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Requiem to the fallen: terrified soldiers' tales from battlefield to be given voice

JANE ALBERT THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 02, 2014 12:00AM



Pamela Traynor watches as Regina Huang, Ayesha Ajgaonkar and Nicholas Vaughan practise the requiem. Picture: Renee Nowyarger Source: News Corp Australia

THEY are the words of terrified, vulnerable, young soldiers, written to their mothers from the battlefields of World War I, fearing the worst but doing their best to sound upbeat in the face of the inevitable.

Many of them would never return, their grieving mothers left with little more than the precious letters they'd received, a reminder of the unbreakable bond between mother and son.

It was while reading these letters from the young men in the trenches to their mothers at home in Australia that librettist Pamela Traynor knew she had found an important and emotive story that needed to be told.

Next Sunday, those words, along with poems written by fellow infantrymen from Australia's World War I effort, will be brought to life for the first time in Australian War Requiem, a new choral work composed by conductor-composer Christopher Bowen with words by Traynor, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the war.

Performed by the Sydney University Graduate Choir, along with five soloists including a Turkish-Australian soprano, an orchestra, chamber choir and two school choirs, the concert is open to the public and will be held at the Sydney Town Hall.

In attendance will be Governor-General Peter Cosgrove, ambassadors from Turkey, Germany, Belgium, France, New Zealand and Britain, and members of the families of the soldiers quoted.

"This has been the most heart-wrenching but utterly inspiring experience of my working life," says Traynor, a writer and award-winning documentary filmmaker whose docudramas include *Prejudice* and *Mum, How Do You Spell Gorbatschov?*

"To be able to hold the original letters in your hand and know that they came from boys — and that's what they were — who had never been outside their little towns, that will be with me as long as I live.

"You know the basics of the first world war but this makes it so intimate."

The new work has been two years in the making. In 2012 the choir received an arts and culture grant from the federal government to create the first large-scale composition by an Australian composer addressing the impact of the war on Australian soldiers and their families.

Bowen and Traynor spent months at the Australian War Memorial thumbing through hundreds of original letters stored there, many of which are quoted verbatim by Traynor.

"My dearest mother," Private Vivian Neville Main wrote to his mother in Australia on Christmas Day 1917. "We're somewhere in France and I've just finished Christmas dinner. I've been thinking of you all at home today. Oh! How I would like to be there with you all. I had a very narrow squeak this time: a piece of shrapnel came and tore my clothes and then went in to the ground. It was quite near enough. From your loving son, Vivian."

Hours later, he was dead. Main was 24.

In addition to the letters Traynor has woven in the Stabat Mater, the 13th-century hymn depicting Mary's grief at the suffering of her son Jesus as he was crucified; and excerpts from a speech given by Turkish army officer Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to commemorate the Anzacs killed at Gallipoli: "I'm calling to all mothers who have shed tears for their sons and want to take them back to their homelands: wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are at peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well."

Traynor has also quoted numerous poems written by the soldiers during the war effort. One such poem is *On a Dying Soldier*, written by pacifist and ambulance officer Reginald James Godfrey before burying a soldier at sea in July 1915.

Before publishing any of the poetry or letters Traynor had to track down the families to ask permission in what proved to be a long but ultimately rewarding journey.

Many of the families will travel from interstate to attend the concert. "They treasure these young men from their families; and I do too," says Traynor.

"Essentially it's about love, the Australian War Requiem; a love between a mother and her adult son. It's also about loss and destruction, but ultimately it's about love."

In addition to the government grant, the world premiere of Australian War Requiem has been co-funded by the governments of Turkey, Germany and Belgium; while the Australian War Memorial has provided archival images of World War I that will be screened during the concert, of soldiers and their mothers, and of gravesites in France, Belgium and other areas that sustained huge losses.

The choir is giving its time voluntarily for what it believes is a significant, timely, new work. Following the world premiere of the Australian War Requiem it is hoped the production will be performed by other choirs in other countries.

Traynor believes the world needs the Australian War Requiem, now more than ever.

"Sons are still being killed on battlefields right now in parts of the world," she says.

"Their mothers are grieving in the same way. What I hope is that when people hear the music they will stop and listen.

"The music really does express everything you'd want to say about war, and why we don't want it again, in any form. My hope is that it will move people away from violence. That is my hope."

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