

BOWEN'S MASTERPIECE ECHOES THE CRIES OF THE FALLEN

RE-LIVE AN AUSTRALIAN WAR REQUIEM



An Australian War Requiem, scored for orchestra, five soloists, massed choir, semi chorus and children's choir, premiered at Sydney Town Hall in August last year. Photo – Anthony Nixon

Australia's first *War Requiem* has been written by the eminent composer-conductor, Christopher Bowen OAM to commemorate the centenary of World War I and the Gallipoli campaign. It was premiered in the Sydney Town Hall to great acclaim in August last year. Scored for orchestra, five soloists, massed choir, semi chorus and children's choir, Bowen's long held desire to write an *Australian War Requiem* was fulfilled when Sydney University Graduate Choir commissioned the work. The choir got behind the event with immense enthusiasm while the small, dedicated management committee brought exceptional expertise and skill to the large enterprise which achieved an unqualified success.

The genesis of the work lay in Bowen's decision to set his music to letters written between young Australian soldiers on the battlefields and their mothers at home in Australia. The Australian War Memorial holds scores of these letters and reading them became a highly emotional experience. Text of the medieval Marian hymn *Stabat Mater* (generally ascribed to Jacopone da Todi ca. 1230 – 1306) which describes the suffering of Christ's mother at her son's crucifixion, was then interwoven with these wartime letters. The juxtaposition provides a powerful text.

An extract from just one of these soldier's letters written by Vivian Neville Main to his mother on Christmas Day, 1917 reads:

My dearest Mother, 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.

Had my birthday in the trenches in none too comfortable a spot but one must put up with these sort of things in these hard times.

By jove it has been cold over here. Everything frozen and the water in my water bottle was one hard lump.

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.

Vivian was killed in action later that Christmas Day, aged twenty-four.

And a letter from a mother, Alice Crowley, to her son Lieutenant Clive Stanley Crowley dated March 31, 1918 reads in part:

My very dear Clive, I am feeling awfully low spirited dearest since hearing such very terrible news relating to this fearful war. It just feels too heavy to bear: Whenever will it end and I am always wondering how you are. I have never felt my old self since you left us. I try and imagine you at home here with us again and see your dear good face as in the happy days of yore.

Lieutenant Crowley died on June 25, 1918. A fellow officer wrote of his death:

At daybreak during an early-morning bombardment at Villers-Bretonneux in June 1918 I met Lieutenant Crowley coming out walking from the front line. He was badly gassed but just able to speak to me and I heard that he died at the Dressing Station the same afternoon. He was a friend of mine.

Another officer reported: "I saw Lieutenant Crowley walking out and heard him say, 'I'm done. Get your gas helmets on, boys'"

These are just some brief examples of the material which inspire the text and music.

Moved to the core

An important and profoundly significant step in the evolution of the composition occurred when Bowen embarked on a journey to Villers-Bretonneux, Pozieres, Passchendaele, Tyne Cot, Ypres and Gallipoli. In these historical locations he experienced first-hand what were once the terrible battlefields where so many lost their lives during "the war to end all wars". As he travelled through towns and villages, it was as if he could hear echoes of the rumble of artillery fire and the cries of the fallen. He wrote in his extensive diary: "I have just returned from a very intensive twelve-day pilgrimage which has provided me with so much inspiration and material for this composition and has moved me to my very core. It is my hope that this *War Requiem* speaks a universal language and reinforces those qualities which bring all people together and enable them to share a common humanity in peace".

The premiere performance proved to be an intensely emotional musical experience for both performers and audience alike. Soloists Celeste Lazarenko and Ayse Gökür Shanal (sopranos), Henry Choo (tenor), Adrian Tamburini and Christopher Richardson (basses) and all those who participated were deeply moved. The performance received a standing ovation from the packed audience at the Sydney Town Hall.

Following the performance, Kim Williams AM, author, leader in arts, business, government and media, described the work as: "majestic, monumental and a deeply moving experience". Australia's mezzo soprano Lauris Elms AM OBE wrote: "Christopher Bowen has written some fine work over the years. In *Australian War Requiem* he has established himself as a great composer for all time. Musically this was a thrilling and unforgettable experience".

You can experience this extraordinary performance when Fine Music plays its live recording of *An Australian War Requiem* on ANZAC day, 25 April from 2pm.

- Pamela Traynor

ON AIR
SUNDAY 25 APRIL 16:00
AN AUSTRALIAN WAR REQUIEM
Recorded by Greg Ghalvalas
for FINE MUSIC
Bowen, C. An Australian war requiem
(2014)

