

## NIGEL BUTTERLEY EULOGY: 1 MARCH 2022

Good morning, everyone. Tom Kennedy has asked me to speak on “Nigel, the musician”.

I first met Nigel Butterley in late April 1965, the year when I came to Sydney. It was in the old Verbrugghen Hall at the Conservatorium of Music after a lecture by the British composer, Peter Maxwell Davies, who had been Fellow in Composition at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide. My wife, Diana, has known him even longer: she met him in August 1961 during the famous Sydney season of the *Play of Daniel* when he was singing the role of Habakkuk and she was a Queen’s Attendant – each night she stuck on his beard.

I had been back in Brisbane over the weekend before that lecture by Max Davies when a composer friend had told me that he’d met the young composer, Nigel Butterley, at the Musica Viva Easter Festival that year. “You should get to know him,” he said. At my request, Astrid Frost introduced us after that lecture and we walked to Wynyard Station together, stopping at a Repin’s coffee-shop on the way. It was the beginning of a long and rich friendship.

In March 1964, his octet, *Laudes* had been premiered and acclaimed at the Adelaide Festival. It was his first significant piece after a period of study of modern composition with Priaux Rainier in London. She had been recommended by Michael Tippett and that piece (as well as his involvement with the mediaeval music-drama) reveals a pattern which has always characterised his music-making as both composer and performer: an interest in the newest and the oldest musical repertoire. And much in between. In short: he followed no dogmas; simply his own artistic integrity.

That piece also illustrates his highly personal approach to his craft. It epitomises his musical, philosophical and emotional responses to four important European religious sites, the first of them where the nature of the piece crystallised for him. It is the marvellous 6<sup>th</sup>-century church of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. He came out of Mass there one Sunday morning, having just walked past its famous and gloriously beautiful mosaics of virgins, saints and martyrs above the Romanesque arches of its Nave; outside he encountered snow everywhere, under a blue sky and he knew, at once, how he would write the piece and use the Gregorian hymn, “Te Deum, laudamus”, elements of which form the motivic structure of the music and which soars out entire and glorious in the third movement.

Its second movement (the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Apse of Norwich Cathedral) is dedicated to his old friends, Petrina and Michael Slaytor (who are here with us today).

When he came to write his first major orchestral work -- a symphony, really, though nobody used that term then – it was inspired by some of the writing of the metaphysical poet, Thomas Traherne, and he called it *Meditations of Thomas Traherne*. While he was working on it, he gave me a profound insight into the creative process, unintentionally reminding me of my earlier realisation that I had **no** gift as a composer or a poet. I was driving him home after a concert and asked how the work was progressing. “I’ve got all these marvellous noises in my head,” he replied. “I have to organise them and put the notes on the page so that, when the orchestra plays the score, the audience will hear those noises, just as I do.”

That name, by the way, is a reminder that Nigel took great care over titles. Sometimes he described the music to friends and offered a bottle of red-wine to the person who made the best suggestion. However, I have no recollection of *ever* winning a bottle. In fact, Nigel was very sceptical – even dismissive – of my musical opinions and judgement and he was probably correct in his diagnoses. Self-evidently, I was a dwarf in the shadow of that musical giant.

He is often described as a serious and reflective person -- and he was. He took all of his work very seriously. Yet he had an impish sense of humour which, having worked with him for some years, the conductor and administrator, John Hopkins, recognised well-enough to commission a work for the famously stimulating “Prom Concerts” in Sydney in 1972. Further, Hopkins decided that Nigel should collaborate with the satiric and comedic genius, Barry Humphries. They produced *First Day Covers – a philharmonic philatelia* comprising things which *should* be on Australia’s postage stamps but aren’t – such as meat pies, lamingtons, sharks, Funnel-web spiders and Garden Gnomes. Butterley accompanied – “enveloped”, even – the verses with witty musical pastiches, the sources for which ranged through Disney’s “Snow White”, Schubert, Beethoven, Delibes, Tchaikovsky, Debussy and Stravinsky (as well as *many others*) revealing, in the words of the composer and scholar Elliott Gyger (who is also with us today, conducting some of Nigel’s music), “an extensive repertoire literacy”.

My personal connection with that hilarious piece is that, when Gordon Chater performed as Edna’s husband, Norm, at the Sydney première (in the future Dame’s regrettable absence) he wore a gray cardigan that I had bought years earlier at Coles, which Nigel always referred to as my “RSL-Cardie”.

That same wickedness and whimsy were apparent in *Westerly Prelude* which he wrote for the inauguration (in 1979) of the organ of the Festival Centre in Adelaide. Knowing that the ABC’s broadcast of the event would be heard by virtually every organist in Australia, at one point Nigel had the soloist, Ashleigh Tobin, slip a pencil above one of the keys so that the note sounded continuously – what organists call a *cipher*, which usually results from a mechanical fault in the instrument. Apparently the joke worked, causing near heart attacks or *Schadenfreude* in many of those listening musicians.

I mentioned the importance of a visual impetus in the passionate art-lover in the genesis of *Laudes*. It is also crucial to understand the comparable importance of poetry. Nigel Butterley loved and was inspired by mystical and “inner” poetry – especially, as I have mentioned, by Thomas Traherne, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Kathleen Raine, as well as a number of Australian poets, many of whom were personal friends. Vocal music was, therefore, extremely significant in his compositional output. Hence, we will hear some today.

This was clear when John Hopkins, as Director of Music at the ABC, set him the challenge of a commission to be the ABC entry in the international Italia Prize which we had won only once before, in 1959, with *Death of a Wombat* by Ivan Smith and music by George English. The *musical* competition was special: it was not for a concert piece but for something which was exclusively radiophonic. The technical challenges were formidable in the extreme, but Nigel’s first impulse was to consult his colleague, Patrick Kirkwood, in the Religious Broadcasts department (also here today). As Patrick

recently recalled it: “It is an astounding achievement of voices and instruments, of speech and song, and still gives a shiver as you hear it.....His *Prix Italia* Piece, which (before the days of multi-tracking) was recorded in different locations, including the crypt of St Marys Cathedral, and the SSO in the Town Hall *etc.*, and all synced together in the final edits.....He came to my office one evening and said that John Hopkins had commissioned him to write a radiophonic piece for the Prize. He was staggered. I happened to be reading the Dead Sea Scrolls at the time, and the section “The War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness.” I read some of it to him and that became the core of the piece, and he built around it other works, including the Irish poem “In the Head the Fire”, which gave the whole piece its title. It was an exciting project and some of us provided singing voices for the Crypt recordings where he also recorded a bell striking, then played it back in reverse in the final recording – quite a wonderful effect.”

My own part in that project was minuscule; first as a member of the male chorus and then – sworn to secrecy by a dubious Nigel – when I gave him his inoculations prior to his trip to Palermo for the award ceremony.

Finally, I’ll say something about commissions. I commissioned two works from Nigel. The first was in 1981: *Conversation Pieces*, a set of student pieces for flute and piano (which was premièred by my daughter and eldest son, for whom it was written), and also, in 1987, short orchestral work, *In Passing*. One of the sections of the former set, in which the flute plays on, unstoppable, is called “I can’t get a word in Edgeways”. Nigel said, “It is a little portrait of you”. That should be the cue for me to conclude my loving *memoire* of this great man and marvellous musician -- a “great enabler” in Patrick Kirkwood’s terms -- with this small personal recollection.

John Carmody, 1 March 2022.