

Margaret Sutherland and *The young Kabbarli* A 50th anniversary exhibition

Alexandra Mathew

In August 1965, *The young Kabbarli*—the only opera by Melbourne-born composer Margaret Sutherland—premiered at the Festival of Contemporary Opera and Music at the Theatre Royal in Hobart.¹ The year 2015 marked the 50th anniversary of this important opera. In recognition of Sutherland's work, a themed display was presented from November 2015 in the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, Eastern Resource Centre (ERC), using objects sourced from the University of Melbourne Rare Music Collection.²

Although best known as a composer, Margaret Sutherland (1897–1984) was also a respected educator, collaborator and entrepreneur. In Melbourne her colleagues included soprano Elsa Haas (1911–1989), and internationally she worked with Australian music publisher and arts patron Louise Hanson-Dyer (1884–1962). The Rare Music Collection contains objects relating to both Haas and Hanson-Dyer, including materials associated with the international pipe education movement, which emerged in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.³ The initial idea to create a display on Sutherland and her opera soon grew to encompass three distinct parts: Sutherland's solo vocal music, her



involvement in the pipes movement and, of course, *The young Kabbarli*.

Sutherland was among the first 20th-century Australian composers to write in a recognisably European style.⁴ Having studied in London with Arnold Bax, she was also greatly influenced by English pastoralism.⁵ However, Sutherland—a brilliant and sensitive song composer—preferred Australian poetry, and set texts by John Shaw Neilson and Judith

Wright, among others.⁶ A number of Sutherland's holograph vocal scores are held in the Rare Music Collection, including *Three songs for voice and violin* (1926). Although Sutherland was a pianist, often accompanying singers in performances of her own work, in this composition she opted for the unusual pairing of soprano voice and violin. As the violin is the highest of the stringed instruments in the standard Western repertoire,

Opposite: Margaret Sutherland, Melbourne, n.d., photographic print. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.

Right: Pipes, made by British or Australian schoolchildren or adult amateur musicians, c. 1929–50, bamboo, enamel paint and cork; various dimensions. From a collection of 21 pipes, components and tools, now held in the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne Library.



and the soprano the highest voice type, the combination became a duet between equal voices, rather than a dominant solo line with subservient accompaniment. The handwritten scores are striking evidence of Sutherland's inventiveness in vocal music, and are visually beautiful, too. Sutherland wrote out her music clearly and with great care—a skill largely lost since the advent of computer programs for drafting scores.

In Melbourne, Sutherland frequently accompanied Elsa Haas, who championed Australian music. Theirs was a fruitful and long-lasting relationship, and Haas even made her own arrangements of Sutherland's music. The exhibition contained one of Sutherland's best-known songs, *In the dim counties* (poetry by John Shaw Neilson), which the two performed in recital together. This score is not in Sutherland's hand, but Haas's. Before photocopiers, it was commonplace—even for professional singers—to write out their own parts for performance. And, in copying a score by hand, one familiarises oneself with the physical shape of each note and the contour of each phrase. Haas's copy of Sutherland's song represents not only the close working relationship between composer and performer, but also an intimate physical familiarity between singer and score.

In contrast to the photographs, programs and handwritten scores on display in one cabinet, objects representing Sutherland's involvement in the pipes movement were chosen on purely aesthetic grounds. From an extensive collection, the curators (Dr Jennifer Hill and I) selected five colourful pipes made by schoolchildren. When handling and arranging the pipes in the cabinet, we had to take care to avoid damaging the now fragile paintwork—the instruments were not nearly as robust as they looked. Also on display was a selection of tools used by the children to make the pipes. These were fascinating in their own right, for their well-worn wooden handles and beaten-metal ends.

The pipes movement started in London in 1926, when schoolteacher Margaret James encouraged children to make pipes out of bamboo, which they then decorated with enamel paint in bright colours.⁷ James declared: 'In these days when we expect to pay heavily in money and in years of labour for everything that is good, pipe-making is an exception and a surprise. It is time to restore an active share in music to everyone'.⁸ Hanson-Dyer helped introduce the pipes movement to Australia, and called upon a number of expatriate

composers to contribute to her first book of pipe music (although for reasons unknown, few ended up in the volume). The manual *How to make pipes* (1935) by Ruth Flockart and Margaret Sutherland,⁹ which we displayed alongside the pipes, is notable for several reasons. Its colourful cover design by renowned French bookbinder Rose Adler makes its appeal to schoolchildren immediately obvious (see page 32). In addition, an international audience was envisaged: the book features, in five languages, instructions for making pipes, as well as a number of arrangements by Sutherland. Four more of Sutherland's arrangements, all simple and composed with children in mind, were published in a separate volume.¹⁰ The display of pipes and related objects also helped link Sutherland as a young composer in Melbourne with an older Sutherland: the internationally renowned composer.

Although *The young Kabbarli*—based on the life of Irish–Australian anthropologist Daisy Bates (1863–1951)—provided the inspiration for the display, it was difficult to locate suitable exhibition materials. Many objects in the collection were either too fragile to display, featured the same images as one another, or possessed little visual

Margaret Sutherland and Maie Casey, *The young Kabbarli*: Chamber opera in one act, Sydney: J. Albert, 1972. Rare Music Collection, Special Collections, University of Melbourne.

interest. However, the University of Melbourne is fortunate to hold a signed first edition of the score, featuring drawings by Charles Blackman. While simple in its design, the score is an item of unique beauty in the realm of printed music, for its thick, lightly textured, off-white pages, elegant font, and spacious layout (see below). The opened score

was displayed alongside the LP of the only recording of *The young Kabbarli*. The record sleeve (pictured opposite) features Blackman's portrait of the opera's subject, Daisy Bates.¹¹ To complete the display, a photograph of Sutherland composing at the piano (see page 28) was placed beside a photograph of the young Bates dressed in an elaborate white gown,

published in her memoir, *The passing of the Aborigines*.¹²

Based on the memoir, and with a libretto by Maie Casey, *The young Kabbarli* recounts an episode in the life of Bates, who was named *Kabbarli* (meaning 'grandmother' or 'woman of the Dreamtime') by the Indigenous people of Broome in Western Australia with whom she worked.¹³

SCENE: Beagle Bay, Western Australia
TIME: 1890's
CHARACTERS: A Protestant Irish woman (Daisy, the young 'Kabbarli') mezzo-soprano
 A Spanish Trappist Brother bass
 Gonsiderwell, a young aboriginal tenor
 Yoolthan, his wife soprano
 Three aboriginal girls non-singing rôles

As the curtain rises the atmosphere is muted, almost static. It is a drowsy mid-afternoon, warm and still. A Trappist Monastery is nearby. Slightly left of centre is a well, with fairly low bushes on either side. A small corner of a bark Chapel can be seen in the background.

INSTRUMENTATION:
 2 Flutes (one d. Piccolo)
 2 Clarinets in B^b (one d. Bass Clarinet)
 Bassoon (d. Contrabassoon)
 Horn in F
 Percussion Castanets, Wood block, Sticks, Flints, Wooden shaker
 Piano
 Viola
 Contrabass

The Young Kabbarli
 libretto: Maie Casey music: Margaret Sutherland

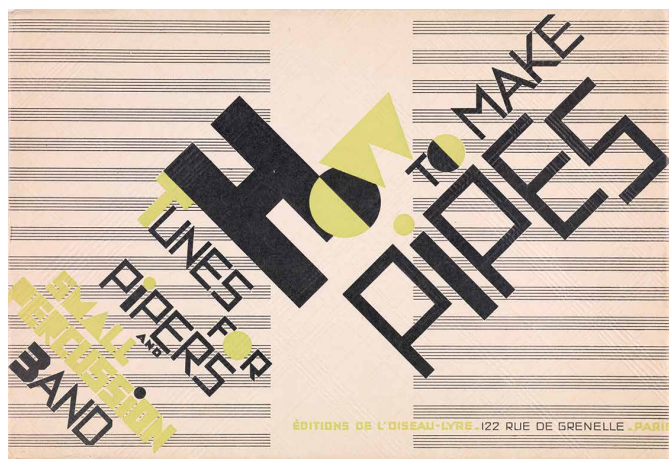
INTRODUCTION
 (♩ = 80)

Piccorno
 2 Flutes
 2 Clarinets & Bass clarinet
 Bassoon & Contrabassoon
 Horn in F
 Percussion *ad lib.* (cont.)
 Piano
 Viola
 Contrabass

Copyright © 1972 by J. ALBERT & SON Pty. Ltd., 139 King St., Sydney, Australia

LP cover featuring illustrations by Charles Blackman: Margaret Sutherland, *The young Kabbarli*, sound recording, HMV Q4OASD 7569, Sydney, 1973. Gift of the University of Queensland Music Library 2001, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, University of Melbourne.





Rose Adler, cover for book by Ruth Flockhart [sic] and Margaret Sutherland, with foreword by Louise Dyer, *How to make pipes: With tunes for pipers and small percussion band*, Paris: Éditions de L'Oiseau-Lyre, 1935. Rare Music Collection, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.

Casey, having met Bates in the 1930s and read her work with interest,¹⁴ suggested the idea to Sutherland, who had recently set to music a number of Casey's *Verses*.¹⁵ While Bates' work with Indigenous Australians is the subject of continuing controversy,¹⁶ Sutherland, through her differing musical portrayals of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters, gently advocated non-assimilation and celebrated the significance of Aboriginal spiritual life.¹⁷ At the time of composition, appropriation of Indigenous materials and music was not deemed problematic by white audiences, but the growth and progress of Aboriginal rights now render some aspects of the opera culturally insensitive. Without wishing to memorialise Bates' work, in the display we aimed to celebrate Sutherland's opera as one of 20th-century Australia's great musical achievements.

Margaret Sutherland—composer, teacher and University of Melbourne alumna—was a daring and intelligent woman with a fascinating history. Her compositions, particularly for the voice, were among the outstanding works to come out of Australia in the 20th century. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to celebrate her music and honour her legacy in the recent display at the Eastern

Resource Centre. The University of Melbourne has an extensive collection of Sutherland's work, and it was a privilege to find rare and curious objects to share with students, teachers and visitors.

Author's acknowledgement: Special thanks go to Dr Jennifer Hill for her support, guidance and scholarship in curating and setting up the display.

Alexandra Mathew is a singer, musicologist and bookseller. Currently undertaking a Master of Music in musicology at the University of Melbourne under the supervision of Dr Suzanne Robinson, she previously studied vocal performance at the Royal College of Music, London. Her writing has appeared in *Context* musicological journal, *Australian Book Review*, *Readings Monthly* and *Limelight*.

The Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library is located in the Eastern Resource Centre on the Parkville campus of the University of Melbourne. The Rare Music Collection (see <http://library.unimelb.edu.au/music/collections>) includes the Hanson-Dyer Gift Collection of 15th- to 19th-century music imprints, first editions and music manuscripts acquired by Louise Hanson-Dyer between 1929 and 1931, as well as the Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre Archive.

- 1 David Symons, 'Sutherland, Margaret (Ada)', *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusic.com.
- 2 The exhibition was displayed from 20 November 2015 to 31 May 2017.
- 3 Daniela Kaleva, 'Louise Hanson-Dyer's *Melbourne centenary music book*: An Australian celebration', *La Trobe Journal*, no. 90, December 2012, p. 57.

- 4 David Symons, *The music of Margaret Sutherland*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1997, p. viii.
- 5 Symons, 'Sutherland, Margaret (Ada)'.
- 6 Symons, *The music of Margaret Sutherland*, pp. 47, 94.
- 7 Kaleva, 'Louise Hanson-Dyer's *Melbourne centenary music book*', p. 51.
- 8 Margaret James, *The Pipers' Guild handbook: The origin and history of the pipe movement*, London: J.B. Cramer, 1933, p. 3.
- 9 Ruth Flockart (1891–1985) was for many decades a music teacher and then director of music at Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne. See Louise Jenkins, 'Ruth Flockart and Dr Wood: A crucial relationship in the development of Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College music program', *Australian Journal of Music Education*, 2011, pp. 3–10.
- 10 Margaret Sutherland, *Australian melodies: For pipe, flute or recorder*, Paris: Louise B.M. Dyer, 1935.
- 11 Margaret Sutherland, *The young Kabbarli*, sound recording, HMV Q4OASD 7569, Sydney, 1973.
- 12 Daisy Bates, *The passing of the Aborigines: A lifetime spent among the natives of Australia*, Melbourne: Heinemann, 1966, p. 15.
- 13 R.V.S. Wright, 'Bates, Daisy May (1863–1951)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 7, Melbourne University Press, 1979.
- 14 Bob Reece, *Daisy Bates: Grand dame of the desert*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2007, p. 105.
- 15 Symons, *The music of Margaret Sutherland*, p. 115.
- 16 Joel Gibson, 'Queen of the Never-Never back in vogue', *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, 2 February 2008, www.smh.com.au.
- 17 Anne Boyd, "'To didg or not to didg': Exploring Indigenous representation in Australian music theater works by Margaret Sutherland and Andrew Schultz', in Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson (eds), *Opera indigene: Re/representing First Nations and Indigenous cultures*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011, p. 101.