

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

Review

Christina's World (State Opera South Australia)

The time seems to have come for this 1983 pastoral Gothic chamber opera by Ross Edwards and Dorothy Hewitt.

State Opera Studio, Netley, Adelaide

Reviewed on 2 August, 2019

by [Brett Allen-Bay es](#) on 3 August, 2019

It was the late Australian conductor Stuart Challender who suggested that composer Ross Edwards and playwright Dorothy Hewitt collaborate on a chamber opera, which is as much a celebration of place and belonging as it is of human interaction. Although this new State Opera South Australia production was originally planned for the old Queen's Theatre, moving to the organisation's headquarters proved advantageous, given the fickleness of winter weather.

Described by Hewitt as "an allegory or fable about illusion and reality and the truth and lies of memory", Christina's World tells the story of Christina, who in her middle age is obsessed to return to the home where she grew up, and remember the imaginative world she created for herself there. She conjures up her younger self. But how much of what happens was ever real?

Although marked as a moderate success on its initial production by the Seymour Group in 1983, the sophistication of both score and plot have gained in understanding since then to a place and time where the mastery and appropriateness of Edwards' score and the almost sinister casting of Hewitt's tale blend to create a kind of pastoral Gothic, reliant as much upon both English and American folk idioms. And even this early in his career, Edwards has set upon the subtle change of sophisticated time signatures that we've come to identify with his compositions.

Throughout, conductor Warwick Stengards' direction was exemplary with clarity and purpose always to the fore and Edwards' subtle and highly individual use of colour used to emphasise and support both the singers and Hewitt's plot. In this score, there is much which is eminently tonal and yet, at the same time, recalls not only traditional British folk song and such adapters of the field as Britten, Vaughan Williams and Copland, it also points towards a musical lineage which is distinctly Australian, born of its strong British ancestry. Particularly impressive is Stengards' ability to create a life-like balance between the vocalist and accompaniment, whilst realising the importance of tuned percussion within Edwards' musical landscape.

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Charlotte Kelso and Elizabeth Campbell.

Photo © Soda Street Productions

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The cast of *Christina's World*. Photograph ©

Soda Street Productions

The director, Nicholas Cannon, and conductor have brought together a near-ideal cast for such a work with no weaknesses among the five singers. Charlotte Kelso and the treasure that is Elizabeth Campbell prove ideal for the central Christina - at different stages of her troubled life. Nick Jones, as lover and cad Tom, is an ideal English tenor, who has, understandably, received praise for his work for Opera Australia and is clearly one to watch, while stalwarts Joshua Rowe as the father and husband, Dick, and Adam Goodburn as Uncle Harry have grown to become truly fine character singers. And it should be mentioned that the entire cast sung out with such clarity that there was no need for prompting surtitles or subtitles.

With a production like this, it is easy to suggest that the time for *Christina's World* has arrived. Gone is the need to have reduced musical forces to accompany Edwards' imaginative and highly idiomatic score and Hewitt's often unsettling libretto and its encapsulation of folk rhymes and ditties is all too appropriate and effective. What we have is, in effect, a painting or tableau brought to life, a place wherein the characters are not only allowed to interact freely, but a place wherein, particularly in the case of the work's title character, is able to muse and suggest in soliloquy.

***Christina's World* has a final performance on August 3 at 7.30pm**

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