

CD: War Letters

new music commemorating WWI

Halcyon

Review by Rita Crews

In this era of instant email, EFT, direct debit and the like, letters are becoming a somewhat rare commodity a fact acknowledged by Australia Post with reduced delivery of "snail mail". But that is just a recent event and for centuries the handwritten word was the principal means of communication. Does one commemorate war? or does one simply remember the event in the hope that 'history does not repeat itself'? The jury still seems to be out for that verdict but in the meanwhile, this selection of extracts from letters sent home during World War I and set to new music is a reminder not only of an historical event but of the futility of the whole sad experience.

The four works on this disc were all written in 2015, a century after the start of World War I and are performed by members of Halcyon conducted by Geoffrey Gartner and which includes Alison Morgan [soprano], Jenny Duck-Chong [mezzo soprano], Clive Birch [bass], James Wannan [viola], Kaylie Dunstan [percussion] and Jo Allan [piano].

Elliott Gyger's *Un poilu australien* is a five-movement work for bass, mezzo soprano, viola, percussion and piano. The words are by Jacques Playoust who had emigrated to Australia as a young child, but returned during WWI to enlist in the French army. Some of the words are sung in French and some in English. The four movements of *Dearest Mother* written by Nicole Murphy for soprano with viola and piano set to music the letters that Edith [Queenie]

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Averell a WWI nurse in the Australian army, sent home to her mother from her overseas postings.

Letters from the Trenches written by Larry Sitsky for mezzo soprano, viola, percussion and piano are a compilation of sentences taken from many letters of the period found by the composer and arranged into a logical order in his words "a kind of letter from a soldier Everyman" describing the various experiences that soldiers had related from the front.

The last work on the disc is Diana Blom's *Triptych [war letters]* for soprano, mezzo soprano, bass, viola, percussion and piano. This is a personal account of letters sent from her uncle Frank Nestor Robinson to his sister [Blom's grandmother] on his departure from New Zealand for Gallipoli. There are also extracts from the war diaries of David Wilkins who served in Vietnam and those of Afghanistan veteran Andrew Hastie. In all, these letters cover nearly a century of war.

In describing his own work, Elliott Gyger's words best sum up the content of this entire collection of letters that range from "initial patriotic enthusiasm, through disillusionment and trauma to moments of despair."

Studio teachers will be interested in the unusual combinations of instruments and voices and students can learn a lot about how words can be set to music.

War Letters is released on the Wirripang label

www.australiancomposers.com.au

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