

THINKING ABOUT *Turbulence* or, ‘the underlying forces usually hidden’

libretto by Cynthia Troup
for a Living Room Opera in three scenes
composed by Juliana Hodkinson

This chamber opera is ‘about’ *turbulence* in multiple ways. On one level, it’s about an episode of perhaps severe or extreme *turbulence* for the aeroplane, caused by the nebulous edges of jetstreams surrounding the passenger flight—combined weather conditions which are, of course, only ever partly predictable. Simultaneously the opera focuses on *turbulence* in the relationship between the two main characters, a mother (performed by soprano Deborah Kayser), and her 19-year-old daughter (performed by Anneli Bjorasen), who are seated at a distance from one another in the small passenger cabin. Obviously this is a longer-term, even a constant kind of *turbulence*, that of the myriad pressures arising from the so-called ‘family romance’. More specifically, in relation to the Mother, this *turbulence* has to do with the Daughter’s individuation, and her growth into independence—and from there, ideally, with the emergence of a respectful friendship between two confident women at different life-stages. In the physical confines of an airline cabin, any small ‘drama’ of action and interaction is magnified in its effects, or potential effects; all sorts of personal boundaries become vulnerable to incidental encroachments. So the opera also ‘stages’ the *turbulence* occasioned by a temporary but inescapable intimacy with the Mother and Daughter. Within the space and time of the performance, everything else, including the audience, is contiguous with the emotional noise and power that’s beating around these characters, and that each of these women generates.

Perhaps most compellingly from a writer’s point of view, *Turbulence* is ‘about’ the *turbulence* inherent to language itself; the volatility and instability of all meaning, which inevitably relies on context, and, for vocalised language, on the tone and timing of an utterance. Context can mean the whole situation for or against an utterance being heard, then understood, ‘caught in flight’ by another’s sensibility. In particular, I’m interested in the hidden poetry and subjective content of language that’s usually considered ‘dry’, ‘neutrally passive’, and ‘purely referential’ or realist—the conventional language of scholarly argument, or scientific description. In texts composed with a such a rhetorical purpose, there’s an

avoidance of speaking about what cannot be known, about fundamental uncertainties, and the contradictions of our lived human co-existence. But in the strategies or syntax of that ‘avoidance’, there’s always *always* an ‘underside’ of imagery: a ‘trace’ imagery of embodied desire; a richly metaphorical language of praise and blame, mourning and rejoicing; so many words and word-images that can convey something delicate and profound about subjective experience. The text of *Turbulence* privileges ‘impartial’ remarks about the predictability of catastrophic events. Yet the underlying trace imagery is felt, it accrues, and eventually overflows into the more directly personal, expressive mode of the poem and melody that comprise the Mother’s aria, ‘For those who are near you are far away’. A linchpin of the opera, a still point, the aria is at once a love song, a lullaby, a lament, a hymn, and an ‘air’, a simple, strikingly memorable tune.

Overall, it’s an experiment, and provocative, to try writing an opera libretto for ‘the unvoiced’ between two people; to have this writing collide and surge into a compressed, composed force-field of static, music, and other sound. From one point of view, like the ‘facts’ of the aeroplane flight and the weather, the humming and rattling, the music, and all the sonic materials are amongst the driving ‘external’ conditions that, from moment to moment, impact upon the characters’ ability to communicate, to ‘survive the journey’ together.

In terms of the sound-world, *Turbulence* is an immersive chamber music, a sustained dream- or sky-scape very precisely composed of vocal, electronic, melodic, and other often ambiguous fragments. Juliana Hodkinson and I became interested in the history of radio broadcast technologies for the aeroplane passenger cabin. Nowadays, the average airline passenger takes in-flight communication technologies so much for granted, but these too, like all technologies, have their own history. For the passenger cabin intercom system, the history is quite short: as mentioned in notes that introduce the libretto, the first passenger aeroplane intercom system can be said to date from 1939. This was the year in which passengers for short-haul flights on DC-3s operated by Transcontinental and Western Air were first provided with in-flight radio broadcasts through loudspeakers. A ‘master receiving unit’ ‘controlled by the airhostess’ was tuned into radio stations and programs that coincided with the plane’s flightpath. The same broadcasting system (circuit and loudspeakers) was used for in-flight announcements made by the pilot (see libretto, p. 3).

So *Turbulence* also unfolds around the idea of imprecise radio technology, the unreliable, perhaps accidental radio broadcast to and within the passenger cabin. Metaphorically this can magnify a sense that the Daughter feels compelled to find a way to ‘broadcast’ from several rows back; that is, to try to articulate—if not successfully communicate—complex feelings about her Mother, feelings coupled with unanswerable questions about the purpose and direction of her own life. The Mother, meanwhile, also ponders questions about the unresolved, the perplexing, but with a sense of positive fascination. Self-confident, confident in her own space, her energies and observations set the compass for the opera. At times she sounds like the very engine of the flight; by comparison, the Daughter’s role is reactive.

Perhaps incautiously, *Turbulence* is a small opera oriented towards unbounded questions (although opera, after all, is a heightened form). How do we tolerate partial, fragmentary explanations for what is? Are words ever really ‘fit’ to ‘express’ fear of the unknown? How do we successfully convey our feelings, and account for their volatility? How do we best respond to another’s attempt to convey her feelings? What are ‘suitable conditions’ for happiness? Can a language of words and music help to transform existential pain?