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'Heavenly Hermaphroditism': A Note on *The Sea-Change*

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We first hear of the commission that became *The Sea-Change* in a letter sent by Warner to Paul Nordoff on 4 February 1949.

The libretto, yes, certainly a man; and certainly no message; and the man, some sort of Quixote, yes. And the time, presumably, some sort of rough and ready Now. But there must also be a framework, a story; for just a character and incidents is not substantial enough to support the weight of the music. We do not want a Symphonic Variation opera like *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, or a tone-poem opera either. So from now on till when I come back from Italy I shall be devising this framework; and when I get back in March I shall send you the draft of it. Of course I have ideas already, dozens of them; but equally I am sure that Italy will give me better ones.¹

It was a welcome commission in more than one way: 'Five hundred dollars, my God! That seems extremely handsome, and will be extremely timely.'

Warner's long friendship and creative relationship with the American composer Paul Nordoff (1909–77) would be a rewarding subject for further exploration. They first met in New York in 1937, as Warner later recalled: 'we talked about the opera he had made from my novel, *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, and the problems of a restricted, money-saving orchestra'.² (Warner was characteristically magnanimous about his failure to secure the author's permission before embarking on the work.) He lived near Warner, Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White in the summer of 1937, at the time of the first triangulation of their relationship.

He was going to a cottage in Connecticut, to orchestrate and get away from the heat-wave. He knew the Kibbe house. With his entrance we were swept back to our own world, the world where a bass tuba, an adverb, the turn of a stanza, are things one lives by. Elizabeth, still dressing, heard our voices.

It was inevitable she should be affronted.³

White was also not far away in 1949 at the time of the commission for *The Sea-Change*; she was to arrive in England on 11 April.

As good as her word, and a thorough professional when it came to accepting commissions, Warner sent Nordoff a framework for the opera on 12 March. As she had predicted, the plan for the libretto had developed and it now had a historical setting partly prompted by the trip to Italy. The letter is a grand evocation of her skills as a librettist who had also been a composer; it deserves to be quoted in full.

Dearest Paul,

I found your letter and the beautiful spectacle of the Columbia advance when I got home.

That was four days ago; but I have waited to write to you till I could tell you something about the libretto.

After some false starts on other themes, I am sure of it ... the theme is Shelley's last summer, at Lerici, where he and Mary, and the two Williamses, and Trelawny went, to suffer their sea change, as Trelawny prophetically said. They are all falling most beautifully into place. Did you know that early in that summer Shelley saw the vision of a child rising out of the sea and beckoning to him? And that after the shipwreck, when Trelawny went to see Mary, 'he did not attempt to console me, but launched forth into an overflowing and eloquent praise of my divine Shelley, till I felt almost happy'? That will be the last scene of the opera – an extended arioso (Trelawny is obviously a baritone) which will answer your idea of a long conversation with someone invisible, either an angel or the devil; for Mary will have no singing part at all in this scene, and the pauses in Trelawny's arioso will be answered by – so it seems to me – by a wordless melodic line, perhaps Shelley's high tenor vocalising, or a solo fiddle; which will comment on the strain of the arioso and lead it further.

There will be only one set: the upper room at Casa Magni with the french window opening on the view of the bay; sometimes this window will be open, sometimes shut, according to the scene.

During the scene of the wreck – which will be left entirely to orchestra and chorus voices off – the window will be open, and the three women, Mary, Jane Williams, and Claire, will be silhouetted against it, shaping a group of intensified anxiety and hopelessness. From this window they will see the arrival of the ship when she first comes from Leghorn, newly built for their summer's pleasure. All the ship business, and Trelawny's seafaring talk, and Shelley's enthusiasm, is going to be lovely. Think what music you can have for the ship coming smooth and full-sailed over the water, the solo voices expatiating, and the chorus of the fishing-people of Lerici on the beach below the window. This device of the upper room is going to be a godsend, because you can have your chorus, all the chorus you want, without them crowding up a small stage. Then there is Jane Williams, and her guitar, another lovely motive of the lyric voice, the light jarring guitar notes, and the sea-continuo supporting it. And for my fun in the job, there is one fascinating strand: that Shelley, who in all his poems was obsessed by rivers, by rivers flowing to the ocean, by rivers traversing underground caverns, is himself expressing this river's hastening compulsion to be lost in the sea.

Shelley and Trelawny will be the two dominating parts. The women interpose, or supply little lakes of duets and trios. Edward Williams I hear as a *serene* bass; the exponent of the feeling of summer, of natural enjoyment of nature, of the blueness of sky and the amplitude of days. I think what lovely full cantabile one can get from a bass if he is not being misused as a grunting Hunding, or a pop-pop-pop merry peasant.

So now, darling Paul, give your mind to the Mediterranean, and write and say you love me for this.

... I will write and tell you about Rome, and Assisi, and the journeys presently. But except to tell you, I cannot write anything that is not the libretto just now, for it is washing round me and islanding me from anything else⁴.

Writing the libretto was an intense creative experience for Warner. 'I wish I could write librettos for the rest of my life,' she wrote to Nordoff on 7 April. 'It is the purest of human pleasures, a heavenly hermaphroditism of being both writer and musician. No wonder that selfish beast Wagner kept it all to himself.'⁵

Nordoff completed the score in October 1950, and Warner noted in her journal that 'it seems like a corroboration of pre-Eliz: when I wrote

it'.⁶ The Warner Archive holds a bound volume of the finished work, on the title page of which Nordoff – modestly giving precedence to his librettist – has written 'The Sea-Change / Opera in Two Acts / libretto by Sylvia Townsend Warner / Music by Paul Nordoff / commissioned by The Alice M. Ditson Fund'. The fund had been established by Columbia University in 1940, and Mrs Ditson's will stipulated that income from the bequest should be used for non-academic fellowships, public concerts, and publications in support of music. But *The Sea-Change* did not meet with the approval of the Columbia trustees, as Warner records in her journal:

A letter from Paul – at first about the composition of *The Sea-Change* – and then about the audition with Columbia: they turned it down, killing it with expressions of esteem – and never did like that libretto. Alas, my poor Paul, my associations have done him no good, I fear.⁷

In 1977 Warner wrote to William Maxwell that Columbia had reneged "because both Paul & I were badged with unsound political views – Shelley, too, for that matter."⁸ *The Sea-Change* was Nordoff's final stage work.

Warner kept thinking about *The Sea-Change* and did a little networking on its behalf as late as 1958, when Ralph and Ursula Vaughan Williams visited for lunch:

I explained that you had written an opera on *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, and that it was glorious, and we talked about its chances of production; and then, because, as usual, the problems of producing a GRAND opera reared their ugly heads, I said artfully, But he has also written a most beautiful chamber opera, about Shelley at Lerici. Chamber opera, as you know, is one of V.W.'s enthusiasms; and Ursula immediately sat up, and asked a great many questions, and then said, It sounds just the thing for the New Opera Company. A very good company, too, said V.W. but aren't they insolvent? Not at all, said she, they've planted a hook in television, and that will make everything all right.

And she is going to write to Peter Hemmings of the New Opera telling him about *The Sea Change*; and as V.W. is its honorary patron and president, she will certainly be attended to. I am to write to him too, sending a copy of the libretto, and telling him that you will be over soon.⁹

Vaughan Williams died only two weeks later, and nothing came of the plan. But the gloomy note is not the one to end on. The libretto is a splendid expression of Warner's creativity and an unparalleled marriage between her gift for words and her sense of music. It comes as part of a mid-century flourishing of musical collaborations between poets and composers: distinguished examples include Auden's libretti for Britten and Stravinsky's collaborations with Cocteau and with Auden and Kallman. *The Sea-Change* shows how far Warner's literary art was still profoundly intertwined with music fully twenty years after her editorial work on *Tudor Church Music*, although only a year after the publication of the magnificent passages about the musical *Ars nova* in Chapter 10 of *The Corner that Held Them*. The libretto as published here is the last of four successive typescript versions in the Warner archive. It is previously unpublished.

Notes

- 1 *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 109.
- 2 *I'll Stand By You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, with Narrative by Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico Press, 1998), p. 171. See also Clive Robbins's 'Memories of Paul Nordoff' in *Newsletter 18*, and Warner's *Times* obituary 'Paul Nordoff: Pioneer in Musical Therapy' reprinted in *Newsletter 11*. Nordoff and Robbins together became pioneers in musical therapy, as Warner described in the obituary: 'Believing deeply in the inner life of each child and the uniqueness of every individual however disadvantaged, he concentrated his acute perception and musical creativity to the task of finding a means to motivate these [handicapped] children' (n.p.).
- 3 *I'll Stand By You*, p. 171.
- 4 *Letters*, pp. 110–11.
- 5 *Letters*, p. 112.
- 6 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, edited and introduced by Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) p. 168; 28 October 1950.
- 7 *Diaries*, p. 171; 30 November 1950.
- 8 *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1938–1978*, edited by Michael Steinman (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 319; Warner to Maxwell, 31 March 1977. See also her letter of 28 January 1958: 'Writing a libretto, I have discovered, is very much like supplying the electrical underpinning for a car... It is great fun to do, and soothing, because one knows from the start that it can't be perfectly right. There are no perfect libretti, I fancy' (p. 65).
- 9 *Letters*, p. 167; to Paul Nordoff, 13 August 1958.