

**PEGGY
GLANVILLE-HICKS**
and the making of the film



A one-hour television film on the life and the music of Australian-born composer **Peggy Glanville-Hicks** has just been completed. Made by a small Australian film company, Juniper Films, it will be broadcast on ABC Television later this year and will heighten the increasing interest being shown in the work of this passionate and powerfully creative woman.

Until comparatively recent times, perhaps as late as halfway through this century, there have only been a handful of strongly creative women composers throughout the entire history of civilization. One of the most outstanding and fascinating of these rare women lived and worked in America throughout the forties and fifties. She was the Australian-born composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks. Although she had an international reputation, not enough has been known about her in this country. In the field of music we have produced many great Australian women interpretive artists, particularly our great singers, but very few great creative talents.

Now her work is being reassessed and a new interest in her music is rising. Performances and broadcasts are taking place and recordings are being made. We are starting to properly realize that Australia has produced a world standard woman composer who lived and worked at a time when being a 'lady composer' (a term Peggy hated) meant that, even to be considered, you had to be 'twice as good as any male composer among your peers'.

Intellectually in the same league as a Virginia Woolf or a Simone de Beauvoir, Peggy was a woman of such talent and passion that she really stands historically as one of the unique creative female forces to emerge in any art form. Australian audiences will be moved and inspired by her unique story of genius and of her courage in the face of tragedy. They will be surprised by the beauty and strength of her music.

We started filming Peggy in her last years. By then we realized we did not have long. She was a fragile ageing woman who had been living on borrowed time. However, she was willing to give it a go and she remained an acid-tongued observer of the musical world and a vigorously caring woman right to the end. We grew to relish the wit and eloquence of her brisk but shredded voice, the fearless, often ascerbic comments and the depth and energy of her feelings. We worried for her and saw that when filming, the sparkle soon faded and she tired easily. Peggy died in Sydney on 25 June 1990 during the course of the production of this film.

We had not fully realised when we started just what an extraordinary woman we were filming. Together with her own memories and her rich lode of eloquent letters, our team visited and interviewed many of her friends and colleagues including two of her oldest and best loved friends.

In Morocco we talked to the friend she called her 'twin', writer/composer Paul Bowles, who recently attained new heights of fame when his book *The Sheltering Sky* was filmed by Bertolucci. In New York we talked to famous American choreographer John Butler who shared her triumphs and who was with her through her time of despair. We talked to composers and musicians who worked with her such as Lou Harrison and John Cape and Yehudi Menuhin, who knew her well, brought us many real insights about Peggy.

A picture began to emerge of a woman who was much more than just an important composer. Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe calls her 'an ideas woman who defined the new world of music'. She was a complex woman who cared more about music in general than her own particular fame as a composer. She was generous, committed and tireless in her efforts to promote contemporary music. She was a compelling writer and used her writing skills to become the formidable champion of young American composers.

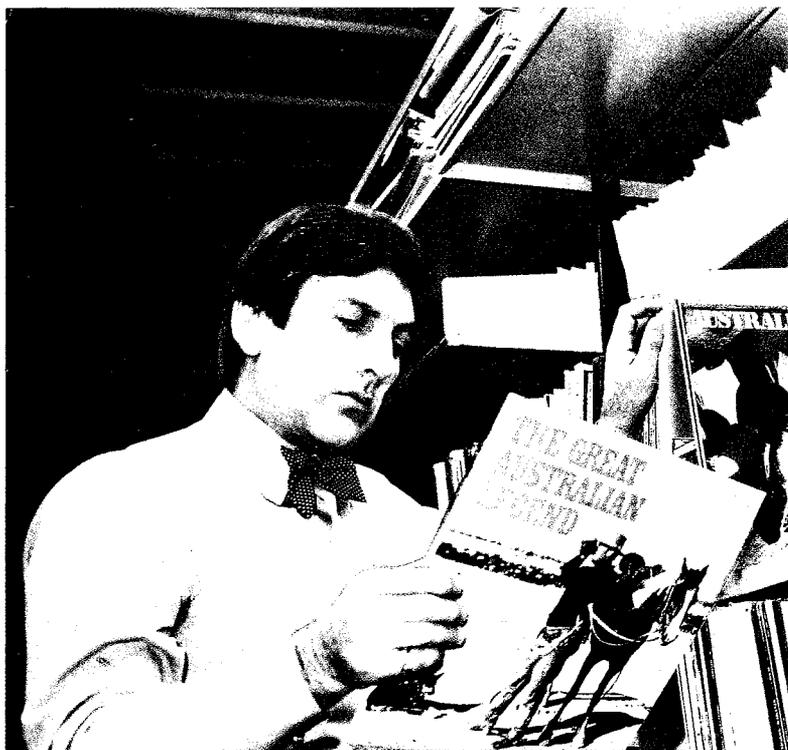
In her private life she was a woman of great humanity who loved intensely. Her



The young Peggy leaves Australia

friends and lovers were made radiant with the depth of her feeling. The more we learned about Peggy, the more stunned we were that such a remarkable woman had lived among us virtually unknown for so many years. You always become obsessed with the film you are making, but we soon realized that Peggy's film was of special importance on many levels.

Juniper Films, founded twenty years ago, is a partnership of two outstanding film-makers, John Tristram and James Wilson. They are flexible multi-talented and resourceful as only members of a small film company can be. They are both perceptive and imaginative directors and they are both excellent producers, particularly Tristram whose ingenuity knows no bounds in the service of the film he is making. As well, James Wilson is a gifted editor. Of necessity, this film, titled **PG-H A Modern Odyssey** is particularly reliant on sensitive and musically aware editing. Wilson's brilliant creative editing on this occasion, is his own special tribute to Peggy as well as to the art of innovative film making.



Above: **James Murdoch**,
Founding Director of the
Australia Music Centre

Right: **James Wilson**,
Director/Producer/Editor,
Juniper Films

Lower right: **John Tristram**,
Producer /Director, Juniper
Films



This small company, with some twenty-seven films in their repertoire and a reputation for integrity, has won many major and prestigious awards, usually against films with larger budgets and more substantial back-up. Many of Juniper's films are about the arts. Their films, **First Citizen**, **Albert Namatjira** and **The Quest of Jimmy Pike** have been screened and acclaimed internationally. This year they won first prize at the American Film Festival with their recent film **Giants of Time**.

Juniper Films also now employs two dedicated and talented young women who are under the thrall of film, Sonia Poorun and Imelda Cooney.

The Executive Producer of **PG-H A Modern Odyssey** was Peter Butler of the ABC. The film was funded by the Australian Film Finance Corporation. One of the important figures concerned with this film is the associate producer and adviser, James Murdoch. The visionary founding Director of the Australian Music Centre and author of two books on Australian music, Murdoch has always been Australia's greatest champion of contemporary music. In this he has a very special kinship to Peggy. Both believed so strongly in the music of today that they both gave almost too much of their lives to promoting it.

In the arts they both reflected that rare sense of modern *noblesse oblige*. In today's terms, it means that if anyone is born with the advantage of a clear vision and a sense of how crucial the arts are to the survival and wellbeing of the human race, then they are obliged to assume the responsibility of fostering and raising the awareness of whatever creative spirit is abroad at that time.

It was his knowledge of her life and music that made Murdoch so valuable to this film. It was Murdoch who brought Peggy home to Australia and treated her with the respect due to such a sophisticated and gifted woman and who supported her with his continuing care and compassion in her declining years. Murdoch is currently writing a book on the life and work of this remarkable woman.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks was born in Melbourne on 29 December 1912. She always intended to be a composer and began her studies locally with conductor/composer Fritz Hart. She left Australia on a one-way ticket when she was 19. In London, she obtained a scholarship from the Royal College of Music and then spent a period of time studying with Ralph Vaughan Williams and leading conductors and musicians.

However, the greatest teacher in Europe at that time was a legendary Frenchwoman called Nadia Boulanger. Her studio was the Mecca for all the hopeful young American composers. They formed a magic circle called the 'Boulangerie'. Although she agreed to teach her, Nadia Boulanger whose sister Lily was a composer, reiterated the many warnings to Peggy that composing was 'no job for a lady'.

Peggy was to become a unique composer. With audacity she rejected the twelve tone system of Europe's great current god Arnold Schoenberg, and she also rejected the heavy harmonic writing of the romantics. She said dense harmonic structures 'were like houses without windows'. Instead she turned to the spacious melodic and rhythmic structure of Indian music which she deeply admired and to oriental music. With Bartok encouraging her, she also sought out the modal music of ancient cultures like the old Greek music for her inspiration.

We were fortunate, during a visit of India's great and spellbinding sarod player Ali Akbar Khan, to catch Peggy discussing Indian music with one of the masters. She said it made her homesick for Indian music.

On another occasion, we filmed Peggy in the studio of leading Australian artist Charles Blackman as he completed a drawing of her. It was a marvellously acute and revealing 'essence' drawing, but Peggy, perhaps not surprisingly, didn't like it.



'It's a good drawing', she conceded, 'but it has nothing to do with me.'

In the background of Blackman's studio at this time were hanging his famous Composers Series. This brilliant collection represents Blackman's telling impressions of some twenty-four of the world's famous composers.

Peggy amused herself, and us incidentally, by making cutting comments on the composers. 'And who is that?' she asked imperiously, pointing to a dark brooding face where the eyes burned out of the drawing like twin fires. On being told it was Beethoven, she said scornfully, 'I thought it was a soap manufacturer'. Blackman, to his credit, remained kindly and patient.

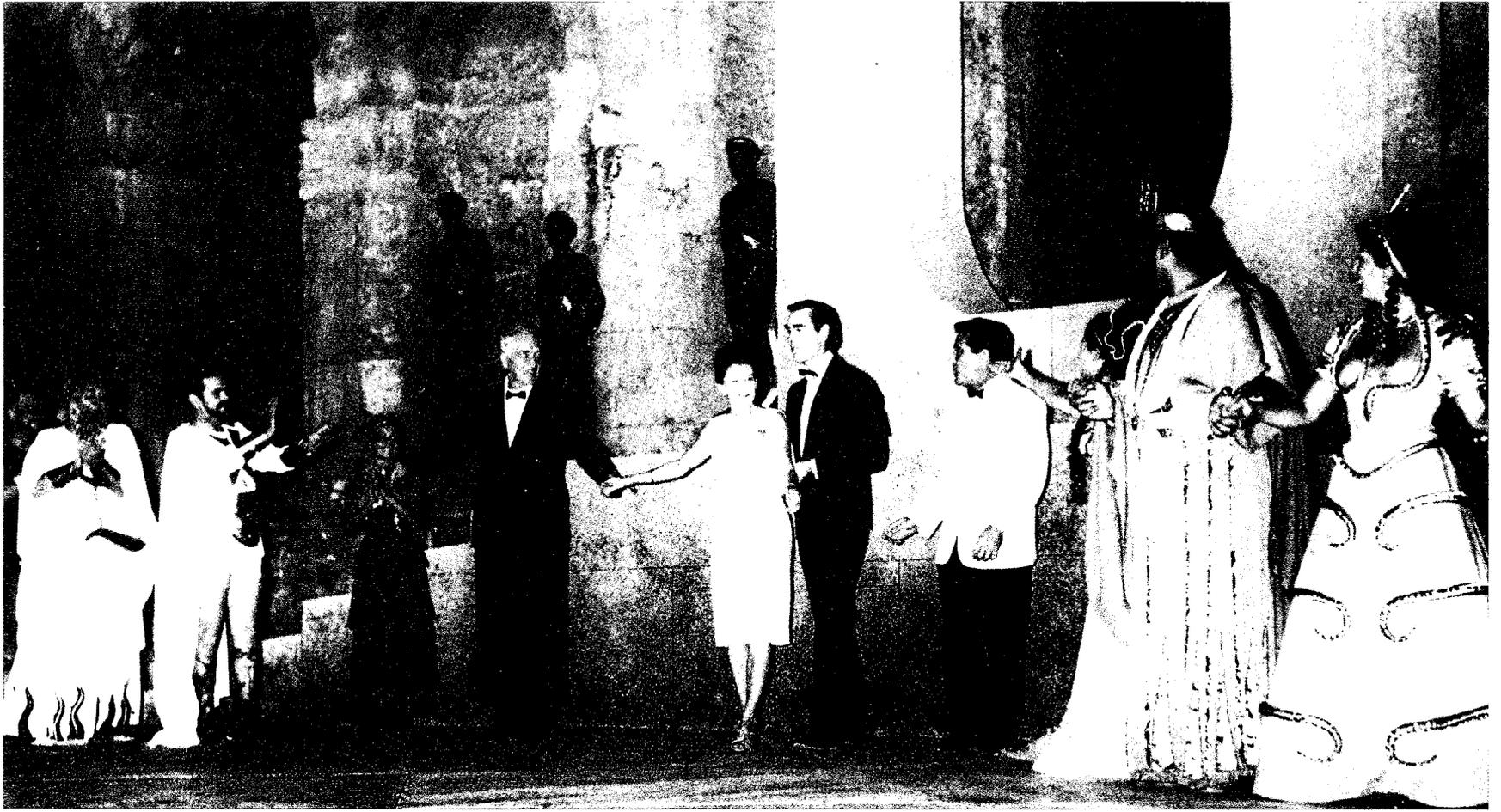
Another time we were filming her down at the fish markets to remind her of her marketing days in Greece and she talked endlessly in Greek to a dark-looking fisherman. We didn't have the heart to tell her he couldn't speak a word of Greek!

She never forgot her Greek days. Permanently on Cortisone, and not allowed to drink after her operation, she concocted a mildly alcoholic compromise for herself, a 'dash' of brandy in a large glass of soda. The 'dashes' increased in those last painful years, but again, no-one had the heart to protest. With the brandies at 'elevenses' and again at five, went a large plate of fingers of raw carrots and celery, a trick she had learned in Greece. Many a time we had to stop filming as Peggy, spying a stray carrot slice, promptly munched her way through the next take.

PG-H, as she was known, arrived on the scene in New York at the end of the thirties. She had married a fellow student, a handsome young composer called Stanley Bate who was promising but very unstable. She married him to protect him. Her relationship with him was stormy and sometimes violent. Although they had a lot in common and Peggy loyally always insisted on his talent, they soon parted. They really belonged in different worlds. Her own letters tell the story of her other great loves. The letters also tell of her many frustrations fighting to be a woman composer in a man's world.

Peggy was one of the first creative Australians to tie herself to America. She felt a deep affinity for both countries. She felt they both constituted the 'new world' where the future of music would rest or, perhaps more

Charles Blackman with
Peggy Glanville-Hicks and
his composer series



*Grand Opera in Athens -
Peggy and John Butler
taking a bow for Nausicaa -
a triumph*

*Peggy with Lawrence
Durrell - the Opera Sappho*



accurately, erupt. She was no timid violet. She knew she needed to sharpen herself in a world where the old traditions would be given new life. She found that in the raucous, exciting crucible of energy that was the America of that time. She expanded in this atmosphere. Her friends and associates were the outstanding creative people of her age.

Peggy, between composing, became one of New York's most distinguished and knowledgeable music critics, writing her illuminating reviews on the Herald Tribune together with her admired friend, the great critic Virgil Thomson. She often quoted Virgil mockingly in his deep southern accent, 'Music's a rum go honey-chile, a rum go', and once wrote a very witty piece about Virgil titled 'Thomsonianana'. A daring entrepreneur, she presented concerts and fought to include America's new creative music alongside the exploding world of movies and musical comedy that were becoming the brilliant heart of American culture.

Peggy's large body of composition which includes concertos, sonatas and most music forms, centres on nine works for theatre, her four operas and five ballets. Her operas each had a libretto by a major literary figure. They included Thomas Mann, Lawrence Durrell and Lord Dunsany.

Her music is exciting, approachable and often beautiful. It always has an air of strength and sophistication about it. Today cult pianist Keith Jarrett includes her vigorous Etruscan Concerto in his repertoire and will soon record it. Yehudi Menuhin says he regrets that he has not yet recorded her seductive **Viola Concerto**. Works like her **Letters from Morocco** based on letters from Paul Bowles are alluring and evocative. Her operas have had many productions.

Her grand opera **Nausicaa**, with a libretto by Robert Graves, was to become her greatest success. Directed by her close friend John Butler, it was premiered in Greece in the vast Herod Atticus Theatre to rave reviews. Critics claimed it was 'bony and strong like the Greek landscape'.

Never had a woman composer known such a triumph.

But at the very height of her career, like some tragic myth, Peggy was struck down. She went blind and it was discovered she had a large, life-threatening brain tumour. With characteristic courage, she underwent the long and difficult operation and with a plastic skull and a short time to live, settled on a Greek island. The house she built there is still standing. Against the odds, she did recover, but her life was spent on medication and under the pretence of still working, she knew the fire had gone from her music. For her it was like exile from her own familiar country where she had lived and worked all her life.

Her moving opera **Sappho** with libretto by Lawrence Durrell reflects the arc of her own life from its hopeful beginnings - 'For I am eager and the flame of life burns quickly' - to her own tragedy, and like Sappho, her final exile - 'A great wind from the dark will blow upon me.'

Peggy finally returned to Australia and found herself living on memories. She was still remarkably poised, alert and wickedly observant. Music was still all of her life. She knew nothing else. She talked of working again. We all knew Peggy's beguiling stories, enjoyed the wit and irony of her company and admired this proud and independent woman, but we knew she would never really compose again.

Peggy left her house, her royalties and all her possessions to music. A trust is now in the process of being set up whereby a series of composers will benefit from her will.

We hope the 'Peggy' film will prove to be a contribution to the new awareness of a great composer.



Peggy in New York

Robert Graves, Peggy and John Butler at the World Premier of the Opera Nausicaa



Nadine Amadio