

TRAVAILS WITH MY AUNT

When I heard the news of Dorothy Freed's death early on 1 April [2000] I was in a Wanganui hotel room, clad in a dressing gown and slippers, poised to sally forth to the dining room for a performance of *Opera for Breakfast*. We had arranged this crazed little show to include *Diva Song*, a marvellously witty piece, full of musical jokes, Verdi, Mozart, Puccini, Schumann and Handel pastiche, which Dorothy had written with Fergus Dick for a revue decades earlier. It had been unearthed for Dorothy's noisy and spectacular 80th birthday celebrations in 1999 and sung brilliantly by Scilla Askew with Bruce Greefield at the piano. Her repeat performance on Dorothy's deathday was a splendid tribute to a colourful, lively figure in New Zealand's musical life. She would have loved it, especially as it was sung by the Director of the Centre for New Zealand Music which Dorothy had done so much to help create.

Dorothy was appalled at the thought that her works might ever be subjected to analysis or have theses written on them, so far be it from me as a loyal nephew to do any such thing. But I don't think she would mind my telling something about her origins and giving a brief survey of her vocal and theatre music.

Though she was a late starter, not having been able to study at a tertiary level until she was a working mother of three in her late thirties, Dorothy did not spring fully formed from the head of Zeus. Her father and grandparents were born in Trinidad. Canon Wiltshire Doorly of San Fernando was an enthusiastic amateur musician, an organist, director of all manner of local productions and a composer of hymns in high Victorian style. I have the manuscript of his *Eight Bells*, a vigorous yo-ho-ho setting of a rather Boys' Own poem by his son, Gerald Doorly, Dorothy's father, about his training days for the Merchant Navy. Wiltshire's wife, Jane Doorly, starred in many of the colony's musical enterprises and was known as the Nightingale of the West Indies. Family lore has it that she hastened her own death by insisting on rising from her sick bed to accompany a promising young Trinidadian soprano who was raising funds to study in England. She was clearly much loved and a commemorative stained glass window, depicting her as St Cecilia, is still in Port of Spain Cathedral.

Gerald Doorly left Trinidad in his teens and had an adventurous career as a master mariner. Highpoint of his life was his journey to the Antarctic as Third Officer on the *Morning* which was sent to relieve Captain Scott's ice-bound *Discovery*. Doorly, who won the job against strong competition as much for his value as an entertainer as for his seamanship, no small matter for those endless polar nights with no radio, always insisted on having his piano on board. The Chief Engineer wrote verse, Doorly, who never learned to read music, improvised at the piano. The resultant *Songs of the Morning*, which he had written out by a Melbourne piano teacher – far too correctly and dully, according to Dorothy who said her father's harmonic inventiveness went far beyond Lovelock – was later published and now, according to recent ransacking of the Internet, is fetching astonishingly high prices in antiquarian bookshops. The songs are unfailingly attractive in a slightly Sullivanesque way, the best of them being the rousing *Yuss!* which owes something to Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads*.

So Dorothy grew up in a household where music was a fact of life, its creation and performance regarded as a perfectly normal activity. She and her sister Geraldine, my mother, became proficient pianists and everyone sang. Not that singing was ever particularly admired in my family – it was simply something everybody could do and it seemed baffling if anyone else couldn't.

When Dorothy began her music degree at Victoria part-time over several years while she worked there as a secretary, what came most easily to her in composition exercises was vocal music. She always said the only difficulty was finding the right poem, the music wrote itself. Some early Shakespeare settings written for theatre productions in the 1950s have a charming simplicity which compares happily with fussier versions, but she really found her own voice when Douglas Lilburn, her composition teacher, insisted that she set contemporary New Zealand poets. She responded particularly to A. R. D. Fairburn and ten of these songs have been published (*Five Fairburn Songs* and *The Sun, the Wind and the Rain*, both available from the Centre for New Zealand Music.) She won the APRA prize in 1957 for her haunting setting of the Katherine Mansfield ballad *The Sea Child* and I well remember my family gathered in awe round the wireless (sic) to hear its first broadcast. It is published in *Kowhai* (SOUNZ 1994) and is recorded by Margaret Medlyn and Bruce Greenfield on *Burning Bright* (Kiwi Pacific 1999). Dorothy was delighted to have her *Kowhai* given pride of place in the SOUNZ publication as well as providing the title for the collection. Interestingly, the poet she knew best personally, James K. Baxter, she regarded as totally unmusical and unsettable. Having observed the recent fashion for creating Baxter songs I suspect she may have had a point...

The songs of the 50s and 60s are essentially conservative in idiom, displaying the musical influences of the composer's youth, but they are more than a colonial outpost of the 'British Art Song'. At her best Dorothy Freed had a real flowing, lyrical inventiveness and, a voracious reader throughout her life, she had a song-writer's essential qualities of acute poetic discernment along with a melodic gift. I remember she was somewhat pipped with me once when I suggested she rather overdid 6/8 time, but admitted later she'd simply never noticed.

Probably Dorothy's most substantial work is *Deserted Beach*, a Ruth Dallas poem set for soprano and string quartet. In its first public performance by Margaret Medlyn and the NZSQ it was coupled on the programme with Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach*. The inevitable comparisons revealed many similarities, not just in subject matter, though these were coincidental – Dorothy had never heard of the Barber – but the surprising thing, to my ear at least, was how well the Freed compared. On the day anyway it seemed the more profound of the two pieces. A recording of this was played at Dorothy's funeral and a CD, this time with Deborah Wai Kapohe, is pending.

Unfortunately a lot of Dorothy's most original occasional work has been lost. She adored the theatre and would dearly have loved to write an opera. She had a dramatic instinct and her theatre piece, *Suicide Deferred*, first given at Dartington Hall, is achingly funny and deserves a revival, as does *Goldilocks and the Five Bears* for narrator and brass ensemble. She wrote incidental music for many plays and for radio drama where she relished the challenge of creating, on a miniscule budget, brief, strikingly apposite music for small ensembles of improbable instruments. When I was studying German at Otago University and playing in the departmental production of Goethe's *Faust* in 1967 we were unsure how to deal with the songs in the play. I mentioned this to my vivacious aunt who was down on a visit. She knew no German but she knew the Schubert songs from *Faust* and what could be expected of non-singing actors. She took my script and retired to bed with pencil and paper. Next morning four new songs lay on the breakfast table, simple, catchy, absolutely right. In subsequent years she was persuaded to do the same thing for Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* and Büchner's *Woyzeck*. I still remember many of the tunes, though the music, alas, has vanished down a black hole.

Dorothy rather lost heart with composition in later years, complaining that her incorrigible propensity for writing tunes made her unfashionable and precluded her from being taken seriously, especially in academic circles, and there is little doubt that she had to struggle harder because of this and also, even

in the 60s, because she was a woman. She found it difficult to forgive Frederick Page who had patronisingly fobbed off her application for a scholarship to Italy because ‘Mrs. Freed has a husband to support her’ – never mind that they were on the brink of divorce. Considering how much she did for others it would have been reasonable to expect a little more support in return. Still, her pioneering work was not in vain and I am glad she lived to enjoy the admiration of many women composers who acknowledged their debt to her. She also saw the rediscovery of her songs which have been performed in public and on radio by the likes of Margaret Medlyn, Margaret Nielsen, Peter Russell, Bruce Greenfield, Gillian Bibby and me. They have also become valued by teachers and students keen to perform New Zealand music but daunted by the technical demands of more progressive composers. Dorothy could sing and play well enough herself to know what was reasonable to expect of her performers.

Dorothy Freed was a vivid, dramatic, energetic, talkative, indiscreet, gregarious person who did everything with flair and verve. She leaves two important legacies to New Zealand music: the tremendous cataloguing work she inspired as a librarian and for her achievement as a minor but significant composer. No one who met her will ever forget her, but her work will outlive even those memories.

Roger Wilson

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