

# Helga Hill – The Journey to Gesture

Helga Hill formed the Early Music Consort of Melbourne in 1973 and the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers in 1976. Her first steps towards the Art of Gesture can be traced back to a performance of *The Squire Masque* (Davenant, 1614) for the New Zealand Music and Dance School at Wellington University in 1982.

The problem with such early works was that, while the words and music survived, the original dances were lost because no method had been established to record them in written form. Helga Hill's task was to devise and teach reconstructed choreographies to match the music. She was to act in close collaboration with the director, Anthony Rooley, and with Emma Kirkby (now Dame Emma) who was to attend to the voices.

This marked the commencement of an association that continued for fifteen years and gave rise to productions of most of the early English operas, complete with newly-devised choreography. Since 1977, Helga Hill had been teaching renaissance dance each summer in Austria and Sweden – with frequent visits to New Zealand. But now she added a theatrical production to the European leg of her annual schedule.

To begin, she accepted an invitation from Anthony Rooley to provide period-style dances for a performance of *Cupid and Death* (Shirley, Locke & Gibbons, 1659) at the 1983 Festival of Flanders in Bruges. Emma Kirkby and David Thomas were among the associate artists. Thereafter the research, writing and teaching of new dances became Helga Hill's contribution to each year's opera, masque or other work.

These included: *Albion and Albanus* (Grabu, 1685), *Don Quixote* (Purcell, Eccles and others, 17<sup>th</sup> C.), *The Indian Queen* (Henry Purcell, 1658 – first performed 1695), *Semele* (John Eccles, 1707), *The Fairy Queen* (Henry Purcell, 1692), *Venus and Adonis* (John Blow, 1681) and *Psyche* (Shadwell & Locke, 1675).

Among other productions by this team were Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1609), *L'Anime del Pergatorio* by Stradella and a program of Italian Balli by Monteverdi and Marini – both from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Dartington International Summer School was the venue for these presentations. *Cupid and Death* was also staged in Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank, London, and with Schola Cantorum in Basle.

Early in this collaboration, Helga Hill was asked to take up the study of period gesture and movement so that they could also become part of these ground-breaking presentations. After a time Emma Kirkby suggested that the process would be advanced by a meeting of Helga Hill with the world's leading gesture authority, Dene Barnett, who – as it happened - taught Philosophy at Flinders University in Adelaide.

The meeting took place in 1991. It was during her subsequent studies with Dene Barnett that Helga Hill decided much of her future work would be devoted to the restoration of the ancient art. But, while she injected segments of gesture into the productions in Europe, in deference to Dene Barnett she did not teach in Australia.

But that changed in 1997. The completion of Helga Hill's annual engagement at Dartington coincided with Dean Barnett's passing. Having rediscovered the lost art of gesture he had spent the last 25 years of his life bringing this powerful adjunct to performance to public attention. In this he achieved some major successes through operas he gestured at Covent Garden, Versailles and other notable venues in Europe and North America.

But production circumstance dictated that these assignments often amounted only to the coaching of artists. Many of them would have been left with little by way of a fundamental grasp of the rules of gesture and of the philosophy behind it. The initial

stages of gesture require much time and effort – a requirement many artists are unable to meet.

On hearing of Dene Barnett's death, Helga Hill knew what had to be done. Despite her on-going schedule of concerts and classes in Melbourne, she believed the time had come to get on with research, write an introductory course and teach it so that gesture could be performed again for modern audiences. Having been inspired by Dene Barnett, she now aimed to further promote the art form he so ardently espoused.

So plans were made to start at the University of Melbourne where a ten-week private course was inaugurated, with the support of Professor John Griffiths, at the Early Music Studio in 1998. This program ran unchanged until 2009. The aim was to build-up a team that could perform the art with fluency. A second aim was to interest the University Drama and Music Faculties in gesture. In 2006, this interest arrived in spectacular fashion when the Head of Voice, Merlyn Quaife, invited Helga Hill to gesture and direct Eccle's *The Judgement of Paris* (1701). Although this was only a student production it drew house-full crowds to Centennial Hall at the Catholic University where it was staged on the 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of July, 2006.

Many people were impressed by the ability of gesture to personalise performance. A tertiary drama teacher commented: "When I come to the opera I expect to be told a story, but tonight we were all part of the story". Frank van Straaten, the editor of *On Stage Magazine*, declared: "We were all transported". The precise link between words, music and gesture, which lies at the heart of baroque opera and opens up the emotions of the audience, was there for all to see.

In preparing this production, students worked on gesture for three months. It was a significant event as many years had passed since the art was introduced to Australia when Dene Barnett directed Rameau's *Pygmalion* for the 1972 Adelaide Festival.

Subsequently, Dr. Alan Maddox of the Sydney Conservatorium invited Helga Hill to direct and gesture performances of Alessandro Scarlatti's serenatas *Il ratto di Proserpino e Fede* and *Idolatrice e Fuore* – both from around 1700. The performance of the two works, basically one-act mini-operas, took place on October 30, 2008.

The next move was to interest secondary schools in the art. This led to a highly successful season in 2011 of John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (c 1683) by St Michael's Grammar School, St Kilda. Costumed by Shane Dunn of Sydney and with musical direction by Dr. Gary Ekkel, this was Australia's first fully-gestured early opera involving a school. It is noteworthy that the second-ever performance of this work took place at Mr Josiah Priest's renowned boarding school at Chelsea (UK) in 1684.

In 2012, the University of South Australia commenced the Arianna Gesture Project under the direction of Dr. Daniela Kaleva who had been one of Helga Hill's first gesture students. The aim of this innovative program is to explore the role of gesture in the theatre of Monteverdi's time and to film a gestured performance by soprano Tessa Miller of the famous *Lamento d'Arianna*. The project is now well-advanced.

Three factors have become apparent during Helga Hill's many years of involvement with gesture. Firstly, Melbourne audiences, who have had on-going experience of the art, love it and, nowadays, demand it. Secondly, at the end of major productions, the surreptitious power of gesture to transport audiences is made apparent by palpable moments of silence before any outbreak of applause. As Helga Hill observed – "It is as if the audience has lost track of time and place". Finally, there is a growing trend for Australian artists with fluent gesture to be offered high level engagements abroad.

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