FRANCIS HART

After immigrating to Australia from England in 1880, Francis Hart became a well-known and highly controversial West Australian journalist. He founded several theatre and operatic societies in the state, including the Perth Amateur Operatic Society. He also established a close association with West Australian governor, Sir William Robinson and with whom he collaborated on various musical works. Hart and Robinson scored much success with the song, "Unfurl the Flag" and the operetta, *The Handsome Ransom*.

The son of an English surgeon and accomplished litterateur, Francis Hart was born in London around 1859 and educated at Queen Elizabeth's School at Ipswich (Suffolk, Eng). As a student he distinguished himself by his work ethic and at age sixteen secured a position as prefect at the school. After completing his studies Hart undertook private tuition so as to prepare his entry into medicine, the career he had determined he would undertake. His plans were changed, however, after he suffered a severe accident during a football match. As Hart recalls in an interview with *Table Talk*, while recuperating at Sydenham he began attending music concerts and theatre productions on a regular basis and this led to him becoming "stagestruck." It was an affliction which remained with him all his life (20 July 1894, 3). Hart also decided around this time to travel to Australia, his intention being to pursue his interest in theatre.

Upon arriving in Western Australia in 1880, aged twenty-one, Hart realising that a fully professional career in the country would be very difficult and he subsequently secured employment as a journalist for the *West Australian*. His earliest articles were given the by-line "Telephone Papers." In 1881 he collaborated with composer S. Pascal Needham on "Cantata," which was first performed at the inaugural ceremony of the Perth International Exhibition in November 1881.

After he left the Fremantle Herald Hart took up a position editing *The Victorian Express*, which was published out of Geraldton. During his four years in that town he met and married an Englishwoman who had previously written for the *West Australian*, and together the pair invested a good deal of time in the local community. The musical society they established eventually boasted a membership of over a hundred people, a huge number for a town the size of Geraldton. Although well viewed by many within the community, Hart's distinctly radical tendencies, bent towards overturning the then political order of things and substituting a free constitution, also saw him make some enemies. He eventually returned to Perth, becoming assistant editor of the *West Australian*. A disagreement with the paper's policies forced him to move to Fremantle, however, and it was here that he revived the *Fremantle Herald*. Before too long, however, Hart once found himself embroiled in political manoeuvring, and as editor of this new voice of the people spoke his mind. In one particularly sensitive power struggle he found himself championing the side of Chief Justice Onslow against the then governor Sir Frederick Broome. The heated battle, for which Hart fought strenuously, also left him in the position of being, "for the time, the best hated man in the community" (TBT: 20 Jul 1894, 3). Fortunately for Hart, Broome eventually left the West and was replaced Sir William Robinson, whose passion for music and the arts was similarly shared by Hart and the two became friends. His close relationship with the new governor not only allowed Hart to make Perth his home once again, but led to him becoming a leading member of the Perth community - both as a journalist and arts patron. It was during Robinson's final term that the pair collaborated on a number of songs and at least one full scale work.

*The Handsome Ransom* (later *Predatoras*) was Robinson's first foray into music theatre. It was given its premiere in January 1894 before some 250 invited guests at Government House. Following the Government House premiere the operetta was transferred to a hall in the city, where it was received with enthusiasm by the public. While holidaying in Melbourne during July of that year, Sir William responded to requests from friends to present the operetta. The production, which included the librettist Francis Hart as Mr Potts, was mounted in the large salon of the Vienna Café without stage mounting, chorus or orchestra, and with about 100 guests in attendance. Re-titled, *Predatoras; Or The Brigand's Bride*, Robinson and Hart had reworked the operetta, adding considerably to its length, which according to the *Table Talk* reviewer allowed it to "fill the whole evening in its performance" (13 July 1894, 5). Several months later the work was re-staged (after some two months of rehearsal) under the auspices of the Williamson and Musgrove organisation. Interestingly, the advertising for this production indicated that the operetta was being "produced for the first time on any stage" (A: 12 Nov. 1894, 8).
While the extent to which Hart and Robinson collaborated is unclear at this stage, it is known that they worked together on the creation of a number of popular songs. Their most successful work in this field was the patriotic number "Unfurl the Flag." The song was not only a huge hit in terms of sales of music but was also incorporated into a number of theatrical productions over the next decade or so. Writing of the librettist's contribution one critic records: "We think he has never produced so sustained a character as that of Mr Potts, [indeed] the libretto throughout shows most careful preparation, accompanied by a just recognition of the exigencies of the lighter operatic stage" (TBT: 20 July, 3). The only clues found to date concerning his possible movements post-1894 are contained in the aforementioned Table Talk article which suggests that Hart, whose "tastes and proclivities [were] distinctly cosmopolitan and metropolitan," was contemplating a permanent move to Melbourne (ibid, 3). It also indicates that he may well have been planning to return to London to carry out some business on behalf of Western Australia.

Little more has been discovered concerning Francis Hart's life or career. His involvement in the theatrical, musical and social aspects of Perth saw him establish the Perth Amateur Operatic Society (and for whom he played many leading roles). He also wrote countless editorial articles, conducted a press agency and compiled Western Australia in 1891. Sponsored by the Government another edition, Western Australia in 1893 was published two years later. Other known publication are The Miner's Handbook and Investor's Guide to Western Australia (1894) and Picturesque Western Australia: With Hints to the Intending Settler (1897).

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

1881:  Cantata  [cantata]
1894:  Predatoras; Or, The Brigand's Bride (aka The Handsome Ransom)  [operetta]

FURTHER REFERENCE

Kornweibel, A.H. Apollo and the Pioneers (1973), 76-80.
"Mr Francis Hart." TBT: 20 July (1894), 3.
"Resources of Western Australia: A Lecture by Mr. Francis Hart, The." WA: 27 Mar. (1897), 10.