

## In his rightful place

R.J. Stove

### The Golden Age: Clive Douglas, Composer, Conductor

By Lynne Douglas

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Clive (Martin) Douglas was among the most gifted composers Australia has produced. Any concertgoers who have not encountered his name are the poorer thereby.

Though Douglas lived until 1977, his reputation had been trashed ten years earlier in the extraordinarily influential text *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* by Sydney scholar Roger Covell. At this stage, Covell (who only afterwards ascertained, to quote philosopher David Stove, 'what real intellectual work was') made unwarranted obeisance to a Darwinian, teleological belief in musical progress. Judging Douglas insufficiently 'progressive' according to then-chic modernist criteria, Covell devoted half a dozen pages to the patronising implication that Douglas's output could be redeemed solely by Covell being permitted to rewrite it. Seen now, *Australia's Music* amounts in its aesthetic verdicts to little other than one more 1960s fashion statement, along with such equally unappealing artefacts as miniskirts, guitar-palpatating nuns, Che Guevara's facial hair, Mao's *Little Red Book*, JFK's court, Harold Holt's photo ops and Keith Windschuttle's encomium to LSD.

But Douglas continued to be overlooked well after the Cold War's end. Even so temperate and detailed an analysis as Gordon Kerry's *New Classical Music: Composing Australia* (2009) omits Douglas except for a solitary reference. All the more justification, then, for welcoming *The Golden Age*, by the composer's daughter Lynne. A personal disclosure: Wollongong's Wirripang firm, which publishes *The Golden Age*, also publishes my own vocal and instrumental pieces. So anyone expecting that I shall denounce Wirripang's products is expecting in vain. That acknowledged, Wirripang's staffers have never considered me a sycophant, and they realise that I would judge Wirripang's releases by the same yardstick as any other company's.

The career of Douglas (born 1903) did not abound in dramatic incidents. Rare, actually, is the composer's career that does. For every Liszt, whose biography provides innate thrills, can be found six Brahmses whose *curricula vitae* are largely mere chronicles of meticulous, dutiful brainwork. Douglas's sole extra-marital and extra-musical passion seems to have been model railways. There are good reasons why *Clive Douglas: The Movie* is not coming soon to a cinema near you.

From *The Golden Age*, readers will learn of Douglas's somewhat chaotic childhood in rural Victorian towns (when Douglas was only three, his father, a policeman, died of pneumonia); of his leaving school when only 15, to support his pianist mother, who had given him early musical training; of his 18-year tenure as a bank officer (which probably helped his art: T.S. Eliot benefited from banking employment, and Trollope from post office administration); of his dealings with redoubtable Melbourne conductor and professor Sir Bernard Heinze (whom I saw on the rostrum five decades afterwards, still directing the Sydney Sym-

phony Orchestra with vigour in his mid-eighties); of Douglas's brief first marriage to typist Isabel Knox, and his second, much happier union to soprano Marjorie Ellis; of his podium achievements with ensembles in Melbourne, Hobart and Brisbane as well as Sydney (Queenslanders' jittery mood in 1942, with Japanese invaders daily dreaded, is well conveyed); and of, most crucially, his own music, with its Jindyworobak-like allegiance to Aboriginal culture (although apparently 'Clive... did not consider himself part of the Jindyworobak movement').

This allegiance Douglas refracted through his Respighian skill in orchestration, his rhythmic vivacity, suggesting Paul Hindemith, and his epic approach redolent of Sir Arnold Bax (who admired Douglas's 'Jubilee Symphony'). His daughter's prose is unfailingly clear, though I spotted three errors: Sydney pianist-composer Frank Hutchens is misidentified as 'Hutchen'; Toronto organist-composer Healey Willan has become 'Healey William'; and 'Saint Saëns' should be hyphenated.

Seldom did 20th-century musicians resist the urge to print manifestoes. Douglas, sadly, was not among those who resisted. Aboriginal traditions absorbed him as greatly as English folksong traditions did Vaughan Williams; and like Vaughan Williams he tended, at times, to confuse his tastes with his duties. Certain lines from a 1956 essay Douglas contributed to Sydney's *Canon* music magazine possess, with hindsight, a disagreeable ring, alien to his basic goodwill, which his biographer repeatedly demonstrates. After vague references to 'a national music' and 'recognisable Australian identity', Douglas wrote: 'A musical idiom must be found which is so intrinsically Australian that no other influence is felt.'

'Must be found'? 'No other influence'? What politburo, pray tell, would determine which composers passed chauvinism's taste test? And who would have controlled such a politburo? Chips Rafferty? Eddie Ward? Khrushchev? These questions Douglas left unanswered. Anyhow, a variant of Satie's famous witticism about Ravel can apply to Douglas. 'Ravel,' Satie joked, 'has refused the Légion d'Honneur, but all his music accepts it.' Likewise, Douglas might have deplored our European heritage, but all his music reveals it. And why ever not? The arduous expertise he acquired in Western civilisation's compositional techniques would have served him equally well, whether he portrayed Aborigines or Aleutians.

Hearty congratulations, by the by, to Wirripang on including with *The Golden Age* a CD of three Douglas compositions (all dealing with Aboriginal subjects): 'Carwoola', 'Corroboree' and 'Namatjira', the last-named conducted by Douglas himself, the others much more recently by Richard Mills and Myer Fredman. Pitifully few of



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Douglas's scores have been committed to disc. So to find these ones made commercially available is a rare treat. They provoke useful comparisons between Douglas and the two other leading Australian composers of around his age, John Antill and Margaret Sutherland. Douglas displays Antill's colouristic virtuosity, without Antill's lapses into bland officialese; and Sutherland's punctilious craftsmanship, without her lapses into neoclassical greyness. Invoking Douglas's overseas contemporaries also redounds to his credit. All right, so he lacked (unsurprisingly) the sheer genius of Edmund Rubbra, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber or the nonpareil Olivier Messiaen; but he deserves an honourable place in the second division of mid-20th-century composers from any land. Which constitutes — in all candour — a pretty good place to be. Should he obtain residence there, it will be partly thanks to Lynne Douglas's commendable and well-illustrated, if unduly brief, tribute.

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*R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne and is writing a biography of César Franck.*