

# CHOCOLATE, VANILLA The Music of

During April 2004 I interviewed the Australian composer, conductor and educator, Ralph Hultgren in Brisbane, Queensland - Australia's Sunshine State - and sought his thoughts on a variety of subjects related to his musical life

Hultgren is Head of Pre-Tertiary Studies at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Brisbane, Chair of the WASBE Schools' Network, a member of the WASBE Board of Directors and contributor to the Artistic Planning Committee for the 2005 WASBE Conference in Singapore, a place he has been invited to as a clinician on over 25 past occasions.

Born in 1953, Hultgren spent his formative years in the 'bush' in Victoria State in a small town numbering a population of a little over a thousand people. His early musical experiences were performances given by the local Salvation Army Band on the annual ANZAC Day commemoration. As 'milk monitor' he washed out the bottles and realized that it was possible to 'play' the hose he was using like a trumpet. A year later, in high school, he started to play the instrument and to compose:

*'I would steal the conductor's score after rehearsal to find out how the composer did 'this' or 'that', looking out for things I didn't understand, searching for the relationship between what I was hearing and the way it appeared on the musical page'*

Before finishing high school, Hultgren joined the Central Band of the Royal Australian Air Force as a trumpet player, continuing his pursuit of knowledge by observing rehearsals and investigating the conductors' scores. This was followed by instrumental teaching in a private school in Victoria and subsequently relocating to Queensland, where he taught for the Education Department three days a week and arranged and composed for the remaining two for the Instrumental Programme in Queensland State Schools:

*'I was beginning to write for children, whereas in the Air Force I was composing for professionals. I learnt things about the practicalities of writing for young players, gradually understanding more regarding performance capacity and building an awareness of their youthful limitations'*

Hultgren, ever searching, commenced formal studies as a part-time student, obtaining his degree part by correspondence and attending music classes at the University of Queensland. This gave him the academic terminology to support his musical intuition: 'What's in a Neapolitan 6th?' he was asked in one lecture. 'Chocolate, vanilla and strawberry' was his reply. Fortunately, a greater understanding of the techniques of composition provided a broader base for Hultgren to draw upon, making him a more 'aware' composer.

A multi-faceted musician, Hultgren works as a performer, conductor, educationalist and composer without compartmentalizing each component, adopting a holistic approach:

*'My study at Master's level was 'Composition as an Autobiographical Paradigm' - artistic practice as research*

*and a pursuit of truth and meaning. I discovered that my composition was that pursuit and the result of an understanding of my environment and its context: an acute awareness of 'self' that must, in the ordinary human being, impact on everything else. I found this a real support to my teaching and my rehearsal method. I am a much better conductor because of the awareness of what I'm doing compositionally. With regard to other conductors of my music, the fine musician will endeavour authentically to represent what I am trying to say and may bring some wonderful additions by bringing his or her personality to my music. It's synergistic - the sum is more than the total of the whole.'*

What impresses me about Hultgren's music is his will to embrace transparent textures in orchestration and the courage to write as he hears rather than compromise as a result of the often commercial necessities imposed by publishing houses worldwide. Most of the time he conceives his music in the sound-world in which it materializes.

I believe the fact that he has no keyboard facility lends an advantage to his thinking and hearing that is refreshing, as opposed to the more formalistic schools of thought/practice encountered so often today:

*'If there is a solo clarinetist, then that individual can bring an intensity to the way they play the line and a personality which is exactly what I want from them. For example, I've written knowing the players who will execute the music, which impacts on the way parts are conceived and eventually realized - a connection with the players' personalities as I write.'*

Hultgren's compositional process is of interest. Nothing is committed to paper until the work is ready to be realized. Sketches are made mentally and the act of notation, a rapid act, is carried out when the white intensity of the work demands its realization:

*'The nine months are up, the baby has to be born. For all the will in the world you can't stop contractions, and composition is, I assume, the same sort of thing.'*

The large array of pencils and an electric pencil sharpener demonstrate the hands-on approach Hultgren has to his music. To physically draw the score facilitates a closer relationship with the individual notes and resultant textures than might otherwise be the case:

*'I have Finale, but that's the fountain pen to make the final 'ink' copy - I'll always use pencils'*

Specific reference to two works, both written for the same commissioning body, throw light on Hultgren's compositional diversity. *Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!!* and *Bright Sunlit Morning* are poles apart in stylistic and artistic terms. The former is broadly commercial, the latter personal and spiritual:

*'There is no difference to the approach to these works as a composer. Obviously some works come out differently to others, like night and day. I'm not schizophrenic but I may be one thing one hour and another the next. I'm a*

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very passionate person so I want to be passionately expressive Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!! is exuberantly passionate, Bright Sunlit Morning more a passionate cry'

Perhaps further insight is evidenced by the passionate spirituality Hultgren openly embraces. He does this in an affectionate and non-converting fashion, though his evangelism is intoxicatingly observed:

*'It is beholden on us that have a capacity to help change society: to be involved in it. Some people do so by working as missionaries overseas or with volunteer aid projects abroad. My belief is that music has such a phenomenal capacity to change lives, and as the gift I have been given it is part of my evangelism. I don't seek to change the world - I'm not a musical Billy Graham - but I can make a small, continued effect over time. As composers, we lay bare our souls and give them to the performer as an intimate act.'*

Hultgren also has some interesting thoughts on the subject of conductors and composers and their masculine and feminine traits:

*'You speak in a much more intimate way as a composer than you do in words, allowing a greater fragility and sensitivity to emerge. With words it is possible to keep one's distance. We might check the way we speak but when we play music that is not so in real life - men are inclined to be more objective and stand aloof from a situation whereas women tend to be in there getting their hands dirty and being subjective: making emotional decisions. I think the composer gets in and gets his or her hands dirty, while the conductor stands off objectively. Conductors should try to dirty their hands more often!*

*If they can do a Schenkerian analysis and explain to you what the score is, they think they've done the right job - they haven't even scratched the surface of it. They talk about architecture but not about soul. They've got the structure but not the spirit. The will of a conductor is to breathe life back into a score, to return the soul to the work, to put the composer's flesh and blood and his soul and spirit back, not to just paint by numbers.'*

Hultgren's religious analogies are abundant. When asked about the audience factor and where this fits into the process his reply was typical:

*'Obviously*

*you want to speak to the audience as a composer but a conductor can also 'speak' by choosing repertoire that the audience doesn't want to hear or is unsure of. I can't expect the parents of the students at my university or the students at the Young Conservatorium to embrace music that's so far away from their understanding. If I believe that they should enjoy Persichetti then I have, over a period of time, to develop the repertoire so that when I introduce them to Persichetti it neither frightens nor intimidates them. You give a person a mild curry before a hot one, so for example, I would want somebody to listen to Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!! because it's sensual music and has an immediacy before they even attempt to listen to Questions and Answers or Bright Sunlit Morning, whereas someone who knows my work can listen to Bright Sunlit Morning and observe that I'm saying something differently here, something they've never heard me say before. It's about trust. You have to trust the conductor, but you also trust they've prepared the audience, who are there because they want to listen. It's not artistic or cultural corruption. They haven't chosen to come because they're going to go to a gulag if they don't, so we have a responsibility to them, not to feed them with 'lollipops' but to give them a well-rounded musical meal - which includes entrée and dessert! - and we need to be both aware and careful of that.'*

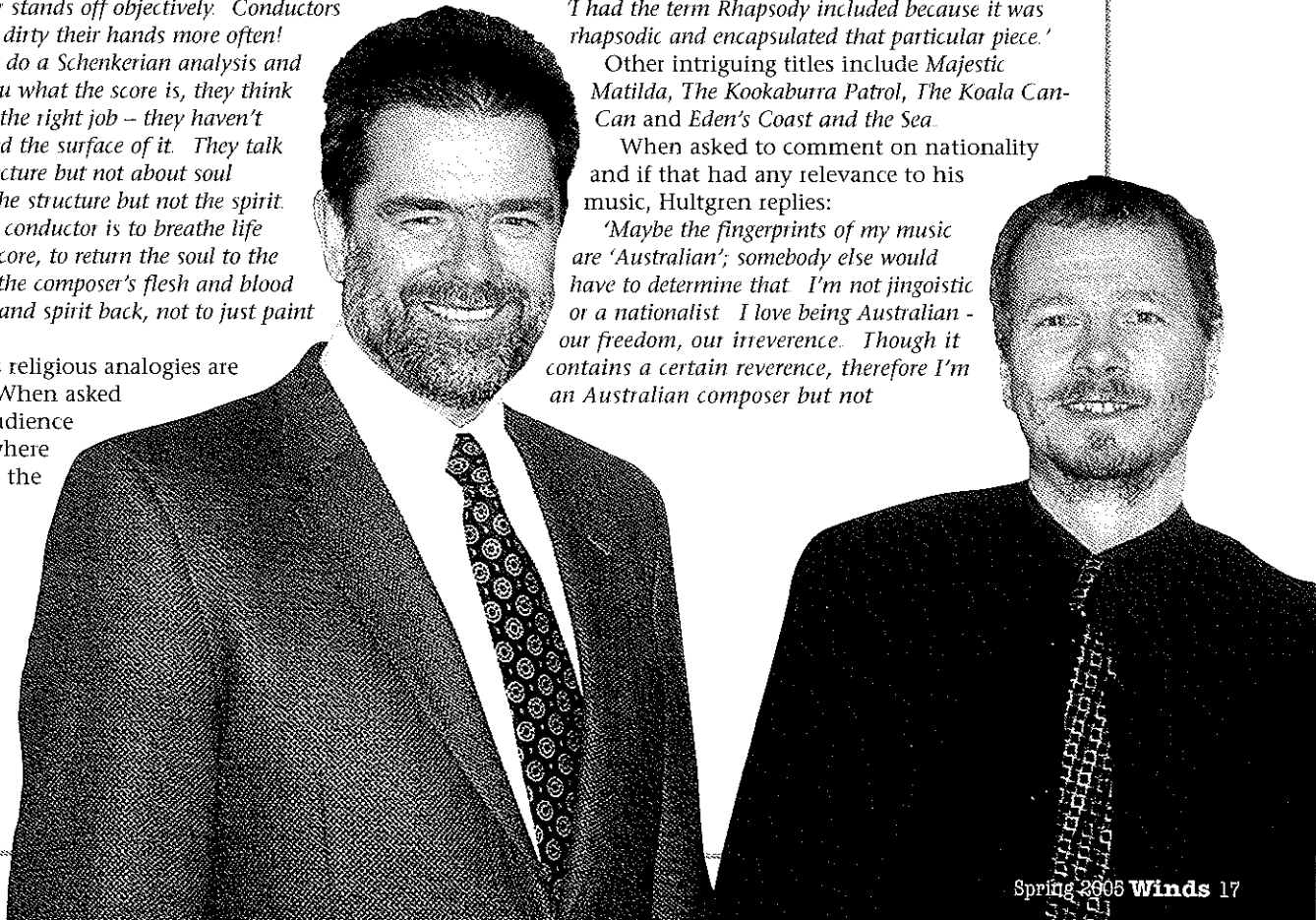
Titles are important to Hultgren. *Masada* tells its own story and even *An Australian Rhapsody* (two Queensland folksongs that typify the environment - the lonely drover/country and the convict life, etc.)

*'I had the term Rhapsody included because it was rhapsodic and encapsulated that particular piece.'*

Other intriguing titles include *Majestic Matilda*, *The Kookaburra Patrol*, *The Koala Can-Can* and *Eden's Coast and the Sea*.

When asked to comment on nationality and if that had any relevance to his music, Hultgren replies:

*'Maybe the fingerprints of my music are 'Australian'; somebody else would have to determine that. I'm not jingoistic or a nationalist. I love being Australian - our freedom, our irreverence. Though it contains a certain reverence, therefore I'm an Australian composer but not*



Ralph and  
Martin

necessarily driven by Australian things. The sounds I hear are Australian, that mix of American and British, etc.'

And the future?

*'I don't have the same manic need to write. There's now a more reflective nature in what I produce. I'm still searching for the lovely melody (editorial: Simple Song would be an example of an extant one, or Dawn April 25<sup>th</sup> for ANZAC Day) and I think there's one in me somewhere. I love writing children's music because I see so much patronization of them and relish the challenge they provide to deliver art, even if in a simplified form.*

*To elaborate further, taking the WASBE example of wanting to commission works for school bands is an excellent pursuit but I don't necessarily agree with the outcomes that have been produced – this is not an artistic judgement on the pieces but there does need to be an understanding on the part of the composer of what a child is capable of doing. A band may have the capacity to play a particular piece but it doesn't follow that they can automatically understand it, so therefore they can't interpret it. They can't make music out of something they don't understand – they can't add the nuance, the subtle shading in colour, etc. and so they can't speak adequately. Therefore commissions need to be undertaken by people who have an awareness of the capacities of the players to allow them to produce a work of art and not just a musical 'title'.*

The music of Ralph Hultgren is published by Kjos in the US and Broilga Music (a company set up by his wife Julie) in Australia. A dedicated family man, he was asked his advice to young composers:

*'They need to listen to music they like, get hold of a score and read and analyse it. If they wish to speak in that particular style they will observe the methods therein. Too often young composers want to be told how to do something but any educational theorist will tell you the most potent form of learning is discovery – find scores and recordings and listen and learn.'*

This confirms Hultgren's own experience as told at the beginning of this article. Coming full circle Hultgren was asked to give a little background to his current Doctoral studies. Based on the concept of composition as autobiographical research, the thesis centres on his latest work *My Sister's Tears*:

*'My sister ended her life in November 2003 while living in London. I didn't deal with the grieving immediately but after a dream in February 2004 about her and her not being able to wipe her tears away or wipe the blood from her face, I started to hear yet another chorale and led that sit with me for a week or so. I even produced a few pages of fumbled sketch, a week later elaborating this into a whole sketch, a process I found incredibly cathartic. It's de-grieving, both as a piece and for me as the composer, but ultimately it's a happy piece in the bright key of D major.'*

The piece was presented as a work-in-progress and is to be entrusted to a US conductor to present the première performance, enabling an overview of the concept of autobiographer and biographer:

*'If the whole process informs the conductor, makes him or her more empowered to understand the 'word' and so therefore more empowered to 'evangelise', then the work isn't in vain. My Doctoral study is an investigation of me as a composer in a context of being a teacher and conductor, not so people can learn about me, rather that they can learn about the process of being empowered in doing whatever they are doing.'*

# BRIGHT SUNLIT MORNING RALPH HULTGREN ANALYSIS BY MARTIN ELLERBY

*Bright Sunlit Morning*, for Solo Baritone and Wind Orchestra, was commissioned by Dr Matthew J George and the University of St Thomas Symphonic Wind Ensemble, St Paul, Minnesota, USA.

The work is a personal reflection on the event in the United States of America on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The piece is approximately US grade five with a duration just under 12 minutes. The scoring is conventional with the exception of the addition of a solo baritone vocal part, which both guides us through the work and binds the structure into a satisfying whole. At the time of its composition it was the composer's most personal work, possibly only surpassed in this regard by his recent work *My Sister's Tears* (2004).

To write a work so soon after the tumultuous events of 9/11 is a courageous enterprise. Such events are emotional and it is easy for artists to fall into the trap of mere reportage. To quote Hultgren:

*'How does one write something about an event so truly awful that musical depictions seem trite and banal? The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 are etched in everyone's memory. I would not wish to represent the events of that day in musical terms. My effort has been to represent my reactions to that dreadful day. How one comes to terms with such an occurrence is very personal indeed. I turned to my faith and to my God. I found solace in the wonder and comfort of the Psalms particularly. Bright Sunlit Morning features the words of many Psalms and also other sections from the Old Testament.'*

The work opens with a solo horn figure, forming a recurring ritornello that is featured throughout the work and

represents the rising of the sun at the commencement of dawn – see example 1.

The apparent innocence of the following introductory pages is both evocative and almost charming. Prior to the initial entry of the soloist the available band members execute an audible whisper – see example 2.

But this was to be no ordinary morning. The calm play of Earth's natural cycle was to be shattered by Man's dark side. The solo baritone enters proclaiming 'Joseph said, *'Don't be afraid of me. Am I God to judge and punish you? As far as I am concerned God turned into good what you meant for evil.'*

The band texture thickens, the Earth is unsettled. The soloist continues: *'God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not fear even if earthquakes come and mountains wash into the sea.'*

Some tuttis (rare for Hultgren) follow – powerful contrasts to the early passages cast in lucid transparency. But not for long – this work refuses usual predictability. The gentle woodwind passage commencing at bar 63, indebted to baroque contrapuntal techniques, endeavours to return us to the opening calm – see example 3.

Then the screw is turned. In a pounding metre, brass fanfare figures build like the trumpets of the angels in Revelation. We expect the next soloist's entry to be pessimistic, cataclysmic even, but Hultgren turns to his faith: *'Come see the glorious works of the Lord.'* But this is a world of conflicts – *'See how He brings destruction on the world.'* More fanfares follow. Then, *'He makes wars to cease'* Hultgren returns to his God. *'I waited patiently for the Lord and he turned to me and heard me cry. He brought me out of the pit of despair. and set me free*

EXAMPLE ONE:

Slow and expressive (♩ = 66-68)

Solo Horn in F

EXAMPLE TWO:

(♩ = 60)

Ritardando

EXAMPLE THREE:

Lyrical (♩ = 72-74)

Flute

Molto rall.

Tempo I (♩ = 66)

EXAMPLE FOUR:

A tempo - reflectively (♩ = 64-66)

Trombone 1

Euphonium mp

Tuba mp

upon a rock'. The ensuing chorale in the lower brass, over which the soloist states this extract from the Psalms, is tender and optimistic but never simplistic. Example 4

The woodwinds take over, enhanced a little later by the saxophone family. How easy to now turn this into a Hollywood spectacular! Not so. Cinematic expectation is not part of this journey. We return to the earlier audible whisper: 'Bright sunlit morning, new day dawning'

Previous figurations reappear; the textures are light, allowing the text of the soloist to be carried clearly. The message is paramount and a recitative style gives added prominence to the ensuing text: 'God is our refuge and strength, a present help in trouble, so we will not fear. The Lord is my light and salvation so why should I be afraid?'

The coda is a spiritual conclusion. The band maintains the sun's bright rays. Though Earth may be in decay, the *Dona Nobis Pacem* of the closing pages prays for a better day.

The concluding words are from the composer himself:

*'I do not seek to preach or foist my views on anyone in writing these notes. They are the best way I can express myself through language. I only seek to reflect on the input of these times on me, a man, a husband and father and a very small part of the world. My music may speak differently to you. Whatever the situation my desire is to share the comfort one can find in faith and the peace one may then share with others.'*

*Bright Sunlit Morning* was originally published by Brolga Music in Australia. The work has been recently assigned to Studio Music in England. It is planned to record the work on the Polyphonic label later this year.