

RICHARD MEALE

1932-2009

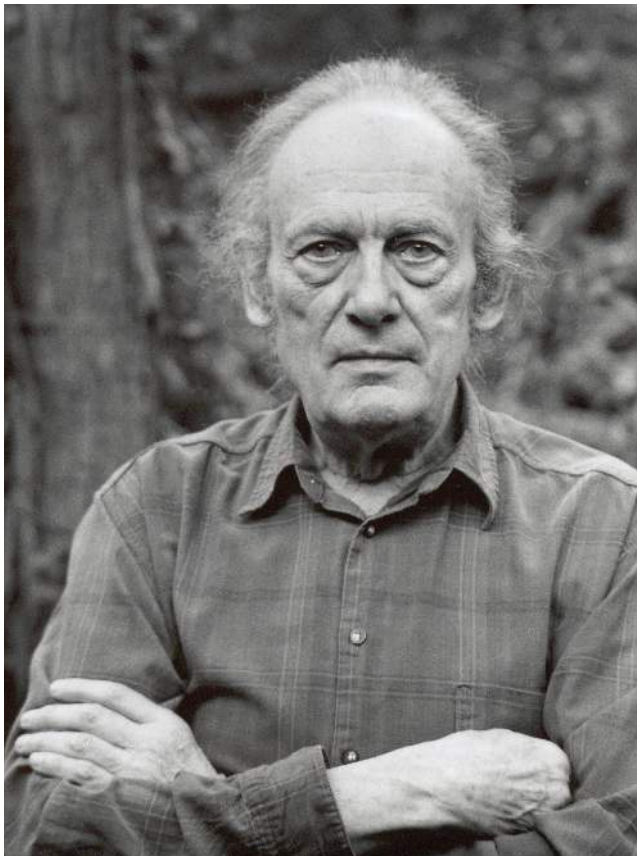


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RICHARD Meale, one of Australia's most original composers, died on 23 November 2009 at the age of seventy-seven. Meale was an inspiring and gifted musician, a driving creative force in Australian music and a leader in his generation. Along with Peter Sculthorpe, Richard Meale brought international attention to Australian music in the 1960s. In 1986, he achieved a highpoint of public recognition with the premiere at the Adelaide Festival of Arts of his opera *Voss*, based on Patrick White's novel with libretto by David Malouf. This opera was the first full-length Australian opera in the repertoire of the national company, The Australian Opera, and was directed to critical acclaim by Jim Sharman.

It was in the 1960s that Meale's formidable orchestral works, such as *Homage to Garcia Lorca* (1964), *Nocturnes* (1967), and *Very High Kings* (1968) brought him acclaim in London and Europe and, exceptionally, an international publishing contract with Universal Edition. The critics catapulted him into public view as the voice of musical modernism in Australia, a leader of the musical 'avant-garde' who would generate the kind of recognition for Australian music that Sidney Nolan and Patrick White had forged for the visual arts and literature. With his peers, Meale legitimised, professionalised and advocated the role of the composer in Australian society. He was Australia's first official delegate to the UNESCO Rostrum new music festival in Paris 1965.

During the 1950s and 1960s, as exceptional pianist and conductor, Meale also premiered a remarkable range of new music in Australia, including the first Australian performances of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with Marilyn Richardson, in Sydney and at the 1964 Adelaide Festival. In his role as programmer at the ABC during the 1960s, he broadcast to Australian audiences recordings of a wider range of music than had hitherto been heard, inspiring people to explore the musical worlds of Debussy, Bartok, Mussorgsky, Bax, Janacek, Schoenberg, Messiaen and Boulez. He also featured the music of Japan, India and Indonesia, which he had embraced during a period of study in ethnomusicology at the University of California on a Ford Foundation grant in 1960. The timeless quality of these ancient musics is effortlessly absorbed into his own musical language in such works as *Clouds now and then* (1969).

Meale read and wrote musical scores like other people read and write books. As a fourteen-year-old in post-war Australia, he discovered the world of musical scores in his local Sydney City Library and avariciously borrowed a bundle each week to 'read' at home. Similarly he taught himself the art of the orchestra by painstakingly copying every page of Rimsky-Korsakov's famous treatise on the subject in the Mitchell Library after school each day before setting out for piano lessons at the NSW State Conservatorium. This was archetypal Meale: endlessly pursuing his thirst for knowledge, rigorously setting out

to educate himself, yet never passing an examination—he hated them! He remained forever formally unqualified, yet became one of the most erudite, cultured, engaging and passionate musical mentors in the country. Perhaps the most formative influence in his life was his piano teacher Winifred Burston, who introduced him to a formidable range of ideas, literature and art, to the writings of people like Gertrude Stein, Garcia Lorca and Wittgenstein. Most of all, she inspired his lifelong love of music that could express extremes of beauty, intellectual rigour and the double-edged ‘duende’ ever present in his emotional palette.

In taking up a position at the University of Adelaide in 1969, Meale established Adelaide as a vibrant creative centre, nurturing many of Australia’s next generation of composers. His artistic friendships, including with Premier Don Dunstan who appointed him to the Trust that established the Adelaide Festival Centre, made him a magnet for students and international visitors alike, famously sharing cooking, red wine and feisty late-night discourse with the same passion, intensity and engagement that he created music.

Meale’s determination to honestly pursue his individual creative voice, regardless of public opinion, again caused critical shockwaves with a radical artistic ‘about turn’ in the 1980s through his quest for a new lyricism in works like the Second String Quartet (1980) and his re-engagement with more formal classical structures of music as in his Symphony (1994). His critics accused him of musical treachery, of renouncing the atonal idiom of the avant-garde, of abdicating his musical leadership in favour of a new kind of musical Romanticism. Yet for him, as a composer, modernist techniques had simply worn out their expressive usefulness, particularly as he sought to explore musically the range of inner emotional worlds of the characters in his two major operas *Voss* (1982–86) and *Mer de Glace* (libretto by David Malouf on the story of Mary Shelley, for The Australian Opera in 1991). After retirement from his university position of

Reader in Music in 1988, Meale largely withdrew from his public roles, with the exception of his long membership of the Board of the Australasian Performing Right Association. He came to focus on the interior world of the mind and music as he retreated to his new home amongst the rainforests of Mullumbimby, and then, increasingly ill, to Sydney in 2001. The composition work slowed down, too, though late works such as the *Three Miro Pieces*, premiered by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2002, continued to win national awards.

The National Library of Australia holds the personal archive of Richard Meale, as well as an extended Oral History interview only months before he died, a rare moment in his rather private last years. Meale’s archive is largely a musical one. Sometimes vulnerable and disordered in his personal life, Richard was never one to much trust anyone, so he committed little to paper in the way of letters and diaries, and probably destroyed (or failed to care for) much of what he wrote or received. The exceptions were the commendations of the colleagues he respected most, including Patrick White who admired Meale above all other Australian composers. What Meale committed most to paper were his musical ideas. His archive reflects his musical obsessions and determination to produce the highest quality musical work possible. It is full of exquisitely notated sketches, fragments, ideas tried and discarded, large musical works, such as his operas painstakingly forged through version after version; even archival recordings of him composing *Voss* at the piano, providing unique insight into the compositional process.

The ABC broadcaster and composer, Andrew Ford, opened his eulogy at Meale’s funeral held in Sydney on 27 November with the following: ‘In Richard Meale we have lost a bold and passionate musical imagination, a curious, penetrating, original intellect, a profoundly caring conscience and a mordant wit.’ This is true, but he has also left behind a substantial body of original and exquisite music that will live long into Australia’s future.

- ROBYN HOLMES