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The Australian premiere of Gustav Holst's opera *Savitri*: Louise Dyer's farewell 'gesture' to the British Music Society in Melbourne

'Musical Melbourne owes Mrs Dyer a debt of gratitude that cannot be estimated.'¹ These were the words that lawyer, public servant and arts supporter Sir Robert Garran used to express collective appreciation, on behalf of those who witnessed the occasion, for Louise Dyer's contribution to the first Australian performance of British composer Gustav Holst's opera *Savitri*. The memorable event took place on 30 September 1926 at the Playhouse Theatre in Melbourne. It was a successful fundraiser for the city's British Music Society (Victorian Centre), underwritten and organised by Dyer, its founder.

Louise Berta Mosson Hanson-Dyer was the daughter of Dr Louis Lawrence Smith, who was a medical practitioner and politician.² She was brought up in a family with an entrepreneurial flair and heroic military past.³ Gaining the highest qualifications in piano performance from the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, in Albert Street, East Melbourne, and the Royal College of Music, in London,⁴ she did not pursue a performer's career or settle into the domestic role of the piano teacher.⁵ Influenced by an education she had received at Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies College and Alliance Française, she upheld progressive values and ideals of living one's life as a valuable member of society.⁶ Her protean career was driven by her 'personal values in a life-long pursuit for realisation'.⁷ Although her work was sometimes diminished to that of a 'society hostess',⁸

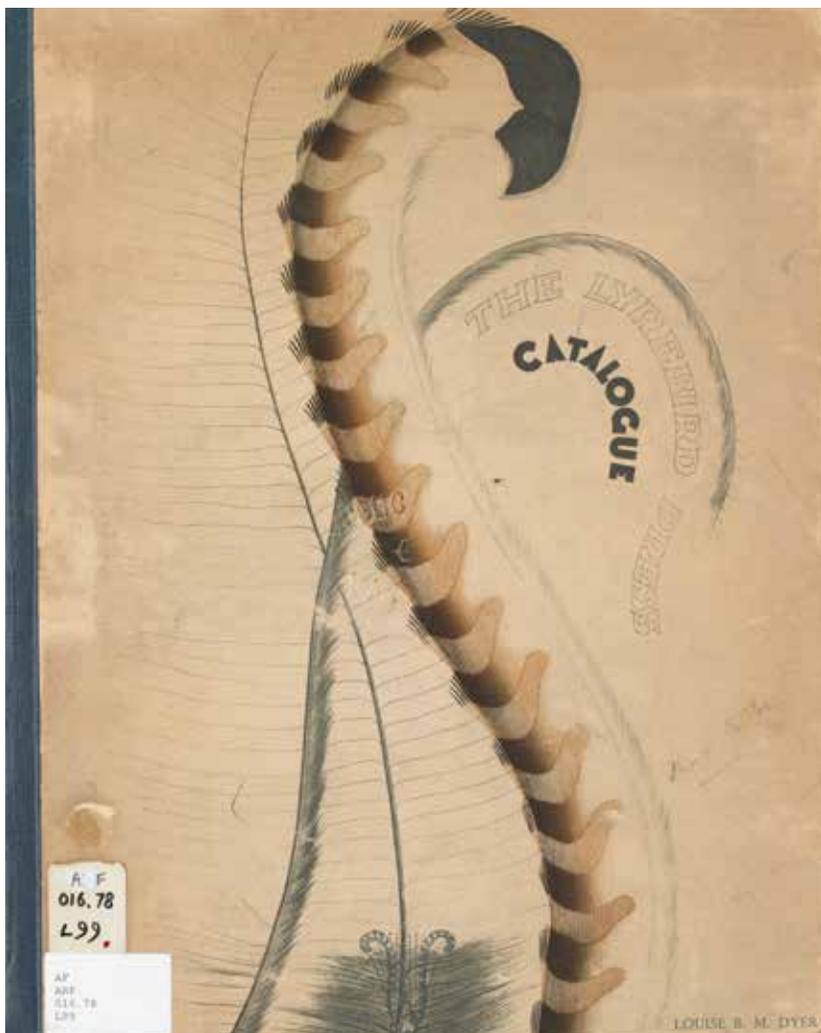
Dyer carved a novel path for herself as a cultural leader. It was a career in music that enabled her to make award-winning contributions to French and Australian culture through patronage and music education, leading organisations such as the British Music Society in Melbourne and her music press and record label, Éditions de L'Oiseau-Lyre (Lyrebird Press). Éditions de L'Oiseau-Lyre promoted early and new music as well as up-and-coming musicians and composers to niche educational and music markets.⁹ Her two husbands, linoleum businessman James Dyer (whom she married in 1911) and Dr Joseph B Hanson (1939), were both instrumental in supporting her work.

The production of *Savitri* was not only a means of promoting Gustav Holst's work and introducing this new chamber opera to Melbourne audiences only five years after its professional premiere, in London on 23 June 1921.¹⁰ It was part of a strategy to strengthen the society's finances and creative networks in the year before Dyer left her birth city to pursue further her career in music in Europe.

Boosting the British Music Society

The production of *Savitri* for the Endowment Fund of the British Music Society in Melbourne was the culmination of Louise Dyer's efforts to ensure financial sustainability for the society before she left in April 1927. The British Music Society was founded in 1818 in London with the aim to 'work solely for the good of music in its broadest sense' as 'the link between professional performers and their audiences' through centres in different cities and collaborations with other organisations.¹¹ The chapter in Melbourne was Dyer's 'baby' – the arts organisation she founded and led and nurtured as honorary secretary until 1927 and continued to support throughout her life.¹² It was a self-governing entity of the parent body, one of three in the southern hemisphere, the others being in Sydney and New Zealand. It was endorsed by Nellie Melba and managed by key music figures: chartered accountant Thomas Brentnall, the society's president, also president of the Melbourne Music Club, and educationists and composers Fritz B Hart, Professor William A Laver and Alberto Zelman Jr as vice-presidents. Louise Dyer's husband, James Dyer – a wealthy businessman and music lover who encouraged her unusual career – subsidised the organisation and oversaw its finances as honorary treasurer.¹³

Looking through concert programs, minutes and reports, one cannot fail to notice the clarity and reiteration of the aims of the organisation. They were formulated and expressed during the inaugural meeting of the society, on 1 August 1921. Brentnall explained that



Louise BM Dyer, compiler, *The Lyrebird Press Catalogue*, Paris: Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre, 1936, front cover. AF 016.78 L99

the object of the Society was to advance the cause of British Music. The Shadow of gloomy music in the pre-war period had passed, and British music was now coming into its own. It was proposed to give concerts at which British music will be performed. A library would be formed which would afford members an opportunity of hearing and playing British music which otherwise they would not have.¹⁴

The objects of the organisation were communicated consistently on the back of annual reports and in concert programs to retain a consistent identity and focus during the period when Louise Dyer was honorary secretary. They were 'to spread the knowledge of British Music', 'to encourage Australian Composers', 'to afford facilities for Australian musicians visiting overseas'

and ‘to foster the spirit of international music’. They feature prominently in both the extant circular and concert program for the *Savitri* fundraising event. The circular announces the forthcoming production under the umbrella of the parent body, advertising the main cast, ticket prices and sales and contact persons. Most of the space is given to the society prospectus, which contains brief historical notes and the objects and benefits for members in the left panel. The right panel lists past instances of premieres given in Melbourne. Two earlier performances of new music by Holst had allowed the city’s audiences to hear his novel style of composition – in particular, the Australian premiere of his signature work, *The planets*, performed on 19 June 1925 in the Assembly Hall in an arrangement for two pianos played by Harold Elvins and William James.

The young society had already established a reputation for staging lavish music concerts. These stylish events showcased the work of the best local and visiting musicians in the Dyers’ private homes in affluent inner suburbs – Torryburn, in Hawthorn Grove, Hawthorn, and later Kinnoull, in Heyington Place, Toorak – and at the Assembly Hall at 156 Collins Street, which could accommodate 900.¹⁵ The annual report in 1926 enumerated 17 concerts that were given during the 1925–26 reporting period.¹⁶ The content of these programs was curated by the artists and Louise Dyer and, from March 1925, were approved by a music subcommittee that ensured high-quality programming.¹⁷

Innovative programming that centred on dissemination of old and new classical music and support of Australian composers, local musicians and rising local artistic talent was part of an artistic approach that distinguished the output of the British Music Society in Melbourne. Combining old and new music was not a new practice in concert programming. The idea of *musique ancienne et moderne* went back to at least the 1890s and was typical of Paris salons such as that of Winnaretta Singer, Princesse Edmond de Polignac, who was heir to the Singer sewing machine company and patron of Debussy and Ravel, as well as of French concert programs in the colonies during the interwar period.¹⁸ It remained a signature of Louise Dyer’s later work with L’Oiseau-Lyre.

By June 1926, the society’s membership had reached 300.¹⁹ The membership fee was 1 guinea (£1 1s), with 10 per cent going to the parent body.²⁰ Members received the *BMS Bulletin* and were also entitled to concert ticket concessions and free access to the library. Initially supplied by the headquarters in London, the library collection was generously supplemented in 1926 by a donation of music books and scores from organist Sidney R Cole. He also supervised library operations and compiled a library catalogue.²¹



Louise Dyer, c. 1930. Photograph by Pierre Choumoff. Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre Archive, Rare Music Collection, University of Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy University of Melbourne

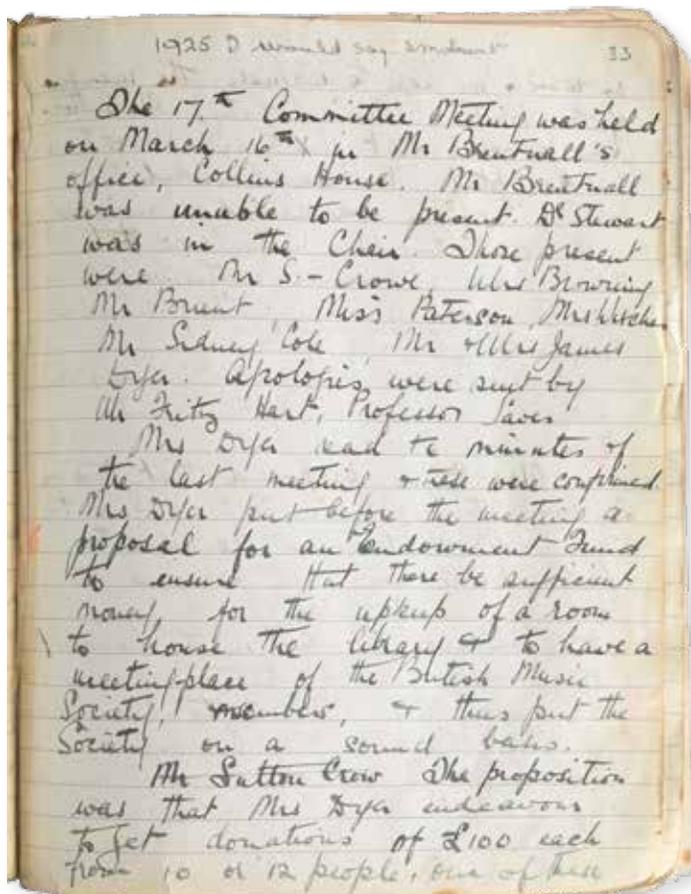
Financial independence is of particular importance to arts organisations that rely on philanthropy, government funding and the box office. This organisation relied on James Dyer's generosity and Louise Dyer's ability to make funds go a long way. Plans for an endowment fund began at the annual meeting in 1925, when Louise Dyer proposed to seek donations for such a fund 'to put the society on a sound basis'.²²

Although there were other concerts that Dyer planned for the second half of 1926 and the first half of 1927, before she left, *Savitri's* premiere was a special event and separate from the activities governed by the British Music Society committee. The report for 1925–26 documented, 'The Endowment Fund has reached £1,000. I have arranged a performance of "Savitri" to further augment this Fund. Every member is earnestly asked to do everything possible to make this performance a great success'.²³

Some financial aspects of the production are evident in a circular which was distributed to advertise the premiere of *Savitri*. The ticket price was 1 guinea, the same as the annual membership fee.²⁴ In comparison, the society charged £2 and £3 for a regular concert held on 27 August 1923.²⁵ In comparison, opera ticket prices for the grand opera season organised by the theatrical company JC Williamson in 1924 and featuring Australian diva Dame Nellie Melba ranged from £1 to £5, whereas those for the opening night tickets were priced from £2 to £9 with tax.²⁶ To put this value into a historical context, the minimum weekly wage in 1926 was £4 10s 6d.²⁷ In addition, individuals who contributed to the Endowment Fund were proudly listed in the concert program. The treasurer's report on the second page of the concert program lists James and Louise Dyer as well as the society president, Thomas Brentnall, and active members such as Sidney Cole, who led the fundraising effort by example. Among the donors was Keith Arthur Murdoch, soon to become the patriarch of the Murdoch media dynasty. In addition, £10 was added to the profit from the performance through an auction organised by James Dyer.²⁸

Savitri's production corresponded to the artistic programming of the British Music Society's events but was a much larger undertaking. Frugal production outlays guaranteed financial success. The choice of repertoire and artists needed to create greater exposure and publicity than the usual music concerts the society was known to underwrite. At the same time, costs needed to be contained so as not to deplete funds. Described by Holst as a chamber opera, *Savitri* relies on limited vocal and orchestral resources: three soloists and a small hidden chorus of female voices, and 12 instruments only: two flutes, a cor anglais, two string quartets and a double bass. The collaboration of local musicians and available visiting artists who were already in Australia ensured affordable performers' fees.

The fundraising was successful. In the 1927 annual report, Sibyl J Hull, the new honorary secretary of the society, informed the committee and members that the performance of *Savitri* 'was a great success, both artistically and financially, and the Endowment Fund benefited to the extent of £500' and was standing at £1515 in a bank trust.²⁹ This strategy was praised by the members of the society. Sidney Cole stressed the positive consequence of the fund during the last committee meeting that the Dyers attended before their departure: 'It is their work and wonderful driving power that has placed the Society in its present position and given us the Endowment Fund. They have been the Godmother and Godfather'. In response to the above motion of gratitude, James Dyer pressed on with the financial side of operations, cautioning that subscriptions must be kept current. In contrast, Louise Dyer drew attention



British Music Society (Victorian Centre) Committee meeting minutes of 16 March 1925, their 17th meeting, recording the decision to establish an endowment fund. From minute book of 1 August 1921–14 March 1934, MS 13548

to artistic matters. She quoted the *Musical Times* and the *Morning Herald*, in which the British Music Society was praised as 'the most enterprising branch, keeping entirely up to date'.³⁰ She was emphasising originality and initiative in the music programming, implying that settling into established musical repertoires and practices and not taking risks would result in dwindling audiences and membership.

Giving Savitri to Melbourne audiences and musicians

Holst's one-act opera *Savitri* appeared in the second half of the program and presented a story from the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*. Holst articulated in it a unique musical soundscape inspired by Henry Purcell's English recitative, English folk music and Indian music. These undertones were faithfully referenced in both programming and staging. The first half celebrated the

golden age of English music. Instrumental music from Purcell's *The fairy queen* was interwoven with duets for soprano and baritone by English composers Nicholas Lanier and John Jenkins. The *Argus* reviewer noted this aspect of the programming with a touch of cultural pride: 'The choice of music reflected, in a striking manner, both one phase of the present renaissance in English music and those roots in the past whence it may be seen to have sprung'.³¹

Choreographed dances in period costume, to music by Orlando Gibbons, gave a taste of 'the old-world charm' of the Baroque, whereas the devised pastoral *Clorillo and his Phyllis*, 'keeping with the artificiality of that period', alluded to the beginnings of English opera. The oriental threads were realised visually in the set and costumes. Even 'the girls selling sweets in front of the house put on Indian dress'. This, according to the *Herald* reporter, was 'the big attraction of the show'.³² The *Australasian* reviewer focused on the visual appeal of the production:

Perhaps the most beautiful in this succession of beautiful colour effects came now, when the stars paled and died before the mystic violet rays in which Death (Mr. Clive Carey), robed in splendour like some Indian king, drew near to the stricken wife. A misty splendour shines over the scene, making the figure of the god assume unusual stature, and the radiance gleams over the bowed head and robes of Savitri and over the white garb and green turban of her dead lord. Won at last by the fearless love of the woman to grant her petition, the god slowly leaves the scene, and as if by magic, the unearthly splendour passes, and the trees stand ghostly and still beneath the stars.³³

Advertisements and articles in the newspapers promoted the public benefit of the event and educated audiences. The marketing strategy concentrated on the conjunction of old and new music and capitalised on readers' curiosity about exoticism to attract more interest. *Savitri* was advertised in the *Argus* on Monday 27 September 1926 as 'a romantic story from India'.³⁴ A lecture and a follow-up article in the *Argus* by composer Fritz Hart before the premiere considered Holst's music in the light of Richard Wagner's influence on his earlier compositions and new trends in British music. Hart clarified: '*Savitri* is one of the first works in which Holst declared his complete individuality'.³⁵ An article in the *Australian Musical News* accentuated the simplicity of Holst's opera. It urged the reader to attend the performance: 'Nobody who holds himself musical can afford to miss it, and incidentally to assist the Endowment Fund of the British Music Society's Victorian Centre, which has been the means of introducing so much new music to Australian ears.'³⁶

Louise Dyer was a noted patron of Gustav Holst, and one of the

production's objectives was to encourage Holst's creativity by disseminating his work.³⁷ The novelty of the plot and the new sound of Holst's *Savitri* made for an original artistic choice in the context of Melbourne's opera repertoire at the time. The premiere of the opera in Melbourne occurred between the Melba-Williamson tour in 1924 and that of the second Gonzales Company in 1928. These opera seasons featured mostly standard Italian repertoire with little representation of national opera schools and less of Australian premieres of contemporary works.³⁸ *Savitri's* production was a continuation of the progressive trends championed by Melbourne's music composers and educationists George WL Marshall-Hall, the first Ormond chair of music at the University of Melbourne, and composers Alfred Hill and Fritz Hart, who founded the Australian Opera League in 1913–14.³⁹ As vice-president of the society, Hart was influential in bringing *Savitri's* performance to life. Remarkably, there were two other premieres of new operas in 1926: Fritz Hart's *Deirdre in exile* and Mona McBurney's *The Dalmatian*.⁴⁰

Gustav Holst wrote his opus 25, *Savitri: an episode from the Mahābhārata*, in 1908–09, before World War I. The first performance of the work was a student production that took place in the middle of this war, at the London School of Opera, on 5 December 1916. The political and economic cataclysms of the time brought people closer. This was a period of swelling economic difficulty in Australia, with waning business, rising unemployment and increasing prices that led to the Great Depression, which hit in 1929 with the stock market crash and lasted until the end of World War II.⁴¹ The mayhem of war and economic crisis imprinted suffering on each personal story. Louise Dyer's family was not spared. She lost her beloved brother Captain Louis Smith.⁴² The opera *Savitri* has a narrative that delivers a strong take-home message that speaks to the preoccupations of people at such times of devastation.

As both librettist and composer, Holst offers an interpretation of the Savitri myth from the third book of the *Mahābhārata*, 'The book of the forest' ('Vana parva') and emphasises the idea of empathy and togetherness. The opera starts with the crucial moment when Savitri faces Yama, the god of death. On the first anniversary of her wedding, Savitri has gone to the forest to meet her husband, aware of the prediction that on this day her husband will die. The opera begins with a dialogue between Savitri and Death (unseen) sung a cappella. In this duet, Savitri voices the heavy burden of Death's looming presence. Her husband, Satyavan, approaches in the distance, singing to Savitri, who is pale and trembling. They discuss what is permanent in life. Satyavan hears someone lurking nearby, and as he raises his axe to protect his wife, he expires. Savitri sings a song to him:

I am with thee, my arms are around thee,
 Thy thoughts are mine,
 My spirit dwells in thee.
 When thou art weary I am watching

When thou sleepest I am waking
 When in sorrow I am near making it a thing of joy
 Beyond all other joys.

Death appears, asserting himself:

I am the law that no man breaketh,
 I am he who leadeth men onward,
 I am the road that each man must travel,
 I am the gate that opens for all.

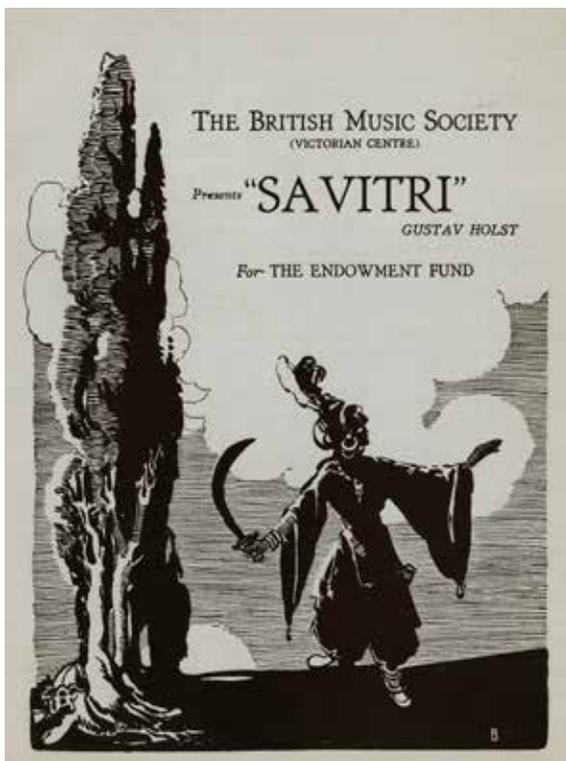
Savitri manages to trick Death with her clear reasoning. She asks for the fullness of life that would be impossible without Satyavan:

But life is a communion.
 Each one that liveth, liveth for all.

Death is impressed by Savitri's courage, unselfishness and depth of devotion. He is persuaded to bring Satyavan back to life. While Death pronounces that even he is Maya – an illusion, Savitri sings to her husband the above song again, only now he is alive and can hear her. Her final lines summarise the idea of empathy and togetherness:

When in sorrow I am near making it a thing of joy.
 Beyond all other joys.⁴³

In 2013, a copy of the concert program for the opera's Australian premiere returned to Melbourne via the Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre Archive, now held at the University of Melbourne. The artwork on the cover underscores the idea of liminality in the *Savitri* story. The monophase image freezes the narrative into one moment. Instead of representing the title heroine, the unknown author⁴⁴ of the woodcut portrays Satyavan.⁴⁵ Satyavan appears alert and ready to meet any challenge that comes his way. Juxtapositions of white and black, the earth and the sky, and sunrise and sunset, highlight these opposites. Horizontal lines in the carving of the sky and trees create a sense of stillness. Tall cypress trees dominate the composition, reaching up to the heavens and alluding to the constant presence of death.⁴⁶ Satyavan's right foot is in the air, while his left foot is on the ground. The viewer wonders whether this is the



Concert program for the British Music Society (Victorian Centre) production of Gustav Holst's *Savitri*. Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre Archive, Rare Music Collection, University of Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy University of Melbourne

beginning of the opera or the moment of the triumphant denouement, when Satyavan comes back to life. Just as the allusion to the day-and-night cycle affirms the permanence of the sun's presence, so this image transcends time.⁴⁷

Artistic collaboration was a vital vehicle of sustainability, consolidating and expanding artistic networks and capacity. The credits in the program indicate earlier alliances and suggest a network of local creative forces. *Savitri's* musical performance drew on the expertise of the Ormond professor of music Bernard Heinze and local musicians, some of whom had been involved previously in society concerts. The main cast featured noted international singers and educationists who were working in Australia at the time. Among them, British baritone Clive Carey, employed by the Elder Conservatorium of Music in Adelaide, was a performer and producer. According to the *Argus* of 11 August 1926, Carey had offered to produce the opera to raise money for the society's Endowment Fund.⁴⁸ His involvement was instrumental in the success of the production. He had formerly sung the role of Death in the first professional production of *Savitri*, in London on 23 June 1921.⁴⁹ In Melbourne, he not only sang the role of Death but directed and devised the pastoral *Clorillo and his Phyllis* and performed the male role in it. Belgian soprano Alice Goossens-

Viceroy, who was teaching singing at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, replaced at short notice Elsie Treweek in the title role.⁵⁰ The orchestration of the music for the pastoral was furnished by Melbourne composer Margaret Sutherland, while the dances were choreographed by Jennie Brenan. Minnie C Bell conducted the Cecilia Choir, a prominent ladies choir in Melbourne. Among the chorus members were singer Freda Northcote, who was featured in a society concert on 19 June 1925 singing Holst's *Vedic hymns* (opus 24).⁵¹ There is also Louise Dyer's protégé Grace Evans for whom she organised a going away concert.⁵²

As prescribed by the composer, the opera was preceded by the 'Hymn of the travellers' from *Choral hymns from the Rig Veda* (opus 26). This prelude was performed by 'the Savitri chorus' and Cecilia Choir, conducted by Minnie C Bell, accompanied on the piano by Elsie Fraser. The Cecilia Choir had already performed groups 2 and 3 from the *Hymns from the Rig Veda* (opus 24) during the society's British composers concert at the Assembly Hall on 18 June 1926.⁵³ Such local operatic collaborations were the exception rather than the norm in Melbourne at the time. *Savitri's* production strengthened and encouraged alliances between distinguished musicians and members of the society.

More participants in the production emerge from the circular and a press article issued before the event. Besides the artists, they included an organising committee, separate from that of the British Music Society. The committee had the purpose of assisting in the organisation and promotion of the event as well as engaging people of means to give their time, expertise and money. The *Argus* reported that the first meeting was convened on 10 August 1926 and chaired by Sir Robert Garran. More than 20 committee members were listed in this article. Among them were prominent Australian artist Blamire Young and Margaret Sutherland, as well as the future secretary of the society Sybil Hull. In the circular, Maude Harvie was mentioned as honorary tickets secretary, whereas Mary Baillieu was noted as honorary secretary.⁵⁴ Succession in governance was ensured when in March 1927 Harvie took the role of the honorary secretary of the British Music Society in Melbourne, and Hull became assistant honorary secretary.⁵⁵

There are great risks associated with presenting compositions that sit outside the main repertoire. It seems the first half, or the light part, of the program was not an artistic success, and it was only the opera that struck a positive chord with the critics. The *Australian Musical News* reviewer suggested that the subtlety of Holst's music 'requires a consummately practised musical simplicity before an "aura" can be woven around it' and that 'simplicity has to be something different from the amorousness and the silly simpers with

which those who went to hear “Savitri” ... were regaled beforehand in a pastoral farrago’.⁵⁶ The *Table Talk* review of the performance showed fondness for Orlando Gibbons’s three fantasias, ‘which proved delightful and quaint in their simple treatment’. The reviewer mentioned *Clorillo and his Phyllis* as a ‘fascinating pastoral idyll’ but recognised that ‘it was the second part, *Savitri*’, that was ‘eagerly anticipated’ and ‘about which the interest clustered’. The article drew attention to the sonorous effects produced by Holst’s use of instrumentation and texture – ‘All previous conceptions of grand opera are departed from’ – and remarked that ‘there is no drowning of the voices – as in modern opera’, pointing out that the small orchestra’s role was ‘to broaden and strengthen vocal effects’. The ‘Hymn of the travellers’ was performed ‘not in a stereotyped way’, but the sound of the voices ‘was waxing and falling as though they were in motion far away and approaching nearer’. The reviewer described the effect of the opera on the audience: ‘Setting, performance and all combined to form such an impressive whole that at its conclusion there was a moment of breathless silence which is the greatest tribute that can be accorded. Then came the applause, and floral gifts for the performers’.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The Australian premiere of *Savitri* is a unique event in the history of the British Music Society in Melbourne and the history of opera in Australia. Louise Dyer facilitated collaboration between local and visiting musicians and patrons and invited Melbourne society to an unusual one-off theatrical event of a brand-new British opera only five years after its professional premiere in London.

In a letter to the society’s president Thomas Brentnall in 1933, Dyer reflected, ‘I am sure you will agree that an endowment fund has been the saving of our Society’.⁵⁸ The British Music Society in London could not withstand the financial pressure of the Great Depression and disbanded in 1933, whereas the British Music Society in Melbourne survived, despite the fact that its membership diminished significantly.⁵⁹

After her departure, Louise Dyer continued to be involved with both the headquarters in London and the Melbourne centre. She was elected vice-president of the executive committee of the former⁶⁰ and became a patron of the society in Melbourne.⁶¹ She also continued to provide encouragement, advice and support to the people governing the organisation.⁶²

The Melbourne British Music Society has sustained its activities until the present day. In 2008, it was given a new name: the Lyrebird Music Society.⁶³ The name rightly honours Louise Hanson-Dyer’s place in its history.