

Introduction to HHR's Music For Voice and Piano at Betty Caldwell Hall, PLC, 19 November 2022

Welcome again to PLC for today's performance of Henry Handel Richardson's music. PLC occupies an important place in HHR's life story, her novel *The Getting of Wisdom* and, most relevantly for this afternoon, her music. PLC provided the foundation of HHR's formal music education, training and performance. And nearly 150 years later, her alma mater continues to provide platforms to support and celebrate her original compositions.

In 1883, 13-year-old Ettie Richardson arrived from Maldon at the Ladie's College (as it was then called) in Albert Street, East Melbourne, with great confidence in her musical talents. As she later recalled: 'I had hummed tunes before I could speak, learned my notes along with my letters, had a good ear, absolute pitch, and so on' ('Some Notes on My Books', *Southerly* 8). Despite her precocious ability, it did not take long for her to have the wind knocked out of her sails. Home tuition by her 'unmusical' mother (her own description) failed to provide her with the requisite fundamentals of music knowledge and application.

And so it was to her an enormous benefit that she arrived at the College in the same year that the school's principal, Andrew Harper, established the Department of Music with the English composer and conductor Alfred Plumpton as the inaugural director.

Music was elevated to the very high standard of the school's academic studies through the teaching of theory, piano, singing and harmony; and the awarding of annual scholarships for pianoforte and singing. HHR seized the opportunity to hone her musical talents.

She progressed rapidly, rising to the senior level in only her first year. In her second year (1884) and aged 14, her talent was reflected in her coming runner-up for the Senior Pianoforte Scholarship to a student four and a half years her senior. Two years later, in 1886, she was awarded this much-longed-for scholarship.

HHR's achievements in performance and composition were on public display at the school concerts that were staged at the campus in East Melbourne and the Melbourne Atheneum and she was highly commended in Melbourne newspapers and the student run magazine, *Patchwork*.

It was in the context of the school concerts that HHR developed her lifelong love and practice of setting poetry to music (some of which we will be hearing today). In *Myself When Young*, she affectionately recalled the advice she received from Mr Plumpton (68):

. . . our Musical Director . . . suggested my trying to compose a song for the School Concert. I gaped; not having the foggiest notion how to set about it, and knowing little of Harmony. He patted me on the shoulder, bade me learn by heart the verses he gave me, and go about repeating them to myself until I found a tune. This I did; and sure enough a tune presented itself, without any conscious effort on my part.

In 1885, Bessie Warren (winner vocal scholarship) sang HHR's composition, 'Long Years Ago' at the school concert. The following year, 'Land of Light', which HHR described as a more ambitious and less successful composition, was also performed by Bessie.

However, it was her original cantata set to Tennyson's 'Sea Fairies' for two sopranos and chorus that was lauded in the *Age* as 'the most important feature in the programme.' (1886 Yearly Concert at Athanaeum). The accompaniments, for piano and four strings, were provided by HHR and four of the professional music staff.

When HHR returned to PLC in 1887 as a day student to retake two of her matriculation subjects, she did not participate in the school's music program. Nevertheless, she kept up her engagement with members of the school's music department, including her former classmate and at, that time, PLC music staff member, Marie Hansen. The two performed at the Exhibition Buildings alongside Mr Plumpton's successor, George Fentum, and also for the Melbourne Shakespeare Society.

In 1889 HHR made her way to Leipzig to continue her music education and performance at the famous conservatorium.

The relationship between HHR, her music, and PLC was revived in 2005 with the benefit of Bruce Steele and Richard Divall's extraordinary work in collating, restoring and editing HHR's private collection of songs for *Musica Australis* (58 were identified in complete or fragmentary form and 9 other titles were recorded). To mark the 130th anniversary of PLC's founding, a CD of 25 songs was produced and published at and by PLC, with performances by leading Australian musicians Vivienne Hamilton, Lucas de Jong and Phoebe Briggs. Since then, we have enjoyed intimate performances here in the Betty Caldwell Hall at our annual orations by a PLC student and staff member and, separately, by the Little Choir from Trentham conducted by Val Goodwin.

And today, this tradition continues. We are indeed privileged that PLC is generously hosting this exciting performance of her music by two accomplished professional performers, Tonya Lemoh and Narelle Yeo.

Tonya is an award-winning pianist who has performed extensively as a concerto and recital soloist and as an associate artist with leading vocalists and instrumentalists in Australia and internationally. Tonya especially enjoys bringing little-known or forgotten artists out from the shadows. She has studied at conservatoriums in Australia, America and Denmark and completed doctoral studies at the Newcastle Conservatorium of Music. Her study and performance of HHR's work was supported by a creative fellowship at the National Library of Australia

Narelle is Senior Lecturer in Opera Production and Vocal Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. She completed graduate studies at the Shepherd School, Rice University and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Before returning to Australia, she soloed for the San Francisco Symphony and the Berkeley Symphony. She has premiered new works in both the USA and Australia. In addition, Narelle has directed opera and musical theatre for numerous companies and schools.

Together, Tonya and Narelle have produced a Toccata Classics CD of 32 of HHR's songs.

It is my pleasure to invite Tonya and Narelle to the stage for 'A Journey through HHR's Music for Voice and Piano.'