

Memory of Stuart Challender AO", Town Hall,
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AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

SYDNEY TOWN HALL, FRIDAY 20 DECEMBER 1991

IN MEMORY OF STUART CHALLENGER AO

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Stuart Challenger deserves more than spare words to help us search for our feelings on an occasion such as this. Words - certainly my prose - cannot capture the complex feelings of grief and thankfulness, of anger mingled with admiration for the triumph of a singular human spirit, which we share together at this moment.

A musician, like Stuart, deserves another musician to collect the thoughts of this assembly by the mystery of harmony and discordancy that is music. If I were a composer worthy of this occasion I would write my piece in the form of a symphony to parallel Stuart Challenger's life. Like that other conductor, Gustav Mahler, in his Third Symphony, I would provide programme notes to chart the stages of the music, capturing in this way Stuart's journey.

You will remember that the Third contains Mahler's notes for the movements. They progress through the merry "Summer marches in" past "What the flowers in the meadow tell me" and "What the animals in the forest tell me" and "What

night tells me" through to "What the morning bells tell
finishing with that most important message of all: "What
tells me".

My symphony for Stuart Challender could take up much
same themes. The first movement would be "What the time
childhood tells us". In this case, it would be a lyrical
happy movement full of tuneful melodies of joy and
serenity. For Stuart's childhood was one of the happy
assurance of his family's love. As we all know, that love
remained unquestioning to the end. A few weeks ago I came
on his mother, June, in the hospice at his bedside peeling
nectarine for him. Just as she had when he was a little
boy. Always there when needed. Uncompromising love and
support. I met his sister Darea when, first among his fellow
citizens, he walked forward earlier this year to receive from
the Governor the insignia of Officer of the Order of
Australia. After the ceremony, in the sunshine amidst the
gardens of Government House June, Darea, Stuart and his
chairs enjoyed a moment's respite from the struggle that
was consuming him. As a backdrop against the glistening
harbour arose the sails of Utzon's building which Stuart
Challender helped to make a place of authentic musical, as
well as architectural, beauty. His father it was who took
him to Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony in Hobart when he
was thirteen. This planted the musical idea. His
grandmother was a stalwart who lived to a great age and never
waned in her support and pride for her gifted progeny. So
the childhood melodies of the first movement of my symphony
could be strong and refreshing - full of confident life.

The second movement on "What the discovery of manhood

us would necessarily start with confusion and discordancy but it would end with strength and passion. Stuart Challender had to discover himself first. That journey took him along the familiar road that most of us take some time in our life when we confront major crises and, ultimately, death: the shock of realization; the feeling of and confusion; the anger of rage; and the painful message to reconciliation, acceptance and internal peace. Stuart made that journey during adolescence and early adulthood. It was a journey, telescoped and much rougher, which he was to make again in his last years.

The third movement, full of fearsome melodies, of discordancy and fright, would portray "What the discovery of the face of death tells us". Angry and noisy this movement would call upon the whole orchestra within (and upon lost hands wandering outside).

The last movement would portray "What human life teaches us". It would finish with trumpets to signal a life, brief but ultimately triumphant. It would also surely finish in peace: the voice of the soloist merging with the mandolins: just as Mahler finished *The Song of the Earth*. A message of love and reconciliation with all humanity: Christian if you like, certainly spiritual, would bring my musical tribute to its close.

That is what we should have today in this place. It is, after all, a place where most of us first heard a symphony played by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra years ago: long before the white sails beside the Harbour and when Stuart Challender was still a boy at play, beyond fear amongst the flowers in the meadows in Tasmania.

But I am no symphonist. All I can offer are words. In the face of the death of any human being - but particularly a friend and a strong spirit such as Stuart Challender - must all be humble. We should remember this in the midst of turbulent public events. It is no time for an excess of words. It is a time for modesty of language and just enough words to prepare our thoughts for music which will transport us into the world of the spirit where Stuart and his orchestra so often travelled with us.

I got to know Stuart Challender about ten years ago. Like you, I saw him walk onto the podium, first as conductor of the Australian Opera and then, later, as Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Will we ever forget his masterful appearance as he strode to the platform amidst applause which increasingly went beyond the formal and ended in a near ecstasy of appreciation and affection? His big frame. His large hands. His masterful eye would soon be galvanised into the force that would take the orchestra, with coaxing and dynamic instruction, through the passages so carefully and intelligently prepared beforehand. His raw energy seemed boundless.

It was Promethean. Prometheus was the friend and benefactor of mankind who, according to the Ancients defended humanity against Zeus at a time when that angry God wanted to destroy the human race. Prometheus stole the fire of heaven, bringing it forth to elevate human beings to the level of the gods. This is what music does. In its mysterious ways it takes us, mere humans, to a new plane of existence every time. Stuart Challender, our Prometheus, was our intermediary in music. His enthusiasm, his strength, his

total concentration, his dedication, won him the respect and eventually the love of his orchestra and the increasing following of his public. Success followed triumphant success. His career, at an absurdly young age, was on the brink of extraordinary international fame. The leading symphony orchestras of the world wanted him. Yet just as his career was blooming in this way he discovered the awful reality of the illness that was finally to claim his life.

It was at this time that I got to know him best. He shared with me the news of his infection with the HIV virus. Its shattering effect upon his spirit was obvious. He was too intelligent and too well informed to be ignorant of the likely course of the infection in all its detail. On the platform, he was surrounded by an orchestra and public which appreciated and admired him giving him the zest and energy which ambition required. But in the privacy of solitude he knew that he was living with a condition which would probably cut him down in the midst of this very success. The bitter irony of this discovery he felt he had to share with particular friends. His rage and frustration were all too evident. They were shared by us, his friends, who felt anger with him that such a specially gifted spirit might be lost.

For a time the magic relief of AZT restored him to his former self. His spirit lifted. The invitations came in as if from a flood. This buoyed him up. Against hope, he held out for remission. He clung onto life, to which he had so much to offer. He did so with a desperation which derived from his knowledge of gifts and talents that he had not yet even fully mobilized.

Stuart Challender was now going through his second hard

journey. Discovery. The shock of realisation. Hurt and anger. Confusion. Rage. Reconciliation. And eventually, at the very end, acceptance and peace.

At milestones on this journey he posed for me three riddles. But unlike the cruel interrogator in *Turandot*, he answered them all, ultimately, himself.

The first was whether he should take an initiative to support people living with HIV and AIDS who, because of their public position, could not easily seek out counselling but might find comfort and support from each other. I talked with him about this idea and with the counsellor who was helping him at the time. Eventually, he concluded (rightly as I felt) that, in death, there is the ultimate democracy:

*"Sceptre and crown come tumbling down
And in the dust lie equal made,
With the poor crook'd scythe and spade"*

He abandoned that idea. He told me later how he continued to participate in support sessions. And of how the love and strength of fellow men and women, struggling with HIV, sustained him in a way that he had not imagined possible. People of different backgrounds - many ordinary Australians - no respectors of a world-famous conductor - shared this ordeal. They accompanied each other on the journey of discovery.

Then, one afternoon, just out of court, I had an urgent message to telephone him. The second riddle. A Sunday newspaper in Melbourne was threatening to "expose" his medical condition. What should he do? Would he have any legal rights to stop such publication? As a friend, I talked to him of the legal difficulties and the problems of

preventing the haemorrhage of the information, once out. "I am thinking of revealing it myself", he said. He sought my advice.

I admired this very private man and knew the high store he set upon his personal realm. "It might do some good for others - and in any case I'd rather tell it my way than have it come out in a shabby exposé", he said. It pained me that he was put under this pressure by an invasion of his personal life at a time when he was suffering pressure enough. But his resolve to face squarely the issue and to do it honestly and manfully commanded respect. This was Stuart Challenger, the man - something beyond even Stuart Challenger the musician. As you are here, you know what followed. He revealed all that needed to be told. It was painful for him and for his family. But he did it. And in a beautiful Goliloquy, with the gentle interventions of his friend David Marr, he told it again to a national audience of millions. It brought the message that people living with AIDS are human beings first. They are on the six continents. They are in every walk of life. They have every sexual pattern. They are our brothers and sisters. Stuart Challenger said that his effort of self-revelation made him feel freer than ever before. It is a tragedy that he felt a prisoner until such an enforced released in such circumstances. But it happened. It was worth a million advertisements about AIDS prevention. I hope it will continue to bring its message of the need for compassion and support for the anonymous thousands in our country and beyond who are afflicted with this wholly unpredictable and terrible condition.

Then came the third riddle. He presented it to me just

a week before he died. I visited him at the Sacred Heart Hospice. "It's a wonderful place here, considering everything", he said to me with a wry smile. His large frame had been reduced. He had taken on the grey colour of approaching death. In fact, his appearance was catastrophic. But from his face shone luminous eyes of extraordinary brightness and clarity. He had a high sense of urgency. "They want to do another interview with me. Do you think I should do it?" We talked around the problem. His mind was concentrated by the fast approaching end. Far from suffering any loss of clarity of thought, his acuteness was actually sharpened. The artist in him did not wish to perform again when, as he knew, his interview with David Marr had been such a triumph of human will over gross adversity.

What did he wish to say, I asked? He had a lot to say about orchestras and music in Australia. His special world. Of his precious friends, Mary Valentine, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the soloists, the Australian Opera. The ABC, for whose support to the end he was so grateful. So many things to say about music and the need to cherish and love it. *Four Corners* had been about himself. But now he felt a need to talk about the future of music in his country. And he also felt a commitment to talk about the need to have an end to wrongful discrimination in Australia. An end to discrimination against homosexual and bisexual citizens. An end to unwarranted discrimination against people with HIV and AIDS. A need for law reform especially in his own State, Tasmania, where irrational prejudice still thrives even in the Parliament which continues to oppose law reform. An end to prejudice against women and men and against any person for

characteristics over which that person has no control. There must be an end to it, he said. He felt a commitment to express these thoughts. Boldly.

Once again, this riddle was solved by him. He died before he could say these things. Yet, in a sense, his life this year has been saying them to us through the long struggle of the past few months. Through the painful persistence at the podium. Through his long journey to London to fulfil his commitment to the English National Opera. Through his heroic final return to Tasmania, whose citizens shared pride in his international success but whose lawmakers persisted in prejudice and resisted reform. And when the final triumphant production of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

What was this conduct telling us? It was telling us of how the spirit of a human being is greater even than global AIDS and how, ultimately, that spirit will triumph over this epidemic and by science, mutual support and education consign AIDS to a footnote to human history.

I end as I started. It is in music and not in words - it is in the contemplation of the music which Stuart Challender brought us - that we will find the truest expression of our thoughts on this occasion. So let it finish with music. A recording taken from a performance in the Concert Hall of the Opera House in June 1990 of Mahler's Second *Resurrection* Symphony. Rosamund Illing and Elizabeth Campbell with the Sydney Philamonia Choir join the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Stuart Challender's baton. Stuart is there at the helm. By the recording he is here with us.

A century ago, in words that are apt, Mahler described in a letter how he came upon this concluding movement of the Symphony. This is what the great Gustav wrote¹:

"... I had long contemplated bringing in the choir in the last movement, and only the fear that it would be taken as a formal imitation of Beethoven made my hesitate again and again. Then Bulow died, and I went to the Memorial Service. - The mood in which I sat and pondered on the departed was utterly in the spirit of what I was working on at the time - Then the Choir, up in the organ loft, intoned [the] Resurrection chorale - It flashed on me like lightning, and everywhere became plain and clear in my mind! It was a flash that all creative artists wait for - 'conceived by the Holy Ghost'! ...

And Mahler went on:²

"After all, a musician's nature can hardly be expressed in words. It would be easier to say what is different about him than about others - but what this difference is he himself would probably be least able to say. ... [the musician] moves towards [his aims] like a sleepwalker - he does not know what road he is taking (perhaps past yawning abysses), but he heads towards the distant light, whether it be the ever-radiant star or a seductive will of the wisp!"

Stuart Challender, like every human, sought will of the wisps. He took that road past dangerous chasms. He became an ever radiant star. The light of his star burns bright in our memory.

So we, his loving family and friends and his fellow citizens reflect with gratitude upon his life in the private stillness of our own minds: helped in our thoughts by the music of Gustav Mahler and by the baton of Stuart Challender, whom we honour together today in this familiar place.

1. K Martner (ed) *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*,
Faber & Faber, London, 1979, 212 (letter by Mahler to
Dr Arthur Seidl, 17 February 1897.

2. *Ibid.*