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,
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. 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’. James’s copy of *How to make pipes* (1935) by Ruth Flockart and Margaret Sutherland, 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. 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
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. 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.*

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.

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SCENE: Bungle Bungle, Broome, Western Australia.

CHORUS: Various species.

CHARACTERS:
- Kabbarli
- Bates
- Albert
- Mutsa
- Aboriginals

TIME: Present.

INSTRUMENTATION:
- 2 Flutes
- 2 Clarinets
- Harp
- Piano

INTRODUCTION

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the Kangaroo and the Emu, appeared at Sydney’s Festival of Music in 1968. The Barefoot Pipers, performed in 1969, was written as an exercise in the use of a single instrument. The piece was performed at the University of Melbourne in 1970 and later recorded. Both works were composed by Sutherland to celebrate the bicentenary of the colony of New South Wales.

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The Young Kabbarli

Music: Margaret Sutherland

Text: Maie Casey

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LP cover featuring illustrations by Charles Blackman: Margaret Sutherland, 
*The young Kabbarli*, sound recording, 
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.

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**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](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 1933, as well as the Editions de l’Oiseau-Lyre Archive.

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1. David Symons, ‘Sutherland, Margaret (Ada)’, *Groove Music* Online, www.oxfordmusic.com
2. The exhibition was displayed from 20 November 2015 to 31 May 2017.
5. Symons, ‘Sutherland, Margaret (Ada)’.