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Festival
2023

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ANTARCTICA

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA & ASKO|SCHÖNBERG

Australia / The Netherlands

Australian Exclusive

Carriageworks Bay 17

5-8 January

1 hr 45 mins (no interval)

CAST and CREDITS

Co-production of Sydney Chamber Opera and Asko|Schönberg

Music Mary Finsterer

Libretto Tom Wright

Conductor Jack Symonds

Director Imara Savage

Set and Costume Designer Elizabeth Gadsby

Video Artist Mick Daly

Lighting Designer Alexander Berlage

Sound Designer Bob Scott

The Daughter Jane Sheldon

The Theologian Jessica O'Donoghue

The Natural Philosopher Anna Fraser

The Cartographer Michael Petruccelli

The Captain Simon Lobelson

The Daughter (actor) Hayden Holmes

Asko|Schönberg

Flute / Piccolo / Alto Flute Jane Bishop

Cor Anglais Evert Weidner

Clarinet / Bass Clarinet Stefan Woudenberg

French Horn Jan Harshagen

Trumpet Arthur Kerklaan

Trombone Koen Kaptijn

Piano / Celesta Pauline Post

Percussion Niels Meliefste

Harp Astrid Haring

Violin Joseph Puglia

Violin Bas Treub

Viola / Viola d'amore Liesbeth Steffens

Cello Sebastiaan van Halsema

Double Bass Eva Euwe

Artistic Director Fedor Teunisse

Business Director Ellis van de Giessen

Producer Jasper Berben

Spoken voices

The Daughter Eve Kreutz

Interviewer Tom Wright

Electro-Acoustic Creation Alistair McLean

Audio Programming Elliott Hughes

Audio Engineers AJ Bradford, Lachlan Carrick

Assistant Conductor and Audio Assistant Huw Belling

Production Manager Damion Holling

Stage Manager Emily Borghi

Surtitles Johannes Macdonald

Spoken Voice Consultant Anna McCrossin-Owen

Original Sound Design (Holland) Arne Bock

COMPOSER'S NOTE

At the frontiers of the imagination is a land of nothingness

To go is to find emptiness

A land without a land

A mirror-land

Antarctica is a library of hidden mysteries.

Throughout the planet's history, stories have been accruing – in the sastrugi of the surface, in the ice sheet, and in rocks below, preserved under each new layer. A palimpsest of narratives, waiting to be excavated.

While other continents have the past laid bare, *Antarctica* is different. These stratified deposits are hidden, lying metaphorically and magnetically at the bottom of the world. It is a brooding place, not designed for humans. Too cold, too dark, without nourishment. It is not a heaven, nor a hell. It is a non-place; silently, noisily, instantaneously, eternally, holding the history of the world.

Antarctica is a contemporary opera dealing with historic, mythic and scientific narratives flowing around the southern continent.

In a time when anthropogenic climate change is destabilising centres (political, cultural, scientific), *Antarctica* becomes a stage for a drama of the future. There are vested interests and systems of thought in contest over what is actually happening on this distant stage – a stage without human performers, a stage without scripts, a stage without sets, a stage of wind and ice, of glaring reflectivity and competing song.

Integral to building this opera was a development phase in which disciplines - music, dramaturgy, visual arts, digital media, humanities, cultural studies and a multiplicity of fields within science - converged. In July 2019, Tom and I attended Opera Antarctica Symposium: FIRST LIGHT. Organised through my role as the University of Tasmania CALE Creative Fellow, and co-ordinated in association with scientist Associate Professor Guy Williams, this two-day forum gave Tom and I the opportunity to meet with creative industry specialists and scientists from the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS). The scientific research presented, including graphical representation, raw data, audio and visual material, provided a rich resource and foundation to map out a reimagining of these fields in relation to Antarctica. Through an interplay between English (as a constantly-mutating language) and Latin (as an unchanging, 'eternal' one) in the libretto, and by delving into my own geology as a composer (coalescing Middle Ages and Renaissance musical practice with electronics and serial composition techniques), our aim is to create layers that capture the epic scale of the southernmost continent.

The opera that Tom and I have made hopes to awaken a vastness of thought, stirring something beyond language in an interweaving of metaphor and imagined events. It is a place where non-human forces are given voice, such as krill, a ship, ice. It is a fable that offers an invitation to explore our imagination, a place to be child-like.

In an age of increasing socio-political intensity and concern for our ecology, displacement of populations and heightened awareness of the vulnerability of our oceans, Tom and I wanted to position Antarctica as a fable for the twenty-first century: a made-up story that has, at its heart, a 'mythic quest' that examines human motives.

- Mary Finsterer, composer

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

"Ice is a recording medium and a storage medium. It collects and keeps data for millennia. Unlike our hard disks and terabyte blocks, which are quickly updated and outdated, ice has been consistent in its technology over millennia. Once you know how to read its archive, it is legible almost as far back - as far down - as the ice goes. To imagine ice as a 'medium' in this sense might also be to imagine it as a 'medium'; in the supernatural sense: a presence permitting communication with the dead and buried, across gulfs of deep time, through which one might hear distant messages from the Pleistocene."

Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*

The question for this creative team is how to best represent Antarctica as both a vast landscape and as a place of spiritual transformation and awakening - a journey of the soul.

Mary Finsterer's music is a unique fusion of structural principles and musical devices from early music paired with contemporary orchestration and electronic treatments of sounds taken from Antarctica and its surrounds: oceans, sonar, the movement of microscopic animals. The design responds to this by placing period characters inside a hyper-modern frame of data and technology. If the Age of Discovery concerned itself with categorising the world as the human eye experienced it,

what can 21st century posthumanism (concerning itself with what the artificial 'eyes and ears' of technology) tell us about the changing planet?

The AV designer Mike Daly has coded an experience in TouchDesigner, a visual programming language for building real-time interactive systems. Noise algorithms randomly select and animate fragments of raw text from data relating to Antarctica, including coordinates, geographic landmarks, research stations, star constellations, flora & fauna species and ancient etymologies. However, the AV is not solely limited to data but operates also as a filmic component and as a giant source of light.

The staging space is a place of memory. Two mist chambers intersect the field of information presented on the video wall. The language of the work is a conversation between these two modes. The lighting design draws our attention to the body as it emerges and dissolves in mist and expands into the video in which it is submerged.

Mary Finsterer and Tom Wright's *Antarctica* largely explores metaphysical and spiritual themes, and the nature of dream and memory in a kind of 'deep time'. Responding to the music and libretto's filmic sensibilities, the sharp edits, slow pacing, long takes, non-linear exploration of time and dreamlike visual imagery, the creative team have been inspired visually by the poetic films of Tarkovsky and the paintings of Brueghel and Vermeer. Tarkovsky and Finsterer/Wright share much in common here in the belief of the spiritual nature of art, and Renaissance art as an expression of that belief. Elements in this world, ice, mist, light, shadow are as much characters as the characters themselves. Indeed, the two are at times inseparable from each other.

One cannot think of Antarctica without engaging with the ever-present disaster of climate change. It is the dissolving of place. If ice captures moments and life, if it contains and preserves things from the past, if scientists can read ice to understand what's happened in the past, then ice (physical) is memory (mental). We have endeavoured to merge these physical and mental spaces. The dissolving of the ice is equal to the dissolving of memory. What are we without a collective memory? A person without hubris understands that we are not above or different to nature but a very small part of it.

- Imara Savage, director

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA

Sydney Chamber Opera is a fresh and youthful answer to some of the difficult questions facing today's opera industry. Artistic Director Jack Symonds and Louis Garrick established SCO in 2010 and it has rapidly developed into an important and distinctive voice in the Australian music and theatre landscapes. SCO is critically acclaimed for its innovative programming, musical rigour and strong focus on compelling theatre-making. At SCO we make opera with a 21st-century outlook that resonates with a new, younger audience, and that shows how vibrant and relevant the artform can be. Our program is a balance of specially commissioned work by leading homegrown composers, the latest international operas in their Australian premieres, song cycles and cantatas in unusual stagings, and canonical repertoire reinvigorated by the country's most daring theatrical talent.

ASKO|SCHÖNBERG

Asko|Schönberg (The Netherlands) is one of the leading ensembles for new music. Quality, experimentation and innovative programming with an eye for current events are its most important characteristics. Thanks to a wide network of musicians, conductors, composers and versatile young makers and partners from various art disciplines, Asko|Schönberg is able to contribute to the future of performing arts. The ensemble operates right around the world from its home base in Amsterdam. The programming balances out the rich collection of important 20th century composers with the most recent 21st century work, with a strong emphasis on the work of current composers, both of which are performed at various venues, festivals and interdisciplinary performances.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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