

# **DECLASSIFY**

## **Episode 15: The Critic**

Guest: Harriet Cunningham

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### **SUMMARY**

This week is a very special insight into the world of being a music critic, an arts journalist and thinking about how to listen to the new, the challenging or listening differently. Declassify welcomes Dr Harriet Cunningham is a writer and researcher, best known as music and theatre critic for the Sydney Morning Herald. She writes for publications including The Saturday Paper, Limelight and the Financial Review. She has recently completed doctoral studies at UTS writing a cultural history of Dartington International Summer School of Music. She has been known to play the violin. Join us as we unpack the world of opera, the backlash from Opera Australia in reaction to criticism, narrowing repertoire choice of major arts companies and its consequences.

## TRANSCRIPT

Victoria Pham (VP): Hello hello! Welcome back to another episode of Declassify, I can't believe we're already at episode 14. And this week is a guest that I was actually very nervous and super excited to talk with, it is none other than writer, academic and highly respected music critic, Harriet Cunningham. Welcome Harriet!

Harriet Cunningham (HC): **Hello!**

VP: So when I was first researching you, and when I first came across you it was quite a while back, I'd say in 2012. So I primarily know you as a music critic, but I think you're much, much more than just a music critic. You're also a writer, and I believe now also an academic. I was just wondering, and I was curious, how did you get to the point where you are now through your studies and your love of classical music?

HC: Yeah, okay. Well, I was, I was brought up in the UK, and I was a child of a classical, a classic music family. My mother was a, his was a professional is a retired professional musician. And my father was a doctor. And like so many doctors. He was a very talented musician, as well played the bassoon. And my parents actually met at a music summer school back in the 50s. And that music summer school was a big part of their lives, and then my life as well. So, I was brought up around music, with music around musicians, listening, going to concerts. Yeah, from a very early age. And apparently, I this is really wanky, but apparently, I heard the Amadeus String Quartet playing Haydn and said, Mommy, I want to play the violin. Anyway, I did and my godmother happened to be Suzuki teacher. So, at the age of four, I was hustled off into violin lessons, was part of the London Suzuki group. And continued to play the violin to a reasonably obsessive level, to the point where, when I was going to university, it was up in the air, whether I would go and study music or something else. And get it out of my system. I actually went to Dartington College of Arts for a year to do music. They called us a prep course, like an arts prep course, which basically involves me playing for, you know, six plus hours a day, before going on to university to study an arts degree.

So yeah, I've been playing in orchestras, since I was old enough. And then at university, I think, possibly spent more time playing the violin than studying Latin and English, including playing in a string quartet to quite a high level. To the point that we were the sort of the string quartet that got hired around all the parties and balls and everything for the university. And all through this, I was still going to the Dartington summer school and playing there and doing arts management there. And I eventually decided that I've got to get out because you have to leave, you have to leave your home eventually. So, I answered an ad to audition for the orchestra for British youth opera, which was a fairly young organisation at the time. We will tentatively called it operating to 30. You know, it was for the for singers at the beginning of their careers. And I got into the orchestra and I did a season with them. And then I wrote to the founder and said you need any help. I'd like to become an arts administrator. And he under the next day, I got a phone call saying actually, we're doing some auditions tomorrow, which should be able to help come down to London and help out. And so from then on, I was working with British youth opera and eventually became the administrator there and did I think three or four seasons before moving to Australia and when I When I arrived in Australia, I was basically burnt out from a really, really intense arts administration job and anyone who's been in arts-admin will completely understand that, you know, touring opera company really intense experience wonderful experience.

Anyway because up but because I was crazy. I about the second or third day I got to Australia, I phoned up the Opera House and said, Would you have any jobs for me? I don't expect to be paid. Because I knew that was the best way to get a job in the arts and ended up working for the Bennelong programme. Long story short ended up at the Australian Music Centre, and worked there for eight years as the marketing manager and which was the most wonderful immersion in Australian music and the Australian music world. And as a side, as a side hustle, as it were, I've always been a writer. I've always written I've always written you know, diaries, novels, whatever, from word go. And was very involved at uni. I was a music critic at the university. And when I came to Australia, I thought, I'd like to get some writing. I'm not quite sure what possessed me. But I basically cold called lots of people. I ended up cold calling the arts editor at the Herald. And at the time, Gordon Carey, the composer was music critic there. And, but he was moving on, and we've had quite dealings through the Australian Music Centre. Anyway, when the arts editor said to Gordon, I've had this weird phone call from this person called Harriet Cunningham. He said, Yep, sure, she's good. And so I got the gig. So I got the gig in in 2000. As an arts critic for as a music critic for the Sydney Morning Herald. That's

cool. And I was the only and I was, and I vividly remember standing in the opera house fire with the other music critics, and they were all male and over 50 and I was 30. And heavily pregnant with my first child. And female obviously. So yeah, that was fun. So yeah, that that's, that's been a constant now a constant backdrop for what? 20 years. So yeah.

VP: And did that start you writing with all these other publications, because I've seen all your things Limelight as well as your own website that you ran in witness performance?

HC: Yeah. So after I had kids, I sort of, I left the Music Centre, and it kind of I kind of naturally branched out into writing and doing features and all sorts. And so yeah, I mean, so writing across lots of different publications, and also doing copywriting. Which was, thanks to Judith, Judith James at who was at the time at the Opera Australia. And I'd worked with her before at the Music Centre. And she needed someone to write the brochure. And she rang up and said, Harriet, have you ever thought about this? I think you'd be okay at it. And so my first formal copywriting gig was writing for Australia's 2005 brochure. Well, you know, there you go.

VP: Were you always interested? Well, from your experience in the UK with opera and then now a lot of your writing, at least when I'm looking for your writing is actually centred around opera was that something you intended or it kind of naturally happened with the flow.

HC: I'm a bit of a theatre not to be honest, I've you know, the I'm the, the leader of what they call it, this the smell of grease paint, I've always loved theatre as much, not more. But as much as music. I've always loved live performance. And my introduction to opera via British youth opera and also, you know, just going to performances had me absolutely hooked - hook line and sinker. So, so yes, opera is a particular favourite of mine and probably because of the magic of theatre, as much as and bringing it brings together to bring together words music and performance, which are three of my favourite things. So yeah, brilliant.

VP: So if then you have a particular interest in one facet of music when you're working as a critic for something like The Sydney Morning Herald, do you get a say in the shows that you're assigned to?

HC: Okay, so here's how it goes. You get at the Sydney Morning Herald you get no say whatsoever. So they have a lead critic whose was Roger Cavell when I started and then became

Peter McKellen. And they look at the concepts and allocate them across the available writers. So I wait when the email arrives, and it says you're going to this, this and this. I go, all right. And then occasionally, I'll also get an email from the arts editor saying, Harriet, not sure if this is your kind of thing, but we'd really like it covered. And Peter's not available. Can you go to this, which is usually something like, I don't know. some reason? Peter always seems to duck out of the Gilbert and Sullivan. And he definitely ducks the Queen's Symphony. As in the music of Queen, synchronised, so I've got to do that one. And then on other occasions, I get a phone call or email from the arts editor saying, Harriet, everyone's all the all the contemporary music critics are out having a party tonight. Can you go to this slide? And whatever? Yeah, sure. Yep. So yeah, sorry. Short answer to long answer cut short. I don't really get a lot of choice. I've also go to, but that's good. That's fine. by me.

VP: That means you're exposed to different performers.

HC: Exactly. If I actually chose what I went to imagine I'd end up going to only things I like, and, and that would be terrible. Because the things I liked. I mean, I will the things only the things that I think I would like and yeah, and I wouldn't go to those amazing things that were going on. Could be could be this could be that and you come away going. Wow, I am so glad I went. So yeah. Amazing. That's a good way to live in general, not just as a review, just to try different experiences out. Oh, yeah, though. Yeah. Do you think there any? Oh, sorry. Keep going? It's very, I mean, I think it's an approach which is sort of core to my approach to being part of the whole performance. ecosystem is, is the whole the business of you go and you buy into the contract between yourself and the person who's performing something you You're the contract is that they think they've got something good to show you. And you go in, in good faith, saying, Well, I'm gonna I really want to hear what you think is that you have which is good to show me and I'm going to give it my best.

VP: I was going to ask you actually, I suppose you've sort of already answered if there were any principles, you will advise anyone who's perhaps reluctant to go to a performance or see an ensemble that they normally wouldn't be comfortable going to see.

HC: Yeah, I had actually articulated it before like that. And so it's good when it kind of falls out of your mouth accidentally, but it is, it really is that it's not easy to put on a performance.

And, and if people have gone to the effort, then they think they have something to say. And so if there's something to say, then I'm just interested to hear it. You know, I'm just curious. I think the thing that I hate most is when people don't respect their audience or don't, or underestimate them or don't, or aren't authentic about what they have to say, basically. They don't have a burning passion to communicate something either they're just dialling it in, or they're, you know, I don't know. That's, and, frankly, that's when I get pissy and write bad reviews.

VP: Well, I suppose talking about critiquing or criticism, I don't know if you want to talk about it, but I remember having already known your work, and then your name popped up again in 2015 over all these publications because of the incident with Opera Australia.

HC: [laughs] Yes. That was quite funny. Yeah. Well, and it's not completely irrelevant, but it's useful background is that I had been working for Australia during copywriting from 2005 through to 2012. And then again, because they begged me in 2014 as well. But I was really I was really over it. I mean, this there's a limit to how long you can copyright for one organisation just because you end up coming up and saying things so I don't know what I was getting something out of my system or what but it I was just so shocked by the way that they didn't Lydon Terrancini had come in and taken and basically sought to define opera as this opulent, Stagey, society night out thing.

And the biggest cognitive dissonance in my head was the fact that the last time the first time I met Lydon Terrancini was in Darwin, where I was at the Darwin Guitar Festival on behalf of the Australian Music Centre. And I seem to remember Gerry Brophy was there as well. And Linden Terra cheney was doing something like he was doing something really wacko, like Ig marohn or something like that. I don't think he was naked. I suspect he was probably topless anyway, he was basically doing during the full worship thing. And and then to meet him and for him to come out with this stuff about you know, no one wants to see the sad truth is that no one wants to see Bliss, people actually want to see the Magic Flute and basically coming out with this stated intention to dumb down and I looked at it and I thought that, uh, you for real or are you?! What is there must be something else going on here? Because I mean, you know, quite apart from being a successful singer and doing witches he was he'd also been running the festival up in. Can't remember filling the word, you know, begins with be another example of me not being able to Northern Rivers nopper obviously begins with B, yes. Even Northern Rivers, which was a very broad programme. And it was like he sort of suddenly had this, you

know, road to Damascus, change of heart. And I thought, I want to look at this and see what he's doing. And so my piece actually, the point of my piece was actually that I said, I think Lydon Terracini trying to sneak new music in the back door and make big prepay for it. Because in tandem with his mainstage seasons, he was doing quite a few innovative things around the edges. But unfortunately, the fact that the mainstage season had become entirely vanilla meant that the flagship of Australian opera had suddenly become a museum piece as far as I was concerned. So yeah. And of course, it all then got really exciting because Linden territory needs not, but got angry, and then he banned me and then he's his management at the time, were not wildly competent, and copied me his email, and I made that email public and oh, my word. The next thing I know, I was getting emails from my critics, music critic colleagues in London going respect. Yeah, it was fun. It was fun.

VP: It's such an odd response to a piece of journalism, because of course, naturally would spawn more unnecessary PR for that company.

HC: Yeah, yeah. No, it was. It was unfortunate. And it was it was also it hit it hit a nerve, because obviously a lot of a lot of subscribers and singers and he was alienating a lot of subscribers and singers. And, to a certain extent, that's completely the right of an artistic director, and artistic director has to come in, and they have to do their own thing. And if they don't do their own thing, then there's something wrong.

And for example, Simone Young, when she took over the opera, she, for example, there were certain singers, certain extremely high profile, fabulous singers, who she said, I don't think she this particular singer can sing Italian. I don't like her singing Italian. I don't want her in these roles, and you know, and it was roles that she made for, you know, a Puccini role that she'd made famous. So, you know, and you know, various thing as under the Simone, of course, under this mon rat era under the Richard Hickox era various people went Yeah, I'm just not that artistic directors cup of tea or whatever. And that's the nature of the beast. But I think Lydon Terracini had less did his did his thinking and choosing with less diplomacy and a and it which gave an impression of arrogance which made him lots of enemies. I think.

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INTERMISSION I:

VP: For our first intermission is a pick from Harriet from Puccini's famous *La Boheme*, Act 4 from the moment where Marcello realises Mimi is dead. In Harriet's words, "this illustrates the emotional kick of opera and of big orchestral music." This excerpt is a 1997 remastering of the 1958 original recording of the opera featuring Maria Callas, Anna Moffo and Franco Ricciardi as lead tenor.

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VP: You mentioned him sort of distilling operatic repertoire on the mainstage to this very simple form. I think I was in high school when he became the artistic director and I went to high school city so all the flags, all the flags changed to just like a rotating heavy rotation of Mozart in Puccini than Mozart, Puccini and yet still the same set of repertoire that we're getting just done every three years, it sort of changes, do you Yeah, that's two things, I got a response as a company because they realise that they're struggling to stay afloat financially, that it will guarantee one certain type of audience, someone who just wants, like you said, as though kind of a fancy night out. And that form of theatre offers you that experience of being in a certain class or historical experience of being in a certain class experiencing this kind of music, as well as making sure that we had a degree of tourists coming in, because I know they do make a rather large proportion of that audience.

HC: Where to start? So, in many ways, Lydon's approach, is what he certainly characterises it as crisis management. And I, I haven't looked through their books, but I'm sure that well, pretty much arts management is basically crisis management. And when you the biggest arts company in the country, then it's the biggest crisis. So yeah, I completely get that. So, he basically chose a strategy. And I, I disagree with his strategy, which is it but his strategy was certainly defensible. In that he basically chose to maximise the high maximise income by going for the high margin operas, which are either retreads won't, you know, existing much loved productions, or new co productions. And he, he was also adamant that people buy opera tickets to see the latest greatest singer. And so was budgeting towards overseas singers. Many of which would come you would, who would come who would not be particularly well known. And I mean, I mean, that's a classic strategy for an arts organisation is to, and especially in, especially in Australia, is to you know, you want to pick up the great talent in the show. So in the year before they hit the really big time, and then you can say, you know, so Bryn Terfel was booked to come and sing full staff in Sydney in can't remember. Anyway, he did. He, Bryn Terfel did



his first full staff on in Sydney Opera House. Wow, great. You know, we had him first. And so I think, you know, I don't totally see the logic behind getting overseas singers who haven't yet made it into the big time. Who but who you've heard and, and thank you. Terrific.

So there was so there was that, that that obviously put a lot of people off side as well because Australia has some has it Australia struggles. Australia would like to have a step give a stage to its own talent and give opportunities to Australian singers. And he was so that was seen as reducing opportunities for Australian singers. It's, it's not right or wrong. It's a trap. It's a strategy. And it was very, it was a very clearly laid out strategy. I it was coherent strategy.

I just think it had. It's got lots of he didn't address the downsides of the strategy, alienating not only Australian singers and musicians but also an Australian audience who loves to follow their own singers you know the local boy local girl, make good I have friends who, you know, people, people, like, the wonderful thing is like mmm with us. Or yet no, she's still in favour, but all sorts of things who people would go to the opera to hear that particular singer? And then, of course, no, not in favour any more, or their, their perfect role has been taken by, you know, an overseas singer, who's the next big thing and exciting and so that there was that backlash.

And then, I think, though, the other main thing was the, the narrowness of the repertoire, which I think was a major is a major oversight. Because it's, turned away a lot of subscribers, because they don't want to see Madame Butterfly again, because even though it's just gorgeous, and I've seen it about six times, and I've written marketing copy for it, about the same number of times as well, but you know, I just don't need to see it again. And nor do many, many subscribers, so, and not only that, they don't they hear virtually all the time and they hear opportunity all the time. And they don't actually need to see a little known Verdi, opera or back catalogue russini opera, they would actually like to see something really interesting. So I think fundamentally, the homogenising of the mainstage programme comes across as a as an underestimation and a patronization of the audience, which does damage.

VP: It feels like a really disappointingly reductive presentation of what opera is because it's a living, dramatic theatre piece. And we're only getting a very, very limited slice of what we think Opera although they did, pretty a pretty drastically

HC: It's also very patronising towards tourists as well. I mean, I remember people saying, oh, when we put on Vegas opera, we got really good ticket sales from tourists because it had the word Opera in it. Well, you know, if, if, if they really want the opera experience, then work with the work with the, with the cruise company and have your young artists do an opera on the opera steps or something, which is the champagne and lovely frocks experience, but to offer up a banal something, which is what banal or hackneyed or predictable doesn't just for the tourists, Doesn't does not bring any kind of prestige to the opera house.

VP: And for tourists, I mean, if they want to go see something in the opera house, they will because of what opera is in the name of the building itself. So I think yeah, it will attract tourists regardless.

HC: And actually, Sydney Opera House has a damn good programme and they will find something they will enjoy going to. So yeah, exactly.

VP: Well, on the flip side, and hopefully slightly more positive, I feel as if the burden of this new programming and experimental things and bringing audiences on a journey falls onto smaller ensembles, particularly the chamber opera companies in Australia and I think they are also more willing to do a few more of those experimenting with concerts online particularly during this time. I think I read a piece by you not too long ago about Gertrude opera and they did.

HC: Oh, yeah. Moments online. They did an entire they did the Yarra Valley opera festival online. And, and yeah, it was terrific. I mean, it was actually I say it's terrific. It was rough as guts and but I you know, it was it was fabulous. There one polished piece was I have to look it up but it was the one about Ned Kelly's sister. Maybe it was Mary Kelly. Anyway, and that was absolutely beautiful. But also pinchgut opera did a sensational online presentation of magicals by Barbara strat. I have to get my mouth ready for this Barbara Razzi Barbara's stroke. And that was really brilliant. And it can't it's you can't see it in the UK because of the I think they're hoping to sell ii overseas but it's only licenced in in the Australian territories at the moment. But that was really terrific. And who else did I What else did I see? Oh yeah, um Victorian opera, they streamed a few operas and including three new operas which they didn't have any live action to it. They actually just had the music. And then they had the, the socials, the text. But it was a really fascinating experience because the libretto was the most beautiful

poetry. And I found the hole I found, instead of being words, Music Theatre, it was words and music. And that was totally compelling as well. So, so yeah.

VP: Do you think the current circumstances although they're very challenging, and I've noticed a lot of the headlines around the world when it comes to arts companies, opera, Australia and the Met both struggling to stay afloat because of this? Do you think However, on the flip side, it's encouraging all this experimentation and a bit more leeway for these companies to try things they normally wouldn't? Because you can now?

HC: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean, I'm not I can't be 100% Pollyanna, I like to be a bit Pollyanna about these things, because that's the way I am. But in a way, the smaller arts companies, because they've always existed on the smell of an oily rag. They're no stranger to hardship. And they are no stranger to sudden change. And, you know, funding falling through disasters. That's not to say that they're not suffering, they are. It breaks my heart to see the amount of suffering in amongst artists, performers, musicians, singers, and, you know, and, and also musicologists everyone involved in the performance industry. Theatre technicians, all of these people who overnight have lost their jobs. And with no, I mean, they were the first out and they'll be the last back in. And, you know, it's not the same with sports, rah, rah. It's very annoying.

So, so yeah, my I'm My heart goes out to them. But I think in many ways, smaller companies are better equipped to, to deal with difficult circumstances. In purely practical terms, look, that they're used to taking risks, and they're their whole business model is built around risk. And I think that's, in fact comes to the heart of one of the things that I have asked I find difficult about opera Australia is that their business model has their company has grown to the size where it is so large that to keep it afloat, they become more and more risk averse. And when I say they, it's all sorts of people, their accountants, their board. You know, I don't think Well, I know that Lydon Terracini is not only inherently risk averse person and I and I know that you know that the company is full of lots of people who are you have not have no real problem with risks, artistic or otherwise. But it becomes this great, great leaden weight when you have this, this huge infrastructure, and this huge payroll and this huge, so many liabilities, that the board and the chief executive become completely hamstrung and unable to sign off on any degree of risk.

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INTERMISSION II:

VP: For our second intermission is another pick by Harriet, and this time an Australian work.

This is an aria, In Anno Domini, from Australian composer, Mary Finsterer's Opera,  
*Biographica.*

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VP: Do you think? That's, I mean, I suppose many large companies do this their reasoning. For now programming or being afraid of taking any risks or working with local practitioners would be that it's a financial risk, always a financial, like a huge financial risk, despite the fact that opera Australia receives about \$25 million of national funding every year. And in 2018, I think they were the world's most successful opera company that they only needed to sell their tickets to be able to make a turnover every single night.

HC: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Look, I don't I don't know the numbers. I mean, your implication is, you're implying that it's not fair

VP: Yeah, yes.

HC: Damn, right. It's not damn right. It's not fair. I don't know that. It's, I don't, it's not holy, the opera's fault. It's government policy and various things like that. They're, they're funded through one government to take risks. They introduce new programmes, blah, blah, blah, they have to, then then a, the next government might cut their programming or say, we don't want you to do that. We want you to do this. Basically, a lot of it's, it's a matter of leadership. And when I say leadership, I mean, cultural and political leadership, as well as just financial business, all of that.

VP: Do you think that sounds there's an intentional disconnection between running something that is fundamentally an art form like it's a commercial business?

HC: Yeah, absolutely. There was a phase coming out of the 90s. Where were coming out of the hole, Gordon Gekko, Wall Street greed is good thing were in management consulting was

this big thing. Were these guys really, really smart guys. And yet, they were all guys. And they're all white, came in and told businesses how to how they could run their business. And you know, there's been lots of TV shows, or you know, how to turn around a business and everything. And this extended across all kinds of businesses and you start extending to the arts as well. You get the consultants in and they go, Oh, you know, there's the classic. There's the classic story about, Oh, you've got, you've got 14 violins all playing the same thing at the same time. Couldn't you just cut it down to two and amplify it, you know, and all of that kind of stuff, which is, you know, and not, not as bad as that but there was this there's always, there's always be this frequently a background a subtext of people in the arts aren't good with money, or people in the arts aren't good at business. Because they're artists and, you know, heading accounts. I mean, the fact of the matter is some of the best business people I've ever met are artists. And some of the, you know, that and they can, there's some people who can make magic out of nothing. And also, who can just spin the most amazing deals. Let me put it out there. It's never been a problem that art artists are just not good at managing money. That's complete crap. However, that has been a subtext at times.

Art is a not for profit business. And that is fundamental, because it's not, it's not for financial profit, because it's all about making art. That doesn't mean running at a loss is good. But the fact is that our costs and art pays back in different ways than in more ways than just financial. And this is something which has been, it can be very difficult to articulate is very difficult to articulate. And in certain political environments, becomes impossible to articulate. So you can make, or you can make, or you can write all the opinion pieces you want about cultural diplomacy, and music making you smarter. The social benefits of Mozart, and you can you can light it until you're blue in the face that going to porcine makes you more empathetic, but in certain environments, it just doesn't fly. And that is profoundly it was something that I just have to sit with and feel sad about at times.

VP: Like we're constantly defending the arts.

HC: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I, I actually was having lunch with someone who was talking about going on to the Board of A is someone in the business world who was talking about going on to the Board of major arts company and sort of saying, oh, and you know, what they might have to, but, you know, I'm looking at it, and it was, from what I'm hearing, they'll probably have their grant cut, because, you know, I mean, the economy and we will have to,

to, we will have to tighten our belts, and I just lost it. You know, the, the budget of that particular organisation is about 1%, of, of the budget of the salary of one single executive at this particular organisation. If you really want to cut the grants more, just defend us just defend us take the money away, drop it, then we won't have to do all the all this we can just we can just turn around we can go to. We can go to philanthropists, we can all drive taxis during the day. Just drop it. And part of me honestly feels like that. It's you've doubtless heard phrases like funding for failure and things like that. Yes.

VP: Definitely.

HC: And you've heard of people saying they're drowning in paperwork, or I've just lost a week of my life doing a grant application or etc, etc. I've been you I bet you have. I have, I should have.

VP: Because it is exhausting because you feel like you're begging to do work. Yeah, or being paid to do work at least and it's a tiny drop of money. Sometimes you writing a grant application for maybe just \$1,000. Just to pull something off. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. A lot of paperwork. Oh, gosh. And now it's going to cost more to do a humanities or Arts degree in Australia. So, it's kind of all happening at once.

HC: Oh, yeah. Although, as it looks like, it hasn't changed the numbers at all. I mean, maybe it will be ongoing. But I just, I just think it's completely bizarre and I don't like having political arguments, because I, they never go anywhere, but it just feels it feels personal.

VP: Yes, it's difficult for it not to.

HC: Yeah, yeah. It feels personal on, on artists.

VP: Definitely yes. Trying to explain to everyone that the arts – the thing we all turn to, music, art, television, theatre, books – is actually something worth supporting. On another note, I think when we first spoke, you mentioned your PhD at the moment and the conversations you've had around decolonization of music as the AMC articles about diversity and Opera at the summit at the end last year, I was wondering how your research has then informed your work?

HC: Yeah, as you know, I've just finished a PhD. And it was, it was a it was a sort of passion project, an accidental passion project, which is probably what most PhDs are certainly for, for people like me coming to it later in life, about the Dartington summer school in the 1950s. And how it how that place became a bit of a hotspot for British modernism in the in the second half of the 20th century. And looking at the makeup of the kind of people who went there. And basically, it was the polar opposite of the kind of Night at the Opera that opera Australia is proposing, which is full of older white people, well dressed of a certain class, all, you probably all know each other, certainly all speak the same language. And we've all seen it before, but they love it. Whereas this, what I was writing about were, people were expecting to meet new people, and they were expecting to be challenged. *And a diversity of ideas, and of backgrounds and of cultures. Was essential, but actually, but also, when you think of the 50s, and you think of white picket fences and monoculture, it was quite radical as well. So, so I think that that's what got me thinking about it historically.*

*And then just with that in mind over the last two or three years, in particular, I mean, Black Lives Matter, yes, but also the various movements coming out of things like Dark Emu and the whole The First Peoples of Australia and all of a sudden, I who am a, you know, white Anglo Saxon woman suddenly heard the message, which is we want you to hear us. And, I went, funny how I've been, I've made a life of listening to people. But I've been in it Ignoring. I haven't I haven't been listening. I've been listening to I've been listening to some things, but I haven't been listening to everything. I need to listen to harder. And it's, it's been an I'm at the very beginning of a, of a journey.*

And I went to a concert in the Sydney festival in 2019. Know 2020 Yeah. 2020. And I will look up the name for you. But the guy, Jeremy something. Anyway, he's classically trained singer, pianist, and also, but also the First Nations Canadian. He was a fantastic musician played beautifully. But he also spoke from the heart about being That's right, part of his project was listening to archival recordings of his elders singing and incorporating this into his music. And so, this was what his project was about. And it coming to Australia in at the beginning of 2020. He said, You know, he was seeing many, many similar themes with the indigenous people of Australia, and his thing that he said, and it just stayed with me. It was so you just said, we just want to be heard. Yeah, it's just, it's not. It's not a big thing to ask. People want to be heard, you know, when you're a kid, you want to be heard.

But people aren't being heard. They're just being anyway. Like I said, I'm at the beginning of, of my journey. So I think I'll always be at the beginning, but it's, it's good to start things.

VP: I think it's really beautiful actually. And was it Jeremy Dutcher?

HC: That's it. Jeremy Lipson. It was such a good festival as well. I mean, Sydney festival director, he's sensational. And he, his approach was to listen to so and so he could have Jeremy Dutcher, but he could also have wacky Sydney chamber opera, you know, European modernism, and totally not so Gypsy Baroque dance. So yeah, I mean, it was great. This was as my kind of festival.

VP: Wonderful, and what a great way to conclude, highlighting a celebration of all the different things that humans can do. We should all be celebrating the amazing, different things human can do! I can't thank you enough

HC: Thank you!

VP: And for anyone out there who wants more Harriet or check out her work – I've popped all the links to her website and writing below, as well as some articles that Harriet herself has recommended. You'll probably catch her reviews in various publications like Limelight, Witness Performance and the Sydney Morning Herald for years to come! Thanks to you all for listening and catch you next time!

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## RESOURCES

Harriet Cunningham

<http://www.acunningplan.com/index.php/about/>

Opera Australia barring of music critic:

<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/news/opera-boss-attempts-to-bar-two-critics-from-performances/>

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/opera/so-childish-opera-australia-artistic-director-lyndon-terracini-revokes-critics-tickets-20150103-12hait.html>

Selection of Harriet's work

<https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/gender-equity-and-diversity-in-opera-summit-the-listener-s-account>

Ideas on opera and opera funding

<https://theconversation.com/does-opera-deserve-its-privileged-status-within-arts-funding-84761>

[Out of the Covid-can: opera online](#)

<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/opera-australia-20180515-h1034b#:~:text=Government%20grants%20contributed%20%2425.8%20million,of%20turnover%2C%20Mr%20Jeffes%20said.>

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/09/21/arts-funding-covid-australia/>

Harriet's choices

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/music/jeremy-dutcher-pays-moving-homage-to-mother-earth-20200116-p53s0m.html>

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/music/2020/08/22/new-music-online/159801840010298>

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2020/12/19/different-hope/160829640010897#hrd>

<https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/24504/>

Dark Emu by Bruce Pascoe