in part, collaborative works written in a cooperative textual and musical framework. Whilst Harwood was usually responsible for the poetry (Sitsky's occasional insertions notwithstanding), both shared responsibility on issues of structure, subject, character and visual setting. This interplay of creative jurisdiction, held in tension with technical autonomy, is vital to Harwood and Sitsky's collaborative dynamic, mirroring the hybrid nature of the operatic genre and offering substantial, useful experience for each practitioner. Prior to the opera collaboration Sitsky's vocal works, for example, were relatively simple works comprising one to four songs at most. It was not until the early nineteen seventies, well after writing *Usher* and *Lenz*, that Sitsky began writing lengthier and more complex vocal works, including *A Whitman Cycle* (1972); *Music in the Mirabell Garden* (1977), for which Harwood wrote an introduction; *Eight Settings after Li-Po* (1973/4); and *Eight Oriental Love Songs*, on the poetry of Omar Khayyam (1980). Sitsky also wrote a memorial piece for Harwood, *Shih Ching (Book of Songs): In Memory of Gwen Harwood* (twelve settings for alto and piano) completed during 1996 (cf. Appendix D for a list of works set). The opera collaboration, and the creative cooperation it enabled, might be said to have had a significant influence on his writing.

The complexity and dramatic style of Harwood's libretti also changed during her career. *Usher* is in essence a series of linked arias, opening with the narrator's introduction and continuing with solo pieces from Usher and Madeline, respectively. There are, of course, some substantial dramatic restraints in operation; Usher mostly talks to himself or talks at the narrator; dialogue is rare; and Madeline does not speak at all, although for the sake of the opera and the soprano singing the role she does get an aria to herself. Several of the arias are also direct quotations from Poe's short story. The complexity of Harwood's later operas is evident in the greater numbers of characters and interchanges between them; in her use of the chorus and increasingly stage directions; and in her sophisticated language strategies for textual transformation; all indicative of her growing confidence as a librettist. As she expanded her repertoire as a poet, the libretto became more complex, culminating in *Lenz* as one of her best works, and *The Golem* for the sheer scale of assemblage and sustained dramatic energy required. Whilst some of these changes almost certainly reflect (and anticipate) the development of her poetic work, they also indicate an emerging sophistication in her words for music, a sophistication nurtured by the intellectual and technical demands of her relationship with Sitsky.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Each of Harwood's libretti deftly balances the functional and the expressive in their adaptation of narratives, their language and their engagement with the spectacular features of opera. Differently textured from her poetry, the libretti hold the semantic demands of language in tension with the musical and dramatic complexities of opera performance. Harwood's careful deployment of significant words in *The Golem*, her musically sympathetic rhythms in *Voices in Limbo* and her skilful management of imagery in *Lenz*, display a complex array of strategies and techniques for producing singable lines in a text of significant dramatic interest. In each text, Harwood's attention to the effect of word setting upon interpretation (including rhythm and its effect on language), her comprehension of the specifics of operatic performance and her capacity to open up a text to dense textual reference and evocation is exemplified.

Each of Harwood's libretti functions as within an operatic whole. Each accommodates the interplay of movement, staging and sound, conveying narrative within the constraints of sung performance and evoking particular responses through imagery and tone. Most of the operas are interpretations of complex narratives – Poe's *Usher*, Büchner's *Lenz*, Wilde's *De Profundis* – and rely on methods that adroitly manage the balance between imagery, spaciousness and music. Harwood and Sitsky both utilised the differences in their media to create dense, complex works, allowing the libretto, and consequent dramatic action, to influence and be influenced by the musical form. In these operas, music encases and elevates language, rather than enervating it. Words participate in the meta-structure of the musical form and work to highlight, but not necessarily dominate, the dramatic turn and complex subject choices or characters. Harwood's use of biblical, Jewish and literary references in *The Golem*, for example, provides a rich intertextual framework without overloading the libretto text.

### 6.1 Harwood's Libretti and the Critical Context

This complexity of textuality and liveliness of form is most fully revealed through a theoretically sound, investigative, multi-pronged reading approach. Via the triple lenses of words and music, the visual, and collaborative practice, we gain an understanding that is not reductionist but focused on the text, the sum of its parts and its location within the operatic context. Applying the methodologies of Werner Wolf (intermediality), Phillip Brett (author-centric study), and Lindenberger, Scher and Kramer (multi-perspectival methods) to the libretti produces a literary picture of Harwood's sometimes obscured but nevertheless important texts, revealing their collaborative and poetic characteristics.

Here, intermedial comparisons indicate the common expressive points in music and words, dramatically and semantically. They emphasise the intersection of words and music and demonstrate how these intersections create meaning. They also highlight how such productive intersections are both designed and outworked, as demonstrated in Harwood and Sitsky's exchanges about dramatic effect in *Voices in Limbo* (section 5.1); in the way Harwood's text for *De Profundis* contributes to the visual



density and impact of the piece (section 4.4) and in the joint decision to set significant words from the Sephiroth in *The Golem* (section 3.2.3).

An author-centric approach considers the influences upon Harwood's writing, in this case her musicality and interest in the nature of authorship, and reads the libretti in light of both her literary motivation and her collected range of expertise, musical, dramatic, personal and poetic. Balancing the influence of music upon Harwood's writing with the intersection of words and music within a work, creates a view of both broadly textual and case specific circumstances. It links Harwood's musicality not only to her technical range but to her passions and, from there, to both the technical and aesthetic foundations of her opera writing. Locating the libretti within the context of Harwood's oeuvre, including their significance and ambiguous place in recent literary studies, also highlights their relationship to the structures and styles of Harwood's other writing (such as the occasional verse and essays discussed in section 3.2.2).

This type of reading also considers the kind of collaborative partnership Harwood and Sitsky created, exploring the creative dynamic that underpinned their opera work. It points to their negotiation processes, the function of wit and the nature of their cooperation, revealing shared expertise and philosophical interests. This in turn illuminates the structures (narrative, theoretical and dramatic) that support the eventual intersections of words and music, of text and setting, and of poetry and performance. It brings the visual and dramatic sensibilities within the texts, along with the strategies they employed to produce the opera works, to the fore. The context of the libretti informs the interpretive process as much as their textuality, language and form.

Examining the platforms of Harwood and Sitsky's collaboration suggests the types of concerns driving the libretti writing process, from the synergies between Harwood and Sitsky's creative imaginations (for example, their attitude towards establishment politics) to their shared interests in a particular narrative tradition. It also allows us to appreciate what they each brought to the works in their own right. The extraordinary productivity and enduring nature of the partnership both reflects Harwood and Sitsky's commitment to the practice of art in the world (often outworked through friendship) and demonstrates Harwood's enthusiasm for the avant-garde. In practice, Harwood and Sitsky's collaboration functioned first as a conversational relationship and second as a site for composer and librettist to explore creative forms not readily available elsewhere. Seemingly singular texts are in actuality jointly authored works, to be read in the context of the combined aesthetic vision that produced them.

These critical methods link the contexts of production, the modes of word, music and drama, and the dynamics of collaborative partnership to elucidate the shape and function of the libretti. Their combined effect begins to explain the processes that resulted in the choice of narrative subjects, for example: it provides a framework for comparing the opera works with other individual works by the poet and composer; and points to the type of thinking essential for the outworking of balance between drama, visuality, word and music.

## 6.2 Harwood and Literary Considerations

The debate surrounding Harwood's libretti can be freed from concerns of genre, singular authorship and texts rendered unreachable in literary studies. It can, instead, consider matters of context, of creative authorship in collaboration and further engagement with readable, dynamic, music-poetic works. The libretti are no longer out of the reach of robust critical techniques, most of all because they need not be removed from their musical home: they can be considered as a distinct literary form which is part of greater whole, that is, as texts embedded within the operatic sphere of music, performance and collaboration.

Based on the evidence surrounding Harwood's writing, including her correspondence, the libretti drafts, her poetry, her comments in interviews and essays, and the texts themselves, an integrated picture of the libretti emerges. From this picture we can begin to engage with the metaphoric, dramatic and poetic structures of the works; understand their relationship to an abstract, and then concrete, musical setting; ascertain their distinctive musical and poetic characteristics; and realise their central place in Harwood's literary output.

This kind of accessibility allows new readings of Harwood's poetry, particularly the chronology of her aesthetic preoccupations, recurring poetic themes, and writing strategies now illuminated through close analysis. Like her poetry, Harwood's libretti deal with the quotidian, fantastical, maudlin, magical and sexual. The sexual and the numinous are equally present in her work, as are the returning themes of intimacy, memory and our understanding of, or desire for, the spiritual. Both her poetry and libretti deftly balance explorations of religious, aesthetic and physical ecstasy with observations of the mortality and suffering these things imply. The libretti often prefigure such concerns, both narratively and stylistically. Reading *Voices in Limbo* (1977), for example, is revelatory; it is in this piece that Harwood's later poetic style is experimented with and it is here that later concern with the themes of sleep, memory and death are evident. Many of the aesthetic and philosophical motifs occurring in Harwood's work also find expression in both the subjects and the forms of the libretti: death juxtaposed with salvation; lifeless bodies in tension with live bodies; quests for wholeness and integration; the pressing concerns of time passing and life decaying. The madness of *Lenz*, the anguish of *Usher*, and the moral ambiguities in *The Golem* are explorations of these same preoccupations. Similarly, her views on the power of art, the memorialising function of language, the expressive capacity of music or the sometimes-tortured process of creative work underpin the concerns of the libretto. The tragic figure of *Lenz*, for example, embodies some of the same questions explored in the Kröte series of poems: questions of desire and creativity, of longing and of meaning through the form of art.

Engaging with Harwood's libretti also generates questions regarding her authorial personae, particularly her overarching concerns with the nature of authorship and their expression in the performative situation of opera writing. Whilst linked to the aesthetics that produced the pseudonyms, this operatic "I" is nevertheless quite distinct, a voice of a collaborator. Harwood's rhetoric of musico-poetics does point to the complex place of her role as librettist within her co-authorial identity. Given

this, the material surrounding the libretti might offer further insights into Harwood's more general literary imagination, her penchant for pseudonymous writing and her interest in the performance of hoaxes. It might enable Harwood's personae, and the rhetoric surrounding them, to be re-read in the light of her performative operatic writing.

Finally, the words for music highlight the centrality of musicality in Harwood's poetic. The relegation of music to the private, instead of the public, sphere in Harwood's life seems to be something she regretted. Collaboration with Sitsky provided access to one of Australia's first-rate musical minds, the national music stage and the opportunity to create finely wrought, challenging works performed by extremely able musicians. The libretti projects appear to have been personally and aesthetically deeply satisfying for Harwood. Her personally identified selected poem, the libretto of *Lenz*, interweaves her recurrent preoccupation with artistic identity and practice and some of her most favoured narratives (Büchner, Trakl) with a complex poetic and musical form. Harwood's selected work is hybrid, operatic, collaborative in its genesis and has been performed for a critical, international audience. It is a dramatic, well formed piece on the page, this decision also reflects the value she attached to her opera writing, its significance within her own oeuvre, and the delight she so clearly gained from the process.

Harwood's clearly articulated position that her words should not be separated from their musical home is correct, for they belong in both genesis and form to their musical context. They are, however, crucial to our understanding of Harwood as a poet, illuminating aspects of her virtuosity, range and preoccupations that are not immediately visible in her poetry. They show the continued patterns of artistic interest, of philosophical concerns, and of the kinds of relationship that coursed through Harwood's professional and personal life. They offer a greater understanding of her poetic imagination and motivations, particularly regarding her hoaxes, personae and pseudonyms. Most importantly, Harwood's words for music are dramatic words on the page and as such demand intimate, sophisticated readings.

Rabbi, master, let the books burn. When the last ash has blown away,  
the word will sound in elemental brightness.

(*The Golem* Act III scene i)

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## Gwen Harwood: A Select Bibliography

The following select bibliography lists Harwood's work across several genres, relevant to the preceding discussion of her words written for music.

For a comprehensive survey of Harwood's uncollected (and occasionally previously unpublished) poetry, refer to Gregory Kratzmann and Alison Hoddinott's edition of *Gwen Harwood: Collected Poems 1943-1995* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003). For a complete list of works about Harwood (until 2005) including review articles, critical essays and monographs, please refer to Kath McLean's comprehensive bibliography: *Gwen Harwood; An Annotated Bibliography* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, April 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The libretti are not published separately; copyright is held with each composer. For further details of the Sitsky operas, including performance details, current score holdings and transcriptions of the libretti, see Appendix A.

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## APPENDICES

NOTE: The appendices are included on pages 93-162 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.