

BEING GEORGE AND LIKING IT!
Reflections on the life and Work of
George Dreyfus on his 70th birthday, 1998
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George Dreyfus is unarguably one of Australia's most successful composers. He would disagree with that assessment, arguing that he has no peer. Modesty has never been one of his failings.

This book gives the impression that George would not feel fully dressed unless he wore a chip on his shoulder, displayed more prominently than his membership of the Order of Australia. He does not take reversals lying down, and uses every possible opportunity to carry the fight into enemy territory. That appears to be one of the purposes of this book. There are others, more praiseworthy.

George's status as a highly significant composer, and one who has raised opportunism to an art form, is based chiefly on his film and television music. That is what loosens the financial floodgates. They remain shut when it comes to what the classical purists would call the serious, high-minded stuff. And so it is that where the reputation of Albinoni depends on an *adagio* (made palatable by someone else), Pachelbel rides on a canon, Paderewski on a minuet, and Rachmaninov came to stand aghast at the popularity of his *C Sharp Minor Prelude*, George Dreyfus floats on *Rush*, the theme of a TV series about the Ballarat goldrush days, which George repeatedly likens to a potential Australian anthem. The royalties from *Rush*, arranged for more instrumental combinations than any piece by Liszt, keep George in clover, after all. *Rush* is played on a sound system in the Gold Museum at Sovereign Hill near Ballarat for 12 hours a day, seven days a week. No shoulder chip there!

The undying feeling of incurable injury which keeps the chip in place was crystallised out of the rejection by The Australian Opera of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* (1970), one of six operas it had commissioned, and among those it then declined to perform, for reasons which only George could possibly find incomprehensible. Those reasons must be pretty obvious to anyone familiar with the opera's subject matter of which, at the composer's insistence, Lynne Strahan made a far from unworthy libretto. The subject is the virtual glorification of a university-based anti-establishment rabble rouser (an

actual individual who, now of course much older but no wiser, recently fell foul of the law for inciting people not to vote at an Australian election). That operatic story would certainly have left a lot of seats in the soon-to-open Sydney Opera House bumless, and the powers that were did not want to dim a blaze of patriotic glory by supporting a revolutionary plot. George Dreyfus fought tooth and nail against the rejection, but to no effect.

So what does this new book give us? There are thirteen essays, atrociously proof-read, of which nine are by the birthday boy himself, and one each by Joel Crotly, Lynne Strahan, Manfred Bruston and Volker Elis Pilgrim. To read them all you must be bilingual, for about half of the book is in German.

Indeed, George Dreyfus' attitude to Germany is controversial. He escaped the Nazis at the age of 11 with his older brother Richard but without their parents (who escaped a little later), in the nick of time, but many members of his family perished in the Holocaust. Most people in that situation felt, after the war, that the less they had to do with Germany, the better. George took an opposite attitude, going out of his way to seek fame there, to the extent that he wrote two operas on German subjects (so far unperformed in Australia) — *Rathenau*, with a libretto by Volker Elis Pilgrim, and *Die Marx Sisters*, with the same librettist. *Rathenau* was premiered in Kassel, *Die Marx Sisters* in Bielefeld, and both were copiously reviewed favourably and unfavourably — and then apparently committed to the bottomless pit in which the vast majority of modern operas find rest after the initial hullabaloo. George has gained a great deal of artistic mileage out of his German origins, which is something many people find hard to swallow.

The essay by Lynne Strahan titled *The Long And Winding Road* is eminently fair-minded. She writes that George Dreyfus is "both awesomely ancient and experienced and frighteningly young and blind"; she calls him a wise old man and the me-too adolescent, and remarks that "the brat hardly turns into the seer, and the seer remains aloof". But let us be objective and point out that quite a few of the Dreyfus compositions have been important trail-blazers, most obviously the *Sextet for Didjeridu and Wind Instruments*, *The Adventures of Sebastian*, *The Fox*, the *Australian Folk Mass*, the *Galgenlieder*, the opera *Garni Sands*, and the youthful *Trio for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon*. That is a collection of which any composer can be proud — and there is far more. It adds up to full justification for a composer to blow his own trumpet, in this case a bassoon.

The 13 essays in the book are mostly reprints from other publications, some of them obscure or defunct. Some originated as talks

and have a colloquial air of informality not without a strong component of charm. But they also have a disdain for punctuation and syntax. Quite the best piece, albeit in German, is the objectively biographical essay by Manfred Burston titled "Mr. New Music In Australien".

George Dreyfus needs no publicity agent; he does the job supremely well himself, starting with an earlier volume *The Last Frivolous Book*. He sometimes does himself a disservice by harping on the rejection slips rather than the voluminous array of praise. He is, and one hopes that he will long continue to be, an exceptionally imaginative and wide-ranging composer who has made Australian music far richer. He is his own guilt-edged kid and revels in the role.

Fred Blanks