This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Ms Elizabeth Silsbury OAM on Thursday, 14th January 2010 at her home in Adelaide about her contribution to the development of the arts in South Australia during Don Dunstan’s Premiership, particularly in the field of music. This recording is being made for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project and will be deposited in the Flinders University Library Don Dunstan Special Collection and in the State Library of South Australia.

Good morning, Elizabeth, and thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

My pleasure.

I think it would be fair to say that you are somewhat of an institution in the world of music in Adelaide, having worked as a teacher, lecturer, conductor, repetiteur and critic for more than four decades. Of these hats, which were you wearing during the ’70s in the time of Don Dunstan?

About four of them, I guess. I started reviewing in 1974, so that was within his time here as a politician and as Premier. I did some conducting, some repetiteur work, but I think the main thing was actually from behind the scenes because that was the time when things were moving towards the establishment of a permanent opera company in South Australia. We already had a State Theatre Company; we had a dance company, Elizabeth Cameron Dalman’s Australian Dance Theatre; and we needed to have an opera company, which the other States either had or were working towards. And Don was very keen on that.

I came into that particular picture through, well, the agency of one James Murdoch, who had been appointed by Gough Whitlam through Jean Battersby during 1972, which was the period coming up to the Labor win in the election at the end of ’72, setting up the members of the boards for the Australia Council, which Whitlam had promised would be established if Labor won the election in 1972, which they did. So from early 1973 we had the Australia Council. I think it was initially called the ‘Australia Council for the Arts’. (break in recording)

I got to know James Murdoch through Len Amadio, who Don referred to as ‘my cultural commissar’ and was a friend of mine, and James desperately wanted to put
on some celebrations for the 75th birthday of Margaret Sutherland. And his major project in that was to present an opera – well, the only opera – written by Margaret Sutherland called *The Young Kabbarli*, which was a story – a very weak, feeble story – about Daisy Bates and her work with the Aborigines. He managed to get some money out of the predecessor of the Australia Council; there was a sort of Australian council for the arts but nothing really well-organised. He had managed to get hold of $4,000 to put this on. He approached Victorian State Opera and they said, ‘No, thank you, we’re not doing it’. It was a ‘whitey’ sort of thing; it would never be done now. And so he came to South Australia knowing of this move to set up an opera company and, as you’ve seen from my book, the Intimate Opera was still operating in 1972, but obviously it could not – didn’t have the resources and the manpower to be able to actually set up a permanent opera company.

So James came to South Australia – – –.

**Just can I interrupt: James Murdoch of the Murdoch family?**

No, no relation to that; a musician – I’m surprised his name hasn’t come up so far –

**I read it in your book but I wasn’t sure of – – –.**

– trained in New South Wales. Huge, huge history. Now lives in Bali. He came to us in South Australia with $4,000 to put on a couple of performances of *The Young Kabbarli*, a short opera, so we had to have the second half of her songs, to do it in Adelaide twice in The Olde Kings’ Music Hall and then to take it to Melbourne to do it in the Great Hall of the National Gallery of Victoria. Wow! Instant international fame! So a few of us got together: I was the repetiteur, Patrick Thomas conducted, James arranged for David Gulpilil to come and dance for us and Dick Bnndilil to play didgeridoo. And so it was done. It was pretty awful, really. It was an embarrassing story with the libretto by Lady May Casey with wonderful lines like, ‘O list to the sound of the didgeridoo’, and a white local baritone having to go blackface.

**Oh, really.**
It really was terrible. But anyway, we did it, and it was with encouragement from Don – I don’t know whether he actually gave us some money. After the first performance I remember him standing in the corner of the hall where we were having supper and saying, ‘I wasn’t expecting *The Ring* but this is not quite what I had in mind!’, and I’ve quoted that story, he gave me permission to quote that. He said he couldn’t remember saying it but it was pretty likely he did.

Now, it was during all that that the moves to set up a permanent opera company in South Australia, they were all sort of going along quite steadily – yes, ‘steadily’ I think is the right word – so by the beginning of 1973 there we were, a small group of us, Intimate Opera people, ring-in me and ring-in Justin; and Don, of course, with great encouragement all the time; and there we were early 1973 with the Intimate Opera Company and with government funding, State and Federal Government funding, for a permanent company. No permanent singers at that stage, that went through various changes along the line. But that was how I came into really quite close contact with Don and that was the most important aspect of my life at that time. It actually led on to James getting me appointed to the first Music Board of the Australia Council at the beginning of 1973, March 1973, with Don Banks as the Chairman.

**Aha, right.**

And when I said to him, ‘James, why me?’ He said, ‘Darling, you’re perfect. You’re a woman, you come from South Australia and nobody’s ever heard of you’.

**Damning with faint praise.**

Oh, no, it was exactly true. And this was along with Frank Calloway and John Hopkins and people from all round the country – Kim Williams who now runs Fox; Mary Vallentine, she was on the staff there; James himself was on the staff – so that was really my stepping-stone and I had just started as a critic and really feeling my way and saying some pretty stupid things, which most critics do when they start off.
Starting up the State Opera was a particular – I don’t want to say ‘hobbyhorse’, but a particular desire of Don Dunstan’s, wasn’t it?

Yes, it was. Yes, that’s right.

You mentioned that he had been at the first night of Kabbarli. Did you see him there in the audience a lot, was he a sort of omnipresent figure in your productions?

Well, whenever he could, yes. Actually, it wasn’t my first contact with him. My first contact with him was through my husband, who was an agricultural scientist, an agronomist, with great interest in music and theatre, and he was very keen to see a West Australian director, Aarne Neeme, appointed as Director of the State Theatre Company. Now, I can’t remember whether Don was actually Premier, but we had him around to dinner one night and I cooked a very fancy French pie with lots of layers; but that was mainly through Jim and through the interest in Aarne Neeme, and probably that would have been very early ’72 or even late ’71.

He was Premier then, yes.

He was Premier.

1970.

Yes, that’s right – was it 1970?

What was the connection between your husband and Aarne Neeme?

Well, Jim was actually President of the Adelaide University Theatre Guild for a while. We met in the theatre, but that goes back to ’57.

Yes, right.

That was his interest. Now, I don’t know how he managed to persuade Don to come to dinner, it’s all in the mists of time, but that was the first time I was actually close, physically close, to him.

How did you find him on a personal level when he was around your dinner table?
Oh! (laughs) Delightful, absolutely delightful. You would have not thought he was Premier or President or proud or important at anything. In fact, he nodded off at one stage; that was how relaxed he was. Apparently, yes, later on people said that he became more distant, but I think he probably had to in order to protect himself –

Yes.

– because a lot of people wanted a piece of Don Dunstan for all sorts of funny reasons. I never found that. He used to call me ‘Liz Love’. (laughter) He loved nicknames. I had known Gretel, of course, his wife, through university. No, I never found him distant. But he didn’t have to have a lot of contact with me, it all just happened, and there was always a reason.

So he always greeted you when you saw him in a crowd or anything?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In fact, he liked saying ‘Liz Love’, because he was the only person who called me ‘Liz Love’. (laughter)

There’s a nice story.

Yes.

Just going back to the opera for a minute, during the administration of Justin Macdonnell I believe there were some significant changes in relation to how the opera – I think still Intimate Opera at that stage, or just on the change before it became ‘State’ – they started to hook up together with the orchestra, is that right?

Oh, yes – there were a number of different arrangements and each one of them had different details. At one stage there was a deal with the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra with John Russell, but none of them really worked and I think….. did Justin try to set up a separate orchestra just for the opera?

I don’t recall that being stated in your book.

No, I don’t think so. It wasn’t appropriate because most of the repertoire – not all of it by any means, but a lot of the repertoire – that we did with Intimate Opera, and I was repetiteur for most of those things and I was repetiteur for The young Kabbarli, most of the repertoire was chamber, so it was only a handful of instruments or even
just piano, though we didn’t do anything that wasn’t written for piano, we didn’t rearrange. No: New Opera is what we established in ’73. Intimate Opera was the predecessor.

All right.

New Opera was when the bunch of people came together and Justin became the administrator, that was New Opera.

NOSA – New Opera of South Australia, was it?

Oh, yes, I guess so, but we always called it ‘New Opera’.

Yes, okay.

Now, for most of that repertoire it was chamber and there were a small group of instruments, whereas the previous Intimate Opera would do pieces with just piano, even though they were originally scored for a number of instruments.

I see.

So we were always faithful and tried to be authentic.

Right, because the Festivals when Anthony Steele started being the [Artistic] Director of the Festival, was that not the first time that the Symphony Orchestra had played for an opera production, is that right, under Justin’s sort of guidance and Anthony’s guidance?

No. When did Anthony come – ’75, ’76?

Was ’74 his first one?

Oh, hang on: yes, I think you’re right. ’74, New Opera took on the gargantuan task of performing *The Excursions of Mr Brouček* by Janáček and we had the Orchestra for that, that was a Festival.

First time it’s ever been produced in Australia, wasn’t it?

Yes, it was. Certainly was, yes. Actually, the first Janacek done in Australia. Anthony wanted something else, and Justin was very keen on *Brouček* and Anthony
said, ‘But nobody’s ever heard of it’, and Justin said, ‘Exactly. That’s why I want to do it’. (laughter) That was great fun.

Now, there was another one that we had the Symphony Orchestra and that was *Comte Ory* by Rossini.

That was inside the Festival or outside the Festival?

Outside.

I think it’s interesting: why I’m bring that up is because when I did interview Len Amadio he said that the Symphony Orchestra at that time – of course, it was run by the ABC –

That’s right.

– and they had not really engaged as a musical organisation with any other –

No.

– not knitted or cooperated with any other musical activity in Adelaide, and it was at around about the time that you’re talking about that this first cooperation started and then a whole lot of good things came out of it. Would you agree with that?

Yes, I certainly would. I’d have to check to see who the conductor was, was it Krips?

This would all be -- --.

But it’s not for me to ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... Yes, this is all on record. I was actually going to ask you, being so involved in the music scene, not just with opera, if you could sort of free-range across the music scene as it was, and I wanted to quote something here to see what your reaction was. Colin Horne in his chapter on the arts in the 1981 book *The Dunstan Decade: social democracy at the State level* – that was Andrew Parkin and Alan Patience’s, they edited it – describes the Elder Conservatorium at The University of Adelaide as having been the ‘traditional source and centre of music activity in Adelaide’. What do you say to that, would you agree with that?

Now, what’s the period he’s talking about?

He’s talking about during the ’70s --
During the ’70s.

– because Colin Horne wrote a chapter on the arts about the Dunstan Decade, so he was the one that said the Elder Conservatorium had been the ‘traditional source and centre of music activity in Adelaide’. What’s your memory of that?

Well, I suppose *ipso facto* it was the major training institution. Things that you’re really not aware of at the time: I’d always taken the Conservatorium for granted, it was just there. I’d studied there myself: I first was there in 1948 and then I did my first diploma and degree and my second degree, I did all that. It was just there. I can’t think of anything else that would compete for that particular designation, but – well, now, let’s think. See, the influence of John Bishop himself – – –. But then he died ’64, didn’t he?

**It wasn’t that long after – he did two Festivals, didn’t he?**

Bishop?

**Yes, he was alive for two.**

Yes, ’60, ’62. I think he died after the ’64 one. That can be checked, that’s on record. And certainly his influence in getting the Festival going was enormous. So yes, I guess from that point of view – – –. But as a centre of musical performance there were – well, they really didn’t have much of an orchestra at that time; the chamber music was good – – –. Well, as I said, there’s nothing else that could earn that title. It certainly was influential and as other institutions have developed and grown and become more active then the influence of the Conservatorium has waned somewhat. But you would expect the major training institution in any city, especially a small one like Adelaide, to be – I don’t think it’s a very important point, actually.

**Well, perhaps not. It was just quite strongly put in the chapter –**

Yes.
– and I wondered what was the underlying reason for that. But let’s move on. Now, was the Symphony Orchestra an important thing in the ’70s, the ABC Symphony Orchestra.

Oh, yes. Yes, that was very important because that was our only source of orchestral music. Musica Viva of course did the chamber music regularly. Yes, yes, certainly it was, it was important. And there were a number of series: there was what’s now called the Master Series for major symphonic works; it was pretty loath to take on anything contemporary.

Was it?

Oh, yes. Yes.

Pretty conservative.

Funny – yes – really odd, because if you look back at the programs of the predecessor of what became the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra they’re actually more adventurous, and we were getting first performances of things that were coming out three or four years after their premieres on the other side of the world. That is what Intimate Opera and New Opera did.

Yes.

You would be familiar with all that.

Yes.

First performances I think of Turn of the Screw and that sort of thing, very soon after they’d been born.

And not rehashing the old repertoire all the time –

No.

– going for modern, contemporary.

That’s right, yes. Well, that was very much Kathleen Steele-Scott’s influence from Intimate Opera and then Justin’s influence from New Opera.
Yes. The chamber music scene, was it pretty vibrant in those days? Because I’d say it certainly is now in Adelaide, there’s lots of little chamber music groups everywhere.

Yes.

But it was a bit different back then?

Yes, it would have been. As far as I can remember, there was only one local string quartet. Oh! There was the Wind Quintet. Now, that would be a point in Colin Horne’s favour, of course, the Wind Quintet, because that was at the Conservatorium and that was put together by John Bishop. But nothing like the number and the quality that have sprung up even in the last I’d say less than 10 years. But the real strength of say semi-professional music outside the major institutions is in choral music rather than in instrumental music, though we have the Kegelstatt Ensemble and the Zephyr String Quartet and they do a lot of very interesting, really quite adventurous stuff. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. But that’s all very much in the recent past; it doesn’t go back all that far.

Yes. There was a – was it called the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra?

(laughs) There was indeed, yes. Now, that was the baby of John Russell – have you got him on your list?

No, at the moment I don’t think so.

Well, he was the founder of the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra and he was a violinist himself and he was encouraged by an Adelaide violinist called Brenton Langbein who had been born in Adelaide, left I think when he was only 20, went to Zurich and lived there for the rest of his life, and between them they founded the Barossa International Music Festival with Brenton as the Artistic Director and John as the Manager. Now, that’s well past Dunstan’s time.

I was going to say did Dunstan have anything to do with funding that, or that was after him, was it?
That was after him, yes; but it was certainly funded by the Government and I was chairing the State Arts Grants Advisory Committee which was responsible for funding the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra and it was very difficult because John was born with a silver spoon and thought the world owed him everything and he would just say, ‘Well, I need $100,000’, and we’d have to say, ‘Yes, but what are you going to do with it, John?’ ‘Well, that’s none of your business.’

You’re talking John Russell.

John Russell.

Yes. Why was the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra not funded through the State Arts Grants Advisory Committee?

It was. Oh, I beg your pardon, I thought you said – – –.

Yes, it was. Yes, it was our responsibility to fund it, but it was very difficult to do because he didn’t like providing detail. He just liked to say, ‘Look, 100,000 will do it this year’. ‘Yes, but, John, what are your programs? What’s your staff? What are your resources?’ ‘Oh, that’s none of your business.’

..... ..... lack of accountability?

Yes, and a natural prickliness, a sense of his own rightness. He went through more general managers – he himself was general manager of it after Brenton died, John did it all himself, but eventually it just couldn’t be sustained.

It folded, did it?

It did have to fold.

Yes.

But no, Dunstan himself, no. But, you see, the influence that he had on John Bannon, his successor, was huge, absolutely, and John became – Don wasn’t actually Minister for the Arts, the title didn’t exist, but the position that he held was de facto.
Yes.

And then when John Bannon – was that early ’80s?

Yes.

And John Bannon became the same thing. But I think John actually took on the title ‘Minister for the Arts’; maybe it started with him, I’m not sure.

Yes. Well, certainly Don Dunstan took a personal responsibility for the arts –

He did.

– although the arts came under Premier and Cabinet.

Premier and Cabinet, that’s right, with – – –.

Yes, with Len Amadio heading up –

That’s right.

– what was a tiny little division or tiny little sort of one desk in the corner and gradually built it up until it became a division and then – – –.

Well, it was never a bureaucratic monolith.

Was there any changes when in that department a music project officer was put on the staff, I think towards the end of the period in I think it was around about ’78?

A music project officer?

Yes, Michael Elwood. Do you remember him?

Oh! Yes, of course.

Did that change things, if you recall? He was then followed by Stephen Block.

That’s right.

But Michael Elwood I believe was the first music project officer.

I went onto the Arts Grants Advisory Committee I think in ’77 and became Chairman later, probably ’81. I don’t think that made a huge difference. Oh, gosh –
to give you a really definitive answer I’d have to look at the applications, unsuccessful and successful, before and after Michael was appointed.

Yes. And I’m not looking for that kind of rigour; I just thought you’d say, ‘Yes, such-and-such happened’ or ——.

No.

But if you don’t recall it, that’s fine.

No, nothing really leaps out.

The formation of the Australia Council much earlier was important.

Yes. (laughs) Yes, it was indeed.

Certainly to the opera.

That was March ’73.

Yes. To the opera, but to other areas of music in Adelaide as well?

Yes.

Tell me about those.

Yes. Well, I’ll tell you about something that was not successful. There was a small group of people tried to set up their own chamber orchestra through one of the teachers’ colleges that became CAEs, colleges of advanced education, in ’73. And an application for funds went to the Music Board – this would have been ’73 or ’74, and by that time I was at Sturt CAE, which eventually became Flinders – and it was a ludicrous application. It wasn’t properly organised for funding, either for initial funding or continuing funding, and it didn’t have the musical leadership that you would need to actually set up something like that and it was clearly a self-congratulation exercise. It came to us –

Are you going to name names?

– yes, because David Cubbin’s dead. (laughs) Yes, it was David Cubbin.

So the application came to you.
The application came to the Music Board and we couldn’t possibly fund it, and I went to a meeting with the people responsible – Earle Hackett was actually the chairman of all that and he should have known better – and it was clear that there was no possibility that this was going to be funded. So I reported back to the Music Board and the whole thing was duly rejected; Earle Hackett had the ear of Jean Battersby and he got to it and persuaded her that this was a matter of personal bias on my part, that I didn’t want one of the other CAEs upstaging the CAE where I was working, which was pretty ludicrous because I had no ambitions of that sort myself. So I had to wriggle out of that one a bit.

That’s an amusing story.

Was that the sort of answer you wanted? (laughs)

Well, yes, because you’d already mentioned the Australia Council had started to feed some money through to the opera and I wondered if it had happened in your memory into other musical avenues here in Adelaide.

Yes, it certainly did: into music education, for instance, and really most of my professional life has been in music education. That came about through a plan that a man called Alan Farwell and I - he was their [Department of Education] Supervisor of Music - and we put together a plan for a team of specialist music teachers to go into primary schools. There was nothing like it at the time, and that was successful and it operated for I think about 10 years. I can’t remember the amount of money but it was quite a lot. And I think it had a lot to do with setting off the principle – which is still not sufficiently firmly established, in my mind – that music in junior primary and primary schools in normal classrooms cannot be taught by the general classroom teachers. Now, this has got a lot to do with Don in several ways: firstly, in his belief in the importance of the arts and the importance of arts education, though I can’t remember any example of him actually being involved in any arts program with children, but it all flowed from his influence and his stimulus, his passion, his belief, his encouragement with both words and deeds in the form of money and his own presence, his own interest, his own genuine interest; and of
course this influenced everybody who came anywhere near him and it flowed over into John Bannon, who succeeded him. Then we had the Libs for a while, didn’t we, and that was a bit funny, that went a bit odd, and Len had quite an interesting time trying to persuade various – what’s his name? Awfully nice man but a hopeless Minister for the Arts. Oh, then along came David Tonkin and of course he loved the arts.

**Don’s Education Minister was Hugh Hudson?**

Ooh, he was.

**Do you recall that?**

I do indeed.

**Now, am I right in thinking that during Hugh Hudson’s tenure in that position that’s when the music high schools started?**

The special interest music schools?

**Yes.**

Yes, that’s true, that was set up.

**He wouldn’t have been doing that, though, without Don’s agreement, would he?**

Oh, no, certainly, certainly, so it wasn’t so much a hands-on thing, it was a matter of general support and encouragement.

**Or directive, even, coming from Don.**

Don’t know, don’t know. But the actual move to set up those schools came from outside Parliament from a man called Don Maynard, who was a primary school – no, a secondary school principal with a personal passion for music, and his idea of setting up the special interest music schools, sort of four points of the compass, that was what started that off. Hugh Hudson got together a committee in about October of whatever year it was and he wanted all these four schools to start in February of the following year.
That was ambitious.

That was crazy. And we replied to him, ‘That is not possible. We need at least a year planning’, and he said, ‘You do it or I’ll sack the lot of you and we’ll get a committee who will do what I tell them to do’. Now, that was the absolute antithesis of the way that Don worked. Don Dunstan I mean. Hugh was a bully, he really was a bully, and not very bright.

And what was the result of it all?

The result of it was we compromised with two, so we set up Marryatville and Brighton for the following year – Marryatville stumbled, fell, picked itself up again, under the directorship of an ex-student of mine, one Margaret Lambert – and Fremont and Woodville came much later.

Well, at least you came to a compromise and two started, which started the ball rolling.

Yes, yes. But it was too early. Yes, but you’re right about Hugh Hudson.

Yes. It’s interesting because, whilst the push for those might have come from outside, there still would have had to have been agreement from Don to even – – –.

Oh, yes. Well, it was a very good idea, it really was a very good idea.

And they continue.

Yes. And Marryatville especially has been extremely successful.

Brighton as well.

Yes – Marryatville’s the one that actually sends the students on to the Conservatorium who go into the first chairs of the Symphony Orchestra – sometimes too early, actually. Like in their early 20s.

Yes. Let me have a look and see what I’ve got here. The choral music scene you said was – I’m talking about away from the opera now, but generally. That was pretty strong in those days?

It’s always been very strong.
[A] mix of amateur and professional or all amateur?

Well, pretty well amateur. The Adelaide Chamber Singers are now semi-professional and a large number of their 24 members are actually singing professionally or well in their way to singing professionally, and they get funded by the SA Arts. They get funded well. Their Director, Carl Crossin, has just become Director of the Elder Conservatorium and so he’s on full academic salary anyway.

Back in the ’70s the amateur performing arts scene was strong, for example in the theatre it was pretty much all amateur and you were talking about the opera having been amateur.

Yes.

So really, until the ’70s, I could be bold enough to say that there was very little in the way of professional performing art, with the exception of the Orchestra of course. Would that be right? It was largely an amateur scene here in Adelaide?

When was State Theatre Company set up?

Early ’70s, 1972 I think.

Yes. And Australian Dance Theatre?

That was a wee bit before, but I’m not sure they got very well-paid.

That was a bit before.

They did get some money from Don Dunstan’s Government.

Yes. Yes, they did. But certainly there was a huge amateur theatre, and there are those who will say that theatre itself has never been better-served than in those days with the large groups of amateur people. They were good. We went to a lot of theatre because Jim was very keen on theatre and so was I.

The early Festivals brought well-known, renowned musical offerings from overseas. Were the local musicians of any type, vocal of instrumental, ignored in the early Festivals or was that something that Anthony Steele did, who brought in local performances?
Well, that’s all on record, too. Stewart Cockburn’s book itemises everything in the early Festivals. Now, who would have performed? Beryl Kimber, Clemens Leske, Lance Dosser, James Whitehead.

So they were programmed in those early Festivals.

Yes.

Local people programmed.

Yes.

Oh, I see.

Yes, they were. But you’re right, the predominance was of people from outside the State and from overseas. But that was part of [John] Bishop’s image of himself. (laughs) But also his image of what he wanted the Festival to do. He wanted to make us all aware of the quality, of the wonderful quality that was available in the rest of the world. Because Adelaide is very self-satisfied, very complacent – even now. Anthony Steele had another swipe at us the other day over Christopher Menz deciding to quit the Art Gallery. And we really do – – –.

He was on radio, was he, Anthony Steele?

No, it was in The Advertiser.

Oh, was it?

A couple of days ago. Yes. (break in recording) It was the international visitors that took most of the attention, of course – well, the Australian Opera was here –

Yes, that’s right.

– at some of those early Festivals.

I think I’ve heard it described – I think Robert Helpmann described it as a – what was it? – a ‘two-week cornucopia in a two-year desert’ or something like that.

That’s right, yes.

Some words to that effect.
Yes, or ‘two weeks of overfeeding followed by 102 weeks of constipation’ or something like that.

**Oh, constipation, yes. Do you think that was fair in those days?**

Yes, I do; and I still look for evidence that these biennial Festivals actually have an influence on the average artistic life of Adelaide. I don’t think they do.

**Don’t you?**

No. No. And I still think a lot of people actually get very busy during the Festival and then they fall back on their plebeian, conservative, even – shall I be blunt? –

**Be blunt.**

– coarse and vulgar tastes. (break in recording) I don’t think that the Festival itself has had a huge influence on the average taste and judgment of the arts or on the level of performance. I think that’s happened through individually-talented people who want to get up there and show off.

**It’s an interesting observation.**

Yes. And we’re certainly not the arts capital. This statement by Anthony Steele, he’s very realistic about our pretensions.

**It’s an interesting thing, because I’m not a South Australian or an Adelaidian and I’ve come to this State only fairly recently. I do see a bit of complacency, I agree, but it seems that when Adelaide first started its Festival and in the sort of heyday, if you like, of Anthony Steele in the ’70s it was way out in front from the other States and their festivals. Melbourne had something called Moomba, do you remember?**

Yes.

**And the Sydney festival was pretty ordinary fare. But in recent years it’s been taken over, perhaps because of more money? Bigger population?**

There are two ways in which the early Adelaide Festivals stood out and became magnets for people from interstate and even from overseas, and one of them was opera – and of course that’s directly attributable to Don Dunstan, to his general and
his specific influence; general I mean in attitudes and specific in encouraging particular people who would go and get the jobs done. From the very first opera in 1960 through to 1992 – and I’ve listed them a number of times – there was a performance of a major contemporary opera having a premiere Australian performance of a major international 20th century opera. Every year from 1960 to 1992.

That’s amazing.

It really is astonishing. It includes the first performance in Australia of Wozzeck for instance., The Makropulos Affair, Death in Venice. I haven’t rattled these off for some time. Oh, and the Tippett Midsummer Marriage. ’88 was the high point - that was Lord Harwood’s Festival - that was with The Fiery Angel. And the very last once was Nixon in China in 1992.

That’s right, yes.

Now, there was a sort of revival: Peter Sellers brought an absolutely ridiculous thing called El Niño. But that was a major magnet for all those years, and the dropping of that has been one of the reasons I think why the pre-eminence of the Adelaide Festival hasn’t been maintained. Now, we’re getting ‘The Big Mac’,¹ we’re calling it, the Ligeti, this time; I don’t know whether that will restore that particular practice. But that was a major one.

The second one – and this is very close to my heart – was having a major choral work every year, every Festival, and a big one. Like there was the War Requiem, there’s the Janáček Glagolitic Mass, there’s Damnation of Faust. That had always been there; (laughs) in fact, that big choral thing, I suppose it’s a natural part of any major celebration, isn’t it, a massed choir? But it was something more than that. The opening of the Adelaide Festival Theatre in June 1973, and there was Anthony Steele there himself singing in the tenors of the Beethoven Ninth. So, you know, we

¹ Le Grand Macabre.
had the Beethoven Ninth among everything else. Now, that also went by the board. Barry Koske and Robyn Archer weren’t that mad keen on choral music and couldn’t be persuaded. It’s a great crowd-pleaser, a big choral work; apart from the fact that you put a couple of hundred people up on the stage, that means there’s two or three for each one and there’s going to be about 600 in the audience to start with before you start selling. (laughter)

You’re right, you’re right. But tell me something: they were local groups, choral groups, that made up these massed voices?

They were. Yes, they were indeed. What year was that? Oh, yes: now, Anthony Steele’s first Festival, that was ’74?

I think it was 1974, yes.

He was very keen on choral music. (laughs) Can I tell you a funny story about Anthony Steele?

Yes, do.

At a concert in the Elder not all that long ago, one of the Brahms clarinet sonatas was played. And at interval he said, ‘Last time I heard that live, I was playing the clarinet and Dame Myra Hess was playing the piano’. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘where was this?’ And he said, ‘At home, in Sheffield’. ‘Oh. Did you often have prominent musicians to visit?’ ‘Oh, yes, all the time.’ Then he said, ‘I can’t remember whether it was the Bluthner or the Bechstein that she was playing’. (laughter) ‘Oh! You must have been pretty well-off, then, Anthony, in your home.’ ‘Oh, yes’, he said. ‘My grandfather was the bookie to Edward VII and he made lots and lots of money. Then they moved to Sheffield and somebody said, “Your name’s Steele, why don’t you buy a steel mill?” So he did.’ (laughs)

Is that recorded in his recent memoir?

I haven’t read his recent memoir, I haven’t actually got it. I don’t know.

Oh, what a story. What a funny story.
I wonder what happened to all the dosh.

Indeed.

It’s certainly not there now. That was the choral music and you asked me were they local groups. Well, from the opening of the Festival, then the Adelaide Chorus, which I worked with, and the Philharmonic Choir, they were brought in as a pair, the two large choirs. That was ’73 and that would have been ’74, ’76, ’78, ’80. Then in 1980 I went to the Edinburgh Festival and was mightily taken with the huge choral music program and worked out – or found out, actually – how they had mounted it, and that was by bringing a number of small choirs together and finishing up with something like 300, of tested voices. So we did that here and for ’82 we did The Damnation of Faust, conducted by Mark Elder, and some very good soloists: Bruce Martin, an Englishwoman. And so that tradition – and that was called the Adelaide Festival Chorus.

It got a name especially for the Festival?

Yes. Everybody was auditioned for that.

Interesting, interesting.

Yes. But that’s very strong. And of course the strength of choral music in Adelaide is underlined every time you go to a State Opera production and see those excellent choruses. I reckon they rival the Australian Opera chorus.

Do these choral groups, were they back in those days – did they get any State funding or any assistance at all?

No. I was with the Adelaide Chorus from ’57 to ’80. No. No. They then merged with the Philharmonic and that’s now the Adelaide Philharmonia, and they get State funding. But back then they would not have. I don’t know when the State funding began. I would guess middle-’80s. I became Music Director of the Adelaide Chorus it was – the previous one was the Adelaide Choral Society – the Adelaide Chorus, reluctantly, because I felt confident with the choir but I couldn’t conduct an
orchestra. So I would prepare the choir, then I’d hand it over to the conductor who could manage the orchestra.

It’s interesting, talking of – – –.

We did get government funding when it got to about ’84 and it became obvious that I could not go on because I wasn’t getting better, and if you don’t get better as a conductor you get worse; and so we got State Government money, State Opera money and Elder Conservatorium money, and put together a package to pay for a full-time, professional conductor, and that was Graham Abbott.

Ah! Right.

That was how we brought him to Adelaide – – –.

Aha, I see. The point I was trying to make on the funding, what groups were funded, what weren’t, was because some criticisms had been made that, with all the innovation in the arts during his Premiership, Don Dunstan somewhat neglected music. Would you agree with that? Taking aside the opera –

The opera.

— which was his particular baby.

Neglected music. (ponders) I’d like to see the evidence for that.

Yes. It came from one of my readings, which is pretty naughty of me that I don’t have the source. It perhaps comes from Colin Horne’s chapter. It perhaps comes from Colin Horne’s chapter in *The Dunstan Decade: social democracy at the State level*. But obviously your reaction is that you don’t necessarily agree with that.

No.

He was a keen pianist himself, was he not?

Don?

Yes.

Yes. Yes, he was. He loved to play. He was a song-and-dance man and he loved to perform. He would read poetry to the union workers when he went to visit a factory and he did a wonderful performance of Ogden Nash’s verses for *The Carnival of the
Animals at the Zoo. Neglected music? Well, I would have been one of the people responsible for making funds available to choirs and ensembles – not the Orchestra, of course, that was the ABC – and that includes the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra. Music wasn’t our biggest customer. And with Michael [Elwood] and Stephen [Block] and myself and Len I think we would have been aware of any complaints that music was being neglected. I think it’s an odd comment.

Yes. Well, I don’t want to distress you over it.

Oh, not at all. No, it’s interesting. I can’t remember anybody saying to me – trying to remember one major complaint. It was jealousy: ‘They got money and we didn’t.’ I think it was a choir.

There were other institutions that also didn’t receive the attention that some did, but then when you’ve got a whole range of existing institutions or developing new institutions it’s quite likely that some are better-served than others and I would say –

Well, it’s quite likely that some are better than others.

Yes, true.

And if they’re better they’re likely to be better-served. The processes of deciding who got what money through the Arts Grants Advisory Committee, which was the body that was responsible for distributing funds – receiving applications, distributing funds – we went through those applications with a fine-tooth comb. And a big advantage in Adelaide – I think it’s an advantage; maybe there are some disadvantages attached to it – the fact that we knew everybody. Everybody knew everybody, and pretty well still does, and it’s very rare that – every now and then it’ll happen – somebody will turn up really being very fine concert pianist and, ‘Where did you come from?’ But it usually turns out that they’ve left the Conservatorium say at the age of 19 and I’m not interested in them until they turn 21. Professionally, I mean, as a critic.

It’s rather a quaint thing that there were people like you from the community that were not public servants who were on these arts grants advisory committees –
Yes.

– and I presume the personnel on those committees changed over the years and others were appointed.

They did, of course.

There was a lot of committees and boards set up by Don and covering arts areas, and you would almost wonder how he managed, or the Government managed, to find so many people to sit on these boards.

That was Len.

Were they all successful? I mean would you say sitting on that board at the time, sorry, the Committee at the time was a success?

As a committee, yes. Some people were (laughs) more suited than others. Max Harris, for instance – do you know that man?

I certainly do.

This would have been early ’80s, I guess, very early ’80s: Max Harris made it plain to Len that he thought we were a bunch of amateurs and we didn’t know what we were doing and he thought he should be a member of the Committee. So Len and Max and I went to lunch together – Len and I are both asthmatic, Max, a very heavy smoker, and insisting on his right to smoke throughout the meal – and his idea of membership of that Committee was that he would say who would get the money and who would not. He, Max Harris ..... Not the sort of attitude that you want people to bring because that’s not what a committee does. We tried to explain this to him. He’d absolutely no concept of collegial judgment and argy-bargy and back to and fro and compromise. Oh, no. (bangs table) He knew what was to be done.

He wasn’t at that stage, or perhaps never at any stage, on any of those committees?

No. I don’t think so, no. Well, he ran Mary Martin’s Bookshop and he ran it extremely well, it was very, very, successful. I can remember a couple of people who didn’t sort of fit in, but there’s not much point in mentioning names. One I was
very keen on, who’s since died, but he wasn’t a committee man, either. But on the whole they were — —.

The meetings were really enjoyable. It was like that first Music Board, that was wonderful fun.

Was it?

It was such fun. And they were such funny people; Don Banks is one of the funniest people I’ve ever met in my life. But no, it was a happy committee.

Now, what else did we have during that time? The Youth Arts, because Carclew was revived, wasn’t it, during that time and refurbished.

Yes – well, it was sort of started at that time because the house had been given by the Bonython family to the City Council, I think, and then it didn’t go ahead as the Festival Centre and then they had to find a purpose for it.

That’s right – oh, yes, I’d forgotten that bit. Yes, a bit remote (laughs) for a festival centre, actually. But yes, and I was on that Youth Arts Board for a while.

Was that chaired by Ruby Litchfield? She was on the Carclew Board in the very early stages, I believe.

Well, not that particular one, but membership changed. And then there were – this is something maybe Don wasn’t directly responsible for, but indirectly – the setting up of the, was it called a ‘Youth Officer’, for the Festival Centre, Christine Westwood.

I haven’t come across her name. Might have been after [Don]?

No, and that led to all sorts of plans of cheap tickets and school visits to the Festival Theatre and showing the kids round backstage and letting them see bits of rehearsals and all that stuff, so that’s another – it’s a spinoff from this general attitude, a general feeling that the arts were important and they were to be encouraged.

Well, the Youth Arts Board was terrific because the idea was that the festival, on the alternate year to the Festival –

Yes.

— would be the Youth Festival, which is still going, of course.
Oh, *Come Out*.

Yes.

Ah, yes. That’s right.

And that was the idea that one year it would be the Festival of Arts and next year it would be the sort of youth festival.

Yes.

But while we’re talking about the sort of spinoffs and things, just go back to the opening of the Festival Theatre. You presumably were there with all your glamour and looking wonderful.

Absolutely. I’ve still got the dress in the cellar. (laughs)

**Oh, have you? Give me a bit of a word picture about that: was it terrific?**

Oh! I’m going to cry. I would never forget the overwhelming feeling of pride. I’m seeing Don Dunstan and Gough Whitlam on our Festival Theatre stage. Oh! See what it does to me, what, 36 years later?

**It’s wonderful.**

1973–2010, how many years is that? Yes. Oh, it just welled up like this. I’m not a great lover of the Beethoven Ninth – they only did the last movement, of course.

**The choral.**

Yes.

**And they did *Fidelio*, the dungeon scene?**

I can’t stand *Fidelio*, I think it’s the most boring, pretentious, phoney opera that was ever written. But it wasn’t the program so much, it was the occasion, and everybody was there and everybody was dressed up in their nines. (sighs)

**And Don gave the speech, I believe, that started, ‘They said it would never happen’, or words to that effect.**

Something like that, yes.
It was a really glittering occasion.

Oh, it was, yes. I don’t remember feeling, ‘This is going to change our lives forever’. And I’m not sure it actually – yes, it did. Yes, of course it did, come on. Come on, be generous. It did change our lives forever, having that Festival Theatre, because so many of the companies and ensembles that have come to Festivals and to other occasions would not have come if there hadn’t been that well-equipped, acoustically somewhat-suspect, but very acceptable theatre and its Festival.

And there have been other theatres that have been pulled down around Adelaide, so there was almost nothing.

Oh, yes. The Theatre Royal, that’s where I saw my first operas, in Hindley Street, Miller Anderson’s, yes, that’s been destroyed; and they’re talking about getting rid of the Union Theatre at the University of Adelaide, ..... ..... Yes. Well, they’re not talking about it; it’s absolutely going to happen, is my understanding.

Who told you that?

Well, it was from the horse’s mouth, if you call the Vice-Chancellor the horse.

He told you?

Yes.

Even though it’s likely to be heritage-listed? And even though the University Council has rejected it?

This was six weeks ago or so, so maybe there’ve been some changes since then.

Yes. Well, certainly Harry Medlin tells me that five of the six conditions for heritage listing – are you a familiar of the Vice-Chancellor?

No, no, not at all, except that it just happened in a conversation at a pre-Christmas party and he said he’s received so many brickbats about that, more than anything else.

Well, he has, yes, and deservedly so.
No – this probably shouldn’t be on the tape because it’s really got nothing to do with the subject.

Okay.

Just going back to Don Dunstan, you’ve got very, very fond memories of him.

Oh, very, yes.

And your encounters with him were always joyous and fun.

Yes, fun, certainly, yes. He had a wonderful recall and he didn’t just remember an incident, he’d remember all the exact words that people had said, which meant being in his company was a very lively, very immediate sort of experience. When Don started on a story you knew it was going to be a damn good story and you knew all the words were going to be in the right place. Yes, indeed.

He was a performer, as you said –

Yes.

– and he was an actor, and of course he came out on stage at the opening of the Drama Theatre –

Yes, that’s right.

– and said the wonderful poem.

Had the poem, yes.

He came to your house once, you said, but did you go to his house, were you in his circle?

No, I never went to his house, no, I wasn’t as close as that. No. But it didn’t bother me.

And his sense of wanting to deliver the goods and change things for the better, did that permeate through Adelaide at the time? [A] sense of excitement?

You don’t want to get carried away about that sort of thing and I certainly was in the inner circle who knew what was happening and knew what was about to happen, so there was huge excitement among those people. How widely did it spread? I think
pretty widely. Not universally, of course, it never does. But the attendances at the early Festivals pretty well everything was full up and later Festivals that was simply not the case, so if that’s a measure of the enthusiasm and the response that he generated - generated - that’s the word for Don, he generated all that interest and all that excitement and all that sense that if we didn’t have a strong arts program then we weren’t really entitled to call ourselves a major city.

Now, that flowed on to a specific instance when John Bannon was Premier – what year was it when the State Opera went into almost total decline?

I think in your book you relate it as – – –.

Yes, and Ian Johnson was the General Manager and he was invited to consider his future. And there’s some very nice excerpts from Hansard saying, ‘We don’t need an opera company. The farmers in the North are starving and they haven’t got enough money for their wheat: why do we have to have an opera company?’ And John Bannon said something like, ‘No self-respecting city can afford to be without its own opera company’, a really powerful statement. Now, he had a background as a song-and-dance man, too, so he was a bit of a show-off; but Don was certainly a great encourager. You’ve talked to John, of course?

Yes.

Or somebody has.

Somebody has, yes. Oh, that’s tremendous. And you made a very interesting off-the-record comment when I first arrived: do you remember what it was?

What was it?

It was related to Don and the sort of person he was and I said, ‘Would you say that on the tape?’

What was it?

I can’t remember it exactly. You said it was about his warmth, his generosity, something to that effect. It was so spontaneous I wonder if you could remember it.
What was he like? I think you said what was he like. No, that was when we were sitting down. I love talking about him, and people do talk about him, people who knew him.

And Adelaide’s a better place for him having been here?

(laughs) Well, Jane Lomax-Smith would say so, she wouldn’t have come if it hadn’t been for him. Oh, yes. Yes, I don’t think anybody else could have made all that happen and had such an effect, because it’s a combination of a whole lot of things, isn’t it? It’s a combination of – well, the belief and the passion, but the internal belief, the genuine belief. It wasn’t an act; he really believed in the importance of the arts. He knew what the arts had meant to him, he knew what the arts had meant to people around him and he wanted to make that available to everybody. No, he didn’t quite get there. Is Adelaide a better place because of Don Dunstan? (laughs) Bloody hell, is it what.

Yes, I think that everybody I’ve interviewed has agreed that his legacy was really terrific.

Yes, and it was unmatchable and it was indestructible.

What do you think about the way he was treated when he left the Premiership and became out of favour somewhat?

That was all so sad. He was obviously ill after Adele died. Oh, that was awful, it was awful.

Do you think he was treated sort of rather poorly on the part of the subsequent Government and the kind of jobs that he didn’t get here in the State, for example?

Oh, and having to move to Victoria to the Tourist Board and all that stuff. Maybe. Maybe. He certainly – he needed to be in a position where he could influence things and when he wasn’t in that position then he was terribly unsettled. And then, of course, he came back and set up the lovely restaurant, and I hope somebody’s going to talk about Dunstan and food.
It’s difficult, isn’t it? It must have been quite embarrassing for the Government then to have him still there and still looking for a job and not being able to find anything that really suited him. And I’m thinking of the current way that the current Government is using Dean Brown, who’s a previous Premier; but then, no, Don did have blots on his copybook. He did some things that were reckless, rash, foolish.

But in his personal life.

Yes. And they did overlap a bit into their professional life. So that was difficult. But it doesn’t take away, not a skerrick, of the good that he did for the State, and not just in the arts. I mean the whole story’s going to show the importance of his influence in dealing with the Aborigines and many of those things.

Well, look, unless you have anything particular that you would like to add I’ve come to the end of my questions and I think we’ve covered the music scene reasonably well, we’ve talked about all aspects of it. Do you want me to pause for a moment and you just reflect in case there’s anything you want to add? (break in recording) Anything further to add, Elizabeth?

I don’t think so, but you have not only revived a lot of very wonderful memories, you’ve also set me thinking about the wider consequences of Dunstan’s influence and I don’t think there’s any limit to them.

Well, that’s a wonderful way to end and thank you very much indeed.

My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW