

## Rebecca Simpson

### Making things, making opera

What drives us to make art? What drives us to make things at all that have an aesthetic component beyond mere functionality? Artists or not, we belong to a species that has as one of its defining characteristics the fact of making things, and a concern – however we may position ourselves in relation to them – with form, proportion and beauty<sup>1</sup>.

Meanwhile, we live in a world in which everyday objects are made less and less by immediately comprehensible, local, or even human processes; and in which genuine individuality or choice frequently comes under attack. Standardisation - social and cultural - can impoverish the ability to respond to the particular, to be responsive, and, by extension, can impede the exercise of responsibility and real choice. So, though I sometimes ask myself whether an absorbed involvement in this minority, often elite art of opera is not a case of “fiddling while Rome burns”, nevertheless development of, and questioning around this complex and multiple, boundary-crossing art form centred on the human voice is, I believe, of relevance to our world today.

In a sense, “making things” is the central theme of my recently completed libretto for an opera-oratorio with composer Ramon Humet, *Himmelsscheibe/ Sky Disc/ Disc del Cel*, inspired by the Nebra Sky Disc. This unique bronze disc inlaid with gold, from the early quarter of the second millenium BC, is the world’s earliest known representation of the night sky.

Discovered in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, in 1999 and now on display in the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle, the Nebra Sky Disc has revolutionised

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<sup>1</sup> David Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, (ed. Faber, London, 1959)

the understanding of the European Bronze Age, (an explosively creative period that launched such crucial developments in human history as the large scale transmutation of ore into metals, the reproduction of certain objects, long distance trade, the accumulation of wealth, and the rise of the individual). The Sky Disc itself was primarily an instrument that enabled the complex process, necessary for more effective agriculture, of aligning the solar and lunar calendars.

Before I talk about specific librettos, I'll provide a bit of background about my writing. On the academic side I studied literature at university, and, on the practical, was involved for many years in an enormous amount of energetic and wide-ranging theatre activity, both as an actor and as a writer of devised work and original pieces. I worked mainly with small, experimental theatre groups making new work or approaching classical texts in original ways.

As a dramatist who writes in a poetic vein, with strong but subtle ideas, a certain epic sense, and a sensitivity to music, I have found a medium in opera for which I feel close affinity. To work with the presence of music in mind, and with periods of dialogue with the composer, opens unexpected doors and makes for a fertile writing situation. An interest in the shift from a speaking voice to a semi-sung, keening voice to full singing, is something that has long interested me as a result of certain experiences in the theatre. Also, crucially, I thoroughly enjoy the composer-librettist "relationship between equals" from different fields, which is how I understand the collaborative situation, particularly when new work originates with the librettist.

My intention is to communicate, as well as possible, material for which I have a passion, whether conceptual and abstract or a good, intelligent story, while always bearing in mind as I write that the music is a dramatic component of the work. Though I aim for succinctness, I allow for the complexity required by the piece's fundamental concepts. I consider it important to write with variety and, finally, I seek to use as few words as possible. Even if not always achieved, my ideal is that no word be

superfluous. This applies to any work but in the case of opera is doubly important since the music, like the text, will have its own internal logic, even though married to that of words and argument. If at points the music is required to support and carry words rather than mesh with them and be inspired by them, stretching may well cause an overall loss of tension in the technical sense.

As a writer I need to work in my own time, and I need to have a strong connection to the material I'm working with. Given those conditions – that I know I have the time I have perceived as necessary, and the material is something I feel passionate about - I can trust that unconscious processes will unite with the conscious ones and the structure and material will come through and make itself clear, so that the work will then be a living thing with depth beyond a more cerebral planning stage. All text, it must be said, goes through many drafts and is very tightly worked by the end.

To date, I have approached the composer I know I would like to work with on a particular project, whose music I feel is right for that project and who may be interested in the themes and proposed framework. It is an honour for me when a composer agrees to a project, and a great stimulus. Dialogue around the writing process is important to me. In the three librettos I've written so far, how much, or when, the composer has wanted to be involved has varied; but a good connection is important.

Enric Palomar and I spoke a lot, prior to my beginning to write. Juana was material, a story, I had already developed, and I had in fact written a series of monologues about the subject, though these were not used in the libretto. (In theatre, I found the characters and the situation too big, too iconic, for dialogue; it was only in opera I could have them engage in this way). So, Enric and I were in agreement about the needs for a text that is to be sung, and on the approach to Juana, the character. An important question here being the defense of her as a political individual, as opposed to the image of a reclusive mad woman some of her contemporaries were determined she should portray in life.

I began to write, and delivered the text, act by act, to Enric. From the point he embarked on writing the music we had periodic conversations about aspects of the text and scenes.

Then with Andy Pape, with whom I've written an opera called Tales of Liberation, he was very involved in developing the story. It's set in Denmark at the end of the second world war. Andy's an American-Danish composer and he was the Danish expert; he had already written many operas and has an excellent dramaturgical sense. Early on, for example, there was one character he was sure must die, and he was right!

With Ramon Humet, who is currently writing the music for Sky Disc, there's been quite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing of material. He's been one of my readers, I suppose, as the libretto has reached new draft stages; though obviously as co-parent of the overall work, a special reader. Although I don't specifically work with dramaturgues, feedback from colleagues and trusted readers is crucial; for me this is dramaturgical input from others. And it always sets me off on a new stage of writing.

In terms of subjects and themes, my previous writing for theatre often involved research of historical and political material, and I continue to be fascinated by subjects where a cross-roads takes characters, society, or a country in one direction or another.

There's always a kernel of a story that intrigues me and leads me to want to write. But it can take a long time for the other element to become clear. There's always the central figure, that may or may not be a human individual – the Nebra Sky Disc is the central figure in the opera-oratorio Sky Disc -, and then a kind of "click" occurs when I suddenly know what the motor of the work will be. In Juana the central figure is obviously Juana, and the circumstance is the comunero rebellion, a revolution really, that occurred in 1521. The comuneros went to Tordesillas, - where Juana had been locked up for eleven years -, to meet with her. They wanted to create a joint government, but she couldn't finally take that step. In Tales of Liberation, the central character is a story-telling adolescent, and it's the

shame of his father that is the circumstance that put the whole thing in motion; his father is a collaborator with the Nazis during the war. And then with Sky Disc, it's the object and the idea of investigating a prehistoric scientific instrument with modern scientific means, approaching it, looking at it, from a poetic and humanistic point of view; the project modified and developed, but that was the starting point.

And then, perhaps more generally, there are themes that move around within my work: being inside, outside; acceptance, rejection; the individual, the group; restriction, freedom; frontiers, limits; the permeability or not of frontiers, and also the idea of threshold, as opposed to an impeding frontier. And with Sky Disc, also Time.

A characteristic of my writing is that it's poetic but with a natural syntax and cadence. In dialogue I want the words that are sung to be words that could seemingly be used by each person in their situation, and of their age, social standing and so on; even if, in other ways, the use of words, language, dialogue is totally unrealistic and symbolic. And then this naturalness sometimes condenses to a higher intensity and tighter form, and a more highly poetic language.

So, it is very important for me to identify the kind of language I want to use, and I find that I'm often in an uneasy state shortly before I launch myself into writing. The kind of language is a key question; and quite often in reading I'm doing, - I always do a great deal of research -, there'll be a certain text that gives me the confidence to move ahead with the language I want to use. Prior to writing the libretto Juana, La Celestina by Fernando de Rojas was the text that did that for me, and with Tales of Liberation the autobiography of a boy and young man in Denmark before and during the second world war. And with Sky Disc, it was the English poet and playwright Toni Harrison's very earthy translation of Greek satyr plays that sparked something in me.

## JUANA

I would now like to play some of Enric Palomar's wonderful music, and show some images of of Juana in Halle, stage directed by Carlos Wagner.

In the piece I'm going to play, the first part is written as a sonnet form. It's Catalina, Juana's youngest daughter, who was locked up with her in Tordesillas. The form symbolised the future that Catalina might have had, since her brother, Carlos I and V – who was instrumental in their isolation -, introduced the sonnet form a little later to Spain. She's expressing held back emotions, talking about her desire to live a freer life, with more movement, gardens, friends; things she doesn't have as a child incarcerated. And it moves from that text into a very much looser piece where mother and daughter are playing a game, but together recount their joint history.

[FRAGMENT OF **JUANA.**]

[PHOTOS]



*Marija Kuhar and Ursula Hesse von den Steinen; Juana, Opernhaus Halle, 2005*

EXTRACT – **JUANA** [English translation on the following page].

JUANA                      Después de la muerte de  
                                    la reina

CATALINA                      Isabel, mi abuela,  
JUANA                      vinimos de Flandes  
CATALINA                      por mar.  
JUANA                      Pero:  
CATALINA                      una tempestad  
JUANA                      nos separó de la flota

CATALINA                      ¡y no tenías miedo! ¿verdad?  
JUANA                      y el viento nos llevó a:

CATALINA                      Inglaterra  
JUANA                      donde fuimos a:  
CATALINA (*intenta recordar*)                      ¡No me acuerdo!  
JUANA                      a Windsor.  
                                    Donde vimos a:

CATALINA                      ¡Mi tía!  
JUANA                      mi hermana pequeña.  
CATALINA                      ¡Catalina!  
JUANA                      Más tarde me preñé de ti.  
                                    Días amables en la costa  
                                    esperando la reparación  
                                    de nuestra nave.  
                                    Días felices, tras meses  
                                    de vivir reñidos.

CATALINA                      Y en el mar de nuevo,  
                                    creías que te estabas mareando  
                                    por las olas.  
                                    Pero... ¡era por mí!

JUANA (*acariciándola*)                      Verdad, sirenita mía, es verdad.

CATALINA                      ¿Y luego?  
JUANA (*triste*)                      Luego  
CATALINA (*sigue jugando, obligando a Juana a continuar*)                      Mi padre...

JUANA (*para sí*)                      Felipe,  
                                    ¡Cómo me traicionaste!  
                                    ¡Cómo me abandonaste!

EXTRACT – **JUANA** (English translation)

JUANA                      After the death of  
                                    the queen

CATALINA                      Queen Isabel, my grandmother,  
JUANA                      we came from Flanders  
CATALINA                      by sea.

JUANA                      But:  
CATALINA                      a storm  
JUANA                      separated us from the fleet  
CATALINA                      And you weren't afraid! Were you?  
JUANA                      and the wind took us to:  
CATALINA                      England  
JUANA                      where we went to:  
CATALINA (*tries to remember*)                      I don't remember!  
JUANA                      to Windsor.  
                                    Where we saw:

CATALINA                      My aunt!  
JUANA                      my little sister.  
CATALINA                      Catalina, Catherine!  
JUANA                      And I conceived you!  
(*remembering*)                      Sweet days on the coast  
                                    waiting for our ship  
                                    to be repaired.  
                                    Days of happiness, after months  
                                    of anger.

CATALINA                      And at sea again,  
                                    you thought you were sea-sick  
                                    But...it was because of me!

JUANA (*caressing her*)                      True, my little mermaid, true.

CATALINA                      And then?  
JUANA (*sad*)                      Then  
CATALINA (*keeping the game going, obliging Juana to continue*)                      My father...

JUANA (*to herself*)                      Felipe,  
                                    How you betrayed me!  
                                    Abandoned me!



## **TALES OF LIBERATION**

My next libretto, *Tales of Liberation*, is set in Denmark at the end of the second world war. It's a story about a family, but at the same time their situation reflects what is going on in the country. There is the idea of outside impinging on the inside, of security within the household but then conflict there as well. At the heart of the house there is a space behind a book-shelf where Hannah, a Polish Jewish girl – who was unable to join the exodus of Danish Jews to Sweden - hides. There's vertical space too: a staircase, talk about the attic, the cellar. So it's very much related to space and architecture, and obviously that's of interest to the composer.

One of the pillars of the opera is a fairy tale the boy tells, which gradually unfolds; it contrasts with and is related – though not in exact parallel – to what is occurring in the home and in the outside world. Jannick's tale has a different texture each time it occurs, a different feel to each part, but is a single story that builds throughout.

Below are a couple of short pieces from the libretto, without dialogue. I hope they give an idea of the space I like to leave for the composer. Awareness that the music is a dramatic element - as the sound of the language can also be - is very important to me.

Where I write in a specific rhythm, it is not in the hope that the composer will simply reproduce it. The first piece of text below refers to the rhythm of a train in motion, so it is an extreme example. But a composer is obviously at liberty to strain, tussle with, inhabit, dismantle, transform and/or be reconciled with the rhythm, - which is part of the muscle of the text's language -, as he or she chooses.

## EXTRACTS – TALES OF LIBERATION

1) *KARIN comes down the stairs, almost sleep-walking, unheard by others.*

KARIN:

...beats, it beats, it beats, it beats, it...  
blood in my head  
blood in my ears

...birds, no birds, no trains, no birds, no...  
why do I wake  
just before dawn?

...beats, it beats, it beats, it beats, it...  
night after night  
creak on the stair

...trains, no trains, no birds, no...  
blood in my head  
blood in my ears

...beats, it beats, it beats, it...  
is there a noise?  
is it my head?

...beats, it beats, it beats, it beats, it

2)

HANNAH:

a wall of books  
leaves  
    like wings  
that carry words  
from one mind  
to another

leaves  
    that would fly  
at the drop  
of a bomb

flame for a moment  
alive in the sky  
then parched  
charred paper  
drift  
dissolve.

## SKY DISC

Finally a little bit about Sky Disc. Initially, the idea was to write a non-narrative, opera-oratorio; but as material, and discussions with Ramon Humet developed, it became clear it would be an oratorio only. However, in a definitive meeting with Oper Halle the directors said: Yes, we do want the oratorio, but it must also be an opera! Fortunately, four voices that I thought of as belonging to figures related to the Nebra Sky Disc, had begun to come through in my preliminary work, and I suggested they become characters of the opera. Ramon and I both found the idea of creating a piece in this way an interesting challenge. So, opera and oratorio unfold in parallel with very different kinds of texts and at the end the two worlds, the two textual/musical/performance worlds, merge. There's a certain conflict between them and eventual merging. It should be a powerful denouement, with a final, short mezzo solo that will bring the intensity down at the end. In a simple way this last piece will draw the attention of the audience to themselves, in an explicit but subtle uniting of audience and performer.

EXTRACT - **SKY DISC** – "Dream of the Sky Disc" (at about half way)

ORATORIO CHORUS:

Bronze!  
Hungry metal!  
I devour forests  
drink rivers.  
Children  
women  
men  
exist and struggle  
survive suffer rejoice  
because of me

Trees blackened  
to charcoal  
and burnt again  
hotter hotter

Rock hacked from Earth's face  
dug from galleries  
carried on backs  
broken  
smelted

till copper pulls free  
- rivers of heat! -  
Copper flows!

Rock  
hacked dug carried  
broken smelted melted

till tin pulls free  
- rivers of heat! –  
Tin flows!

Fresh water rivers  
toss pips of gold  
sifted gifts

Copper  
from the mountains  
tin  
from an island,  
confounded  
- heat again! -  
in the crucible

they twist  
disperse are molten mate  
become bronze  
- rivers of sunlight!

subject to heat  
as at the start  
start  
star (...)

To end, I believe that as an art form that is both steeped in the emotional power of the human voice and is highly structured, opera exemplifies the interplay of freedom and discipline that, in general, artistic creation requires if a piece is to reach beyond itself and its makers. And, being a dramatic art, - as well as the intrinsic, multi-layered nature of a medium that is interpreted by musical director, stage director, singers and musicians -, the particular role of the audience in “completing” a work cannot be forgotten, (I don’t refer here specifically to the ending of Sky Disc mentioned above). Rather, it can be taken into account in the making, so that the audience is not presented with an entirely closed “product” but with a piece susceptible to being enriched by, and for, each individual. Thank you very much.