

## **Interiors: Henry Handel Richardson and her music**

Presentation by Dr Tonya Lemoh at HHR concert at PLC, November 19. 2022

Welcome and thank you for joining us this afternoon. We are here to share with you the world of Henry Handel Richardson's musical journey.

The title of this presentation, "Interiors" was inspired by the fact that while Henry had a celebrated public profile as a writer, her songs remained largely private. Few were performed in her lifetime, and only one was ever published. The songs thus reveal a hidden side of her. The lied genre, which was her medium of choice, is one that captures layered emotional and psychological worlds in miniature, using the piano and the voice in a dynamic interaction where there is a constant dialogue between the two.

### **Richardson's Life**

A few biographical details about Richardson: born in 1870 in Melbourne, and christened Ethel Mary Richardson, she aspired to be a concert pianist and composer in her younger years. Both parents were musical, her mother played the piano, and her father was a fine amateur singer, though he was a medical doctor by profession. Richardson and her sister were given piano lessons and encouraged to perform at an early age. They "passed for prodigies" in their hometown of Chiltern, according to biographer Michael Ackland. (p.37) Her father died when she was nine years old, after a long decline into mental illness, probably brought on by syphilis. This early tragedy marked her deeply and is revisited both in her songs and her books.

Richardson studied piano and composed her very first works while she was still a student at Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies' College. The musical director was Alfred Plumpton who also composed and taught piano: quite possibly his encouragement was important in Richardson's early attempts at composition. Certainly her works got performed at the school's annual concerts: In 1885 a program lists a song called "The Land of Light" and in 1886 a cantata appears: "The Sea Fairies for voice, string quartet and piano accompaniment" – quite an ambitious setting for a sixteen year-old girl! She continued composing throughout her life, only ceasing when death was imminent, and she had become too weak to hold a pencil.

In 1888 Her mother moved with the family to Leipzig and Richardson entered the conservatorium with piano as her main instrument. During her final performance exam, she realised she was not destined to be a concert pianist. Reflecting on it two decades later, Richardson attributed this partly to her Australian roots:

*"I was born and brought up in Australia and was so much of a musical prodigy that the people who had to decide these things naturally chose music for a profession for me, Had I been born a Hun I daresay it would have come off, for*

*I would have grown up in a congenial atmosphere and have learnt the things one has to know in early youth. But Australia- what can be hoped from that! When I was eventually sent to Leipzig, I found the fight too hard, overworked and left there a broken- down mass of nerves. It was a bitter disappointment at the time but I can only be thankful now that things turned out as they did””*  
(letter to Robert Hichens from 1917)

In another letter Richardson admitted with rueful insight:

*“I had a gift for music as well as for writing but at the end of the time I gave up my idea of becoming a concert player: there were too many others who were better than I was. In other words, I discovered my true level as a musician.”*

After a difficult transition period, she began writing, her first major work a translation of the Danish novel *Niels Lynne* by Jens Peter Jacobsen, a poet whose texts she later set in her songs. Richardson’s early musical experiences culminated in her first great literary work, the novel *Maurice Guest*, which explores the story of a young English musician in Leipzig who falls in love with an Australian pianist.

Richardson’s personal relationships were complex; she married Scottish academic John George Robertson, with whom she enjoyed a long and stable partnership, but she also describes erotic and romantic fascination towards women in both her novels and her personal correspondence. Her book *The Getting of Wisdom* recounts a powerful erotic fascination between two schoolgirls, and the female protagonist in her novel *Maurice Guest* is based on an actress for whom Richardson sustained a long infatuation. Her final companion, Olga Roncoroni, lived first with the married couple, and subsequently became Richardson’s sole companion after the death of her husband. Both of Richardson’s long-term companions were involved with music. Robertson was a professor of Germanic languages at London University who gave a series of lectures on Wagner in the 1930’s. Roncoroni was a pianist who played for silent films, and the two women often played the piano in duet. They faced the war years together, and Olga nursed Richardson through a long and difficult illness. Richardson died in 1946, a celebrated author, having been awarded the Australian Literary Society Gold medal for her novel *Ultima Thule*, and the Silver Jubilee medal from King George. Her writing was translated into numerous European languages, and she was a literary sensation in Scandinavia, Germany and America. Her music however remained quietly amongst her papers, unplayed and unpublished. During her lifetime, only one song was ever published, and there was a radio broadcast featuring her works sung by Sophie Wyss. Robert Divall and Bruce Steele later catalogued and created performance editions of her work.

In total today there are over 50 complete songs and several sketches and incomplete compositions.

She wrote her songs for herself, not for the public, nor for the music critics. Her attitude to them being published or performed was ambivalent. While only one was published during her lifetime, she insisted the others be carefully preserved, which implies that she felt they had some artistic merit. Prominent musicologists Bruce Steele, Richard Divall and Dr Rachael Solomon have all contributed greatly to scholarship about Richardson

War played a significant role in Richardson's life. Her adult life spanned both world wars, and living in Germany and England, she was very much in the thick of things. Her later diaries especially mention the psychological and practical impact of war, which came particularly close to her home in Hastings. Songs such as "The Night of Trafalgar" and "The King's Men" differ from her other works in their unapologetically traditionally male military art song style featuring strong tramping rhythms and heroic, rousing refrains.

Richardson's "masc" identity as Henry was well established by this time, and it is possible her songs allowed her to freely explore this side of herself. In a letter to Mary Kernot in 1912, she wrote: "*it's so much easier to be a man and saves so many complications. I always feel half one and am sure I went wrong in the making*".

Richardson's life, while fraught with ill health and loss, also reveals a nature that was extraordinarily resilient. She also explores the idea of seasons and love, using Spring to represent its fervent beginnings, and the waning and changes that invariably follow. The song, 'At Kew', is a simple, graceful piece celebrating the charms of Spring. Compare this with her tragic memories of her father being placed in the mental asylum at Kew in Melbourne, an association that was surely not lost on her. To me, this speaks eloquently of her ability to turn suffering into beauty through art. She set several poems about Spring to music, capturing the natural glories of the season and the sense of re-birth it brings.

Henry Handel Richardson was anything but traditional when it came to gender roles and identity. She originally assumed the name Henry as a professional pseudonym but her closest friends and family, including her husband, all called her Henry, at her insistence. Was Richardson's choice of lied as a compositional genre influenced partly by her gender?

The lied genre – and indeed song composition in general was one of the few areas where 19<sup>th</sup>- century women were able to experiment with composition. The increasing emergence of the piano as a household instrument in the latter 1800s led to more opportunities for women to cultivate their musical skills, and the emergence of the lied as a genre coincided with this trend.

Did Richardson choose lieder because she thought it appropriate for a woman? I would argue this is not so. As an author, Richardson chose a male pseudonym,

which she insisted on rigorously with a great deal of secrecy shrouding her real gender- she was determined to challenge the assumption that one could discern whether a man or a woman had written a work of literature:

*About the time I wrote Maurice guest there was considerable discussion in the press about women's work as writers, and the ease with which its qualities and defects could be recognised. What has since been called "an impish desire" to test this seized me – with what results you know. It was not till the early twenties that the truth came out.*

Her refusal to be pigeonholed and her fierce guarding of her identity played an important role in her professional success. In composition, the lied is just as likely to have appealed because of its synthesis of words and music, and the fact that Richardson was herself an accomplished pianist who simply preferred lieder as the best vehicle for her own form of expression, capturing as it does the perfect synthesis between words and music.

It seems an obvious choice. In addition, some of the Romantic composers who were most admired during her time at Leipzig Conservatory included Robert Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn, both of whom were prolific lieder composers. Several major male composers are considered significant primarily because of their compositions for voice and piano : these include Franz Schubert, Hugo Wolf and Henri Duparc.

Richardson composed several songs about death, and no self-pity or fearfulness is evident in her song settings. In a letter to Mary Kernot she wrote:

*"Yes, women live long. I DO hope I shan't go on into the eighties, I've seen too much of them. I'd like to finish up a few more things before my time comes but I'm getting tired of this world and all its stupid fuss, and shall pass to the next with gladness and curiosity".*

Richardson's relationship to music informed and impacted upon her creative output as a writer, and her first and last novels were about music. She wrote in a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1929:

*"So many people have remarked on the "musical form" of my work that I begin to feel there must be something in it. I am of course quite unconscious of any such striving while writing ...."*

### Why is her musical legacy significant?

Apart from music's influence on her output as a writer, Richardson 's journey through music sheds light on the Australian experience as a music student in Leipzig, and the considerations involved for women of her era with professional aspirations as composer and performer. The composer Arnold Schoenberg achieved some renown as a painter, though he is primarily celebrated for his music. Of the relationship between the two, Courtney Adams in her article "Artistic Parallels between Arnold Schoenbergs Music and Painting 1908-1912)

notes that “the paintings and the music arose from the same inner need for expression, and they show some significant similarities as well as some striking differences in approach”. Certainly, in Richardson’s case, there is a great drive to pursue both avenues of expression, though one is in the public professional sphere, and the other private. The similarities between her compositions and her writing include the recurring themes of love, death, creativity and obsession, while one of the most striking differences is the complexity and tightly structured approach to her novels compared with the artless simplicity and, spontaneous quality of her songs.

Ricardson’s music opens a different gateway to exploring her inner world, adding new perspectives and greater depth to the understanding we already have of her creative work.