



DISCOVERY

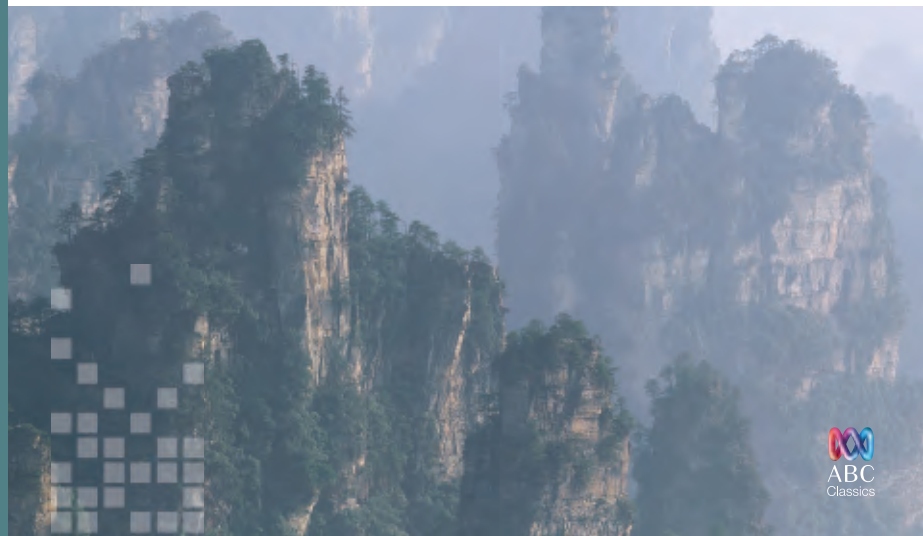
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PEGGY GLANVILLE-HICKS

The Transposed Heads

English • Leighton Jones • Stevens

West Australian Symphony Orchestra • Measham



PEGGY GLANVILLE-HICKS 1912-1990

The Transposed Heads

OPERA IN ONE ACT

Text by the composer after the novella by Thomas Mann.

1	Scene 1	22'47
2	Scene 2	8'55
3	Scene 3	7'27
4	Scene 4	24'32
5	Scene 5	4'40
6	Scene 6	9'10
Total Playing Time		76'36

Gerald English *Shridaman (tenor)*

Michael Leighton Jones *Nanda (baritone)*

Genty Stevens *Sita (soprano)*

Maggie King *The Goddess Kali (speaking part)*

Raymond Long *Kamadamana (speaking part)*

Festival Chorus *Villagers*

West Australian Symphony Orchestra

David Measham *conductor*

One reason why audiences sometimes have trouble with modern opera is that it defies categories. If a story which is set to music is tragic, even gruesome, we expect to be moved, sad or cathartically purged. Comedy is easy to take as long as it produces laughter – we know we are expected and allowed to laugh. But how are we to react when a composer chooses a libretto like that of *The Transposed Heads*? This is a tale of close brotherly friendship, of two men's love for the same woman, of the drastic and unexpected solution to their problem, and the amazing mistake welling up from the unconscious of the object of their desire; of the realistic, down-to-earth interventions of the Goddess Kali, and the rather preposterous one of a Holy Man.

There are elements here of many literary categories: realistic drama, exotic fantasy, humour and metaphysics. There is violence and passion, too, but one of the subtitles given by the author Thomas Mann to his novella *The Transposed Heads* (1940), on which the opera is based, was 'A Whimsical Legend of India'. (The original source is in the Bhagavad Gita.)

The hallmark of Mann's style and literary method is a profound sense of intellectual irony – a play of thought and experience between opposite values and views of life. Another of his preoccupations is brotherliness and the tragedies to which it can lead: in the case of this Indian legend, a virtual exchange of identities. Peggy Glanville-Hicks' libretto for her opera is extracted from Mann's novella (which runs to 70 pages) by a process of deletion. With the exception of a few connecting phrases supplied by Mann himself, the text is taken word for word from the novella (in the Lowe-Porter translation), mainly from the direct speech of the characters. The composer wanted to preserve throughout what she called 'the sedate fantasy' of Mann's style.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks was drawn both to the timelessness of the story and to the knowing modern awareness of Mann's handling of it; for example, she describes Sita's inadvertent transposition of her lovers' heads as 'the greatest Freudian slip of all time'.

Her interest in Indian classical and folk music is another reason why she was attracted to this particular story; in 1955 she was co-presenter with Yehudi Menuhin of concerts of Indian music at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and she made a systematic study of Indian music some years after completing *The Transposed Heads*, comparing it with the folk music of Greece, where she was living.

Of *The Transposed Heads* she wrote: 'Many of the themes are taken freely and in some cases directly from Hindu folk sources; it required no great amendment of my own writing method to plan the structure of the work so as to include Indian materials, for over a period of years I have gradually shed the harmonic dictatorship peculiar to modernists, and have evolved a melody-rhythm structure that comes very close to the musical patterns of the antique world.'

As some critics have pointed out, it is doubtful whether Hindu music can be forced into the strait jacket of Western intonation. The music of *The Transposed Heads* often, in fact, sounds most like medieval European popular music, partly because of its modal basis (a debt to Vaughan Williams?). But the real test of operatic music is how well it works in the theatre. Initial reviews described the score as tuneful and attractive, with exotic melodic and percussive effects. It was recognised that 'P.G.-H.' (as she signed her reviews) wrote well for the voice, and knew how to set the English language effectively to music – a skill which, in her case, owed something not only to Vaughan Williams but to the example of her mentor as a critic, Virgil Thomson.

On the other hand, the libretto has been criticised as resisting dramatic treatment, partly because, even though much of Mann's metaphysical discourse has been cut out, there remains a considerable amount of conversation between the two men, Shridaman and Nanda. The marriage scene, a ballet with chorus, enables the Indian colour to be accentuated, and offers opportunities for rich staging. The most overtly dramatic scene, and the most obviously challenge to the director and designer, is the transposing of the heads, which requires that Shridaman and Nanda should be approximately the same size but quite different in clothing – they can then change clothes behind a fragmentary wall during the conversation of Sita and Kali, each arising in the costume the other wore as he fell.

(The use of the speaking voice, amplified for the low-comedy part of the Goddess Kali, and again for the Holy Man, in contrast to the elaborate singing parts, is patterned on Thomas Mann's choice of a brisk, plain, almost vernacular style for his godly beings, while his humans often resort to flowery eloquence.)

A gruesome tale, then but handled by librettist and composer with vitality, humour and even charm – vitality in the insistent rhythms, whether Hindu or not, which match Virgil Thomson's description of P.G.-H. as tireless and insistent – and with real passion in the vocal lines, which are intensely lyrical and singable; an opera whose unexpected balance of elements support Thomson's claim of its real originality.

Many American writers saw its qualities as essentially American, but the fresh voice in a derivative but vital culture might equally be recognised as part of P.G.-H.'s Australian heritage. In 1970, *The Transposed Heads* belatedly became P.G.-H.'s first major work to be performed in Australia, by the University of New South Wales opera. In 1986 it was staged at the Australian Festival in a double bill with her *The Glittering Gate* (1959).

David Garrett

The Transposed Heads – Synopsis

Scene 1 By the banks of the River Ganges

As they rest in the shade, two young men, the Brahmin Shridaman and his lower-caste friend Nanda, inadvertently see a young girl performing her ritual bathing. Nanda, who has seen her at the village festival, recognises her as Sita. Fearing to let her know she has been seen, they continue to watch quietly, Shridaman being moved to eloquence about the sacred nature of the vision and Nanda taking it more calmly and on a more earthly plane, though he admires the eloquence of his friend, to whom he is greatly attached.

Scene 2 By the Ganges, a few days later

Shridaman tells Nanda he is suffering from a mortal illness and asks him to help build his funeral pyre. Nanda is willing and is even prepared to join his friend in death, but in view of the seriousness of the undertaking, asks the nature of the illness. He is amused when he learns that Shridaman is sick for love of Sita, assuring him that she is not betrothed and that Shridaman is such a good catch that there is sure to be no difficulty getting her family's consent for a wedding. He offers to be the go-between.

Scene 3 *Sita's village*

Sita and Shridaman are married.

Scene 4 *A clearing in the forest*

Nanda has accompanied the newly married couple on a journey. In a clearing they come across a ruined temple to the goddess Kali, and Shridaman, going inside to pray, is overcome with religious awe and the desire for the annihilation of his personality, and beheads himself with his sword. Going to look for him, Nanda is overcome with guilt at the sight of the body, feeling sure that Shridaman has killed himself because he has become aware that Nanda is in love with Sita, so he takes the sword and beheads himself. Sita, finding both bodies, thinks they have killed one another for her sake, though she is puzzled as to how they have managed with only one sword. Reluctantly, she decided that she too must die. As the sword is too heavy, she tries to hang herself with vines, but she is stopped by the voice of the goddess Kali, who ridicules the suggestion that the men have killed one another over Sita. The goddess decides to restore the two to life and orders Sita to place the heads back on the bodies, being careful not to put them on back to front in her flurry.

What she does is put the heads on the wrong bodies.

Although each man professes himself honoured at receiving the body of his friend, each claims Sita as his wife. To resolve the difficulty, Nanda suggests they consult the guru Kamadamana.

Scene 5 *The ashram of Kamadamana, high in the Himalayas*

The guru first decides in favour of the Nanda head / Shridaman body combination, on the grounds that the right hand is tendered in marriage and must prevail; but immediately reverses his decision, saying that the head is the important thing. He awards Sita to the Shridaman head / Nanda body combination. Nanda decides to become a hermit.

Scene 6 *In the mountains*

Sita comes to Nanda's hermitage looking for the combination she doesn't have. She is followed by Shridaman. All agree that they cannot continue as they are, and decide to die and join their essences to the universal all. Nanda builds a funeral pyre; but as Shridaman points out that Sita cannot ascend it until she is a widow, the two men kill one another with their swords and fall on the pyre together. They are joined by Sita and all are consumed.

Alison Jones

Sound Producer Ray Irving

Sound Engineer Karl Akers

Digital Mastering Allan Maclean

Recorded in September 1984 in the ABC's Studio 620, Perth, in the presence of the composer.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks' *The Transposed Heads* is published by G. Schirmer – Australia.

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