

# SIR RICHARD BOURKE AND *La Clemenza di Tito*

Jeff Brownrigg investigates the 'humane' connection between an early colonial governor and a lesser-known Mozart opera

A number of eye-catching images of colonial Governor Sir Richard Bourke are held in the National Library's Pictures Collection. The most numerous are hand-coloured etchings by 'AA', after a lithograph of Conrad Martens, featuring a larger-than-life bronze sculpture of Bourke. Today, Bourke's statue stands outside the State Library of New South Wales, gazing across Sydney's Botanic Gardens, over the roof of Sydney's Conservatorium (once the stables of Government House), past the lofty sails of the Opera House to the northern shores of Sydney Harbour. If he were able to take in this vista and reflect upon how Australia had developed in the 160-odd years since he returned to his ancestral home in Ireland, Bourke could not fail to notice that opera and music have taken root in the antipodean cities he helped create. Specifically, he might have been delighted to note that in the 21st century an opera house is one of the most conspicuous and visited icons of contemporary Sydney.

Richard Bourke was born in Dublin in 1777 and attended Westminster School, where he was a contemporary of the poet, Robert Southey. During his youth, Bourke often visited a distant relative: the well-known and controversial thinker, Edmund Burke. Burke is often considered a father of English Romanticism, especially for his idea of 'the sublime', as manifested for example in the poems of William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley, and the awesome and sometimes threatening portrayal of natural landscape. Burke also wrote significant works responding to the American and French Revolutions, but it was his writings about the nature of political power, and particularly the responsibility of rulers towards those they ruled, that must have impressed his 'nephew' Richard. Burke's

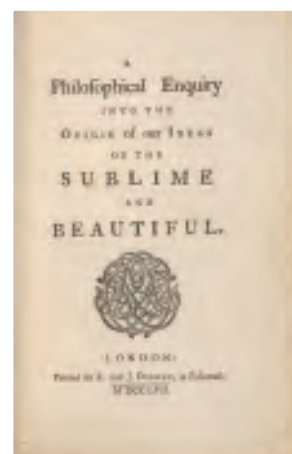


vision included a benign aristocracy mindful of its social obligations: a monarch was, in effect, the head of a vast national 'family'. Natural responsibilities followed. Richard garnered some of his social and political theory from his celebrated 'uncle', and would later be given the chance to apply himself to matters of benign governance. While it is not possible to point to conversations or correspondence in which Burke instructed Bourke, the young Richard was profoundly affected by his relative. (After Richard's retirement from public life, he edited Edmund's correspondence.)

After attending Exeter College, Oxford, Richard joined the army in 1798 and was gazetted an ensign in the Grenadier Guards. In 1799 he was shot in the face during a confused skirmish with the French on a sodden battlefield in Holland. A musket ball smashed his upper and lower jaws causing considerable disfigurement and a disinclination to public speaking, though his injury healed. In 1800 (further complicating the task of anyone attempting to write about his life), he married Eliza Jane Bourke,

above:  
Unknown photographer  
*Statue of Sir Richard Bourke,  
Governor of New South Wales* c.1870  
b&w photograph; 28.0 x 22.9 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3582072

below:  
Title page of Edmund Burke's *A  
Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of  
our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*  
(London: 1790)  
Rare Books Collection, RB DNS 7716





above left:  
Unknown artist  
Portrait of Sir Richard Bourke  
c.1829  
lithograph; 22.5 x 18.3 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an9455971



above right:  
Unknown artist  
*Porto Jackson* [Government  
House at Parramatta] c.1835  
coloured print; 10.6 x 13.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3510483

whose father was a friend, but no relation, of Edmund Burke. After successfully completing courses at the Military College at High Wycombe under Major General Robert Brownrigg (Quartermaster-General), Bourke was stationed in Essex before being appointed Superintendent of the Junior Department of the Royal Military College at Great Marlow, near London. He was subsequently gazetted a Major. Courses at Marlow included German, French and Latin, together with natural and moral philosophy. Bourke, already powerfully attracted to the arts and philosophy, also enjoyed London's nearby pleasures, including the musical theatre.

It was in London that the first United Kingdom performance of any of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's operas took place: at the King's Theatre, on 27 March 1806. The work was *La Clemenza di Tito* (*The Clemency of Titus*), Mozart's last opera. Though no reference to Bourke's attendance has been found in diaries or correspondence, it seems very likely that Bourke was either at the London premiere or at least attended a performance during the season. Mozart himself knew that *Tito's* style was formal and dated, and its purpose occasional, but that does not seem to have limited its success in the 20 years immediately after his death in 1791. Bourke was certainly attracted to Titus' ordeal; the basic philosophical and moral tenets underpinning the character's behaviour rang with a powerful resonance for him, and he soon had his own copy of the score. (It is not clear which edition Bourke owned: by 1810, the opera had been reprinted 10 times.)

Today *La Clemenza di Tito* is often treated disdainfully. (It was not given its first

performance until the late 19th century. The Sydney Opera produced it more recently; it has been performed by the Australian Opera and the Sydney Opera House.) *Tito* is perhaps her artistic throwback, but it must have been, for its time, a performance of extraordinary quality. In the ordinary modernity of *The Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni*—the three Mozart operas that immediately preceded *Tito*—*The Magic Flute*, written with *Tito*, was both more ordinary and fantastical. Mozart had written *Tito* in the summer of 1791

to celebrate the coronation of Leopold II as King of Bohemia, and travelled to Prague to supervise the completion and rehearsal of the work, dying barely 12 weeks after the opera's premiere in September at Prague's National Theatre. After that premiere, the Emperor's Italian wife, clearly a lady of very contemporary tastes and Mediterranean predilections, described *Tito* as 'una porcheria tedesca' (in modern parlance, perhaps 'German swill?').

We know that Bourke possessed a copy of *Tito's* score, so it seems reasonable to assume that he took it with him, along with his piano, on his two major colonial placements—as Acting Governor and Governor of Cape Colony (1826–1829), and as Governor of New South Wales (1831–1837). After the tempestuous voyage to Australia—severe enough to push his already infirm wife into an early grave six months after their arrival—the Bourke family settled in Sydney. With the assistance of his family, particularly his daughter Ann, Bourke became a patron of concerts in Sydney and Parramatta. His biographer, Hazel King, notes that he experienced resistance to his rule on 'religious, political and social grounds', especially from 'Botany Bay Tories'. Bourke saw the colony at large as a society in the process of learning what it was: its progress being along the lines of the advanced nations of Europe, with basic human values underpinning a culture in which each human life mattered. His approach was anchored in humanity and compassion, and the values expressed in the charters of 'the rights of man'.

In following these principles in the new colony, Bourke echoed the position of Mozart's Emperor Titus in the opera. When

challenged by circumstances, Bourke most often adopted a position dictated by his deeply held conviction of fundamental human goodness and the value of each individual's life. This is the same point of enlightenment towards which Mozart's opera inexorably moves. In New South Wales, Bourke saw the transformative possibilities of forgiveness mirrored in the colonial system of assignment. The colony had been set up to rehabilitate errant souls, and to build a new society from their number. To this end, most convicts were assigned as labourers, where possible, so that they might practise familiar trades. On serving out their sentence, when freed the great majority stayed on to live in the community which the liberal philosophers and Whig politicians in England believed would be the end result of the transportation system. Such outcomes were fundamental to Bourke's concept of his duty in Australia: he was optimistic, with his eye firmly fixed on the future. The words of the second act aria in *Tito* echoes Bourke's approach:

If sovereignty, O friendly gods,  
Requires a heart that is hard,  
Then remove my sovereignty  
Or give me a different heart.

If I cannot win the loyalty  
Of my subjects with affection,  
I do not want a loyalty  
That is secured by fear.

In Mozart's opera, Titus struggles against his inclination to vengeance. Mozart and his librettists provide glimpses into the psychology of a person in authority who is faced with momentous decisions affecting the lives of others, but who is guided by compassion. Titus has good reason to condemn those he imagined to be his friends, but who have plotted to kill him. But he is inclined to mercy when he sits in judgement on them:

The planets have conspired,  
I do believe to force me,  
despite myself to harden my heart  
but no, they shall not succeed.  
I summon my energies  
to continue the fight.  
We shall see who best stays the course,  
the treachery of others, or my clemency.



such sentiments seems obvious enough. His own copy of a score of *La Clemenza di Tito*, which some five years ago passed out of the Bourke family's hands in Ireland to an undisclosed purchaser through Sotheby's, is thus an artefact of considerable Australian significance, particularly if it is annotated in Bourke's own hand. The role of music in the formation of nations is complex and multifarious. Bourke's possession of Mozart's *Tito* score is a great example of music articulating aspects of social policy and the formal behaviour of an administrator. There is no doubt that Australians ought to feel a debt of gratitude both to Mozart and his librettists—and to a colonial governor who was inspired by their opera, and who deserves to be better known.

JEFF BROWNRIGG is a Canberra-based writer and researcher with a special interest in the history of music in Australia



top:  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
*Deh prendi un dolce amplesso:*  
*Duettino in the Opera of La*  
*Clemenza di Tito* (London: R. Birchall,  
between 1824 and 1829)  
Music Collection, MUS Snell mb  
783.12 M939

above:  
W.A. Mozart, from a *Contemporary*  
*Miniature in Oils*  
reproduced from *Mozart's Operas:*  
*A Critical Study* by Edward J. Dent  
(London: Chatto & Windus, 1913)