



# Shared beginnings

Soprano and composer Deborah Cheetham Fraillon speaks to **JANE CORNWELL** about her orchestral work, *Treaty*, her past as a member of the Stolen Generation, and her hopes for Australia's future

**D**eborah Cheetham Fraillon isn't mucking around. "For generations, Australians have been taught to fear embracing the longest continuing culture in the world," says the multi-award-winning soprano, composer and proud Yorta Yorta woman. "It's as if they think they might lose something if they do."

"This," she adds, "is the Great Australian Tragedy."

Having recently returned from leading artists talks in Norway, bringing her First Nations perspective to the classical music space at Oslo Opera House, and after popping across to Geelong Arts Centre, 75km out of Melbourne, to supervise the annual youth choral workshops hosted by her Short Black Opera company, Cheetham Fraillon is in the Docklands apartment on the Melbourne waterfront she shares with her wife, the conductor Nicolette Fraillon. She is tired but sharply focused.

"I can well imagine the arguments that will spring up from reading such a statement by me," she tells *Review* via a Zoom call. She leans in. "I am a member of the Stolen Generation. I didn't grow up with my family or in my community. I found my way back to them in my twenties, and I'm still learning parts of my personal history that were hidden from me for a long time."

She equates her story – and, as a trailblazing playwright and composer, Cheetham Fraillon, 60, is acclaimed for her authentic storytelling – to that of Australia more broadly.

"Australia has a past of real brutality and sadness, of things that we would not consider possible today. All of this needs to be embraced before we can ever hope to move on meaningfully."

The arts help, responding to the times we live in, illuminating shared experience and shared history. Prompting thought, piquing discussion, encouraging reconsideration. The trauma wrought on First Nations Australians by the overwhelming rejection, in October 2023, of the proposal for an Indigenous voice to parliament, unsurprisingly brought reaction from our high-profile creatives, including Cheetham Fraillon. She is chair of vocal studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (her alma mater: her bust is in the university library), a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and as of 2021, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's First Nations creative chair, a five-year-appointment.

Her compositional partnership with the latter includes projects such as *Eumeralla*, *A War Requiem for Peace* (2019), which is a Gunditjmara-language work based on the war of resistance between First Nations people and settlers in southwest Victoria in the mid-19th century. There is also *Baparrripna* ("Dawn" in Yorta



Yorta), featuring didgeridoo virtuoso and Kalkadunga man William Barton, that premiered at the MSO's New Beginnings season in February 2022; and *Earth*, a movement intended to complement Holst's *The Planets* suite. *Baparrripna* and *Earth* works were recorded together at Hamer Hall in March 2024 and released on the MSO in-house label in May of this year.

"Carry my song/moving through silence/shining world," sings Cheetham Fraillon in her soaring soprano, an instrument she began honing at the age of 14 after watching opera star Dame Joan Sutherland on TV at home in the suburbs of Sydney. She has since sung everywhere from the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony (performing her first composition in a First Nations language) to stages in France, Switzerland and Hanover, Germany, where in 2000 this writer saw her perform with her late uncle Jimmy Little, who was a prominent Aboriginal music star.

("He told me my mother, Monica Little, had the best voice in the family," Cheetham Fraillon, one of nine children – of whom six were taken away – has said).

*Earth* was her first composition after the Voice to parliament