

POEM FOR A DRIED UP RIVER

ABOUT THE WORK

British poet Alice Oswald wrote the breathless and exquisitely sonic *Dunt: a poem for a dried up river* after seeing a Roman figurine of a water nymph in a museum. Oswald says of the water nymph figurine: "I admire these extreme ways of invoking rain, just as I admire anyone who dares, by means of metaphor (and all language is rooted in metaphor), to communicate with something that isn't human. If you've paid money for seeds or animals and you want to increase their worth by growing them on, then a water nymph is not some kind of a literary personification of water, nor is it a liquefaction of women, but it's an effort, driven by absolute need, to make contact with something inscrutable."

This performance, co-devised with artist/scenographer Elizabeth Gadsby, considers the effort Oswald refers to, and explores the strange puzzle presented when a human culture requires that a small, inanimate figurine of a female form somehow manifests water.

There is a clear division of labor in the distribution of the vocal material: one soprano sings the poem, the other sings almost entirely wordless vocal materials, many of which derive from sounds that are the natural consequences of physical effort. This latter voice functions to express the work of the water nymph, who occupies liminal territory between animal and goddess, natural and supernatural, real and unreal. The sounds from the water nymph start with an activation of the breath, the first place effort reveals itself in the body. These breath sounds are then mimicked

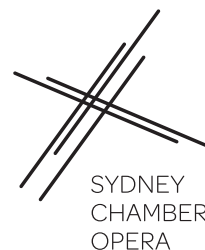
in the instruments of the ensemble as the nymph's voice extends into song. The piece's structure and palette of timbres are intended to suggest other kinds of liminality or a confusion between contrasting states: dry and wet, weak and strong, barren and fecund.

— **Jane Sheldon**
Composer & Performer

It is my great pleasure for Sydney Chamber Opera to present the first Australian performances of SCO Artistic Associate Jane Sheldon's profoundly beautiful *poem for a dried up river*. Premiered in New York in 2019, this unclassifiable vocal/stage work announces Sheldon as a major Australian composer after two decades as one of this country's leading singers of new work. The musical language is at once original and seductive, nourished by Sheldon's long experience as interpreter of all manner of vocal and physical demands required from the many composers and theatre makers with whom she has worked.

In the space of about half an hour, an entire world is brought into being through the simplicity of the breath, the beating of drones against each other and the raw evocation of the natural world as a place of beauty and terror. Moment to moment, the music is often extremely fragile but when coupled with Elizabeth Gadsby's evocative installation, it somehow possesses a quiet inevitability I find extremely compelling.

— **Jack Symonds**
Artistic Director,
Sydney Chamber Opera



AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

Music

Jane Sheldon

Text

Alice Oswald

Installation & Design

Elizabeth Gadsby

Electronics & Sound Design

Benjamin Carey

Lighting Design

Alexander Berlage

Choreography

Danielle Micich

Soprano (nymph)

Jane Sheldon

Soprano (poem)

Anna Fraser

Conductor

Jack Symonds

Violin

Veronique Serret

Viola

James Wannan

Cello

Jack Ward

Trombone

Matthew Harrison

Percussion

Claire Edwardes

Bree van Reyk

Production Management

Rhys Robinson

Stage Management

Ellen Castles

Surtitles

Johannes MacDonald

Duration

35 minutes

Acknowledgement

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body and the NSW Government through Create NSW.