

## Music and coal: a postcard from Germany

Thomas Reiner



Ferris wheel above cookery ovens at the Zollverein in Germany

Close down your old coal mine and turn it into an arts performance complex. That's what the Germans did with their Zollverein – a former coalmine and coking plant in Essen. I was over there last year to listen to the first performance of Stefan Hakenberg's opera *The Amputation of Charlie Sharp*, with a libretto by journalist and writer Philip Gourevitch. The opera is set in a hospital that looks after injured soldiers and tells the story of Charlie who has lost both legs after stepping on a land mine. A cursory glance at the world news page of any decent newspaper should be enough to convince most people how important it is for these sorts of stories to be told with all their trauma and destitution. Notwithstanding the serious subject matter of the opera, I had to think how edifying it is, not only to see the performance of a major new work by a living composer, but also to have this performance in a venue made possible thanks to a shut down coal mine. It made me look at the bigger picture: Germany's energy mix. In 2014, renewable energy sources (including wind, solar, biomass and hydropower) accounted for more than 25% of Germany's electricity generation.<sup>1</sup> Doing a little math, there are about 80 million people living in Germany, so 25% of that is 20 million. This is getting pretty close to the about 24 million people living in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.erneuerbare-energien.de/EE/Redaktion/DE/Standardartikel/Infografiken/infografik\\_bruttostromerzeugung-2014.html](http://www.erneuerbare-energien.de/EE/Redaktion/DE/Standardartikel/Infografiken/infografik_bruttostromerzeugung-2014.html) (14 July 2015)

Australia. I guess what I am trying to say is that almost our entire population could theoretically be covered by Germany's renewable energy. One also wonders about Germany's comparatively cold temperatures, small landmass and limited coastal areas, and what that implies for Australia's potential to exploit its exposure to wind and sun.

So what then is the link between coal and music? Well, cultural literacy comes with an understanding that these things are always intricately connected. In other words, many people in Germany would be aware of the nexus between the arts, society, ecology, economy, and politics, and the Zollverein beautifully embodies this connectedness. Here in Australia, I get the sense that our lack of cultural literacy and our ecological vandalism are treated as separate things, that is, if they are recognised as such in the first place. What I mean is that some of us are passionate about the environment, others about getting children out of detention, others about not letting politicians decide what constitutes excellence in the arts, and so on. But even if we care about all of these things, there does not seem to be an overarching worldview or philosophy to hold it all together. Don't get me wrong, I am not asking for another ideology in this supposedly post-ideological world of ours, but some writers have argued compellingly that the apparent lack of a dominant ideology with everybody happily embracing contradicting tendencies and dynamics constitutes a quasi-invisible and rather diffuse ideology in its own right.<sup>2</sup> We might have settled for a combination of views such as that market forces will ultimately take care of the economy, that our human rights abuses are just a party-political and temporary thing, that we will look after the environment eventually, and that preventing doctors and social workers from speaking out about conditions in the detention camps is just an unfortunate government policy. In the mean time, we might pay of the mortgage, make a donation to Amnesty, practice yoga, sign a senate inquiry submission about arts funding, or all of them together. There are expressions for these inconsistencies: existential dissonance, spiritual hedonism, and first world problems.

We are far from a solution to all of this, but as musicians we could at least contribute to a healthy dialogue, provided we allow our music to speak, rather than treat it as an abstract or semantically slippery art form, or worse, as a form of entertainment somehow uncoupled from our time and place. Our own contemporary Australian operas always take second place behind some old European stuff, and when Neil Armfield staged Wagner's *Rhine Gold* as part

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London: Verso (2008).

of his production of the *Ring* in 2013 in Melbourne, he failed to underline the obvious parallels between the ill-fated greed for the Rhine's gold and our own desire to dig out every gram of coal still left in the ground. Yes, Armfield's production did include some references to contemporary Australia, but this is window dressing compared to the traction he could have gained by giving Alberich the appearance of Gina Reinhart and turning the Rhine maidens into a group of Aborigines rather than into a bunch of Show Girls. In other words, we shouldn't be too subtle about these things or the message gets lost. Major European opera houses wouldn't dare failing to contextualise their work and present lame, unreflective and non-distinct productions for the sake of celebrating the so-called repertoire. We can do this here, because there seems to be this delusion that to have opera companies and symphony orchestras is, in and of itself, already a sign of cultural excellence.

There is a song called *Rast (Rest)* in Schubert's *Winter Journey* in which the lonely protagonist finds refuge in a charcoal burner's hut. In the Middle Ages, charcoal burners were ostracised and their profession considered dishonourable. They were accused of evil practices. I wonder whether this is an uncanny parallel to Germany's Zollverein now providing a space for the arts. I also wonder whether there will come a time in Australia when the business of coal mining is going to be recognised as harmful and dishonourable, and when our cultural literacy emerges out of an engagement with the broader challenges we face as a society.

Thomas Reiner, Brunswick 2015



Winding tower at the entry to the Zollverein in Germany