PREFACE

(TO BE SUNG ON THE WATERS)

Professional musicians will often scorn the notion that music may text an inner message.

Recalling rehearsals with the posthumously famous Georg Tintner, a hard-boiled West Australian Symphony Orchestra player lamented to me: “Hell, he’d lecture us on Beethoven, Nietzsche and philosophy when all we wanted was to move on, go home, have tea.”

Nevertheless I think also of Thomas Mayer, a conductor now likely to be famous only in heaven, if at all, but violently displaced like Tintner from his home landscape and for the same cruelly senseless political reasons. Mayer was fond of quoting to audiences Beethoven’s user-friendly remark: “Music has higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.” I’ve noticed too that in heartfelt reactions to music, people often say it spoke to them and in similar reactions to poetic text they are moved to say it was music.

Glen Phillips’ poems in “Winged Seed Songs” live eloquently between such contradictions. Many of the poems inwardly rehearse European music, carried forward into an Australian landscape. In some poems, and cycles of poems, musical forms have suggested poetic ones. Others are of music as it newly presents in landscape: when you stop the car …noise of silence/ is as sudden as thunderstroke.

The graces and refraining patterns of music too, will hover us across ancient, magic terrain, as in “Roebuck Bay”: The way to the sea is across the sea…

Adding to richness, poems set in China, Spain, Denmark or England run a different landscape where Australia itself may be carried inwardly like a haunting tune.

But of course for me, many of the poems are as sprawlingly Australian and familiar-threatening as Patrick White or Peter Cowan in their “Down at the Dump” or “Red Back Spider” mode: The knottiness of Webern, for example, runs for Glen in the barbed wire entanglements of human incursion into bush. The ‘singing’ of these internal/external landscapes, even their smells, is enviably masterful.

In “Twelve Etudes” I am powerfully drawn to the Slessoresque of In the chalk dusted/ schoolrooms left behind/ a dog eared pad/ where perfected lines/ earned the coloured stamp. Yet I am even more drawn to the abrupt transition here, again a musical one, to Now streets seem full of avatars-/ gold painted, bronzed or white washed/ they spring from hinged treasure chests…

The suburbia we love/hate also gets a classic serve: Afternoon hours shuffle by in heat/ the human arises, discovers a yawn/ when shadows begin to lean out on the street.

There was an Ivesian time in the Australian landscape, sadly gone, when musicians regularly played on the march, or in park rotundas. Distance lent enchantment then (at least for Hal Porter) to “the Shire Band despairing its way through Melodie d’Amour”.

3
Porter was referring I think to how a musical ear will inwardly correct the pitch and rhythm of a bad performance if the external acoustic signal is sufficiently faint to become a series of mere cues.

I think also of another WASO musician who told me that as a boy working long hours on an isolated farm in the Lake Wakatipu district of New Zealand, it was the sound of a dance band on a pleasure steamer wafted across the water that spoke of an exhilaratingly different world—one he ran away to, to learn the double bass.

Nowadays we travel the distances in a car listening to recorded music. Thus in “Baandee Cimbalom” the flattish twang of the instrument mirrors for Glen, the salty flatness of the ruined lake land and (perhaps only for me) evokes as well the many Slavic men and women who settled it, working on farms or the railway.

Returning to Beethoven and the hardboiled professional musician or singer: The latter must in performance get on with the job, tumbling forward in a formidable array of skills and mind/body memory co-ordinations, some of these painstakingly learnt in a training period longer, crueller, than that for a surgeon, and some of them mysteriously innate. In the hurly-burly the professional might miss Walt Whitman’s insight, that the listener is the final part of any performance.*

We know Beethoven ended as a person able to communicate only through his art, and that may be why his art is so developed. His revelation must be different for us all, but it gives out to us all from the same depth of humanity. In the extremes of the musical landscape Beethoven fearlessly traverses, Mayer perhaps meant that he is saying to us, Do not worry, I, like you, have been there too.

Like us, Glen is a fellow traveller in this rich world. Sometimes he comforts, sometimes he questions, often he tactfully keeps the mysteries. His best work for me fits lovingly into a high tradition of Australian writing. If I seem to have dropped names it is because his work will often resonate within that tradition, yet also venture freshly beyond it.

KEN GASMIER.

*All music is what awakes within us
when we are reminded by the instruments;
It is not the violins or the clarinets -
It is not the beating of the drums -
Nor the score of the baritone singing
his sweet romanza; not that of the men's chorus,
Nor that of the women's chorus -
It is nearer and farther than they.

— Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass, 1855-