

Finzi Trust Travel Scholarship

Venice, 21st April – 4th May 2008

Helen Porter

Composition project: *The Venetian Interludes*

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Biography, Helen Porter

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1. Introduction

Venice might not seem the obvious choice for a peaceful retreat to work on composition, but ever since the idea of composing a chamber opera adapted from Henry James novel ‘The Aspern Papers’ became a reality, I felt it would be desirable to spend time there. Venice is at the very heart of the novella, and its relevance to the story is succinctly put by Rosella Zorzi, a Professor of American literature, teaching at the University of Venice:

“The labyrinthine alleys of the city are the echoing mirror of the labyrinths of the mind, of the devious purposes of the characters...”

It was this Venice, the “devious and secret Venice” I set out to explore, both physically and musically.

My specific task in relation to the Finzi travel award was to begin work on the four Interludes for string quartet. These Interludes serve a number of purposes: they are to provide the chamber opera with a clear structure, denoting the passing of time and the

increasing intensity of the Venetian summer, and to represent both the psychological states and the development of the characters. They also loosely represent the four elements: earth, air, water and fire. I wanted to approach composition in a new, challenging way, in order to avoid falling in to old familiar patterns. With my previous output of vocal work, all of the supporting music was developed using the vocal lines as a starting point. I wanted now to begin not with word setting, (ie. with the shape of the vocal line determining melody and rhythm) but trying to compose music for the opera inspired by place, combined with an understanding of the psychological states of the characters. I felt, if I could achieve this, it would lead to a deeper texture in the music, an undercurrent which would not only bring something unpredictable from myself, but which would also reflect the underlying narrative of the work, that which Professor Zorzi describes as the '*psychological thriller*' element of 'The Aspern Papers'.

2. The Canossiane Institute

A few weeks prior to my departure for Venice, we decided that my husband Peter would come out with me for a few days. He is a painter and print maker, and we had often talked about going away somewhere together to work. We agreed that we would work independently during the day, and come together for dinner in the evening to discuss the day's progress. Before the end of the first week, he would return home and I would have the remaining time on my own.

We left home for Bristol airport at 1.30pm, and landed at Marco Polo airport just before 9pm. We then took a bus to Venice, and a ferry from the Piazza Roma to Zatterre, in the Dorsoduro area, and arrived there at around 10.30pm. What should have been a five minutes walk from the quay at Zatterre to the Canossiane Institute became a lengthy meandering along narrow paths and waterways. Not only had the ferry not docked at the spot that had been given in the directions, but the name of the road was also nowhere to be found on the map. After a 40 minutes trudge with suitcases and laptop, and some detective work on Peter's part, we came to roughly where we thought we should be. Our problem stemmed from two rather unpredictable problems: 1) the name of the road – 'Rue de la Romite' on the directions, was given as 'Rue de la Ermite' on the map. 2) The name 'Rue de la Ermite' was crumbling off of the ancient stuccoed wall, and completely illegible. Although it was late, and we were tired, I was conscious that I was having a useful first hand experience of the '*labyrinthine alleyways*' of Venice!

I kept a diary each day (I am keeping a journal for the duration of the writing of the whole chamber opera), extracts of which I will use (in italics) to illustrate this report.

Fondamente de la Romite

22nd April 2008

"The Covent (Canossiane Institute) is absolutely perfect, and I feel so incredibly lucky. My large marble floored, high ceilinged room, with beautiful spotless bathroom, is on the ground floor, looking out over a large, sunny courtyard. There are two sets of high double doors that can be thrown open. I have a desk, shelves and solid chair – a proper workspace. It's quiet and peaceful. Nuns still live in the convent, and although we can't communicate with language they are very obliging

and friendly. I have been shown a large space I can use, which has a piano. The piano, sadly, is irreparably out of tune and unusable, no doubt due to a constant environment of extreme heat and damp! Despite this, I feel I have landed in the most perfect place. There is also a small kitchen where we can make tea and coffee, and prepare lunch....”

My room at the Convent from the Courtyard

It seemed amazing to me that this place existed only a short walk from the tourist (and pigeon) mayhem of San Marco. I had not expected such a beautiful space, both for working and living, for two weeks.

The convent had very few guests staying. There were some students, who lived in completely separate quarters, as did the nuns. During the first week we met Judy Rees, a retired priest who by coincidence lived in Salisbury, and knew both Howard Moody (from Sarum Orchestra) and Alec Roth (composer, who has just premiered ‘The Traveller’ at Salisbury Cathedral).

3. Venice: ‘A Battered Peep-show’

Meandering through the streets of Venice is surely one of the great pleasures of being in this extraordinary city. We spent the morning orientating ourselves, walking to Piazza San Marco via the Palazzo Barbaro, which you can see from the Academia Bridge. This Palazzo is of special interest to me, as it is where Henry James frequently stayed with the owners, his friends Daniel and Ariana Curtis. He also wrote and completed ‘The Aspern Papers’ there in 1887. It is renowned to be one of the most beautiful Palazzos on the Grand Canal. We found the back entrance to the Palazzo, and I was thrilled to find the name of ‘Curtis’ still over the door bell. I then later discovered that their great grand daughter, Patricia Curtis, still lives there today.

*The Palazzo Barbaro, Grand Canal
(Second Palazzo from the left)*

The daily (and more frequently, nightly) wanderings through Venice conjured so many ideas in relation to the composition. It struck me how the church bells are a constant presence in the city. The narrow, dark alley ways, constant presence of water from the busy, turbulent music of the Grand Canal to the quiet backwaters of small canals forgotten by the masses. The landscape of Venice, so often written about, (so much that even Henry James found it a daunting task and one to be avoided) provides a rich palette of sounds and textures. It also seemed a good omen to come across an exhibition of violin-making on the first day, accompanied by Vivaldi music for string ensemble in a beautiful church, the ...on the Campo Stephano. I also saw some of the most innovative street busking, the highlight of which was a man performing ‘The Sounds of Crystal’ - baroque music on a range of wine glasses containing different levels of water. The sound was haunting and extraordinary, and drew a large, mesmerised crowd.

I soon discovered that another great advantage to the Convent was its close proximity to almost everywhere I wanted to be. Five minutes from the Palazzo Barbaro, less than that to the University Ca Foscari and the Conservatorium, less than half an hour walk to the Palazzo Capello and to Professor Zorzi.

On the first day in Venice I telephoned the Professor to arrange a meeting with her. We had had email contact before, and she sounded very enthusiastic and invited me to her apartment at the Santa Maria Formosa the next day. I spent the rest of the day re-reading 'The Aspern Papers'. I wanted to have the story fresh in my mind before I began serious work on the Interludes.

Tuesday 23rd April

"Worked on the interludes until 3.30pm, then at 4pm set off for my meeting with Professor Rosella Zorzi. I gave myself an hour and a half to walk from the Convent to her address, Castello 6119 at the Santa Maria Formosa. I'm proud to say that having negotiated my way over bridges, across campi, through sottoportegos and along fondamentas, I found it within 40 minutes (I did take a few wrong turnings.... I am now sitting in the big, busy square, enjoying a café latte (an expensive one, at 4 euros...) and will read my 'Henry James letters from the Palazzo Barbaro' until it's time to ring the professors doorbell..."

4. Professor Rosella Mamoli Zorzi

My meeting with Professor Zorzi was a great success. She told me many things of great interest and relevance to the project, not least the whereabouts of the Palazzo Henry James had in mind for Juliana's crumbling and dilapidated Palazzo. This is called the Palazzo Soreno Capello on the Rio Marin, a little hidden away street near the railway station at the Piazza Roma.

As well as hearing interesting details from an academic's point of view regarding 'The Aspern Papers', Professor Zorzi also gave me a number of useful contacts. She has suggested I write to Barbara di Valmarana, the president of the 'Friends of La Fenice', who she felt sure would be interested in the project.

We arranged to meet again on Monday morning, and she would show me books from her library collection at the University.

Professor Rosella Mamoli Zorzi

5. Palazzo Soreno Capello: Juliana's Palazzo

We set off the next morning to find the Palazzo Capello. It is now the "Ministero per I Beni e le Attivita Culturali, and has recently been renovated. It no longer has the crumbling and neglected appearance of the Palazzo that James describes, but even so it is still clearly recognisable from his description.

Wednesday 24th April

"It has an enormous garden, partly restored, and just as the Editor describes it in 'The Aspern Papers', is easily accessible by gondola. The water is just a few feet from the entrance, in front of which runs a small, narrow pavement. This is particularly unusual for Venetian Palazzos, as most of them have the water coming

right up to the front of the building. The interior is vast, and the garden far bigger than I had imagined, and enclosed by a wall of Roman brick. It strikes me how lucky I am to be in Venice not as a tourist, but rather on a mission with a very clear objective. I am 'absorbing' Venice. From alley ways, covered passages and bridges to small details like unusual door knockers and iron gates, the abundant fragrant wisteria or the beautiful and extraordinary churches with their magnificently decorated interiors – anything can inspire something unexpected. I feel that having such a purpose for being here allows me to become part of the landscape, and not mere as someone admiring the surface of Venice. I am not looking for the tourist attractions, art exhibitions and guided tours, but rather searching out the unusual places, and for very particular reasons..."

Palazzo Capello Soreno, Rio Marin. La Sala Grande.

View to the left

6. Down To Work

In the afternoon I set to work on the interludes. My starting point was thinking about possible ways of structuring them, and continued this work in to the following day. I needed to explore carefully the dramatic demands for each Interlude, as well as thinking about the musical shape, atmosphere and function in the opera. I enjoyed the process of structuring the ideas on paper, something I had never really tackled before. Working on all four interludes alongside one another seemed necessary in order to ensure that they would each have their own distinct musical 'character'. It struck me that whilst not having access to a piano would be challenging and present certain difficulties, working without one would also force me to spend more time thinking and planning, and therefore being better prepared before I started to work with the dots...I was curious to know if this carefully considered, unhurried mental preparation would make a big difference to the process of composition. I found the transition from written ideas on paper to music very hard. I had hoped that all the careful preparation would make the composition work easier, but this was not to be. The one thing I did feel helped was having an overall shape to work with, even if the music itself didn't come particularly easily.

7. 'Ci Vuole Pazienza in Tutto' (One must have patience in everything")

Saturday 26th April

Yesterday was a 'struggling' day. I suppose there is no reason why being in beautiful Venice should eliminate those awful hours of torture where nothing of any value seems to emerge. This was a stark lesson. It wasn't going to be plain sailing after all. But it seems that a hopeless day is often followed by a reasonably good and productive one, and that's what I'm experiencing today. I have worked hard all day, breaking only to walk along the quay at Zatterre at lunchtime, and stare out across the sparkling sea to the coast of Giudecca Island. Peter also took me to the place where

the Grand Canal makes its entrance in to Venice. I uncovered some possibilities for 'Air' and 'Water' today. Finding it all horribly difficult, but this is familiar. Not having a piano is the constant challenge, but there's something in having to think in strings, rather than scrabbling about over the piano keys searching for harmonic ideas.

Despite the challenge, in the end I was glad not to have had a piano to work with. I would inevitably have fallen back on old habits, precisely what I was trying to break from. The computer has a playback facility, which is helpful, but it's not an instrument where you can really improvise and play, and get a 'physical' grasp of the music you are trying to compose. My approach was instead partly thematic – trying to discover musical ideas to represent place, atmosphere and character. For example, with 'AIR', I explored the idea of using the cello to represent the elderly, sedentary Juliana, and the viola for the forlorn Miss Tina, and developed a theme which wove the two instruments together, symbolising the two women's inter-dependence upon one another. The Air interlude begins with a two-part between these instruments only. This also gives the feeling of space and isolation, as well as a sense that both are inextricably linked to one another. The viola tries to break free, but is ultimately dominated by the 'cello (in the story, even in death.) Because of having the time to think, interesting ideas were emerging – not only to do with the specifics of the Interludes, but with the generals of the Opera. These two, after all, are also inextricably linked.

8. A Day Off, Eating and Ice Cream

Sunday 27th April

A day off today, and Peter's last day in Venice. We headed off together after breakfast to the island of Torcello. A one and a half hour boat trip, in beautiful sunshine. Torcello, however, was a bit of a disappointment, and I felt I had for the first time fallen in to something of a tourist trap. The outstanding thing about the island is that it is home to Venice's oldest church, which has some stunning mosaics, the most impressive of which is a 'gold' Christ. The island was once home to 20,000 people, when Venice itself was still just a swampy, sparsely inhabited land. Now there are just 60 people living on Torcello.

Evening. After seeing Peter off on the ferry, I came back to the convent and got back down to work again. Tomorrow I will meet Professor Zorzi again, and then go to the conservatorium to see a man about a piano...

9. The Second Week

Monday 28th April

The rhythm of my day in the second week was to get up at 7.30am, shower and have breakfast, and write in my diary if I hadn't already done so the night before, and be ready to work at my desk by 8.30am. I then worked through until lunchtime, stopping for coffee at 11am. After lunch, which I always prepared at the convent, I would get back to work again, sometimes moving my chair outside my room and in to the courtyard, sitting in the shade with the computer perched on my knees. I loved to feel the breeze and to sit in the warm completely absorbed in my work.

Outside my room – a shady spot

By the second week I settled much more ‘inside’ my work. I think this is because the first week had been about getting out ideas to work with, which was quite a struggle, but once I had a few ideas, I then could enjoy developing them and seeing where they would lead. I did continue to struggle, but this wasn’t a destructive force – I quite surprised myself by how constantly I was able to work, even through the difficult patches (the ones where at home I would go and load the washing machine, or Hoover the living room....)

The day has started well! IDEA: very high, quiet chord clusters on the upper strings – a high rising and falling motif on the cello. This symbolizes Juliana as ‘AIR’ – stifled, reaching for a love, or a youth, long past. Yearning and claustrophobic – the difficulty of breathing. Air is also synonymous with light in Venice – and heat. What is beautiful becomes stifling; what is fresh becomes stale; musically akin to harmony becoming dis-chord. Interesting ideas to play with here...

I stopped work to meet Professor Zorzi again, this time in the University Ca Foscari, which was a three minutes jaunt from the Convent. She had ready for me an enormous pile of books she thought might be of interest to me. She took me along to the University library, a beautiful wooden interior, and seated me at the end overlooking the Grand Canal. The books were wonderful – some she had edited or written herself, including a beautiful one: “Gondola Days”, the result of an exhibition she had helped to curate a few years back, relating to the Palazzo Barbaro Circle. There was also a book of the paintings of John Singer-Sargent (Sargent’s Venice), who knew James and was also a guest of the Curtis’s at the Palazzo Barbaro. He went to Art School with the son of Daniel Curtis, Ralph. I felt these paintings really connected with what I am trying to achieve musically. Not a portrayal of the tourists Venice – or the Venice Henry James described more than a hundred years ago: “Venice scarcely exists any more as a city at all; that she exists only as a battered peep-show and bazaar. There was a horde of savage Germans in the Piazza today...”

His paintings show the dark, less instantly charming parts of Venice (and they were enormously criticised as a result of this) – back streets, bead stringers, dark waterways. A less obvious but altogether more interesting and unfamiliar Venice. I spent a blissful two hours in the library – lost all track of time until Rosella came to find me, said I could keep hold of the books and invited me to a party at her house on Thursday evening.

10. The music.

Suspense; waiting; foreboding; brooding; often dark. Full of expectation. The interludes need to give an impression of this, and ‘Fire’, the last interlude, is the one which finally explodes the deceit, and ‘truth’ is revealed. So each interlude must have a feeling of being unresolved, in order for the final interlude to be the catalyst...

During the course of my work on the interludes, it became necessary to write quite detailed pictures of what they were about. I decided that alternating between different rhythms would give a pervasive feeling of uncertainty, of digging away, searching for something. This was harder in practice than it was in theory, but by the end of the day felt I was beginning to get somewhere with ‘Earth’, and that the material had potential. Often the composition strayed quite radically from the written idea, into a different territory altogether. They seemed to take on a life of their own, and rather than trying to restrain myself, I let the composition go where it seemed to want to lead

me. This occasionally led to a dead end, but at other times something interesting would emerge.

Tuesday 29th April

Had a good, concentrated first hour of the day, then went off to the Conservatorium to see if I could use a piano.

This turned out to be something of an adventure, and probably typically Italian. I spent roughly an hour and a half in the building, being sent from top to bottom in search of the illusive 'Secreteria della Dirretore'. I never did get to see her, but the upshot was that it would not be possible to use a piano without written permission from the Dirretore, who was away, and in any case it was very unlikely because it had to be for 'exceptional' reasons, and mine didn't appear to be overly impressive. I think even if I had tried to organise this in advance I wouldn't have got any further, although in hindsight I should have tried. However, I did get to have a good look around the Conservatorium:

Shabby and lived in, like a very worn coat handed down through the generations. Loved, but not mended; once decorated and new, now scarcely even patched or darned. The place is all grey, and inside adorned with gloomy paintings. I am standing opposite the Slaying of the Innocents. The marble floor is the only really beautiful part of it, apart from the sounds of students practicing and rehearsing. It could be a music school anywhere in Europe. The sound of a piano played brilliantly, dominates...

The Conservatorium

So it's onwards and upwards with no piano. The following evening, to give myself a break, I went along to the Venice Jazz Club, where I spotted a piano, but like every other piano in Venice, was not available for use during the day.

During the afternoon I continued to work on the Viola and Cello two part at the start of 'air'. I am pleased with it because it has a clear sense of purpose, and seems to really reflect the isolation of the two women. I also became mindful of Britten's 'Turn of the Screw', where he uses glisses to beautiful effect. I started to play with this idea, which lead to something totally different, but was a very satisfying process.

Wednesday 30th April

"I feel a bit 'spent' this morning, so I am sitting in the courtyard flicking through Rosella's 'Gondola Days' with a cup of coffee. I don't mind this feeling – I'm not 'stuck', just not yet ready to settle in to something. I've decided to work more with 'Water' today, as I have been rather neglecting this piece. I think perhaps because it's the one that's going to give me the most trouble, despite being surrounded by water! However, I've just had the idea that this needs to come on the end of the Editor's sense of elation at hearing that the papers really do exist, and him taking Miss Tina out on to the Grand Canal. The music should begin with an exhilarating rush on to a chord full of excitement and anticipation, and then rush headlong into a turbulent section, depicting the beauty of the Grand Canal, the sun reflected on the water and the water lapping against the gondola. The interlude should then become calmer, as if turning off from the Grand Canal in to a quiet waterway. The instruments interweave and become distracted by one another, and the mood becomes unsettled....."

After a good session working in the morning, I walked to the Museo Correr, at San Marco. Rosella told me that the photographic collection here was excellent, but very

badly run since the man who had been in charge for years had died. I had seen an old photograph of the Palazzo Capello, photographed in James' time, and thought it would be lovely to have a copy of it. However, as she had anticipated, it was extremely difficult to talk to anyone who knew anything about it. In the end, I did manage to get an email address, and was told this would be the best way to obtain photographs. I'm still waiting to hear from Museo Correr..

Thursday 1st May

"After a couple of good, concentrated days, I now feel 'stuck' again..."

It so often seems to me that I can feel very 'stuck' indeed, but suddenly things will come right without me even noticing. A bit further on in my diary, I suddenly write that I have

"Just had 30 minutes of really satisfying work..."

I am learning a great deal about myself as a composer. I also think I am learning to trust myself. I have always had a suspicion that even when I'm stuck, things go on working somewhere deep down in my subconscious. I now know that this is true, and the beauty of writing all this down means that when I feel completely stuck in future, I can look at this and remind myself of what the process is!

11. The Professor's Party

Friday 2nd May, 8.30am

"Last night I was privileged to be a guest at Professor Rosella Zorzi's party. I was in the company of authors and academics from across the globe, which could have been daunting, but for the fact that they were extremely friendly and warm-hearted people. Being the only musician was of course a bonus! I met a wonderful woman called Judith Martin, an American who writes books about Venice. Her latest book, "No Vulgar Hotel" has its title taken from a novel by Henry James (The Wings of a Dove). She had seen the Daniel Argento opera of 'The Aspern Papers' when it premiered in America in the 1980s, and knows him personally. It is really fantastic to have made such good contacts with people who live and work in Venice. I am sure it will help to make bringing 'The Aspern Papers' to Venice a possibility. They were all so generously interested and enthusiastic about the project.

The sun is beautifully hot already. I am sitting out in the courtyard with my cup of tea. I sense I am beginning to feel ready to come home – or perhaps ready to ease off the intensity with which I have been working and concentrating..."

Tonight I had my final meal at the little restaurant, 'Ossaria al 4 Feri', where I had eaten every night since discovering it. It was just a few minutes walk from the Convent, a tiny, homely place, which seated only about 20 people. The menu was simple – grilled fish and shellfish of every description, grilled vegetables and delicious panacotta. Betty, the jolly, hearty owner, made me welcome each evening. I decided as soon as we discovered this restaurant that I would come here, rather than trail around trying different restaurants.

Betty (in pink).

May 3rd, Saturday

"Having decided last night to give myself a break today, I changed my mind this morning as I felt like working. I remembered the feeling of being in a tourist trap last weekend, and it seemed to make much more sense to make the most of my last whole day in the peaceful surroundings of the Convent. I spent the morning working on the

interludes, pulling some things in to better shape, and then went out after lunch. I did take a spontaneous trip to the Lido. I didn't exactly regret it – it was lovely to stroll through the warm sea, but I wouldn't rush to go there again in future, for all the obvious reasons. I feel I am returning home at a good time. Two weeks was exactly the right length for this trip. It will be good to go to London next week, to try out some of the ideas, and then to put them on one side for a short while, so I can come back with fresh eyes and ears..."

View of San Marco from Giudecca

12. Two Weeks and Twelve Minutes

Another great pleasure of the fortnight in Venice, and a major reason for going there, was the possibility of absorbing myself 100 percent in this one project. At home the demands are several, particularly from the different strands of my work, a lot of which is about giving out. This was a rare opportunity for me to absorb, rather than to give, and I made the most of every minute of the time there with regards to this. It is a luxury that is simply unaffordable, but realising the enormous benefit of this, not just to my composition but also to my well-being, I feel I must try to make time every year for quiet retreat of some sort.

Finally, I would like to say how very grateful I am to the Finzi Trust for making this trip possible for me. It was a dream for me to be able to spend time in Venice, and whilst it is early to judge the exact nature of the influence on my work, I know for certain that the way the composition is going is completely different to anything I've done before. At any rate, the work has begun, the foundations for four string interludes have been laid, thematic material discovered and explored, approximately twelve minutes of music written, and I am now in a position to develop this work over the summer in preparation for performance by Sarum Orchestra later in the year.

Thank you.

Helen Porter

May 2008