

CARRIAGEWORKS AND SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA PRESENT
EARTH.VOICE.BODY

28 SEP—7 OCT 2023

130 minutes including one 20 minute interval.



THE SHAPE OF THE EARTH (2018)

45 minutes.

Music Jack Symonds

Text Pierce Wilcox

Singer Mitchell Riley

Electronics Benjamin Carey

interval (20 minutes)

LA VOIX HUMAINE (1958)

42 minutes.

Music Francis Poulenc

Text Jean Cocteau

Singer Celeste Lazarenko

QUATRE INSTANTS (2002)

20 minutes.

Music Kaija Saariaho

Text Amin Maalouf

Singer Emily Edmonds

Piano & Musical Direction Jack Symonds

Director (*La voix humaine & Quatre instants*) Clemence Williams

Director (*The Shape of the Earth*) & **Lighting Designer** Alexander Berlage

Set & Costume Designer James Lew

Assistant Director Emily Edmonds

Production Manager Damion Holling

Stage Manager Joshua Broadbent

Principal Artistic Associate & Company Management Huw Belling

Surtitles & Stage Assistance Ezra Hersch & Alexander Maltas

The Shape of the Earth was commissioned by Resonant Bodies Festival, Australia & Carriageworks. Piano sponsored by Kawai Pianos, Australia.

With thanks: Hospital Hill Audio, Opera Queensland, Phoenix Central Park, Studio Zorro

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Jack Symonds, Artistic Director, Sydney Chamber Opera

This evening of monodramas deals thematically with loss and absence in highly contrasted aesthetic worlds and expressive states. Stripping back Poulenc's classic *La voix humaine* to voice and piano creates an intense relationship between performers that magnifies Poulenc's unique and supreme achievement in creating the ultimate paradox: a long musical form made entirely from discontinuous, miniature phrases. I see this late work as the piece towards which his whole life was leading – as a composer who mostly worked in intensely contrasted, instantly memorable 2-bar phrases, as a great song accompanist and as a highly individual dramatist who synthesised and refined the French musical and theatrical traditions of the early 20th century.

It is, however, very much 'of its time' and written through the male gaze. By counterpointing it with Saariaho's extraordinary song cycle *Quatre instants*, we can view this same subject matter through a totally different perspective: one of complex sensuality, violent ecstasy and as poetic a depiction of loss as I know in recent music. These 'four moments' are passionate snapshots in a torrid romantic relationship: longing, desire, pain, consummation. The fourth song is an extended reminiscence which astonishingly mingles all of these states of mind, as if from a great distance in time, and 'proves' this entire piece as cut from one profoundly rich cloth. It's hard to believe this vast ocean of sound can be conjured with just two performers, energised as it is by torrential, glittering piano writing making the instrument into a huge resonating chamber to contain dramatic vocal lines of pulverising eroticism.

My own work *The Shape of the Earth* takes as its inspiration Patrick White's iconic novel *Voss* and reimagines it completely. Pierce Wilcox and I were concerned not to emulate the epic, heroic tone of the novel (already a Grand Opera by Richard Meale), but rather interrogate its ideas in 21 quizzical miniature songs, reflecting shards of a complex, broken persona, with electronics extending the piano and vocal sounds to create a three-dimensional 'shadow' of the performers, suggesting vast spaces within and without. This *Voss* is an idealist thrown into a world he longs to understand, yet remains always out of reach. The five parts of this staged song cycle trace a journey from comic disbelief to flayed loneliness, with White's indelible creation hovering just in the background. To make this kind of work in Australia now requires a loving scepticism of the idea of Romantic, European ambition and an unflinching desire to try to understand how it became a dominant force in 19th and 20th century culture.

My deepest thanks to Carriageworks, our home since 2014, and to the three fearless singers who have embodied these works with unflinching vocal, physical and expressive intensity. Mitchell Riley, Celeste Lazarenko and Emily Edmonds have been friends and artistic collaborators for more than a decade, and working so closely with them to realise these intimate pieces has been a great privilege. Watching Clemence Williams and Alexander Berlage bring these works to dramatic life has also shown me the ideal way of shaping small-scale new work: a deep artistic trust allied to an uncompromising vision in the endlessly fascinating relationships between music, text, performer and space is the operatic ideal to which we should aim at all times!

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Alexander Berlage, Director (*The Shape of the Earth*)

A weary traveller wakes to find he is alone; a vast and empty wilderness left with nothing but the infinite stars and desert of his own mind. Lost in the chasm of solitude, he contemplates his very existence: how, why and what has he become?

Taking inspiration from Patrick White's epic and iconic novel *Voss*, this is a complex and colourful work that takes us deep into the wilderness and oblivion of the psyche in the desperate pursuit of meaning.

Originally staged as a one-off performance as part of the 2018 *Resonant Bodies* Festival at Carriageworks, it has been both a thrill and honour to revisit this piece with the incredibly virtuosic Mitchell Riley.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Clemence Williams, Director (*La voix humaine* & *Quatre instants*)

The presentation of Poulenc's *La voix humaine* alongside Kaija Saariaho's *Quatre instants* inspires a multitude of resonances but, perhaps most potently, it displays two vastly different approaches to understanding oneself through intimate relationships with others. Our production of *La voix humaine* invites you to witness the inner workings of a woman deeply in love, and in even deeper distress. The story follows a woman on the phone to her former lover in various phases of processing, denial and acceptance. In other productions, you might find a naturalistic representation of our central figure alone in her apartment, on the phone. This time, at least, that's not *all* you will see...

The conception of this production has been inspired by the imbalance and fundamentally unresolved nature of the music. We hope that ruminating on this imbalance and

minimisation of power allows us to better understand the psychological world and painful undoing of the central figure.

Put simply, *Quatre instants* is a contrasting display of a woman coming to an understanding. She too has lived the highs and lows of love, intimacy and loss. However, it feels like time has passed – or certainly enough for her to sift through knowledge and experience to find her sense of self at the other end.

We're presenting this work as an unfolding process; an active gesture of a person coming to an understanding. First we see our central figure collect fragments to process, before being invited to feel the paradoxically present memory of pain. We then sit in a moment of balance, pleasure and beauty, only to unwind each sensation into a final moment of resolution and understanding.





ABOUT SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA

Resident company at Carriageworks, Sydney Chamber Opera is a fresh and youthful answer to some of the difficult questions facing today's opera industry. As one of "Australia's most innovative arts groups" (*SMH*) we have "redefined operatic performance in Australia" (*ABR*) to show "an astonishing new vision of what contemporary Australian opera can achieve" (*Time Out*).

Jack Symonds, Louis Garrick and Huw Belling 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. SCO makes opera with a 21st-century outlook that resonates with a new, younger audience, and that shows how vibrant and relevant the artform can be. Its program aims for 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.

We have fostered deep engagement with a wide range of artists across music, text, design, and theatre at the intersection of many cultural practices, and we have a unique methodology where we approach opera as *chamber music* – where each individual has equal responsibility for their part – a prerogative that we extend to all of our creatives. SCO has also been presented by the Holland Festival, Tokyo Festival, Sydney Festival (eight times), Biennale of Sydney (twice), Melbourne Festival and Dark MOFO.

Artistic Director Jack Symonds

Principal Artist Associate Huw Belling

Production Manager Damion Holling

Artistic Associates Danielle Maas, Mitchell Riley, Jane Sheldon, James Wannan, Pierce Wilcox

SCO BOARD

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THANK YOU TO SCO'S 2023 SUPPORTERS WHO MADE THIS PRODUCTION POSSIBLE

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PUBLICITY

Kym Elphinstone, Jasmine Hersee

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Marissa Bagley, Sandra Bardwell, Daisy Barrow Piper, Kate Bobis, Bea Buckland-Willis, Katie Cassidy, Jackie Chaiyakarn, Frances Colin, Eliza Cooper, Simon Croker, Laura Soerja Djanegara, Sabrina Evangeline Benes-Feher, Nix Francia, Hugo Fraser, Alexander Fry, Chloe Geary, Eddie Gock, Ruby Goldman, Maddi Goyen, Dana Guarnaschelli, Amy Hack, Emma Harbridge, Cait Harris, Lucy Heffernan, Ella Hemsley, Teale Howie, Ava Lagoon-Robinson, Alina Liu, Alexandra Malcolm, Pierre Marcos, Celine Marshall, Benedicte McGowen, Spencer Morrow, Nolan Murphy, Sarah Muttlak, Sarah Napier, Amy Nelson, Isabella Niven, Yue (Tanaporn) Norsrida, Ezara Norton, Jake Parker, Francesca Paula Simon, Noah Rayner, Hannah Roberts, Katie Rosewood, Jordan Sharp, Evalyn Sharpham, Saskia Shearer, Lilian Shepherd, Greeshma Shetty, Sarah Smith, Kate Smytheman, Victoria Soo, Nell Trotter, Madeleine Urquhart, Gita Vasaityte, Eleni Vergotis, Tanya Veselcic, Uma Volkmer, Jess Wang, Bianca Watkin, Ella Watson-Heath, Emma White, Emma Whitehead, Ramonne Wilson-Lemme, Strickland Young

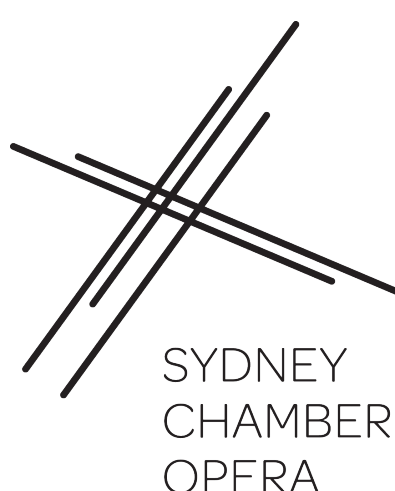
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CARRIAGEWORKS



KAWAI