

Ralph Middenway was born in Sydney on 9th September 1932. The Blue Mountains provided bush walking and the beginning of his love of the bush and Australian plants.

At Sydney High and later Sydney University he started with languages (a life-long interest), switched to Engineering (useful later for designing and building), then finally got it right with Music, Anthropology and Linguistics. The musical 'moment of truth' was when he heard the choir of Sydney University Musical Society rehearsing the stunning Bach motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*.

Through studies in music, anthropology and linguistics at Sydney University, he began to develop his ideas about music in our own and other cultures. Peter Platt's and Donald Peart's conducting greatly influenced him; he also sang in choirs, notably with Vincent Shepherd and Norman Johnstone, and appeared as a conductor.

He studied composition with his friend and neighbour Raymond Hanson, as well as another friend, Eric Gross. Hanson introduced him to the philosophy of Paul Hindemith - as his musical influences, Middenway also listed Paul Dukas, Maurice Ravel, Arthur Honegger, Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Walton, Hugo Distler and 'perhaps' Carl Orff.

Writing music, teaching music and drama, singing, conducting and writing words kept him increasingly busy, and, instead of completing a degree, he soon found himself working in various roles from teacher to theatre manager, stage director, production manager and theatre consultant. Out of the blue came an invitation to teach music and drama at Tudor House, Moss Vale - no teaching qualifications needed in those days in private schools. He stayed seven years. He moved to Adelaide where, for twelve years, he worked at Adelaide University Union, ending up as its CEO, followed by a period managing the Parks Community Centre.

In 1983 he started working as a full-time freelance composer. His work was championed by conductor Patrick Thomas, and performed by the ABC Adelaide Singers, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and West Australian Symphony Orchestra. Other notable performers of his music include Elizabeth Campbell, Australian String Quartet, Australian Brass Quintet, Robert Dawe, Sally Mays, the Australian Youth Orchestra and Michael Kieran Harvey. In addition to Australia, his music has also been performed in Europe, North America and Japan.

Given his theatre work and his love of the human voice, Ralph Middenway inevitably gravitated towards opera. His three operas are *The Letters of Amalie Dietrich*, a one-act four-hander commissioned by the State Opera of South Australia; *Barossa*, a *Singspiel* commissioned by Brian Chatterton for Australia's Bicentennial; and *The Tempest*, with 15 singers, 6 dancers and 2 actors. *The Enchanted Island* (from *The Tempest*) was funded by the Mara Dole Foundation.

His most conspicuous musical role, over twenty years, was as (sometime Chief) Music and Opera Critic and feature writer for *The Advertiser*, with a stint on *The Australian*. Almost by accident he became Founding Chair of the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia Inc., for which he contributed to and co-edited a book of essays on *Parsifal*.

For twenty years, he lived and worked on his native flower farm in bushland on the Fleurieu Peninsula, wine country - the nearest cellar door half an hour away. In 2008 he and his wife sold their farm near Adelaide and moved to Hobart.

A major project undertaken in Tasmania was a new full performing edition of the *Play of Daniel*, to be sung in Latin. One version was specific to St David's Cathedral, Hobart; the second adaptable as to venue, scale and instrumental preference. The third, completed in collaboration with translator Professor Emerita Rosemary Lloyd, was for Francophones.

Another recent, large project was a cantata about St Francis of Assisi, *The Sun of Umbria* (2013), using poetry by Hobart poet and educator Clive Sansom.

In 2012, he began a PhD (Composition) at the Tasmanian Conservatorium, University of Tasmania, graduating in August 2015, with a folio of compositions and an exegesis about the process of setting words to music.

For the last few years Ralph struggled with the symptoms of Ménière's disease. The slow loss of hearing meant he could no longer accurately hear music as it was played.

Ralph Middenway passed away on 22 August 2018. He is survived by his wife, Aina Dambitis, daughters, Leigh Middenway, Marion Middenway and Alison Bounds and three grandsons.

<https://ralphmiddenway.wordpress.com/>

not on
fuku

Operatic Wish List: projects planned but unwritten

- **Kokoro – The Japanese Life of Lafcadio Hearn**

In 1987 then AO baritone David Brennan asked Ralph Middenway to write him a stage piece about Lafcadio Hearn. A writer, part-Irish, part-Greek, Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890 and died there fifteen years later. He was naturalised (as *Koizumi Yakumo*). He was a remarkable man by any standards. Our understanding of everyday life in *Meiji* Japan (to some extent even the Japanese understanding of it) relies ultimately on his quirky eye and rich prose.

Andrew Taylor was the obvious choice as librettist. Koto player and Japanese linguist Kimi Coaldrake was also interested. In 1990, the Suntory Foundation in Osaka and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra funded a visit to Japan by all three to conduct research for the project. They were the first of the international visitors celebrating the of Hearn Centenary.

Following their travels in Japan – meeting key contacts and visiting key sites in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Toyohashi, Matsue, Izumo and Inuyama – they developed a clear framework for the piece. The goal would have been to show Hearn's gradual assimilation into and affection for the Japan he came to understand so well.

It would have been scored for baritone, koto, flute(s), clarinet(s), viola, cello and light percussion. Following convention, the koto player would also be a bit player and sing a little. *Heian-kyo* is a trial run for some of the purely instrumental music.

- **Love's Coming – Images of John Shaw Neilson**

Many wonder that John Shaw Neilson could produce such poetry from a life of such hardship. The best of his poetry is colourful, sensitive, charming, strong, penetrating, implicitly dramatic.

In 1994, through Brian Chatterton of Co*Opera, the Penola Festival asked Ralph Middenway and Andrew Taylor to plan a lyric drama built around his life. They settled on using key Neilson poems as short arias in the continuous *arioso* texture built on Andrew's libretto. Two singers would play Neilson and lost love Florence Case, two others a number of roles, including Adam Lindsay Gordon, Neilson's parents, A.G. Stephens, Mary Gilmore and Mary McKillop.

A small wind section, tuned percussion, harp and strings – or flute and cor anglais, string quintet and two electronic keyboards would have accompanied the singers. The goal would be a directly comprehensible piece unconfined by realism or historical accuracy.

- **'No name' (after E.T.A. Hoffmann)**

The macabre Hoffmann story is highly charged emotionally. The goal would have been a highly dramatic full-length opera. There would be a cast of four principals and a small chorus, some of whom would also have vignette roles. A standard orchestra would be needed. The scenario is agreed. The story, like many of Hoffmann's, has been set to music. This planned version would have had extra dimensions not previously explored, one surreal, the other real-life, presenting a real challenge to the company.