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“Gold Paint and String” The Peggy Glanville-Hicks Trust House

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Peggy Glanville-Hicks died in June, 1990, and in her Last Will and Testament, she left her entire Estate in the care of her Executors (James Murdoch and Shane Simpson), with the instruction to form a trust in her name, and that her house in Paddington, Sydney, be established as a residence for composers to use as a rent-free haven in which they could pursue their profession without the stress of finding the costs of rental. The choice of composers, their nationality, their gender, and the genre of their work, was to be the decision of the Trustees.

The Executors drafted the deed of trust, appointed the Trustees, and raised the funds to renovate the house for its purpose.

The Peggy Glanville-Hicks Trust House, the only one of its kind in Australia, in its twelve-year history has been host to some of the most talented composers in Australia.

By 1966, Peggy Glanville-Hicks had established herself as perhaps the most significant woman composer anywhere. Nevertheless, with a large body of works, including five operas and many ballets, and as a writer of note, she remained virtually unknown in Australia.

Born in Melbourne in 1912, at the age of nineteen she went to London to the Royal College of Music, where she studied composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams, and then later to Vienna to study with Egon Wellesz, who had himself studied with Arnold Schoenberg, and finally with the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

Back in Australia at the beginning of World War 11, with her husband, Stanley Bate, also a composer, she found Australia had no use for them, and Boulanger arranged for them both to travel to America in 1941.

And so commenced Peggy's meteoric career in New York, first as a music critic on the New York Herald Tribune, whose Music Editor was Virgil Thomson, and then rapidly as a composer. For four of her operas, her librettists were Lord Dunsany, Thomas Mann, Robert Graves, Lawrence Durrell ("No composer has had such luck", she boasted).

In 1959, she took up residence in Greece, where she devoted all her time to composition. She attracted significant grants from the top Foundations. In 1961, her opera *Nausicaa*, to a text by Robert Graves, received a full production at that year's Athens Festival, to wide and international acclaim. She chose as soloists a cast of American-Greeks, including the comparatively unknown soprano Teresa Stratas. Then, with a Ford Foundation grant, she was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera to compose a new opera based on Lawrence Durrell's verse play *Sappho*. She composed the role of Sappho for Maria Callas. The SFO declined to produce the opera at the time on the grounds that it was "too modal". The opera awaits its first production.

All of these successes accounted for her firm presence in the music world.

In 1966, she returned to New York to be present at the first performance of "A Season in Hell" a newly commissioned work by the Harkness Ballet, and one night, in a car driven by her choreographer, John Butler, suddenly lost her sight completely. He turned and rushed her to hospital. It was a major tumour of the brain, in the region of the pituitary gland.

Her friends were galvanised into action. Led by poet Sylvia Spencer, Anaïs Nin, Leonard Bernstein, and Yehudi Menuhin, the considerable sum of dollars was found so that the operation could take place, and she went in to a long and agonising surgery on a bed of ice.

She lived. The creative urge died.

"Everyone wondered if the hair would grow. But it did." she recalled jocularly in 1990, as if talking about another person. "They said, 'No alcohol!'" I wailed, 'You must be mad! In my profession?' So we tried everything: gin, whiskey, campari and soda. Catastrophe! But

a dash of cognac, three pieces of ice and a full glass of soda. That was it!" The doctors gave her a few years to live, and sent her back to Greece to sit in the sun. By this time Peggy had a house on Mykonos, a house on the adjacent island, Tynos, and her main house in Athens, near the ancient Herod Atticus Theatre. After five years, surviving additional operations for "plumbing" as she called it, she perked up, looked around and itched to apply her considerable experience and talents somewhere.

In 1970, for a university production of her opera *The Transposed Heads*, she flew to Australia, and to "case the joint" as it were, to renew old friendships, and to see if she could get a toe in the door of the opening season of the Sydney Opera House. Nothing less than one of her operas would do. Alas...

The Peggy Glanville-Hicks Composers' Trust House

She had a talent for real estate, and bought low, renovated and sold high. She resolved to return to Australia, and then sold all her real estate in Greece, cashed in her investments that had been carefully nurtured through the years by her old friend and personal financial adviser, Sir Ian Potter, and bought a terrace house in the inner Sydney suburb of Paddington. She had come home to stay.

In 1975, she arrived one bright and sunny morning, wearing one of her frightful stage wigs, obtained for her by her caring friends after her brain operation. By this time, the wigs were used for comfort and warmth and not so much for vanity. She quickly installed herself in a boarding house in Edgecliff and so began a reign of terror for the Eastern Suburbs real estate agents. She inspected more than fifty houses. None would do.

Then, one day, she found the one she had dreamed of, at 45 Ormond Street, Paddington.

It had "harbour glimpses", which meant in the jargon of the day, the view of a postage stamp-size blue of the harbour by risking life and limb craning over her upstairs balcony. It was also the closest house available to the leading St Vincent's Hospital; and in the backyard was a noble willow tree. When a large grey owl took up residence in it, she knew this was to be her last home. By the time of her death, in the house were some 50-odd images of owls, wooden sculptures from Bali, ceramic pieces, drawings, paintings, photographs. Down the ages the Owl had been a symbol of the female *anima*.

In the first weeks, she slept on a borrowed mattress on the floor of the upstairs bedroom, while awaiting her considerable furniture to arrive from Athens, including the relic of her grand piano, brought down by donkey from her mountain eerie from the island of Tynos. Peggy had acquired it originally from Vladimir Horowitz, who had used it as a cross-Atlantic practice piano. (The sound board of the piano was found to be irreparably cracked from its many travels.) She had the time to scour the laneways of Paddington and collected amazing pieces of detritus the affluent denizens had thrown out. Later, she used to quip that her house was held together by gold paint and string.

She lived on two meagre half pensions, one from Australia and one from America (she had become an American citizen in 1949), and the annual royalty check from BMI, pitifully small. Of course she had to live very frugally, and her standard dinner always consisted of two lamb cutlets, two boiled potatoes, and a handful of boiled beans. As she had no taste or smell since her brain operation, this was not a problem and was the perennial ideal meal prescribed by her New York doctor for a balanced diet! But she relished textures. She discovered the crispy, glazed Japanese crackers which doubled nicely with the inevitable brandy and soda. She cooked for herself, but always forgot what was on the stove, and so her black and ruined pots and pans had to be replaced every few months or so.

The house was host to many paintings – none of them exceptional or famous works, but all of them distinguished in some way. Several of them were by Stanley Bate. When her young husband succumbed to nervous breakdowns, she bought him painting materials and soon he displayed a real talent. There were paintings by Maurice Grosser, with a portrait of Peggy (since disappeared), and several of deserts in Morocco. Grosser was the dramaturg for the famous opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, to a text by Gertrude Stein and music by Virgil Thomson. Deborah Cooper, a young Australian painter, was introduced to her by Barry Stern at his Gallery, the only one she ever visited, and she finished up buying three of her works. There were some lovely blue-sea paintings by her Greek friends. That Aegean-sea blue was a recurrent colour throughout the house.

Surprisingly, there were only one small cabinet of books, for someone as widely read as Peggy. Various music dictionaries in which she appeared, the Colin McPhee books on Balinese music, the basic volumes of Madame Blavatsky, the oriental spiritualist. Astrology – she had studied astrology in the 1950s (and was very knowledgeable about it – all the charts of her friends are in the Mitchell Library, Sydney) with Dane Rhudyar, a maverick American composer and astrologist. Her relaxation came from the endless novels of

Agatha Christie. As she began to be vague in her memory, she said it was good thing, because she forgot if she had read a book before, and so really enjoyed reading it again, as if new; so there was an endless recycled supply! Although she had brought ancient LP playback equipment from Athens, she rarely listened to the few old scratched records in her small collection. Her favourites were ...all of Brahms and some of Respighi. Rarely her own. She refused to read Australian newspapers, rejected television as entertainment or information, but was coached to install a small transistor radio to listen to the 7 o'clock news. For a few months. The irritating 'contraption' was then quietly retired.

Objets d'art? There were a few. A Ruskin bowl, which she donated to the Nicolson Museum at University of Sydney, plus a few Greek vases pre-BC. Ever the mistress of the one-liner, she once celebrated a birthday of the present writer with a small box, saying "I can't afford to buy you anything. I can only give you something priceless!" In it was a beautiful, intact, black, inscribed Greek vase from c. 300 BCE.

One evening at dusk, she espied a strange face peering into her front room as she was about to imbibe a brandy and soda, and so she had installed French windows, and this became a part of the daily ritual, the formal closing of the shutters, which could be locked from the inside and signifying pre-prandial drinks,. Not satisfied with her security – Paddington being one of the most burgled suburbs of inner Sydney – she acquired some faux lead piping and meshed the front windows with it, making them look like a regular burglar alarm device, and filched a sticker from a neighbour, informing the passer-by that the house was under surveillance.

Her garden was Peggy's delight, her private domain during the day, as it was flooded with the morning light from the east, and in Spring was a riot of colours and perfumes. And bees!

One morning, on a sudden impulse she shifted her chair and seconds later, her western neighbour's wall crashed down on where she had been sitting. For Peggy, it was another instance of her deceased mother's protective interventions that she believed had saved her life several times before.

With a few bricks and pieces of found wood, she changed a characterless and typical suburban backyard into one of charm, terraced, and comfortable, with young trees, flowers

and the magnificent willow at the far end, hiding the constraining grey palings facing the back lane. Peggy had envisaged all this on her very first inspection of the house.

When all was in place throughout the house and garden, everything in harmony with each other, she announced, “Well, that’s it. Just right...no more change.”

Peggy Glanville-Hicks was Head for two years of the Asian Music Studies Program at the newly established Australia Music Centre in Sydney, and she got a terrific lift from it. It was right down her alley, she rejoiced. “I’m working for UNESCO,” she proclaimed to her circle of correspondents. She saw grow a major collection of the traditional musics of Asia, and especially of India and Indonesia.

She became a stimulating *éminence grise* at the Centre and her concentrated emails of musical philosophy darted into the minds of the younger generation of Australian composers and musicians. She personally shepherded a young lute-maker, Peter Biffin, through the hills of Australian and Indian bureaucracy for him to go to India for further study. She hosted luncheons for visiting composers, and helped launch new music editions by local composers. When her memory began to fail her, she called everyone “Little One” and managed to make it sound charming.

Following the brain operation, she composed nothing of substance again, only a three-minute trifle in 1978, for the Pamela Boden Exhibition, a charmingly-titled *Girondelle for Giraffes*. There was much talk of a new opera, but after several years, only a page-and-a-half existed; it gave her a daily topic of conversation and a pretence of busy-ness. A gift of a set of Balinese frog *gamelan* prompted her to think of writing a piece for them, but nothing eventuated.

She had persuaded the Australia Music Centre to bring to Australia from San Francisco her old friend Pamela Boden, then in her late eighties, with seven of her wooden sculptures. Sculpture and Music! Why not! They had been friends in the 1930s in Paris, since Pamela had unsuccessfully eloped with Peggy’s husband, Stanley, but they had not met since. At the airport, the two old ladies passed each other like ships in a fog, and turned without recognition.

“Is that you, Pam?”

“Good God!Peggy?”

Seven composers — Californian Lou Harrison, the Aboriginal David Gulpilil, four other Australian composers, Don Banks, Peter Sculthorpe, Vincent Plush and Ross Edwards, and herself, were each commissioned to write a short piece related to one of the seven sculptures. The works were recorded and timed to play with each illuminated and revolving sculpture, and held in the wide spaces of the Australia Music Centre, then housed above The Spaghetti Factory in the Rocks, Sydney. The mixed-media show travelled to the Tolarno Gallery, in Melbourne. Another ‘first’ for Peggy! Pamela had stayed with Peggy for six weeks, so it was with some relief that Peggy saw her off back to San Francisco, and Peggy returned to Ormond Street to reclaim her house.

After that, she put up her feet in her pretty terrace house and counted the pitifully few performances taking place of her music. But she could also count the stream of young Australian friends and acquaintances who had come under her spell, tolling the Greek goat’s bell installed in the front door. For the fifteen years remaining to her, she and her house became an essential stop off for local and visiting musicians.

In 1980, her old friend Narayan Menon invited her to the official opening of his Centre for the Performing Arts in Bombay, and a conference on East-West music, where she saw again many of her old friends, including her favourite, Yehudi Menuhin.

She got restless in 1982, and, ever the catalyst, returned to New York “to see friends and to promote Australian music”. From her quiet house in Sydney to New York was too much a wrench and she found too many ghosts there, in spite of renewed interest in her music from Dennis Russell Davies and Keith Jarrett. Their performance of her spritely *Etruscan Concerto* had to be repeated at the Avery Fisher Hall, so reported Sidney Cowell. She stayed at favourite old hotels and with favourite old friends, and visited bright new offices of organisations which she had helped found. But she discovered little interest in Australian music. She was 71.

Back home (home now being Australia again), composer Lou Harrison and Bill Colvig on their way to Bali from campus lectures in New Zealand, came to spend three months with her, including Christmas of ‘83, and as a house-present, left her a glittering chandelier which she immediately positioned above the grand piano in the front room of her house. It remains there.

While staying with Peggy, Harrison composed his major *Piano Concerto* for Keith Jarrett, which was soon recorded. Jarrett later recorded her own *Etruscan Concerto*. No reminiscing for them — plans for the future of the East/West matrix were the order of the day. She loved to call Virgil Thomson at his Chelsea Hotel apartment for his birthday, usually getting wrong the date and the time difference and waking him in the early hours.

Heavy doses of cortisone began to affect her memory and weight. The operation had left her without the senses of taste or smell, which made her a rather boring and hazardous dinner companion. The loss of smell was also a domestic disaster because she doted on a particularly smelly poodle. It became an olfactory ordeal to visit her. The loss of memory however was life threatening: Sometimes she would forget to take her medication, and once her front door had to be taken down to rescue her from a coma. She was still living alone in her house.

She had begun her downward spiral.

Like many elderly people, her favourite stories became polished and burnished for the last ounce of wit and timing, endlessly told. If she noticed a visitor's eyes glazing over, mischievously she would invent a new twist to her story. But she had a gift of every time making it sound new and as if it had just happened yesterday. Peggy sparkled as a hostess, and her annual party for New Year fizzed and bubbled. Normally she was wary of mixing her friends, and one-to-one was the best way to communicate. If a dear friend arrived unannounced while she was engaged with another, the friend would be asked politely to leave and to call another day, preferably with advance notice.

The odd honour fell to her; in 1977 The Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal, and in 1987, shepherded through the processes by her friend, composer Peter Sculthorpe, the Degree of Doctor of Music (*Honoris Causa*) from the University of Sydney. "Better than a Damehood...", she exulted.

Nevertheless it was a Damehood she craved. There had been only one composer Dame before — Ethel Smyth — and she felt that her own achievement had been grander.

Slowly performances did happen and recordings were made. In '84, she fulfilled a long-time dream and on a three-day journey, crossed Australia and the Nullarbor Plain by the Indian-Pacific train to go to Perth, where the ABC recorded her *Viola Concerto*, with Keith

Crellin, violist, and her Thomas Mann opera *The Transposed Heads*, with a lovely cast and for the first time, the full WA Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Measham, and issued it on CD. An earlier version of the opera was recorded by MGM, but with a pared down orchestra.

On the way over, she wandered into the smoking compartment and casually opened the lid of the piano to inspect, as pianists do, the brand name. A bored, tough Australian gold miner yelled to her to “give us a tune, love!” She summoned up a classic withering look and told him “Love doesn’t *do* tunes!” and huffed off.

The Adelaide Festival of 1986 presented two of her operas in a double-bill, *The Glittering Gate* (to Lord Dunsany’s text and the first time electronic music had been used in opera), and *The Transposed Heads* (“. . . once you closed your eyes, it was wonderful!”).

As a mark of her sweep through the American and European musical circles, Peggy maintained an astonishing correspondence with many of the stellar names of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. This fascinating archive is now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Supplementary materials are also held in the National Library of Australia and the State Library of Victoria. There are some in the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., and copies of some of her correspondence in various specialist archives in the United States.

Over her last years in Sydney, lots more of her old mates dropped in at 45 Ormond Street — Menotti, Cage, Copland, Menuhin, Harold Schoenberg, Lennox Berkeley, Morton Gould, and many more. Virgil Thomson promised to visit her if the Sydney Opera House would produce his last opera *Lord Byron*. She was not amused. *Her* major opera *Nausicaa* should have opened the Sydney Opera House.

Gian Carlo Menotti called on her while on his way to the misconceived Spoleto Festival in Melbourne. For the very first Spoleto Festival in 1958, he had commissioned her to compose not one but two ballets. (The poster for that Festival, showing Peggy’s billing, was found amongst her things when she died. It was framed and now is hung in the House.)

John Cage had been a close friend since the 1940s, and their fascinating correspondence is in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Particularly interesting is his reporting to her his electric encounters with Pierre Boulez in 1949 (“He’s one of us!”) Sitting in her “guest” chair,

facing her, did they talk about music? No! They talked about mycology! And she sent Cage down to the National Park, south of Sydney, to find some choice mushrooms.

Aaron Copland was regarded as the “father” of American music (and also a prize pupil of Nadia Boulanger) making Virgil Thomson, according to Ned Rorem, the “mother” of American music. Both these giant figures supported Peggy many times with strong references for Peggy’s applications for funding. The Australia Music Centre had acquired all of the published scores of Aaron Copland, and he dutifully autographed the lot, when Peggy organized his encounter with young Australian composers there,

Yehudi Menuhin was an old friend and collaborator. She had met him for the first time in New York (but had previously met his sister Hepzibah in Melbourne), and together they had first presented Ali Akbar Khan to New York audiences. They remained thereafter in close contact. While at Menuhin’s house at Alma, California, Peggy met there her second husband, after a whirlwind affair. She was there to orchestrate a newly discovered Felix Mendelssohn violin concerto, and prepare its piano reduction, for Menuhin to premiere. After Peggy’s death Menuhin said he was extremely sorry he had never recorded Peggy’s own beautiful *Viola Concerto*.

Harold Schonberg was one of her fellow music critics in New York, but on the *Times*. And while she didn’t care much for his musical opinions, she enjoyed rabbiting on about the “good old days” under Virgil’s vigilant eyes.

Sir Lennox Berkeley (also from the Nadia Boulanger Bakery), in Sydney on behalf of APRA, brought Peggy up-to-date on the English scene, and she hosted him and his wife on a lovely sparkling day on a “gin palace” on Sydney Harbour. Near the Sydney Opera House they narrowly missed running into another “gin palace” which was taking Prince Charles on a similar cruise. Sir Lennox was shocked at the near mishap, and as a dedicated royalist quaked at the likely headlines in *The Times*, London. Lady Berkeley was still miffed that the Queen had recently by-passed Sir Lennox when she appointed an Australian — Malcolm Williamson — the new “Master of the Queen’s Musik”. Legend has it that the nominee was really for another composer Malcolm, but Malcolm *Arnold*, but an aide didn’t check properly the nomination!

Morton Gould, a minor American composer, but a major figure with BMI, was accorded by Peggy a special “elevenses” at her house, and followed by a splendid lunch at the Sydney

Opera House. She lobbied him to introduce more music in America by Australian composers.

Peggy's life was punctuated by these encounters with old friends and colleagues from her past, as well as with her own darting visits interstate and abroad, until her health began to fade.

Her house renovations in Greece had taught her much, and she hadn't hesitated to re-align the archway between the front and the second room of the Paddington house. The existing archway did not satisfy her sense of proportion, and so she had workmen in to enlarge the arc, along a line which Peggy had drawn in pencil on the white wall. And, of course, she was right, it was a better look.

She developed other eccentricities, some endearing and some not.

She engaged the Woollahra Council, responsible for her street in Paddington, in a long battle to remove long standing but dangerous trees from the footpath. The trees had put out major roots which had seriously broken the pavements and were a hazard for walking. She telephoned, wrote letters, and generally harangued the Council staff, but to no avail. She seriously plotted to poison them, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Trees may be chopped, but not poisoned! Only after her death, did the Council remove the offending trees.

She adored chandeliers, and periodically insisted on cleaning them herself, mounting each time a rickety ladder to the limit of her strength, much to the alarm of her friends. She cleaned them with white vinegar, claiming it repelled flies and other insects, and that the crystals and glass shone brighter. She would ascend and then reach up and wash, but not dry, each individual piece with a strong solution of vinegar mixed with water. When dry, the pieces shone with brilliance. And the vinegar *was* a deterrent for flies and other insects, but of course not for her, as she couldn't smell anything.

Occasionally the moulded decoration on the ceiling surrounding the chandeliers shed some of the pellets, but quickly repaired by Peggy, once again mounting the unsafe

ladder. Not liking the usual plaster of Paris, Peggy masticated white bread to the exact pellet size and replaced the fallen bits with this verisimilitude. Of course when the bread pellets dried, they too dislodged, and sometimes would “plop” into one’s 5 o’clock brandy and soda, much to Peggy’s amusement and to one’s dismay.

Her drinks-hour ritual was to begin with a tip of the glass over the carpet to make a libation to Apollo, always the presiding household god. The carpets themselves, said by Peggy to be a family heirloom, and very valuable, eventually succumbed to this treatment, and were assessed as of little value.

She had bought items of Moroccan furniture when she had visited Paul Bowles in Tangier in 1956, and she put out rumours that some of the items had hidden drawers, secreting some of the family jewels. Alas, not so, but another romantic notion of Peggy’s.

When she first occupied the house, she refused to have the customary metal bell in the wall and had it removed. She replaced it with a striking Greek goat’s bell which she had brought from her house on Tynos, the island adjacent to Mykonos. It was activated by pulling the end of a gold-painted metal meat skewer, attached inside the door to the bell, which clanged a sound at the level that pleased her, and which she could hear even when she was in the garden.

In her last years, Peggy had befriended an artistic woman, Val Ochalski, who helped her with various chores, and soon Peggy asked her to share her house, while Val undertook painting classes. After a stormy beginning – two strong-willed women – they soon settled down and got on with their lives. This was a relief to all Peggy’s close friends to know that she had someone on hand.

The telephone answering machines of those close friends would be peppered, as many as six times a day, with her shredded voice pleading to “Come and totter over for a tippie!” A major documentary film on her life and music (“It’s Time!” she echoed) was made for the ABC, but she died from a heart attack on 25 June, 1990, mid-production.

Serious, and satisfyingly ample obituaries appeared in the world's press. Some of which she would have edited and amended strongly with a blue pencil.

Sydney's musical leaders gave her a High Anglican Church Mass, and what she loved most — a full house — and as usual, a stunning new address, *The Field of Mars*, in a central *nekropolis*. She was accompanied, like an emblem, by her favourite ceramic white owl.

She left her house in Sydney to be set up as a composers' haven by an eponymous Trust. In her Will, one heard her voice of experience utter "It's the middle years you need it! You have to get rid of the rent!"

Following her death, her Executors found that House was in a terrible state of repair: furniture that was dangerous to trust, rotting floorboards, mould growing up the walls and across ceilings, rising damp, dangerous wiring, threadbare carpet and dysfunctional utilities. It was no more than one might expect of a poor, sick and elderly person who, during her later life had managed to maintain her home in a state of elegant decrepitude, but cleverly disguised by a patina of style and an artist's eye.

The executors undertook extensive renovations, upgraded aspects of the house and fitted it out. The maintenance and rejuvenation continues – as money allows. They also attend to an endless list of administration matters as well as respond to unceasing questions as to copyright and musical matters

The Trustees felt that the house should not become just a museum for Peggy, but have retained several significant objects; the lid of her piano (strategically positioned on the wall of the entrance corridor), and her extraordinary mural which she had painted on the southern neighbour's wall, then outside the kitchen at the back of the house.. It is one of Peggy's few feminist statements. (Betty Churcher: "*The mural is not only an important reminder of the person and personality of Peggy Glanville-Hicks and her time, it has artistic merit in its own right.*")

Nearly twenty years after her death, she has an extensive discography, regular ABC broadcasts and the satisfaction of knowing that a procession of talented composers is enjoying her home.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks. A composer. A writer. And a woman.

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