

Reflection and Description

This is the transcription of a recording made in response to a series of questions posed by Stephen Emmerson. It is very discursive and often somewhat rambling but it gives a sense of context and the creative genesis of My Sister's Tears.

My Sister's Tears – A Reflection March 2004

This is a most interesting situation I find myself in. Stephen Emerson and Stephen Cronin, my doctoral supervisors, sat with me yesterday as we talked through a new piece I'd written and they asked me to take the time to put my thoughts on to tape sitting by myself alone in a room just to mull over it. Stephen (Emmerson) had sent me some ideas, but that's 36 hours ago. I had a busy day yesterday that stopped me getting to this and I think I've busied myself this morning to stop me getting to this.

The piece I wrote was called "My Sister's Tears" and it is based around my sister taking her life last November. (pause) Heather's friend, Jo Cassidy, sent an email that Leonie, my sister-in-law got, and she contacted me and said "Is this true? Have a look." and I checked the email and I recognised Jo's name and I said it's probably true. She phoned Jo and they talked and said what had happened, (pause) and it was a couple of days before I went to America to work, and because Heather was in London, I mean there was nothing I could do. Because of the death by misadventure there had to be an inquest and she couldn't be buried straight away.....(*phone rings*)

So you can hear the phone call so I've just spent 20 minutes on the phone with work so it put a bit of a dampener on all of this....you know, all the politics of it all.... it just frustrates because I guess when you write as a composer, you're not interested in the politics, you're not interested in the politics of the...institutionally, like the Con or whatever. Talking to Cronin yesterday, he writes because it's an emotional thing and I do too I suppose. Interesting things we talked about yesterday. Looking at the piece, looking at how the beginning motific-stuff leads to that more than at the end – why? Put the conductor's hat on and make decisions about that. Maybe.... it's coming to rest. Then he asked does that mean that I'm coming to terms with my sister's death. I don't know.

And I don't know whether sorting it through has happened with writing the piece. I don't know whether it's heightened it. (pause) It is really difficult to sit and talk about this. (pause) It is easier to just write the piece, (pause) 'cause if you just write the piece people can interpret it any way they like but you know what you've said, (pause) you've spoken (pause) and nobody can tell you, you are wrong. They can say they don't like it, but they can't tell you you're wrong. (Pause)

Interesting the piece is an uplifting piece it's not a sad piece, (mood minor key). It's in D which is unusual for me. (pause) It's very interesting. I think I'll try to find the questions Stephen asked me and see if it gives me a bit of focus because I'm just getting maudlin.

Quoting Emerson – *“Great news that you had such a good day. For a moment you are putting down everything that you recall about the way it came out. If your typing is as slow as mine, you mightn't want to record on your tape any of this. What thoughts went through (my) mind today and the other day when I finished the piece and the days that preceded it?”*

I wrote lots of it in Melbourne – well, no I didn't, probably the first bit of it. Um, I heard the tune.

“What thoughts” O.K. where did it come from? I had a terrible dream about Heather..... a terrible dream (pause) Um (pause) and I couldn't save her and I held her in my arms, I wiped her tears and they wouldn't wipe away, (pause) and I wiped the blood on her and it wouldn't wipe away (pause)... and I couldn't save her....and I heard the tune, after the dream sometime, I heard the tune which is the chorale song-like thing that's the main part of the piece. What were my thoughts? I just had to write; I mean there was no thought that this represented that or that represented that. Coming back I can say “well this tinkly thing at the beginning could be Heather dancing when she was a little kid” - but that's the conductor...that's....there was no consciousness of that??? I don't know what guides my pencil when I write.

“How much was planned?”

None of it. How much was planned – none. I just had to write the piece, I had to write that melody.

(Sigh and a pause)

“Does it just unfold as expected or did it take some unpremeditated term?”

I don't know what is expected. I guess - as I was talking to the guys yesterday - I'm Mr. Ternary. I expected it to come out ABA. You know, bit of an intro; first bit; second bit; DC or DS and the CODA. But it hasn't, it's more through-composed. The melody comes back a number of times and speaks and that...the...the raised eyebrow idea at the beginning, the wispieness, the smile, the whatever it is, the first motific thing, that comes back...rushes in, rushes out.

“Any sketches, or did it come out in a complete form?”

Oh, it always comes out in a complete form...a couple of scribbled out bits. Interesting to talk to Stephen Cronin yesterday and find that he couldn't take the scribbled out bit, he'd keep coming back comparing them and my sense is

that once it is scribbled out, it is gone. I don't come back and look at it. You know it may as well be torn off. I think because I can't play the piano it comes out pretty quickly. And interestingly I went to the piano a number of times, knowing harmonic structures that I wanted but knowing where I could place them so that they let the music through. There are so many harmonic ideas...to fit with the melodic materials and cadence points that just couldn't be a normal cadence.

(there is a pause)

"What decisions were you conscious of, both general and..."

I can remember being very conscious about scribbled-out things, it became too grandiose and melodramatic, you know, "Really, really, really!"...and the decision about some note lengths and the big brass chorale in the middle...too long – was over the top. (Pause and Sigh) Oh, I don't know, perhaps things that I haven't articulated consciously, I don't know, they'll come. I'll have more understanding of it as I prepare it.

"Anything that's fresh before it evaporates."

What a wonderful way to put it.

"Were you the vessel through which it passed.?"

(Pause)

I wasn't a detached bystander. (Pause) I was very conscious of it happening – very, very conscious. There was no detachedness about it. I can remember those fumbling times; a couple of times going to the piano. (Sigh and a pause) Playing little phrases...it just touched...I don't know what I was trying to say but I would just cry.....I would just cry. My eyes would fill up with tears like they are doing now. Why is it, why is it, what am I trying to do with this piece. I'm trying to talk to my sister. I can't bring her back – I couldn't save her in life, so I can't save her in death. (Pause)

I worry about... her soul, her relationship with God. I've prayed "Lord have mercy on my sister's soul"...and, I'm desperately sad. Who's going to transcribe all this? I'm sorry you're upset. (pause)

Desperately sad...

(Quite a long pause now)

"Why is the piece, 'the piece'?"

(pause)

Because I really loved her...from the moment she was born – beforehand.
Here big brother – I can't even imagine...(pause)

I can remember looking at her in the hospital when she'd had the car accident - oh, what an ache. (Long pause) My word – (long pause and a sigh – “ah”) this has been very interesting - hasn't it. How will it come out when I'm the conductor – that will be very interesting too and maybe I will look at some of her poems?

(Pause – begins again in a more positive tone)

I might take a minute now and look at the sketch and see if there is anything that sticks out – that would be sensible wouldn't it.

(He is obviously referring to the sketch of the work now)

The opening is just so ...wispy. (pause) I don't know what it is, but it's wispy. It's lightness. (the sound of soft weeping) You know, she was such a beautiful little girl. I can remember pushing her around on her bike.... always a bit of a Prima Donna – typical Hultgren. Ha! (Pause)

Anyway – interesting...I'm not sure how I feel about the music. I think I'll have to visit it a bit more, just, I want it to not sit in a tone centre, but to sit in D and then make G feel like it should happen, not sit in D, and then end. I love the thought of the same tone. Oh, absolutely. Anyway, the bassoon plays at the end of the introduction; bit of meandering. This simple phrase could lead into the brass chorale, just trombones, I think, but then, I wouldn't mark...then bring the horns in...the middle section that goes high in the register of the melodic tessitura...bring the horns out and then add the tuba with the trombone and fill the sound out. Maybe I've marked it a bit slow too, maybe it's just a bit slow....(mumbled and inaudible comments)

Maudlin! But these voices...see if they can speak and speak clearly, unambiguously. No one should take their life - no one should. I can't believe it, when Marissa died I just...oh look...what a waste, and now my sister. I am so terribly sad. (He weeps)

(Long pause)

There are lots of sighing things in the bassoon bits and when they're sort of.... Ha ha (he sounds like he smiles here) – this melody that comes in at 59 after that big brass chorale, when I was afraid of being melodramatic, is a little... clichéd maybe, I don't know, but it sighs, it sighs and then even the transitions before the tutti that the lines that all lead into the transition, the transition sighs and then after the restatement of that tune continues, those lines sigh again and the low flutes – that sound can just throb. That could be such a pure, beautiful sound.

Anyway, the trumpet speaks again, the chorale ideas come back again – with all the illusions to the beginning filter through in a full restatement of the beginning again and then a bit of a paraphrase of the tune, and then as beginning ideas are coming to rest as Stephen was talking about yesterday, Stephen Cronin. Even the melismas are more scaleic and not as leaping around and when they come back like the beginning, they're more finely structured – they don't leap as much – they leap a little bit, but not much and then it just (*he sings*)...comes to rest. Oh look at that! The end says, a *niente* - to nothing.

Oh Lord, where is my sister and can I wipe the tears please?