

BRUSH OFF!



GEORGE DREYFUS



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SAVING *THE GILT-EDGED KID* FROM OBLIVION

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“Any play that doesn’t hurt you in some way has something wrong with it.”

Edward Albee

“He who dies without having settled his accounts is wicked, he will not go to Paradise.”

Céline, *Bagatelles Pour un massacre*

“The past is never dead.”

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

“History is burnt porridge.”

Lynne Strahan, *The Gilt-Edged Kid*

thank you to Kay

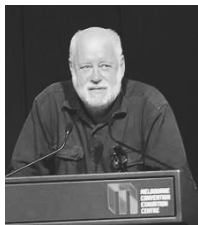
Other Books by George Dreyfus

The Last Frivolous Book (1984)

Being George and Liking It! (1998)

Don't Ever Let Them Get You (2009)

ROGUES GALLERY



Phillip Adams



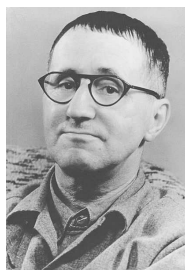
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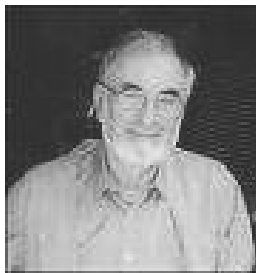
Jean Battersby



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Moss Cass



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Du Paty de Clam



Herbert C. Coombs



Roger Covell



Zelman Cowen



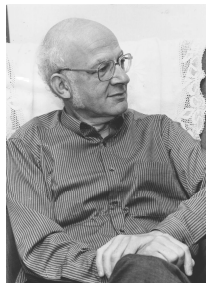
Clive Douglas



Edward Downes



Captain Alfred Dreyfus



George Dreyfus



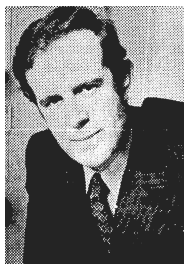
Kay Dreyfus



Clemens August
Graf von Galen



Eric Gross



Stephen Hall



Peter Hemmings



Hubert-Joseph
Henry



Ken Mackenzie-Forbes



James Murdoch



Leonard Radic



Peter Sculthorpe



Larry Sitsky



Lynne Strahan



Kenneth Tribe



Felix Werder



Peter Wilenski



John Winther



The first bar of *The Gilt-Edged Kid*¹ is also the second bar. “How could you, George?”, remembering Anton Webern’s dictum, of fundamental influence on the younger generation of post-war composers, “Das Selbe immer anders”. But then Richard Wagner repeats the first two bars



of the Vorspiel to Act Three of *Siegfried* three times. I immediately feel better, both are a marvellous start to perfectly good operas, both completely relevant to the climate of the day, both fulfilling conductor Edward Downes’ pronouncement in the Opera Australia 1972 Year Book:

“Nevertheless each age must hold up its own mirror. That is what the theatre in general, and opera in particular, is for. We must produce new works which reflect the fears and aspirations of mankind *now* in the 70s, and here—in Australia. If we do not we abdicate one large part of the right of opera to survive as an art

form. Without new works we shall surely be an expensive musical museum.

“We must not expect that every new work we produce will be a masterpiece. If one in the first ten is really good we shall be lucky indeed.”

So you can imagine I did not take it too kindly when Opera Australia’s² Artistic Director Stephen Hall wrote to say “We regret that we do not wish to perform the opera [*The Gilt-Edged Kid*] at this stage”.³ Nor did I take it kindly for the following forty years; in fact I waged a “spirited campaign ... against the company’s rejection of the work”.⁴

I had thought that I was on the right track, had the goods to be an opera composer. For starters, soon after leaving school, I had been bassoonist for JC Williamson’s Italian Opera tour of 1948–49. We travelled around Australia, playing the major works of Verdi and Puccini, *Faust*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, *Carmen*. We even had a single orchestral rehearsal for *Don Giovanni*, but by then conductor Franco Ghione had well and truly given up, it was just not the La Scala orchestra, where he had recorded *La Bohème* with Beniamino Gigli in 1936. “Il Fagotti,” he called out in despair, wanted to go back to Milan, but Frank Tait would not give him his ship ticket back and after all, Italy had lost the war, Australia was a good place to be.

I could not really play the bassoon at the time, lousy instrument, lousy reeds and no teacher, and anyway, the bassoon was never meant to play in six flats as in Canio's Aria in Act 2 of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, or so I thought until I went to study with Karl Öhlberger at the Vienna Academy in the mid 1950s.

We students could get a *Stehplatz* right at the top of the Wiener Staatsoper for one dollar. I heard *Tristan and Isolde* five times in a fortnight, *Die Meistersinger*, *Frau Ohne Schatten*, *Die Zauberflöte*.

As bassoonist in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra I greatly increased my operatic know-how. We played the major Mozart operas, *Fidelio*, the early Wagner operas, *Ariadne*, Benjamin Britten and Carl Orff. Karl Rankl, one of my cultural heroes, conducted Richard Straus's *Salome*. I still have Rankl's photo hanging in my music room, conducting the Arbeiterchor Groß-Berlin in 1930. I am addicted to Weimar Republic music.

Furthermore, I had inherited countless classic opera vocal scores from my mother's friend, Austrian painter Robert Hoffmann.⁵ I bought up Richard Edmund Beyer's collection of Franz Schreker and Max von Schillings scores and, with my mother's *Wiedergutmachungsgelder*, acquired the full scores of Richard Strauss's operas and Kurt Weill's *Klavierauszüge*.

There can be no doubt ... I was well armed with operatic know-how and experience.

In the past I had made multiple stabs at creating my own opera. I went to see John McCallum about the rights to Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, little knowing that Ralph Vaughan Williams had already composed it. I made a start on setting a comic incident in the life of Giacomo Casanova, little knowing that Paul Burckhard had previously used this story, or that even Hugo von Hofmannsthal had been playing around with this subject to get Richard Strauss out of the gloomy barbaric *Elektra* world.⁶

Nonetheless, by 1966, I had finished my full-length opera *Garni Sands*.⁷ Later that year I travelled to Germany on a UNESCO Travel Grant to study with Karl-Heinz Stockhausen at the Rheinische Musikschule in Köln, but he was only there for two weeks of my six month Travel Grant—he was enjoying worldwide renome at the time and was behaving appropriately. I filled out the time by imbibing contemporary opera most nights of the week, here is a list of operas I saw:

1966

September 28	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Khovantchina</i> (Mussorgsky)
September 29	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Manon Lescaut</i> (Puccini)
October 2	Deutsche Oper Berlin	<i>Iphigenie</i> (Gluck)
October 4	Deutsche Oper Berlin	<i>Die Bassariden</i> (Henze)
October 5	Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin	<i>Das Rheingold</i> (Wagner)

October 6	Städtisches Theater Dortmund	<i>Der Krieg mit den Hölzchen</i> (Čapek/Fischer)
October 7	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Die Soldaten</i> (Zimmermann)
October 8	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Ariadne</i> (Strauss)
October 9	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Salome</i> (Strauss)
October 10	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Der Mantel</i> (Puccini); <i>Die Kluge</i> (Orff)
October 12	National Theater Mannheim	<i>Hero und Leander</i> (Bialas)
October 16	Musiktheater im Revier Gelsenkirchen	<i>Harmonie der Welt</i> (Hindemith)
October 17	Opernhaus Köln	<i>La Bohème</i> (Puccini)
October 17	Opernhaus Wuppertal	<i>Die Macht des Schicksals</i> (Verdi)
October 20	National Theater Mannheim	<i>Ein Sommernachtstraum</i> (Britten)
October 21	Staatsoper Stuttgart	<i>Die Französische Stunde</i> (Killmayer) <i>Aventures – Nouvelles aventures</i> (Ligeti)
October 24	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Billy Budd</i> (Britten)
October 27	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Manon Lescaut</i> (Puccini)
October 29	Opernhaus Hamburg	<i>The Visitation</i> (Schuller)
November 1	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Parsifal</i> (Wagner)
November 2	Opernhaus Düsseldorf	<i>Ein Sommernachtstraum</i> (Britten)
November 4	Nationaltheater München	<i>Nabucco</i> (Verdi)
November 9	Opernhaus Wuppertal	<i>Jacobowsky und der Oberst</i> (Klebe)
November 11	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Otello</i> (Verdi)
November 13	Musiktheater im Revier Gelsenkirchen	<i>Harmonie der Welt</i> (Hindemith)
November 16	Opernhaus Düsseldorf	<i>Elektra</i> (Strauss)
November 19	Staatsoper Stuttgart	<i>Tosca</i> (Verdi)
November 20	Opernhaus Düsseldorf	<i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i> (Debussy)
November 22	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Ein Maskenball</i> (Verdi)

November 24	Opernhaus Essen	<i>Preussisches Märchen</i> (Blacher)
November 27	Staatsoper Stuttgart	<i>Die Auferstehung</i> (Ciker)
November 28	Nationaltheater München	<i>Karl V.</i> (Krenek)
November 30	Nationaltheater München	<i>Die Zauberflöte</i> (Egk)
December 1	Opernhaus Frankfurt	<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> (Weill)
December 2	Staatsoper Wiesbaden	<i>Otello</i> (Verdi)
December 3	Theater der Stadt Koblenz	<i>Der Mantel</i> (Puccini) <i>Der Feuervogel</i> (Stravinsky)
December 4	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Das Rheingold</i> (Wagner)
December 6	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Die Walküre</i> (Wagner)
December 7	Opernhaus Wuppertal	<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> (Weill)
December 8	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Siegfried</i> (Wagner)
December 11	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Götterdämmerung</i> (Wagner)
December 14	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Otello</i> (Verdi)
December 20	Staatsoper Hamburg	<i>Arabella</i> (Strauss)
December 22	Staatsoper Hamburg	<i>Albert Herring</i> (Britten)
1967		
January 3	Deutsche Oper Berlin	<i>Die Bassariden</i> (Henze)
January 5	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Ariadne</i> (Strauss)
January 7	Opernhaus Wuppertal	<i>Jacobowsky und der Oberst</i> (Klebe)
January 14	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Liebe der drei Orangen</i> (Prokofiev)
January 17	Staatsoper Wiesbaden	<i>Marienlegende</i> (Martinu)
January 18	Opernhaus Frankfurt	<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> (Weill)
January 19	Nationaltheater Mannheim	<i>Ein Sommernachtstraum</i> (Britten)
January 23	Theatre National Populaire Paris	<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> (Weill)
January 27	Covent Garden London	<i>Arabella</i> (Strauss)
February 3	Sadlers Wells London	<i>House of the Dead</i> (Janáček)
February 8	Opernhaus Düsseldorf	<i>Don Carlos</i> (Verdi)
February 11	Opernhaus Nürnberg	<i>Der Junge Lord</i> (Henze)
February 13	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Falstaff</i> (Verdi)
February 14	Opernhaus Köln	<i>Otello</i> (Verdi)

February 15	Opernhaus Essen	<i>Die Dreigroschenoper</i> (Weill)
February 16	Opernhaus Düsseldorf	<i>Lulu</i> (Berg)
February 18	Theater der Stadt Bonn	<i>Elektra</i> (Strauss)
February 19	Landestheater Darmstadt	<i>Lulu</i> (Berg)
February 19	Opernhaus Frankfurt	<i>Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny</i> (Weill)
February 21	Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin	<i>Elektra</i> (Strauss)
February 24	Deutsche Oper Berlin	<i>Elegie für Junge Liebende</i> (Henze)
February 25	Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin	<i>Elektra</i> (Strauss)
February 26	Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin	<i>Puntilla</i> (Dessau)
February 28	Covent Garden London	<i>Turandot</i> (Puccini)
March 4	Staatsoper Hamburg	<i>Jenufa</i> (Janáček)
March 5	Staatsoper Hamburg	<i>Arden muss sterben</i> (Goehr)
March 8	Staatsoper Wien	<i>Der Rosenkavalier</i> (Strauss)
March 12	Staatsoper Wien	<i>Der fliegende Holländer</i> (Wagner)

So when at the end of my Australian National University Canberra Creative Arts Fellowship in 1968, the Chancellor Nugget Coombs asked me to compose an opera based on Katherine Susannah Prichard's novel *Coonardoo*, I was ready to go.

Perhaps I was foolish, embarking on another opera when my first one had not yet been performed, but Reserve Bank Governor Nugget Coombs was God of the Arts in Australia, Chairman of the Australia Council, though somewhat prone to high-minded superficialities in the press,⁸ and better at the grand ideas than the practicalities of working them out.⁹

He mumbled something like “Opera Australia will perform it”. Crossing Aboriginal art themes with the local European, as in the *Coonardoo* story, was his passion,¹⁰ what could go wrong? Full of optimistic enthusiasm I looked around for a librettist. Clem Christesen, my backer for the Creative Arts Fellowship, suggested author Lynne Strahan, who then devised a three act outline for an opera based on the novel, and posted it off to Nugget Coombs.

The reply was a call, not from Nugget Coombs, but from Claude Alcorso, Chairman of Opera Australia. Nugget Coombs had asked him to get in touch with me, he said. Could he come and talk to me about our idea? So I invited him and his family to lunch, only to hear him explain that the opera company didn’t want to commission me to do a full-length opera at all, as had been indicated at first. Nor did the company want to do *Garni Sands*. Instead they’d decided to commission five composers, each to write a one-act opera.

I didn’t say “Betrayal”, I just said, “Oh, Hell!” Take it or leave it, was his offer; if you don’t want to do it, there are plenty of other composers who’d love to accept.

Against my better judgement, I signed up for the job. Lynne Strahan was to work on the libretto while I was away on my US State Department Travel Grant. When I came back, she had six ideas ready and asked me which one I liked best. “*The Gilt-Edged Kid*”, I

exclaimed. “That’s the one I like too”, she said and set to and finished it.

So, at the beginning of 1970, I was writing my second opera. *The Gilt-Edged Kid* was a big work, for a cast of ten singers and orchestra, which took me a year to complete.

The music I wrote is quite different from *Garni Sands*. It’s like my first symphony. Bluntly put, I wanted to appeal, particularly to Australian audiences who had limited exposure to contemporary European operas, like Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* or Bernd Alois Zimmermann’s *Die Soldaten*.

Lynne Strahan’s libretto mirrored my intention, intensely Brechtian, another of my cultural heroes. The master had a horror of emotionalism, false sentiment, fulsomeness or glossing things over. He could be convinced only by realistic attitudes, truth, and sobriety.¹¹

Our opera is about a series of contests between the Administrator and the Kid, singing all the time, to decide who’s to have the power. There’s the strategy game, musical instrument with voice, poker machines, woodchop and archery. There are operatic precedents for all the contests including the basic struggle for power (Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*): *Meistersinger* (song-contest), Strauss’s *Intermezzo* (for card game read poker machine), Brecht/Weill’s *Mahagonny* (for boxing read woodchop),

Rossini's *William Tell* (archery). Not unlike Franz Schreker's *Irrelobe*, with its allusions to *Die Zauberflöte*, *Der Freischütz*, *Il Trovatore*, and particularly F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

I can't find a precedent for the opera's strategy game, with its model warships and planes, except that it mirrors my addiction to Märklin model railways.

We knew what we were doing, writing an operatic opera. Here was a message for Edward Downes: this is the "one out of ten" that will crack the jackpot, the one you were looking for in the 1972 Year Book.

For a producer it's a dream, but he couldn't say, "I'm going to do it like *Madame Butterfly*, or the first act of *Siegfried* where there are only three people on stage for an hour and a half". Lynne Strahan's characters are on stage all the time, bustling about and singing their short sentences.

When I finished the score, it was 13 December 1970, I took it down to Lynne Strahan in North Carlton. We were very pleased with it. I had written it on dyeline transparencies and run off a beautiful copy on my machine. It looked marvellous. We wrapped it in tissue paper first and then in cardboard and brown paper and I took it to the local post office. *The Gilt-Edged Kid* was on its way!

I have every right to be uneasy, about anything to do with the arts in Australia, just take ABC staff conductor Clive Douglas' sustained endeavours to remove me from the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra,¹² a sort of Mozart and Salieri thing. He succeeded, in return I gave Australia



its alternate national anthem as some would call it.

My three minute much-loved evergreen classic is a thousand times more successful than any of Clive Douglas' pathetic stabs at Jindyworobakism, *Kaditcha*, *Carvolla* or *Wangadilla*—bottler! as Frank Strahan would say.

From the outset, my unease about the whole Opera Australia commissioning project is evident in the early letter I wrote to Roger Covell.¹³

Perhaps I should not have been so suspicious, because the initial response from Stephen Hall had been quite positive, “I certainly like the title of your opera”, “the characters ... sound colourful”, “your general idea ... very theatrical”. He even asked when it might be completed,¹⁴ and wrote to say that he “was looking forward to reading it very much”.¹⁵

“I am really excited about the progress you have made” he wrote in the New Year of 1970.¹⁶

Still, I was uneasy, in German you say “hatte einen Riecher”, when *The Age* reported that Felix Werder had been added to the list of commissioned composers.¹⁷ Was Opera Australia going to perform all the operas in one go? Something unique in music history. Was it going to be, as in the best Australian sporting tradition, a competition? No wonder I was concerned, justifiably. Felix Werder was the reigning *Age* music critic, his librettist Leonard Radic the reigning *Age* theatre critic. Talk about a level playing field, they were socking it to Opera Australia in reviews and editorials in no uncertain terms.¹⁸

By the middle of the year, even Keith Humble had been added to the list of composers to write one-act operas,¹⁹ it was a long way from my three Act *Coonardoo*. I felt duded, but steamed ahead all the same, after all the first of the operas was to be produced next year,²⁰ the light might just still shine on *The Gilt-Edged Kid*.

A rule at the German General Staff Headquarters was “when in doubt, do nothing”, *Stellungskrieg*— mistake! No wonder they lost two world wars. I promptly set out on my own mistake. If only I could just redress at least some of the countless mistakes I have made through my life, they seem like the thousands of black dots in the third section of my *Sextet for Didjeridu and*

Wind Instruments. I felt so insecure that I offered Stephen Hall a “performance” of the half-finished opera. I proposed to sing all the 10 vocal parts myself, Kay Dreyfus was to accompany, playing from the full score.²¹

The “performance” took place on 14 July 1970—mistake! However, all was not lost, there was still some interest, resident producer Bernd Benthak came for dinner, we may have talked about the opera, perhaps even in German.²²

At the beginning of December 1970 the completed score was in Sydney, I followed it in January 1971 to work on the score of the documentary film *RAAF Heritage* at Film Australia. After seven years as a film composer I was very confident indeed, but considerably less confident, even after eleven years, as an opera composer. I went to see Stephen Hall at his apartment in Woolstonecraft, the wheels were beginning to squeak and grind, I could tell.²³

For the next six months my paranoiac unease continued. I drafted an article for *The Australian's* Kenneth Hince²⁴—mistake! The blow fell with Stephen Hall's “We do not wish to perform *The Gilt-Edged Kid* at this stage”. It reminded me of Major du Paty de Clam offering Alfred Dreyfus a pistol in 1894 to shoot himself.²⁵ Now all of these were mistakes—Devil's Island, the show trials—it took the French Dreyfusards twelve years to remedy the injustice.²⁶ It's taken the

Australian friends of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* forty to redress theirs—you hope!

There is a further similarity, namely to find a dummy, victim *Opfer*, like Alfred, Jewish, from German occupied Alsace-Lorraine. George—no clout, unlike *The Age* music and theatre critics, no friends in high places like Peter Sculthorpe. Even Nugget Coombs who initiated the whole project did not stand up for me.

However, like Mathieu Dreyfus, Alfred's brother, I was not slow to respond.

The day following the Stephen Hall “disaster letter” I prepared a three hundred word position paper²⁷ and later that year composed a thousand word statement for public distribution far and wide²⁸—shades of Emile Zola's “J'Accuse”²⁹—which relates “the story so far”, just like the three Norns do in the Vorspiel of *Die Götterdämmerung*.

But foremost I wrote to Jean Battersby, Executive Officer of the Australia Council³⁰ requesting “an inquiry into matters relating to the seven operas commissioned ...”.³¹ From Ken MacKenzie-Forbes I got the precedent-setting “Brush Off!”.³² Undaunted, I tried again, accusing Opera Australia of impropriety;³³ once again I received the “Brush Off!”, this time from Jean Battersby herself.³⁴

Undeterred, once again I responded, at greater length, the word ethics creeps into the correspondence.³⁵ In retrospect I think Kay Dreyfus had a big hand in drafting this letter, I'm not big on ethics. The reply came from Ken MacKenzie-Forbes—"Brush Off!".³⁶ This may explain Jean Battersby's complete lack of surprise at my and Lynne Strahan's uninvited invasion of the Australia Council meeting in Adelaide.³⁷

On 6 March 1972 we trundled up the stairs of No. 1 King William Street, and knocked on the door. Nugget Coombs was there in the chair, and Jean Battersby. She stood up when she saw us and I said, "Could I see you for a moment?" She came outside, leaving the door open. I could see that Nugget Coombs recognised me and that he was furious.

Jean Battersby said, "George, we won't be able to see you now. Can you come back in an hour when we're having a cup of tea?"

We went back in an hour. There were about twenty Council members sitting around. No one got up. Nugget Coombs was looking quite angry. He obviously didn't like the situation, which was not surprising, I suppose, for somebody who had been running the Arts of the country and had taken it upon himself to prove to a Liberal Government that the Arts should have taxpayers' money. That was a big thing: for the first time in the nearly 200-year history of Australia, taxpayers' money was being used for the Arts in a

relatively massive way.

Mildly, Nugget Coombs grilled me. After all, he had tried to get *Garni Sands* on in Canberra, he'd got me the commission for the *Sextet for Didjeridu and Wind Instruments*, and he'd suggested that I write an opera based on *Coonardoo*. I could see now that he didn't want me to convince the Council that I'd been getting a rough deal from the opera company. He certainly didn't want any instruction going out from the Council to Opera Australia as a result of this meeting, saying "Stop playing *Tristan*; tomorrow you are to start rehearsing George's opera."

In the end, Jean Battersby said, "We'll let you know." "Look", I said, "We've come all this way and we've got nothing." Kim Bonython asked a question. I felt he thought I was a joke. But you should always watch the funny ones. They're the ones who are serious underneath. Goethe said, "It's the half-mad who are dangerous, whom you've got to watch, not the idiots."

"We've got nothing," I repeated as I was leaving, and Jean Battersby said "We'll write you a letter."

"Why did we come here?" Lynne Strahan asked as we were going down in the lift. "We've achieved nothing."³⁸

Of course it was all a mistake, like Mathieu Dreyfus planting a fictitious story in the French press of

Alfred's escape from Devil's Island.³⁹ All that did was ensure security on the island was tightened still further, the ex-Captain was now shackled to his bed, in the sweltering heat⁴⁰—at least Lynne Strahan and I were allowed to leave the Adelaide meeting scot free—with tails between our legs. Nugget Coombs reminded us and the Council that we had been paid for our labours. Forty years later Opera Australia still used this justification. What a mind-set, like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* it just won't go away.⁴¹

Opera Australia could commission dozens of Australian composers and not perform any of the works. It would be cheaper than staging one of them and yet fulfill its nominal obligation to support Australian content.

Lynne Strahan subsequently wrote to Nugget Coombs a poetic letter of personal explanation, “composers are not road-workers”.⁴² He did reply ultimately;⁴³ it turned out to be yet another “Brush Off!”.

Not to be undone, Lynne Strahan wrote again a month later,⁴⁴ there was no reply, not even the “Brush Off!”, so like at the battle of Kursk, we brought up overwhelming forces, or so we thought. Lynne Strahan and I wrote together, two weeks later, to Nugget Coombs,⁴⁵ and this time were rewarded by the double-barreled “Brush Off!”, this time by the returning-to-the-fray Jean Battersby.⁴⁶

Lynne Strahan and I went to see Federal parliamentarian Moss Cass, a friend from *The Adventures of Sebastian the Fox* television series days in 1963. He asked for a written report, another version of “the story so far”,⁴⁷ for forwarding to fellow parliamentarians Lionel Murphy and John Wheeldon. The Friends of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* were stirring!

In his book *Australia's Music*, Roger Covell pointed to similarities between Australian sport and culture,⁴⁸ the emphasis on the competitive spirit. Imagine my delight when being made aware how far Nugget Coombs' idea to commission me in 1968 for a full length three act opera, based on his vision of *Coonardoo*, had degenerated into competition.⁴⁹ Talk about a level playing field, the MCG being moved to the Australian Alps, Samson versus Delilah: *The Age's* senior music critic, Felix Werder, and senior theatre critic, Leonard Radic, versus self-employed composer George Dreyfus and stay-at-home mother of three, poet Lynne Strahan.

Could this be the Aussie Rules version of opera? Much read Sydney cultural gossip columnist Musetta⁵⁰ had revealed public dismay that composer Peter Sculthorpe had renegotiated his opera commission. His was now to be a two-act opera with a guarantee of performance.⁵¹ “How's that?”, as one calls out in cricket, for a level playing field, ahead on points, social justice?

There is no doubt that by mid-1972, I had started to flail around wildly, obsessively, prompted by David Ahern's report⁵² that my opera had been rejected. I protested to the Company.⁵³ "No, no", replied Stephen Hall, "We are just not going to play it".⁵⁴ The ubiquitous "Brush Off!".

I was well on the way to self-destruction à la Brunhilde, Cho-Cho-San—I do like Wagner and Puccini—but my opera protagonists didn't think much of me, nor did I think much of them, obviously, shades of Kurt Weill's attitude towards Nazi Germany in 1933.⁵⁵

I next targetted Charles Berg, financial colleague of my brother Richard Dreyfus and Board member of Opera Australia. Would he bring up for discussion the rejection of my commissioned opera? My reputation was seriously damaged.⁵⁶ I wrote to Board member Zelman Cowen asking for his support.⁵⁷ Lynne Strahan wrote to Moss Cass again⁵⁸—I particularly liked her line that I was "machinating like a top graduate from ASIO". Fellow composer and stalwart champion Eric Gross wrote to Claude Alcorso on our behalf.⁵⁹ The return blow—opera as ping-pong, how more sporting can you get?—came from Stephen Hall: "the Company does not intend to give reasons for its decision not to perform your opera".⁶⁰ The "Brush Off!" Aha!, the first stirrings of the empty envelope syndrome.⁶¹ Eric Gross persevered with Federal parliamentarians Peter Howson⁶² and Douglas McClelland,⁶³ and from the Australia Council I kept on getting the "Brush Offs!".⁶⁴

It was at this time that I was conducting my opera *Garni Sands* at the University of New South Wales in Sydney—you could not help but notice the event, there were press interviews and reviews, one of the singers was even a member of Opera Australia and to top it all off, the production was assisted by the Australia Council. Yet not one of their Board or staff members came to any of the five performances to judge for themselves the talents of the composer on whom they were shovelling dirt consistently. They deserve to be remembered, even forty years later, even posthumously, as many of them are quite dead by now.

But perhaps they were overseas at the time, attending high-minded, but devoid of reality, conferences, preparing statements like Nugget Coombs' press interview⁶⁵ or his testament for Margaret Sutherland to support the performance of her opera at the National Gallery of Victoria?⁶⁶ What must Coombs have been thinking of, did he give the dilemma of my opera even a single thought, or did the event's organiser James Murdoch just write it for him? One would have thought that Nugget Coombs at least would have come to judge *Garni Sands* for himself, see and hear if his own composer, who had brought credit to his very own idea, the Australian National University Creative Arts Fellowship, who had carried off with aplomb his dream of blending Aboriginal and white man's culture in my *Sextet for Didjeridu and Wind Instruments*⁶⁷, knew what he was doing operatically speaking. But no, from the Australia Council more of the "Brush Off".⁶⁸

In the final *coup de grâce*, my champion, Zelman Cowen, was thoroughly trounced when he moved at Board level that George Dreyfus should be given a reason for the rejection of his commissioned opera.⁶⁹ Minutes recorded that “acting on legal advice”, the Board resolved not to enter into any further correspondence on the matter.⁷⁰ Zelman Cowen was the only one who dissented. Good to know that decisions on Australian culture were being made by hiding behind faceless lawyers and empty files.⁷¹ Did he recognise the similarities with the events of eighty years before?

Zelman had asked Stephen Hall to bring the files and correspondence to the Board meeting, but Hall came empty-handed. Just as at Alfred Dreyfus’ court martial, December 19 to December 22, 1894, the file of incriminating evidence was actually empty,⁷² instead Major Hubert-Joseph Henry exclaimed “There are secrets in an officer’s head that even his kepi must not know”.⁷³

Perhaps with his love for the law and history Zelman Cowen might have persevered, after all Alfred Dreyfus was ultimately proven innocent, even if years on Devil’s Island, further court martials and revisions intervened.

I thanked Zelman Cowen,⁷⁴ but persisted with my own attempts to bring the *Gilt-Edged Kid* back from Devil’s Island. I was particularly irked by Hall’s comment that the others were “ahead on points”⁷⁵ and Edward Downes’ “the best will be performed”.⁷⁶ After all, there

I was, a full-time composer, living off my wits—films, television, symphonies and chamber music, not my mother Hilde’s *Wiedergutmachungsgelder* nor Kay Dreyfus’ university salary—as against the other two composers who had handed in their operas, *Age* Music Critic/Adult Education lecturer Felix Werder and piano and composition lecturer Larry Sitsky. It just didn’t seem right, or logical, to anyone who cared to listen.

After all of this, a normal person would have walked away, would have wanted to “move forward” as Julia Gillard is fond of saying, would have said “fuck the lot of them” as my third book⁷⁷ was going to be titled, but I lacked the courage, even if in its pages you can find my “Ballad of the Opera Stoppers”, very Brechtian indeed.

A fresh tack was required, to stop *The Gilt-Edged Kid* being damned into oblivion. I thought I’d try letters to the editor.

Philip Kurt obliged on my behalf,⁷⁸ as did Peter Mayfield,⁷⁹ George Tibbits⁸⁰ and Kay Dreyfus, stalwart supporter of the opera since bar one.⁸¹ I fired off two myself,⁸² all generated in response to its music critic Ken Hince’s unfortunate article⁸³—I had been to see him. Mistake!

Eric Gross persevered relentlessly with a further letter to Peter Howson⁸⁴ and then to Prime Minister Gough

Whitlam himself.⁸⁵

Cliff Pugh enticed Nugget Coombs to a meeting of the Victorian Australian Labor Party Arts and Culture Policy Committee at Pugh's house in North Melbourne, where I handed Nugget Coombs the Committee's resolution asking the Federal Government to withhold immediately any further subsidy to Opera Australia until the company met its obligations to Australian composers. Nugget Coombs glanced at it, looking mighty thunderous. I shall never forget his contorted face, perhaps he thought "is this what I deserve from the boy to whom I gave his big chance in Canberra in 1967, saving him from penury?" But then to this day I think he should have given a chance to *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, whose life he started in Canberra in 1968 and whom he watched go under in a morass of operatic subterfuge, whether it be the Dreyfus affair or the *Ring Cycle*, there is no such thing as half-justice.

Nugget Coombs, collecting his composure, muttered something about a seminar in Sydney to discuss Australian operas, just as he had mumbled something like "Opera Australia will perform *Coonardoo*" three years previously. George, beware of well-meaning good-doers. I immediately wrote to Claude Alcorso, offering to take part; he immediately replied to say it had been postponed.⁸⁶ What a surprise! Just like Amonasro's dramatic entry in Act Three of *Aida*. Librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni expected audiences to be surprised, but as they had all seen the opera many

times before...

So the Friends of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* resolved to hold their own seminar, except they called it a symposium, "Opera and The Australian Composer".

Intending not to do things by halves the Friends of the *The Gilt-Edged Kid* had opened a Second Front forming the Australian Opera Reform Group in February 1973. But unlike the petition to rescue the Percy Grainger Museum in Royal Parade from the rampages of Melbourne University,⁸⁷ the Reform Group could not offer its Chairman Robin Grove world-wide support for its endeavours. Instead Phillip Adams came to entertain the assembled crowd of well-wishers.⁸⁸ The press reported on the Group's ideals a number of times⁸⁹ and Noel McLachlan contributed mightily in support of the cause with copious press articles Australia-wide.⁹⁰

As to the Friends' second effort, the Symposium "Opera and the Australian Composer",⁹¹ everybody who was anybody took part, with fabulous papers and panel discussions, not to be missed, good newspaper coverage and excellent resolutions. Edward Downes, sent down especially from Opera Australia headquarters in Sydney, sat skulking at the back of the Pram Factory on the Saturday, "What the hell am I doing in Australia in the first place, among all these colonials?", but then participated spiritedly in Sunday's free-for-all discussion. I was congratulated by all for

not saying a single word, making the tea and coffee instead.

It all lead to nothing as far as *The Gilt-Edged Kid* was concerned, despite the voluminous letters and reports in the Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney press—well, not quite, there were coups and counter coups at the Opera’s Head Office. Stephen Hall, out!—never to be heard of again—unlike *The Gilt-Edged Kid* and its composer. Claude Alcorso, out!—back to Tasmania with a good view of Antarctica—and in with John Winther and Charles Berg, not that they were of much use to the cause of social justice for my opera. Nor did any of them last that long anyway, shades of the *Führerhauptquartier* after the failure of the 20th July plot in 1944,⁹² but obviously not dramatic enough for an opera scenario nor a Hollywood feature film.⁹³

However, Gough Whitlam’s Principal Private Secretary Peter Wilenski did give the saga very serious attention.⁹⁴ His contribution is another “the story so far” summary, like Gurnemanz’s monologue in Act One of *Parsifal*,⁹⁵ ending with “Opera Australia has not stated that it has rejected the work in George Dreyfus, bur rather that it has selected the two most suitable of the commissions.”

Whatever happened to “ahead on points” or “the best will be performed”, opera as a game with moveable goal posts, how unsporting can you get? And what’s so “unsuitable” about *The Gilt-Edged Kid*? Does it call for

two sailing ships on stage simultaneously, like Richard Wagner in his *Flying Dutchman*? Does the vocal writing make extreme demands on the singers, like Aribert Reimann in his *Lear*? Does it call for unusual instrumentation in the pit like four Wagner tubas in the *Ring Cycle*, which the Company always dreams about, or harmonium, banjo, bass guitar, bandoneon, zither, like Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny*, which was actually part of the Company's 1976 season?

No, a normal Mozart/Beethoven orchestration is stipulated in the score. Nor does Lynne Strahan ask any of her characters to get undressed on stage, unlike the opera commissioned from Peter Sculthorpe under the same project. "Nude Opera" screamed the Melbourne *Sun* and *The Australian*⁹⁶ and *The Sun* even referred to "brutal Aboriginal rites".⁹⁷ How's that for suitability? Nugget Coombs must have loved this disclosure as he opened his morning paper, probably choked over his Weeties.⁹⁸

I reckon that no-one ever looked at *The Gilt-Edged Kid* score itself, none of the Letters-to-the-Editor writers, no-one at the Australia Council, and I doubt if anyone at Opera Australia really ever did. No George, get it into your thick head, in the years after you had submitted your opera, suitability was no longer the point. Rather, the little tradesman, the composer sitting below the salt-cellar, the one overtly living without visible means of support, should accept the decision of authority, however mistaken it may be. "Basta", as my

authoritarian father Alfred would say, with his typical German upbringing, banging the table with his fist.

Well, nuts to all of you, I say. I have not lived in Australia for all these years for nothing, it's rubbed off, anticipating the title of my third book. Successive Opera Australia staffers made a mistake. It should be admitted, just like American Secretary of State Robert McNamara's admission about the futility of the Vietnam War, he was not too proud, and the Russian Parliament's admission that the NKVD had perpetuated the Katyn massacre.⁹⁹

In fact, revision is all the rage now, as it was with Alfred Dreyfus' first retrial at Rennes in 1898–9,¹⁰⁰ or with the stolen generations court case in 1998–2002, Mark Dreyfus acted on behalf of the aborigines,¹⁰¹ Opera Australia should not be too proud to redress its woeful decision.

I was not prepared to pay for this mistake, sleight of hand, for the non-performance of my opera. I was not going to give up, but then neither were Opera Australia and the Australia Council, Dreyfusards versus anti-Dreyfusards. George, you are a pain in the arse, there are higher principles at stake here, the honour of the French Army, the anticipated Revenge War against Germany, separation of Church and State a constant thread throughout the whole Dreyfus affair. No, George, we cannot let you win!¹⁰²

Talking about winning and loosing, young bloods Opera Board member Brian Donovan and Australia Council member Kim Williams joined the contest, convinced of the injustice done to *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, but unlike the opera's main protagonist, who finished up with an arrow in his chest, they could leave the battlefield, undamaged and alive.

The turmoil in the Melbourne Branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music did not help the cause of *The Gilt-Edged Kid* one bit. My friends and supporters Frank Pam and Gregory Young accused Australia Council staff member James Murdoch of complicity in financial improprieties with Council funds by the Society's new Committee.¹⁰³ I had been deposed as President at the stormy AGM at Tamani's Restaurant in South Yarra, while the Council found no evidence of James Murdoch's complicity.

Frank Pam and Gregory Young would not accept the "Brush Off". They wrote to the Federal Attorney-General Senator Lionel Murphy, the complaint went back to the Australia Council, who, having by now gained considerable experience with *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, gave them the "Brush Off".¹⁰⁴

Understandably James Murdoch turned out not to be one of the Friends of *The Gilt-Edged Kid*. Already in 1972 Murdoch had referred to its composer as a buffoon with nihilistic attitudes,¹⁰⁵ no wonder I lampooned the entry in his picture book with a satiric

version of the text in my song “Deep Throat”.¹⁰⁶

In spite of the Reform Group, in spite of the symposium, by 1974 *The Gilt-Edged Kid* had got nowhere in his quest for justice. Some direct action was called for, despite memories of the futile drive to Adelaide and back in March 1972. “Be careful,” said both George Tibbits and Kay Dreyfus, showing considerable concern for my physical welfare. I flew myself to Sydney, invaded John Winther’s office, not unlike renowned German playwright Rolf Hochhuth, author of the landmark play *Der Stellvertreter*, who staged a protest invasion of the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm,¹⁰⁷ Bertholt Brecht’s own theatre after the War, one of my favourites in Berlin.

I demanded, “tell me when you are going to play my opera, you will have to get the police to arrest me”, not unlike celebrity gardener Peter Cundall getting arrested at Tasmania’s Parliament House in Hobart.¹⁰⁸ Originality is obviously not one of my characteristics.

All this being much milder than interrupting an Opera Australia performance, rushing down the aisle with a loud hailer screaming “Justice for my Opera” or “Bring *The Gilt-Edged Kid* back from Devil’s Island”.

Completely unfazed, John Winther responded, “You know George, this piece of yours that I hear on the radio all the time, I think it’s called ‘Rush’, *skynde sig* in Danish. It’s very attractive you know”.¹⁰⁹

I slunk out of his office, deflated, tail between my legs, took the ferry to Manly and back to shake off my nervous tension, it was not the greatest day in my life. There was no response to my demand, of course, anyhow John Winther is considerably bigger than me, likes his food, could have thrown me out without a problem, whereas I diet.

The year passed by with considerable correspondence protesting the fate of my opera; there were the perpetual “Brush Offs!” from the other side.¹¹⁰

I was told of the formation of a panel to assess my opera, secret of course, like the faceless men of the Australian Labor Party Federal Executive that made Gough Whitlam wait outside the room during their policy-making deliberation. Secret except for its member Georg Tintner, who declared on behalf of my opera and never conducted for the Company again, and James Murdoch, representing the Australia Council, who reminded the panel that Opera Australia had no legal obligation to perform it at all. Murdoch was suitably rewarded by being moved sideways to head the Australian Music Centre, which he promptly sent into receivership.

It took John Winther six months to mail me 400 words of pseudo music-historical twaddle to justify his “I know this decision will disappoint you greatly...”¹¹¹ Nor was there any mention of the social justice issues: “the best will be performed”, the Felix Werder/Larry

Sitsky operas being “ahead on points”, the renegotiation of the Peter Sculthorpe contract.

And what’s the idea that my opera “had to ensure a long life time”? What “long life time” did Werder’s *Affair*, Sitsky’s *Lenz* or Sculthorpe’s *Rites of Passage* have to prove before their productions took place? None. In fact they have all bitten the dust, so why use this reason for disposing of *The Gilt-Edged Kid*?

And did these operas, and the other stage works of their composers, ever receive overseas production, seen to be of such significance by the local hierarchy? Unlike *The Gilt-Edge Kid*’s composer, who did attract considerable attention in Germany, some good some bad, with his operas *Rathenau*,¹¹² premiered at the Staatstheater Kassel in 1993, and *Die Marx Sisters*,¹¹³ premiered at the Stadttheater Bielefeld in 1996:

Rathenau

Frankfurter Rundschau
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin
Berliner Zeitung
Freitag, Berlin
The Sydney Morning Herald
The Age, Melbourne
Südkurier Konstanz
Hessische Allgemeine
Wiesbadener Kurrier

Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich
Lotte Thaler
Bernd Feuchtnr
Frieder Reininghaus
Albrecht Dümmling
Roger Covell
Clive O’Connell
Pedro Obiera
Bernd Müllmann
Jürgen Weishaupt

Die Zeit
Die Welt
Der Spiegel
Hamburger Abendblatt
Süddeutsche Zeitung
Neue Ruhr Zeitung
Wuppertaler Rundschau
Weser Kurier
Neue Westfälischer Zeitung
Neue Zeit, Berlin
Hannoversche Allgemeine
Neue Musikzeitung
Opera Australia
Rhein Main Presse
Westfälischer Anzeiger
General Anzeiger, Bonn
Osnabrücker Zeitung
Opera Magazine, London
Opernwelt
Westdeutsche Zeitung
Das Orchester
Trierischer Volksfreund
Rheinischer Merkur
Luxemburger Wort
Mitteilungsheft Nr. 4 der
 Walther Rathenau Gesellschaft
Deutschland Sender-Kultur
Deutsche Welle
Sender Freies Berlin

Eckhard Roelke
 Kläre Warnecke
 Klaus Umbach
 Carl-Heinz Mann
 Wolf von Lewinski
 Pedro Obiera
 Peter Klaus
 Michael Struck-Schloen
 Michael Beughold
 Hans Berndt
 Rainer Wagner
 Wolfgang Kühnen
 Elke Neidhardt
 Wolf von Lewinski
 Pedro Obiera
 Frieder Reininghaus
 Hans Berndt
 Roger Covell
 Manuel Brug
 George Scurla
 Bernd Müllmann
 Pedro Obiera
 Frieder Reininghaus
 Sonya Luyken

 Götz Küster
 Ingo Dorf Müller
 Gudrun Stegen
 Albrecht Dümpling

Die Marx Sisters

Süddeutsche Zeitung

Stefan Keim

Frankfurter Rundschau
NDR Musikforum
Salzburger Nachrichten
Nürnberger Nachrichten

Opern Welt
Westfälischer Anzeiger
WDR III Kulturmagazin
General Anzeiger, Bonn
Die Welt
Deutsche Welle
Westdeutsche Allgemeine
Hessische Niedersächsische Allgemeine

Theater Rundschau
Rhein Main Presse
Wuppertaler Rundschau
Westdeutsche Zeitung
NDR III Kulturjournal
Rote Zone
Trierischer Volksfreund
Mindener Tageblatt
Die Glocke
Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung

Das Orchester
Westfalen-Blatt
Tips Bielefeld
Neue Westfälische
Stadtblatt Bielefeld
Bielefelder Universitäts Zeitung
Handelsblatt
Die Deutsche Bühne

Ulrich Schreiber
Götz Bolten
Matthias Norquet
Werner Schulze-
Reimpell
Wolf von Lewinski
Helmut Fortmann
Wolfgang Korruhn
Christoph Zimmermann
Reinhard Beuth
Johannes Spittler
Michael Stenger
Werner Schulze-
Reimpell
Christoph Zimmermann
Wolf von Lewinski
Peter Klaus
Olaf Weissenborn
Ulrich Schreiber
Christian Scheuss
Pedro Obiera
Udo Stephan Köhne
Franz Hagendorf
Werner Schulze-
Reimpell
Wolf von Lewinski
Jürgen Schmidt
Stefanie Gomoll
Wolfgang Drees
Friederike Töppler
Namen unbekannt
Ulrich Schreiber
Michael Struck-Schloen

Hamburger Abendblatt
Der Spiegel
Sender Freies Berlin
Berliner Zeitung
Der Tagesspiegel
Westfälische Nachrichten
Ruhr Nachrichten
Neue Ruhr Zeitung
Deutschland Radio
Giessener Allgemeine
Das Opernglas
Rheinische Merkur
Rheinische Post
Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung
Welt am Sonntag
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
AJR Information

Carl-Heinz Mann
 Klaus Umbach
 Irene Tüngler
 Frieder Reininghaus
 Albrecht Dümmling
 Marlis Fichtner
 Marieluise Jeitschko
 Pedro Obiera
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 Dieter Lechner
 Alfred Brüggemann
 Frieder Reininghaus
 Albrecht Dümmling
 Pedro Obiera
 Marielouise Jeitschko
 Frieder Reininghaus
 Carl Flesch

In fact, the discrimination against *The Gilt-Edged Kid* becomes all the more blatant when one takes “on board”—very operative when one considers that there are a fleet of ships in opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Ariadne*, George Antheil’s *Transatlantic*, John Adams’ *The Death of Klinghoffer*—Opera Australia’s publicly expressed “disappointment in the quality of all the works composed through the commissioning scheme”.¹¹⁴

Who could tell what demands on the skills of orchestra and singers, a reason for rejection given by John Winther in his twaddle letter, were ever evident in the score of *Rites of Passage*? The press had every reason to

be perplexed, for had anybody ever sighted the score of Peter Sculthorpe's opera?¹¹⁵

I screamed blue murder, sent a letter of refutation to Chairman Charles Berg,¹¹⁶ got the usual "Brush Off!".¹¹⁷ The Australia Council and Opera Australia must by now have had pre-typed "Brush Off!" letters addressed to George Dreyfus.

An innocent bystander¹¹⁸ could not but marvel at that one line response: "The Board resolved that your letter be received and its contents noted".¹¹⁹ Did not one single Board member even speak up and question "hey, wait a moment, is this not the issue that our Board member Zelman Cowen brought in front of our Board two years ago? If it's still going, perhaps there is something more to it, perhaps the issue is more than just a musical one, where we would have to defer to our music staff, but the composer is looking for social justice, it's a moral issue, and this we could discuss—after all, we are upright representatives of the Australian community, and our standing in these matters is as high as any of the music staff, why would we be appointed otherwise?" But all I got was the perfunctory "Brush Off!", in one line, under the table. No wonder that Chairman Charles Berg and his Board were subsequently severely criticised for disregarding the public interest.¹²⁰

f stands not only for loud but also foreboding. Had not the Chairman Charles Berg and the Board, like

Wotan, brought it upon themselves



for their malevolent treatment of *The Gilt-Edged Kid*?

For there was turmoil at headquarters. “Opera head may be facing sack”, trumpeted *The Age*.¹²¹ “Curtain rising on operatic takeover fight”, trumpeted *The Australian*.¹²²

Heads were rolling, just not mine. I changed direction, leaving *The Gilt-Edged Kid* behind me—but not forgotten. I went to New York City to conduct *Garni Sands*, not at the Met, not at City Opera, but with the Bel Canto Opera Company, corner Madison Avenue and 31st Street. “Well done” wrote *The New York Times*,¹²³ “Keine Australische Bohème”, wrote Wolfgang Breuer in the German-language *Aufbau*.¹²⁴

The Gilt-Edged Kid did not enjoy being in limbo, it’s not his nor his composer’s style. Much encouraged by my New York experiences and completely unmoved by “the unsuitability for musical setting” of Lynne Strahan’s libretto¹²⁵—on the contrary, I revel in its quirky, acid one-liners, just as Julia Gillard revels in sending up Tony Abbott for his three-word slogans—I set to, keeping the ten vocal lines and text unchanged, but arranging the orchestral score for a similar

complement to Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.

I thought my opera would go well as a double bill with the Stravinsky, there are after all successful precedents in the opera world, such as Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Florentinische Tragödie* coupled with his *Der Zwerg*. There was great enthusiasm among the singers and instrumentalists of my specially formed GEKKO company. No-one got paid, no-one ever cancelled, we rehearsed for half a year, Elke Neidhardt directed, ABC producer Brian Adams came and filmed. I recall performances at Montsalvat, Ballarat's Begonia Festival, The National Gallery of Victoria, The Sydney Conservatorium, but not one of the opera stoppers or their minions ever came to judge for themselves, in "real time" as one would say today, nor made use of the pre-typed Dreyfus "Brush Off!" letters, of which there were surely many lying around in their offices. What a waste, or saving on postage, but then backstage and Boardroom squabbles¹²⁶ could have made the licking of poisoned postage stamps fatal.¹²⁷

John Winther's short-tenured successor Peter Hemmings had other things than *The Gilt-Edged Kid* on his mind, abrupt dismissal, virtual sacking¹²⁸ for being "hell bent" on performing the *Ring Cycle*,¹²⁹



is still at work. Perhaps he could have saved his skin by being hell bent on performing *The Gilt Edged Kid*, the full score and libretto are in the Company's library, the opera is ready to go, it calls for a boyish Siegfried-like tenor for the Kid, a manly Wotan-like baritone for the Administrator, and has a composer prone to touches of self-immolation like Brunhilde. And it is much cheaper to put on, a smaller orchestra—four Wagner tubas not required, minimal sets, no Magic Fires that could burn down the opera house, and cheap to produce, it is ideal for an opera company engaged in endless rows,¹³⁰ the Kid would be its *Erlöser*.¹³¹

Unusually extensive turmoil induced the Australia Council to begin an opera inquiry.¹³² I rushed to take part, forgetting, prize amnesiac that I am and ever hopeful to boot, that all my own previous attempts to get an inquiry had failed, been ignored, a recipient of the “Brush Off”.

I appeared before the committee,¹³³ was too obsessive, single-minded, it's not what they were looking for. In its final report there is reference to *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, but no reasons are given as to why this commissioned opera had not been performed, one straight in the kisser for Zelman Cowen.

Full marks to Opera Australia, we have come full circle, it escaped its responsibility yet again, like Cesare Angelotti escaped from Castel Sant' Angelo, except he

was shot in the end, whereas the opera stoppers got off scot free, like most of the Hadamar perpetrators.

There are more changes at the top, Kenneth Tribe appears as Management Co-ordinator for Opera Australia and Stuart Challender joins the music staff. New parameters are set, the goal posts have moved again, very sporting: *The Gilt-Edged Kid* was found unlikely to have “either the artistic success or public acceptance to justify a major production by this company”.¹³⁴ Did the Felix Werder, Larry Sitsky or Peter Sculthorpe operas ever need to prove that? Nor did I ever ask for a “major production”, and just in case we had forgotten Lynne Strahan’s libretto is yet once again declared “unsuitable for musical setting”.

Perhaps lawyer Kenneth Tribe and conductor Stuart Challender, before letting forth with their “suitability” claptrap,¹³⁵ would have been better to inform themselves about the “suitability” of Stefan Zweig’s libretto for *Die Schweigsame Frau*¹³⁶ or better still, the “suitability” of Peter Ruzicka’s libretto for his opera *Hölderlin* at the Deutsche Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin, venue of five George Dreyfus performances since 2007,¹³⁷ except that both were dead by then, well and truly beyond being informed.

I tried once more—low in spirit by now, well done Opera Australia, Australia Council, that’s how to deal with a recalcitrant composer—with yet another new Opera Australia Manager, Patrick Veitch, but nothing

much came of it.¹³⁸ He was not going to be pressured, he didn't even bother to use one of the pre-typed George Dreyfus "Brush Off!" letters, there must still be boxes full somewhere in their offices.

By mid-1981 I had given up, temporarily anyway. It was no longer about my opera, it was me or them. Over the ten years a tradition, inherited by successive management, had grown up that "we are not going to let Dreyfus win, it sets an unhealthy precedent". This can be deduced from Australia Council General Manager John Cameron's well meaning but inopportune letter to me,¹³⁹ the *coup de grâce*, the stripping of Alfred Dreyfus' epaulets and breaking of the sword, held fast in that striking print of the degradation:¹⁴⁰ "À mort" one can hear the held-back crowd scream outside the École Militaire.¹⁴¹

Really unfortunate is the final comment "let *The Gilt-Edged Kid* sleep in peace" which awakens memories of Bishop of Münster Clemens August Graf von Galen's protest about the nefarious activities at Hadamar in 1941.¹⁴² Not for nothing had I played my one man show *Surviving*, including the Ballad that nails the opera stoppers,¹⁴³ at the Institution there in the late 1990s to an audience of three somewhat perplexed Germans. No, I shall never forgive them, unlike the end of *Garni Sands*.¹⁴⁴

But it's not over yet!¹⁴⁵

Alexander von Zemlinsky waited seventy five years for the *Uraufführung* of *Die Traumgötte*, he was dead by then; Ottorino Respighi waited ninety years for the *Uraufführung* of *Marie Victoire*, he was dead by then; Emil Nikolaus von Reznicek waited eight decades for the *Uraufführung* of *Benzin*, he was certainly dead by then. The American rock group System of a Down sing about the Armenian Genocide ninety five years after the event. I can wait out the operacide which Opera Australia is perpetrating against *The Gilt-Edged Kid*; I'm not dead, yet!

Opera Australia talks about “rebirth and renewal process”,¹⁴⁶ “harmony and stability”.¹⁴⁷ Sorry, I don't quite fit into “the developing of ‘a family’ of young composers”¹⁴⁸ but was one of them when this sorry episode of Australian cultural bastardry started in 1968, and, guess what, the *Ring Cycle*, Peter Hemmings' undoing, raises its head again. And so, instead of



we might hear the Rainbow,



symbol of eternal hope and reconciliation, and with our

heart and soul, like *Elektra*,¹⁴⁹ exclaim “*The Gilt-Edged Kid* lives”, just as the whole congregation sings at the end of my *Australian Folk Mass*, in full voice,



Notes

The complete files of correspondence and newspaper articles relating to Opera Australia and *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, are held at the State Library of Victoria and the National Library of Australia.

The scores of all George Dreyfus's operas are held at Matheson Library, Monash University; Australian National Library; State Library of Victoria, Australian Music Centre, Sydney and the Musikarchiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

¹ Opera in one act (1970). Libretto by Lynne Strahan, music by George Dreyfus. Full score, 197 pages.

² For the sake of consistency, the name "Opera Australia" is used throughout.

³ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 19 August 1971.

⁴ Thérèse Radic, "George Dreyfus", in Warren Bebbington ed., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵ Hoffman's portrait of the author is reproduced on page 24 of *The Last Frivolous Book* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984).

⁶ Walter Panofsky, *Richard Strauss: Partitur eines Lebens* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1965), p. 153.

⁷ Opera in two acts (1965–66). Libretto by Frank Kellaway, music by George Dreyfus. Vocal Score, 226 pages.

⁸ *The Age*, 30 June 1965; "National Review", *The Age*, 26 July 1971.

⁹ See "Jenny, Make It Happen". In George Dreyfus, *Don't Ever Let Them Get You* (Melbourne: Black Pepper, 2009), pp. 63ff.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Klaus Volker, *Brecht, A Biography* (London: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 328.

¹² Papers relating to the author's dismissal are to be found in the files of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Australian National Archives.

¹³ George Dreyfus to Roger Covell, 10 February 1969.

¹⁴ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 29 September 1969.

¹⁵ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 13 October 1969.

¹⁶ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 9 April 1970.

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- ¹⁷ *The Age*, 19 September 1969.
- ¹⁸ *The Age*, 21 August 1970; *The Age*, 5 September 1970; *The Age*, 10 April 1971; *The Age*, 30 August 1971; *The Age*, 4 September 1971; *The Age*, 13 November 1971; *The Age*, 26 February 1972; *The Age*, 18 March 1972; *The Age*, 6 May 1972; *The Age*, 16 December 1972; *The Age*, 12 May 1973.
- ¹⁹ *The Bulletin*, 18 July 1970.
- ²⁰ *The Australian*, 7 August 1971.
- ²¹ George Dreyfus to Stephen Hall, 31 May 1970.
- ²² Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 17 September 1970.
- ²³ Report of meeting, 5 January 1971.
- ²⁴ Draft for Kenneth Hince, early August 1971.
- ²⁵ Michael Burns, *Dreyfus, A Family Affair 1789–1945* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1992), p. 122.
- ²⁶ Wilhelm Herzog, *Der Kampf einer Republik: Die Affäre Dreyfus* (Zürich: Europa-Verlag, 1932), p. 960.
- ²⁷ Position paper, 20 August 1971.
- ²⁸ Statement, late 1971.
- ²⁹ George R. Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair: A Chronological History* (Houndmills, Basingstok, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 153.
- ³⁰ For the sake of consistency the Council is referred to as “Australia Council” throughout this text.
- ³¹ George Dreyfus to Jean Battersby, 29 November 1971.
- ³² Ken Mackenzie-Forbes to George Dreyfus, 8 December 1971.
- ³³ George Dreyfus to Jean Battersby, 12 December 1971.
- ³⁴ Jean Battersby to George Dreyfus, 31 December 1971.
- ³⁵ George Dreyfus to Jean Battersby, 10 January 1972.
- ³⁶ Ken Mackenzie-Forbes to George Dreyfus, 14 January 1972.
- ³⁷ Pamphlet for distribution to Australia Council members, 6 March 1972.
- ³⁸ For Lynne Strahan’s eloquent *zeitentsprechend* version of “the story so far”, see her “The Long and Winding Road”, in *Being George and liking it! Reflections on the life and work of George Dreyfus on his 70th birthday* (Richmond: Allans Publishing, 1998), pp. 57–68.
- ³⁹ Guy Chapman, *The Dreyfus Trials* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1972), p. 76.
- ⁴⁰ Ruth Harris, *The Man on Devil’s Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 2. See also Alfred Dreyfus, *Briefe aus der Gefangenschaft* (Berlin: Verlag Siegfried Cronbach, 1899).

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- ⁴¹ Adrian Collette to George Dreyfus, 3 August 2009.
- ⁴² Lynne Strahan to H.C. Coombs, 7 March 1972.
- ⁴³ H.C. Coombs to Lynne Strahan, 17 March 1972.
- ⁴⁴ Lynne Strahan to H.C. Coombs, 28 April 1972.
- ⁴⁵ Lynne Strahan and George Dreyfus to H.C. Coombs, 10 May 1972.
- ⁴⁶ Jean Battersby to George Dreyfus, 19 May 1972.
- ⁴⁷ Report to Moss Cass, 24 June 1972.
- ⁴⁸ Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), pp. 244–5.
- ⁴⁹ *The Bulletin*, 18 July 1970; *The Australian*, 7 August 1971.
- ⁵⁰ Alias Maria Prerauer.
- ⁵¹ *The Sunday Australian*, 28 March 1971.
- ⁵² *The Bulletin*, 24 June 1972.
- ⁵³ George Dreyfus to Stephen Hall, 21 June 1972.
- ⁵⁴ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 23 June 1972.
- ⁵⁵ *Der Protagonist*, opera by Kurt Weill; Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1979), p. 40.
- ⁵⁶ George Dreyfus to Charles Berg, 5 July 1972.
- ⁵⁷ George Dreyfus to Zelman Cowen, 5 July 1972.
- ⁵⁸ Lynne Strahan to Moss Cass, 6 July 1972.
- ⁵⁹ Eric Gross to Claude Alcorso, 7 July 1972.
- ⁶⁰ Stephen Hall to George Dreyfus, 21 July 1972.
- ⁶¹ Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair*, p. 45.
- ⁶² Eric Gross to Peter Howson, 24 August 1972.
- ⁶³ Eric Gross to Douglas McClelland, 24 August 1972.
- ⁶⁴ Ken Farnham to George Dreyfus, 28 July 1972.
- ⁶⁵ *The Herald*, 17 November 1971.
- ⁶⁶ Extract from program, November 1972. Coombs said, “Today our opera companies are becoming increasingly aware of the need for Australian works. It is widely recognized in music that the future vitality of the performing arts depends in part on this evidence of relevance to our own life and environment.”
- ⁶⁷ “Jenny, Make It Happen”, p. 76.
- ⁶⁸ Ken Farnham to George Dreyfus, 30 August 1972.
- ⁶⁹ Zelman Cowen to George Dreyfus, 8 November 1972.
- ⁷⁰ Document entitled “Summary of points”, 13 December 1972.
- ⁷¹ Zelman Cowen to Claude Alcorso, 9 November 1972.
- ⁷² Guy Chapman, *The Dreyfus Case: A Reassessment* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), p. 89.

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- ⁷³ Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair*, p. 45.
- ⁷⁴ George Dreyfus to Zelman Cowen, 6 December 1972.
- ⁷⁵ Statement made by Stephen Hall to the Australia Council in October 1971. See report prepared for Mr Moss Cass, MHR, 24 June 1972.
- ⁷⁶ *The Australian*, 7 August 1971.
- ⁷⁷ *Don't Ever Let Them Get You*.
- ⁷⁸ Philip Kurt to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 1972.
- ⁷⁹ Peter Mayfield to *The Australian*, 15 December 1972.
- ⁸⁰ George Tibbits to *The Australian*, 15 January 1973.
- ⁸¹ Kay Dreyfus to *The Australian*, 13 January 1973; Kay Dreyfus to *National Times*, 18 April 1973.
- ⁸² George Dreyfus to *The Australian*, 13 January 1973; George Dreyfus to *The Age*, 15 April 1973.
- ⁸³ *The Australian*, 13 January 1973.
- ⁸⁴ Eric Gross to Peter Howson, 20 November 1972.
- ⁸⁵ Eric Gross to Gough Whitlam, 30 January 1973.
- ⁸⁶ Claude Alcorso to George Dreyfus, 25 January 1973.
- ⁸⁷ Relevant material held in the George Dreyfus collection, State Library of Victoria.
- ⁸⁸ Advertisement, *The Age*, 7 April 1973.
- ⁸⁹ *The Australian*, 10 February 1973; *The Australian*, 22 February 1973; *The Herald*, 11 April 1973; *The Herald*, 11 April 1973.
- ⁹⁰ *The Sun*, 17 April 1973; *The Herald*, 17 April 1973; *The Canberra Times*, 18 April 1973; *The Australian*, 21 April 1973; *Nation Review* 18–24 May 1973; *The Age*, 19 May 1973; *Nation Review*, 26 October–1 November 1973.
- ⁹¹ Kay Dreyfus ed., *Report of Symposium 'Opera and the Australian Composer', Pram Factory, Carlton, 24 and 25 February 1973* (Melbourne: ISCM, 1973).
- ⁹² Joachim Fes t, *Staatsstreich: Der lange Weg zum 20 Juli* (Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1997), p. 258.
- ⁹³ Bryan Singer's 2008 film *Valkyrie*, starring Tom Cruise.
- ⁹⁴ Peter Wilenski to Douglas McClelland, 27 April 1973.
- ⁹⁵ Full score, p. 93.
- ⁹⁶ *The Sun* (Melbourne), 27 September 1972; *The Australian*, 28 September 1972; *The Australian*, 5 November 1972.
- ⁹⁷ *The Sun*, 27 September 1972.
- ⁹⁸ "Jenny, Make It Happen".
- ⁹⁹ BBC World Service, 26 November 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Siegfried Thalheimer, ed., *Die Affaire Dreyfus* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963), pp. 237ff.

¹⁰¹ See <http://www.markdreyfus.com/speeches/apology.html>, viewed January 2010.

¹⁰² Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus* (New York: George Braziller, 1983), p. 14; Herzog, *Der Kampf einer Republik*, p. 960.

¹⁰³ See Clinton Green, "The International Society for Contemporary Music in Melbourne: Forerunners, Foundation, and Decline", *Musicology Australia* 32/2, pp. 256–7. Green sources correspondence held in Gregory Young private papers.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁰⁵ James Murdoch, "George Dreyfus", in *Australia's Contemporary Composers* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 85–6.

¹⁰⁶ Dreyfus, *The Last Frivolous Book*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ *Rheinische Post*, Düsseldorf, 21 August 2009.

¹⁰⁸ *The Age*, 20 November 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Recorded by ABC Melbourne Show Band (Hammar LP 002).

¹¹⁰ Lynne Strahan and George Dreyfus to Jean Battersby, 1 March 1973; John Winther to George Dreyfus, 27 March 1973; John Winther to George Dreyfus, 26 April 1973; George Dreyfus to John Winther, 12 March 1974; John Winther to George Dreyfus, 20 March 1974; George Dreyfus to John Winther, 22 May 1974; George Dreyfus to Charles Berg, 5 August 1974; Charles Berg's secretary to George Dreyfus, 12 August 1974; John Winther to George Dreyfus, 14 August 1974; Charles Berg to George Dreyfus, 11 October 1974; George Dreyfus to Charles Berg, 31 October 1974; Charles Berg to George Dreyfus, 13 November 1974; Charles Berg to George Dreyfus, 10 January 1975; George Dreyfus to Charles Berg, 15 January 1975.

¹¹¹ John Winther to George Dreyfus, 15 January 1975.

¹¹² Opera in one act (1993). Libretto by Volker Elis Pilgrim, music by George Dreyfus. Full score, 346 pages.

¹¹³ Opera in one act (1996). Libretto by Volker Elis Pilgrim, music by George Dreyfus. Full score, 463 pages.

¹¹⁴ Peter Howson to Eric Gross, 9 November 1972.

¹¹⁵ *The Sunday Australian*, 26 March 1972; *The Australian*, 9 June 1972; *The Sun* (Melbourne), 27 September 1972; *The Sun*, 29 September 1972; *The Australian*, 28 September 1972; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 5 November 1972; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December 1972; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December 1972; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1972; *The Sydney*

Morning Herald, 14 December 1972; *The Australian*, 15 December 1972; *The Australian*, 13 January, 1973; *The Australian*, 10 February 1973; *The National Times*, 16–21 April 1973; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 10 June 1973; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 19 August 1973.

¹¹⁶ George Dreyfus to Charles Berg, 27 January 1975.

¹¹⁷ Charles Berg to George Dreyfus, 4 February 1975.

¹¹⁸ *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, full score, bar 1592.

¹¹⁹ Charles Berg to George Dreyfus, 4 February 1975.

¹²⁰ *The Age*, 31 May 1980.

¹²¹ *The Age*, 25 March 1977. Trouble was not new; see *The Australian*, 19 February 1972; *The Sunday Australian* 27 February 1972; *The Age*, 22 March 1972; *The Sunday Australian*, 7 May 1972.

¹²² *The Australian*, 3 June 1978.

¹²³ *The New York Times*, 5 May 1975.

¹²⁴ *Aufbau*, New York, 9 May 1975.

¹²⁵ Kenneth Tribe to George Dreyfus, 3 March 1981.

¹²⁶ *The Age*, 23 October 1979.

¹²⁷ See Verdi's *Simone Boccanegra*.

¹²⁸ *The Age*, 23 October 1979.

¹²⁹ *The Age*, 26 October 1979.

¹³⁰ *The Age*, 9 October 1979.

¹³¹ *Parsifal* Act 2, full score, figure 189; Laurence Dreyfus (no relation), "Hermann Levi's Shame and *Parsifal*'s Guilt: A Critique of Essentialism in Biography and Criticism", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6/2, pp. 125–46.

¹³² *The Australian*, 13 October 1979.

¹³³ Submission to the Inquiry into Opera/Music Theatre in Australia, 18 December 1979.

¹³⁴ Kenneth Tribe to George Dreyfus, 3 March 1981.

¹³⁵ Joseph Goebbels screaming at Richard Strauss, 28 February 1941, in the Propaganda Ministry, Berlin: "Be quiet Herr Strauss! You have no conception of who you are, or who I am! ... Stop your claptrap about the importance of serious music, once and for all ... Tomorrow's art is different from yesterday's! You, Herr Strauss, belong to yesterday!" Kurt Wilhelm, *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 255; Werner Egk, *Die Zeit wartet nicht* (Munich: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1981).

¹³⁶ Gerhard Splitt, *Richard Strauss 1933–1935: Ästhetik und Musikpolitik zu Beginn der national-sozialistischen Herrschaft*. Pffaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987.

¹³⁷ *Sebastian's Greatest Adventure* (2007), *Ein Kaffeekonzert* (2008), *The Prize* (2009), *Drei Kästner-Gedichte* (2010), *Sextet for Didjeridu and Wind Instruments* (2011)

¹³⁸ George Dreyfus to John Cameron, 27 May 1981.

¹³⁹ John Cameron to George Dreyfus, 29 May 1981.

¹⁴⁰ Norman L. Kleeblatt ed., *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth & Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 158.

¹⁴¹ Chapman, *The Dreyfus Trials*, p. 52.

¹⁴² Gerhard Baader, Johannes Cramer und Bettina Winter, "Verlegt nach Hadamar". *Die Geschichte einer NS-'Euthanasie'-Anstalt.* (Kassel: Historische Schriftenreihe des Landeswohlfahrtsverbandes Hessen, Katalogue Band 2., n.d.), p. 157.

¹⁴³ Full text reprinted in *Don't Ever Let Them Get You*, pp. 22–45.

¹⁴⁴ *Garni Sands*, Act 2 full score, pp. 388ff.

¹⁴⁵ *The Gilt-Edged Kid*, full score, bar 406.

¹⁴⁶ *The Age*, 10 June 2009.

¹⁴⁷ *The Age*, 1 July 2009.

¹⁴⁸ *The Age*, 10 June 2009.

¹⁴⁹ Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, full score, p. 268, figure 144a.

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