

Andrew Ford (b. 1957)

An die Musik (2005)
for mixed chamber choir

For a decade before composing this piece I had thought of writing some choral music that celebrates the act of singing. The Adelaide Chamber Singers' 20th anniversary finally provided the excuse I needed.

There are two sorts of text in *An die Musik*, literary and non-literary. The former consists of two long poems by David Malouf and Gwen Harwood, and one sequence of three short poems by Thomas Shapcott. All these words were written in the late 20th century by Australian poets, and all deal with 'composed' music, indeed Shapcott's 'Piano Pieces' are really about composers. The non-literary texts which 'interrupt' the others are folk poems/songs from Malaysia, the Pueblo Indians and the Finnish Kanteletar, and they are about singing. The first two are freely adapted by the composer from *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry* (1978, ed. Ruth Finnegan). The Kanteletar extract was adapted from a translation by Anni Heino.

An die Musik was commissioned with financial assistance from the Music Board of the Australia Council by the Adelaide Chamber Singers. It is dedicated to them on their 20th birthday and to my friend and colleague Tristram Cary on his 80th.

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'An die Musik'

We might have known it always: music
is the landscape we move through in our dreams, and in the Garden
it was music we shared
with the beasts. Even plants
unbend, are enchanted. A voice wading
adagio through air, high, clear, wordless, opens perspectives
in the deepest silence; clovers
hum; the jungle's layered
sound-mix seeks horizons, arranges itself as avenues.

*As we raised our voices high in song,
The monkeys dropped from the trees . . .*

What else does it make,
this concert champêtre, if not a space we might re-enter
in innocence, pure steps
of sound on which the creatures
descend at almost dusk to recognise, as in a pool,
their names (not cat, not Moggy), and passion-flowers
incline their busy flywheels to the sun, spinning a line
of melody that modulates from yellow
to green as in mirror fugues and counter-clockwise through the year.

*As we raised our voices high in song,
The flowing river stopped to listen . . .*

So then, play your beanfield
Vivaldi's Gloria and see the thin pods swell, miraculous and many
as the mouths of Hosannah. Watch them
explode across a stave, the angel syllables,
zip-fresh, sky-packaged, and flutter
prestissimi on strings in hemidemisemiquavers.
Let the countryside be filled
with a din, a chime, an agricultural boom, real orchestras
(the Boston Pops) in real market gardens.

*As we raised our voices high in song,
The flying bird turned back to hear . . .*

Imagine as Ein Heldenleben blooms
in a paddock, the slow inner lives of pumpkins, big stones
cracking, a moon-washed field
astir like a symphony as Bruckner coaxes the zucchini.
The green things of the earth
discover a fifth season to push through to, all
grace notes, as their vegetable souls
aspire to "the condition". A new species
taps at the boundaries. Beethoven's Tenth is what it breathes.

David Malouf

*As we raised our voices high in song,
The monkeys dropped from the trees,
The flowing river stopped to listen,
The flying bird turned back to hear.*

Malay

*I heard the songs:
the thunder songs
the dancing songs
the fire-starting songs
the day-break songs
the flute songs
for the grinding of corn.*

*I heard the songs
chanted under a turquoise sky
in the mountains north of Zuni:*

*I heard the cry of an ancient people:
'We who die await the dawn.'*

Pueblo Indian

'Schoenberg Op. 11'

'There is frost in the air
and a dark feeling about the edges of sight.
I heard the songs
chanted under a turquoise sky
in the mountains north of Zuni:
Why will the children still be noisy
and fight loudly in the cold street?
I look out the window at nothing to fear
and see all the city usual and busy.
I heard the cry of an ancient people:
'We who die await the dawn.'
In the quick dusk I hear a child shout
(laughter or terror?)
and am uneasy
so that I must turn away
and switch on all the lights.'

Thomas Shapcott

'Brahms'

Cluttered with ash and coffee stains
the old man's coat hangs on a nail,
it is limp and shapeless, one pocket's torn
and the others bulge out heavy and full.
Even without him in the room
the coat suggests his bulky form.
Time's past and past since it was new,
the cuff and the collar are worn quite through,
but it keeps an old man safe and warm
and will see him beyond this winter time.

Thomas Shapcott

Listen to this song, this singer . . .

'Webern'

'Let me show you my love'
he cried
breaking a flower
from its green stem.

Thomas Shapcott

*Listen to this song, this singer . . .
I sing the ruins into money
I sing the pebbles into pennies
I sing the mountains into butter tubs
I sing the stones into eggs
I sing the glades into bread-fields
I sing the groves into wheat-fields
I sing the hills into puddings
I sing the slopes into pies
I sing the gravel into salt
I sing the lake-bed into malt
I sing the reeds into fruit trees
I sing the rushes into cabbage-patches*

Finnish

'New Music'

Who can grasp for the first time
these notes hurled into empty space?
Suddenly a tormenting nerve
affronts the fellowship of cells.
Who can tell for the first time
if it is love or pain he feels,
violence or tenderness that calls
plain objects by outrageous names

and strikes new sound from the old names?
At the service of a human vision,
not symbols, but strange presences
defining a transparent void,
these notes beckon the mind to move
out of the smiling context of
what's known; and what can guide it is
neither wisdom nor power, but love.

Who but a fool would enter these
regions of being with no name?
Secure among their towering junk
the wise and powerful congregate
fitting old shapes to old ideas,
rocked by their classical harmonies
in living sleep. The beggars' stumps
bang on the stones. Nothing will change.

Unless, wakeful with questioning,
some mind beats on necessity,
and being unanswered learns to bear
emptiness like a wound that no
word but its own can mend; and finds
a new imperative to summon
a world out of unmeasured darkness
pierced by a brilliant nerve of sound.

Gwen Harwood

David Malouf's 'An die Musik' (from Poems 1959 – 98, University of Queensland Press 1992) and Thomas Shapcott's 'Piano Pieces' (Selected Poems 1956 – 1988, UQP rev. ed. 1989) are both used by permission of the authors, Gwen Harwood's 'New Music' (Selected Poems, Penguin 2001) by permission of the author's estate.