

PORT FAIRY SPRING MUSIC FESTIVAL CHAPTER

by LEN VORSTER - 2020

Michael Easton and I arrived in Australia from different parts of the world in the early 1980's. Michael arrived in 1982 from the UK and I arrived in 1983 from South Africa. We met in Melbourne in 1984 and within a few months we were playing duo piano concerts, and doing promotional tours for Allans Publishing and Yamaha.

In July 1984 Michael and I attended a rehearsal by the Warrnambool Chorale of one of his new choral works. Afterwards we decided to explore the area, and when we arrived in Port Fairy we immediately fell in love with this historic coastal town on the banks of the Moyne River. Not only were we enchanted by the beauty and character of the town, we were also impressed by the architecture of several buildings – Lecture Hall, St John's, St Patricks, Drill Hall, Court House, Merrijig Inn, the banks and several of the old pubs. It did not take long for us to buy a holiday house on the South Beach! Little did we know then that only a few years later we would be inspired by the charm and intimacy of this town to create a festival of music, theatre and art. Michael and I initially talked about doing a concert in the Lecture Hall, but the old grand piano was not in best shape. In the meantime Michael had met Eda Ritchie who had a house on the East Beach, and the idea of a Festival was discussed.

Fast forward to a meeting in 1989 at the cosy Merrijig Inn (owned by Margot Woods who joined our first committee) with Eda Ritchie, Michael Easton, visiting British composer Michael Hurd and myself. The four of us started to map out a framework for a weekend music festival to be launched in the Spring of October 1990. Michael Easton would be Festival Director, I would be Artistic Director and Eda (whose local and regional knowledge and connections were invaluable) to be Chairman. The four of us agreed that the Festival would not just be a series of solo and chamber recitals, but would also present symphonic repertoire, chamber operas, ballets, jazz, art, drama, installations, and involve the local community. All events would run for about one hour.

Port Fairy was perfect in so many ways – especially in that all the venues were in walking distance of each other. The audience would be encouraged to attend as many concerts as possible (and they did!), but still have time to enjoy the many other attractions of Port Fairy – the beautiful river, beaches, Griffiths Island, sailing, golf, restaurants, pubs, antique and book shops. I have vivid memories of seeing performers and audience members literally running to their next concerts!

At 8:30 pm on Friday 12 October 1990 our dream became reality, and I performed in the first Festival concert - a program of chamber music by Haydn, Mahler and the Poulenc Sextet in the beautiful Lecture Hall. Michael was also composer of several works on that weekend, and in particular his *Overture to an Italianate Comedy* which opened the first orchestral concert of the Festival in the exquisite St. John's Church. The first opera to be performed at the festival was Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrone* (with Alison Rae Jones and Brian Hansford). For me the highlight as a performer was doing a recital of German Lieder with contralto

Lauris Elms (in the lovely acoustics of the Lecture Hall). As an avid collector of LPs I had first heard Lauris Elms on LP - one of my treasured box sets was the recording of Benjamin Britten conducting *Peter Grimes* with Lauris Elms singing the role of Mrs. Sedley. How I would have loved to stage *Grimes* in Port Fairy. It is interesting to note that in the summer of 2013 the Aldeburgh Festival staged a performance of *Grimes* on the beach at Aldeburgh. Probably not a good idea for Port Fairy in the spring.....but could be possible in a re-designed Reardon Theatre!

It was however Lauris Elms' performance of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* (magnificently delivered from the pulpit in St. John's Church) that cemented the foundation of the Festival. Her daughter Deborah de Graaff enhanced the occasion with her performance of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. How wonderful it was that Lauris also agreed to become the Patron of the Festival.

From an artistic point of view I felt that it would be very exciting to allow performers to engage in more than one performance over the weekend, i.e. moving from recital to concerto, from opera to jazz, or perform in an installation; or even moving from jazz to Classical - here my one regret is that jazz singer Marion Montgomery and I (even though we discussed the possibility) did not get to do a recital. I have always admired Barbara Streisand taking on Schumann, Wolf and Debussy!

It was also important to engage as many young and upcoming performers and composers, and to have Australian and world premieres; also to connect with members of the local community - not only did we engage local performers like Gavin Franklin and Bernadette Conlon (who performed Michael Easton's Accordion Concerto in the 1996 festival), but we also organised workshops and masterclasses for the local school children. These sessions were run by our visiting artists and created a lot of interest and excitement.

In my twelve years (1990 - 2001) as Artistic Director, inspired by Michael and guided by a hardworking committee chaired by Eda Ritchie (and Jennifer Whitehead following skilfully as Chairman in 2000), we created and realised programs of wide-ranging diversity. With Michael's overseas and local connections we were able to invite not only international artists, but also many renowned Australian performers. Most of the international visitors also performed with Australian artists.

Arts bureaucrat Paul Clarkson was consultant to and a great supporter of the Festival. His efforts helped to secure more funding, and he shared his vast knowledge of the arts scene in Australia and internationally.

At the end of the 90's (and to celebrate the arrival of 2000) it was decided that for the Festival to move to the next level it would go international! Through contacts with various consulates in Melbourne Michael was quick to establish relationships with Japanese and Swiss businesses. Sponsored by Toyota we launched the Japanese-Australian Festival in 2000, and a year later, in partnership with Longines, the Swiss-Australian Festival. With Swiss Consul General Werner Ballmer's support, and sponsored by Swissair, 2001 also saw the launch of the first PFSMF 001 CD *Reflections for Cello and Piano* with the Berlin-Vorster Duo. Sponsored Lindt Chocolate and Mövenpick Ice Cream was enjoyed by all! These

collaborations brought new colour, dynamic feel and energy to the Festival. People are still talking about the cows with cow-bells walking down the main street (while the Swiss and the Australian National Anthems were performed by the local Consolidated School Choir on the Village Green), and the excitement created by the Japanese Wadaiko drumming!

From my point of view one of the most important sponsors of the Festival was Yamaha who provided and tuned pianos for all the main venues. At one Festival Yamaha provided no less than four grand pianos! Another vital sponsor was ABC Classic FM who promoted the Festival with direct and delayed broadcasts, and who also gave many young performers their first radio broadcasts. The Melbourne Savage Club, where Michael and I were members, was a happy sponsor staging memorable launches for the Festival in their historic building in Bank Place in Melbourne. Many of the Savage Club members and their families were our founding audiences.

Among the music critics Kenneth Hince and Jeremy Vincent were always warm in their praise, allowing the festival to gain more credibility and standing in the Australian music and theatre scene. Jeremy Vincent wrote in *The Australian* in 1991: "In just two years the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival has established itself as one of the highlights of the Victorian music calendar."

The extraordinary scenic artist Paul Kathner (and in the early years with director Graham Murphy) designed and created the most inspiring and beautiful sets, not only for the operas and ballets, but also "dressing" the various stages for recitals.

Dawn Holland's contribution to the success of the festival was (and I believe still is) enormous: technical expertise, building stages and sets, lighting, "setting the stage" for performers ranging from children, bands, singers, instrumentalists and orchestras to fully staged operas and ballets. Despite a massive workload she always exuded calm, humour and professionalism which put all the performers and participants at ease. I also felt no matter what went wrong Dawn and her capable team would save the moment.

Michael and I were always amazed by and thankful for the way committee members Margaret Broers and Andrea Lowenthal (who also looked after ticketing) found and juggled accommodation for all the performers and audience members on Festival weekends.

Festival performance highlights over the first 12 years for me included:

Operas by Walton – *The Bear* (directed by Grahame Murphy); Menotti – *The Medium* (directed by Cath Dadd); Barber – *A Hand of Bridge* (with Geoffrey Chard); and Berkeley – *The Dinner Engagement* (with Lauris Elms in her operatic farewell performance on Saturday 8 October 1994) conducted by Brian Stacey; Joseph Horowitz – *Gentleman's Island* with Ian Cousins and Timothy Rogers (directed by Wendy Joseph); Michael Hurd's comic opera *The Widow of Ephesus* with Elizabeth Campbell, Margaret Haggart and Grant Smith. Also Hurd's opera *The Aspern Papers* conducted by Brian Stacey received its world premiere. *The Quickening* by Johanna Selleck received its premiere performance, and *Milushka* by Katy Abbott was musically directed by Benjamin Northey.

Lauris Elms gave her last ever performance on Sunday 9 October 1994 at the Festival singing Lennox Berkeley's *Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila* for contralto and string orchestra (conducted by Phillip Green). Michael Easton who had studied composition with Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music could not have been more thrilled.

Eda Ritchie and I devised two programs of music and poetry *Celebrating the Sea + Celebrating Spring* - both beautifully narrated by Eda. Michael Easton's *Griffiths Island* on a poem by local poet James McInerney premiered in the Sea program - it describes a person, perhaps in old age, reliving memories of the wonderful coastline around Port Fairy. A very young baritone Brad Daley performed in the Spring program - he is now a sought-after Wagnerian tenor in Europe!

Also the exquisite shakuhachi of Riley Lee accompanied by Marshall Maguire; the Ensemble für Neue Music Zürich; David Chesworth Ensemble (Chesworth's *Conversations with the King* received its world premiere); The Australian National Academy of Music performed a concert including the works of Richard Mills, Johanna Selleck (world premiere of *Becoming* for string quartet and soprano - performed by soprano Natsuko Arrai) and Karen Tanaka (*At the Grave of Beethoven* for string quartet was an Australian premiere); Woof! Percussion Ensemble; *In Transit* by Bryony Marks; Cantigas performing on mediaeval instruments; Eclectic Collective with Christopher Latham and Daniel Herscovitch; the Fiorini Trio; Australian String Quartet; Prism Wind Quintet performing Michael Easton's *Paganini through the eyes of Dufy*; *Electronic Waves* by Japanese composer Karen Tanaka (who was present at the 2000 Festival); Mark Pollard coordinating *A Decade of Australian Music*; *Poem in October* with tenor Gerald English; *Baroque Voices* with soprano Vivien Hamilton and tenor Michael Terry; counter-tenor Christopher Field and harpsichordist Elizabeth Anderson.

Mythology: A Dance Spectacular choreographed by Robert Ray; *Club 'Les Six', Night Dances* (featuring John McCabe performing Brenton Broadstock's *In the Silence of the Night*), *Ballet Cinematique, Ballet Exotique, Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Michael Easton's *Cocktail Suite* choreographed by Mark Annear for dancers from the Australian Ballet School; *The Mozart Question* (celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of Mozart's death) in the Court House starring Maggie Millar, Alan Hopgood and Michael Hurd; Easton's *Dorothy Parker Says* featuring Deidre Rubenstein; *Reckless* by Christina Hindhaugh; *Callas - the Woman* with Irene Cassimatis, written and directed by Alan Hopgood; Easton's plaintive work *I Chose to Climb*.

Further highlights: Marion Montgomery and Laurie Holloway in a Johnny Mercer tribute *That Old Black Magic*; Howard Neil's *Top Hat, White Tie and Tails* with a cast including Jan Russ, Margaret Haggart, Carrie Barr and Michael Dalley (narrated by Alan Hopgood); *George and Ira: The Gershwins* narrated by Christopher Lawrence and directed by Paul Clarkson; Luke Gallagher directed *Strike Up The Band* with the Rainbow Band and *Lieder of the Pack*; Axle Whitehead Quartet at Ginger Nut's; Madam Pat Thompson and her Orkestra; the Allan Browne Trio at the Star of the West Hotel; the Al Jadida Arabian Jazz Ensemble directed by Phil Gunter; Anna-Lee Robertson in *Thank God I'm A Country Girl*; Pamela Shaw, who also presented *The Power of the Lyric*, was the star in the musical *Lucky Stiff*. Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* with Paul Kathner as the Judge

(presented in association with the Warrnambool Theatre Company) was a winner, as was *Paternity* (another world premiere), a courtroom drama with music by Michael Easton and Michael Strong. *Children's Hour* with Nehama Patkin and Friends highlighted some very young and talented performers. Michael Easton and Alan Hopgood entertained the children with their comic opera for kids - *Little Redinka*; Easton and Michael Atkinson's *The Selfish Giant* was directed by George Fairfax.

Brigid Cole-Adams created a wonderfully evocative musical installation in the Drill Hall reflecting the life of people in a fishing village - titled *Golden Echo*, it was inspired by Thea Musgrave's *Golden Echo I* for French Horn. The performance of Michael Easton's Piccolo Concerto with Frederick Shade (with the Academy of Melbourne conducted by Brett Kelly) was released on Michael's CD *Sun Fun and Other Disappointments*. Lauris Elms performed Michael's song-cycle *Sun Fun and Other Disappointments* (to words by John Betjeman) in the 1991 Festival - Michael wrote: "The sheer horror of a world full of appalling people is so beautifully captured by Betjeman. I thoroughly enjoyed writing these four settings".

The Choir of Ormond College directed by Douglas Lawrence gave two Australian premieres by Michael Hurd and Geoffrey Burgon. The Victoria Chorale (directed by Val Pyers) presented *Shanties, Songs and Serenades*, and The Australian Boys Choir conducted by Noel Ancell presented *Choral Music of the Sea*.

Recitals by Welsh harpist Ieuan Jones were very popular. Guitarists Slava Grigoryan, Anthony Field, cellist David Pereira and harpsichordist Jacqueline Ogeil shined in solo recitals. Duo Tsunoda/Almonte gave the Australian premiere of John Corigliano's Sonata for Violin and Piano.

Donna Coleman's performance of Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata* (with flautist Mardi McCullea) was highly impressive. Further piano recitals and concertos by Michael Brimer (Beethoven's 'Emperor' Piano Concerto), Ronald Farren-Price (Chopin), Ian Holtham (Liszt), John McCabe (Haydn, Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* + the Rawsthorne Piano Concerto), Stephen McIntyre (a French recital), Lachlan Redd (Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*), Paul Rickard-Ford (Liszt), Frank Wibaut (Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*), the Kruger-Fujimara Piano Duo, Max Cooke's Team of Pianists, and many more ensured ongoing success for the Festival.

Orchestral concerts - the State Orchestra of Victoria conducted by Richard Davall; many orchestral and ensemble concerts conducted by Brett Kelly; and in the early years, the Geminiani Chamber Orchestra conducted by Marco van Pagee (especially Tony Gould's Music for Saxophone and String Orchestra). The Victorian College of the Arts Chamber Orchestra (conducted by Phillip Green) presented John McCabe (renowned for his landmark recordings of the complete Haydn Piano Sonatas) as soloist in the Haydn D major Piano Concerto. Christopher Kopke conducted the Australian Heidelberg Symphony Orchestra - I was fortunate in 1997 to do a tour with them in Europe as soloist in Michael Easton's *Concerto on Australian Themes*.

Some of my own performance highlights for the Festival over the 12 years:

Schubert's *Winterreise* with internationally renowned tenor Ian Partridge; also his Australian Farewell Recital in 1998 including Schumann's *Dichterliebe* - just before the 1998 Festival Ian and I also recorded for Marco Polo the complete songs and solo piano music of Lord Berners; wonderful recitals with Lauris Elms; a two-piano recital with British pianist John McCabe (including McCabe's *Edward II* which is dedicated to me!); Elgar's Piano Quintet with the Carl Pini Quartet; performing with my Schirmer Ensemble at the 1997 Festival (works of Falla, Stravinsky and Mark Pollard); recitals with Elizabeth Wallfisch, Miwako Abe, David Berlin, Deborah de Graaff, Frederick Shade, Masahide Kurita, Richard Thurlby; Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* and Milhaud's *Le boeuf sur le toit* choreographed by Mark Annear; Merlyn Quaife and choreographer Lucas Jervies in the Poulenc/Cocteau *La voix humaine*; A Goethe Retrospective with baritone Ian Cousins; the delightful soprano Ann Mackay in her 1994 recital; a recital with Japanese soprano and flautist Ikuko Teramoto and Yachiyo Nakamura; Michael Bertram's *The Green Castle* with Margaret Haggart and the Binneas String Quartet; the complete Chopin songs beautifully sung by Merlyn Quaife (in Polish!); *Ladies in Scenas* with Margaret Haggart and Elizabeth Campbell (premiering Paul Grabowsky's *The Witness*); "Our Glad" with Judy Glen celebrating Gladys Moncrieff. As a singing actress Helen Noonan was electrifying and captured the despair and desolation in her 1992 portrayal of the Poulenc/Cocteau *La voix humaine* directed by George Fairfax.

As a lover of film festivals I wanted to link film and film music to the Festival program, and showcase the Cinema (Reardon Theatre) as a cinema. So on 8 October in the 2000 Japanese festival, to celebrate Toru Takemitsu's birthday, I 'programmed' the 1966 Japanese psychological thriller *The Face of Another* for which Takemitsu wrote the film score. This programming idea was pure self-indulgence! In the 2001 Swiss Festival we showed free films on Arthur Honegger, Frank Martin, and Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler in the Sea Scouts Hall.

Those were heady days - very exciting, but at times quite stressful. Creating and implementing rehearsal schedules in Melbourne and Port Fairy were, to say the least, extremely challenging. There would be several rehearsals in Melbourne for the staged works, and in the final week before the Festival I would be running from one rehearsal to the next while Michael would be picking up international and interstate performers from the airport. In the last few weeks before the Festival Michael and I would do several overnight trips to Port Fairy to attend Festival meetings (no Zoom in those days!). We used to take the 'short cut' on the back roads through Bannockburn and Mortlake. When we got to Tower Hill there was always an increased level of excitement because we could see the Norfolk Island Pines of Port Fairy. Whoever was not driving on the trip was making notes while we discussed the finer points of the upcoming Festival, but also already planning the next year's Festival. Those were some of our most creative and inspired times together.

There were always many convivial lunch and post-concert gatherings over the Festival weekends hosted beautifully by Eda and Robin Ritchie, and by Michael Easton who would host as well as entertain (especially with his rendition of "I went to a marvellous party" incorporating several of the guests in his lyrics!). At the concerts Michael delivered many entertaining and relaxed pre-concert talks,

and he also wrote most of the program notes for the Festival.

At this point I would like to pay tribute to our treasurer Bob Towler who negotiated and managed the complex Festival finances with such skill and grace. Also, I would like to thank all the committee members (1990-2001) not mentioned elsewhere for their great contributions: James Tippett, Michele Billings, David MacLean, John Clue, Angela Beagley, Marten Syme, James Tait, Michael Keyburn, Barry Levinson and Peter Strickland.

Looking back I am still amazed at what we achieved, and I know that all of it would not have been possible without the tremendous effort, enthusiasm, and belief in the Festival from the committee, the sponsors, the performers, the critics, the local support, the audiences, and finally the magic of Port Fairy.

My one regret was that I did not program Michael Easton's *Concerto on Australian Themes* at my last Festival as Artistic Director in 2001. Fortunately I performed it at the end of that year in London at the Royal Academy of Music when Michael was honoured with an ARAM (Associate of the Royal Academy of Music). It was a joyous occasion, and among those present were Ian Partridge (performing), Erich Fackert (performing), Pamela Shaw (performing), Michael Hurd, Marion Montgomery, Laurie Holloway and Michael's very proud parents John and Betty Easton.

2003 - I saw Michael Easton for the last time in October 2003 at the Festival. It was good to see him on form, witty and erudite as ever in his pre-concert talks, and clearly relishing his role as Festival Director. Michael invited me to do a recital with the ever-popular soprano Margaret Haggart, and I also performed with Wendy Grose in her hilarious show *Perfect Timing: The Life of Anna Russell*.

2004 - Sadly Michael passed away in February 2004 at the age of 49.

By invitation from the Festival I helped to devise a program for the 15th Anniversary Gala Concert in memory and celebration of Michael Easton. This concert also included Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach* for Baritone and String Quartet which Michael and I had programmed in the first Festival in 1990 (I think on request from Eda). I also performed recitals with tenor Michael Smallwood and flautist Frederick Shade (including Michael Easton's Sonata for Flute and Piano). Many of Michael's compositions were performed over the weekend, and his *Elegy for Strings* performed by the T'ang+Flinders Quartets was extremely moving.

2005 - Artistic Director Stephen McIntyre invited me to do a recital with baritone Christopher Tonkin. We performed Rudi Stephan's *Liebeszauber* and Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. I had to relearn the Schumann cycle from tenor to baritone keys - the lot of the accompanist! I also did a 'cabaret' concert with soprano Ali McGregor - *Tell me the Truth about Love* (songs of Purcell, Britten, Menotti, Weill and Bolcom).

2009 - Stephen McIntyre invited me to perform in a concert - *Romance of a Lost Instrument*. I accompanied Nick Byrne (from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra)

who is the world authority on the ophicleide. I have to admit that I had never heard of this 'lost instrument' before! However, I was pleasantly surprised by its unusual and warm tone, and also by Nick's mastery of this rarely performed instrument. I also performed with Anna-Lee Robertson in her fun show *Sing for Your Supper*. Anna-Lee is originally from Port Fairy; her mother Kerry was on the Festival committee and her father Colin, a local real estate agent, provided much of the accommodation needed by the Festival.

2014 - Artistic Director Anna Goldsworthy invited me to perform at the Festival, but unfortunately due to ill health I had to withdraw.

2020 - Congratulations to the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival and to present Artistic Directors Monica Curro and Stefan Cassomenos on reaching this 30th anniversary milestone!

And thank you to all involved for keeping the dream alive.

Len Vorster

1 October 2020