

FRITZ HART

Fritz Hart studied at London's Royal College of Music and early in his career worked as librettist on Holst's opera, *The Revoke*. He travelled to Australia in 1909 to take up a contract with J. C. Williamson as music director, and during the 27 years he resided in the country wrote numerous music theatre works, beginning with *A Knight for a Day* (1910). Engaged by G. W. L. Marshall-Hall as teacher at his Conservatorium (Melb) in 1912, Hart also formed a professional association with Alfred Hill through the Sydney Amateur Orchestral Society. In 1913 he became Director of the Melbourne Conservatorium, and co-founded with Hill the Australian Opera League (AOL). He staged the first of his seventeen Australian operas, *Pirrette* the following year. He founded the Fritz Hart Conservatorium of Music in 1915. Hart became conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1927 and the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra in 1936.

Composer, librettist, conductor, pianist, teacher, poet. Born Fritz Bennicke Hart on 11 February 1874 at Brockley (England). Hart studied at the Royal College of Music (London) and early in his career worked as librettist on Holst's opera, *The Revoke*. He travelled to Australia in 1909 to take up a contract with J. C. Williamson as music director, and during the 27 years he resided in the country he wrote numerous music theatre works, beginning with *A Knight for a Day* (1910). Engaged by G. W. L. Marshall-Hall as teacher at his Conservatorium (Melb) in 1912, Hart also formed a professional association with Alfred Hill through the Sydney Amateur Orchestral Society. In 1913 he became Director of the Melbourne Conservatorium, and co-founded with Hill the Australian Opera League. The following year Hart staged the first of his seventeen Australian operas, *Pirrette* (with Hill's *Giovanni*) under the auspices of the AOL. He founded the Fritz Hart Conservatorium of Music in 1915 with the patronage of Dame Nellie Melba and completed the first of his *Deirdre* operas, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in 1916. *Deirdre in Exile* was completed in 1926. He became conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1927 and in 1936 conductor of the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra. He died in 1949.



Source: National Library of Australia

As a child Fritz Hart's passion for composition and musical performance was encouraged through his parent's love of music. His mother was a talented pianist and teacher, and his father acted as choirmaster at the local church, where from age six Fritz began singing. In 1884, aged ten, Hart was accepted for a choristership position at Westminster Abbey. Following the completion of his formal schooling he first attempted several positions as clerk, before taking up two prestigious offers in 1893. One was to study piano and organ at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in London, and the other as organist for a London church. This period also saw him immersed in the world of composition and performance. While at the RCM Hart made the acquaintance of fellow students such as Gustave Holst, Vaughan-Williams, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and John Ireland. It was Hart's friendship with Holst in particular that played a major influence in his development as both a composer and intellectual. During his time at the college Hart wrote the libretto for Holst's first opera *The Revoke*, along with several other smaller works including an incomplete score for *The Magic Mirror*. In the decade or so following his graduation in 1896 he worked primarily as a freelance conductor, an occupation which saw him involved with a variety of musical forms including musical comedy, operetta, opera and incidental music for drama, some of which he composed himself.

In 1909 Hart accepted a twelve month contract with J. C. Williamson to act as music director for the forthcoming Royal Comic Opera Company's Australian season (the contract was later extended for a further three years). Shortly before he left for Australia, however, the London Symphony Orchestra performed his much acclaimed 'Fantasy Overture.' One of his first works to be staged in Australia was the two act musical farce, *A Knight for a Day*, co-written with composer Raymond Hubbell and librettist, Robert B. Smith. It premiered at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney on 9 June 1910. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that although described as a musical farce, "the term is scarcely comprehensive enough. The play is a sort of olla podrida, for the authors have furnished a mixture embracing burlesque extravaganzas, pantomime, rollicking farce, picturesque ballets and a resplendent transformation scene. It abounds in absurd situations" (11 July 1910, 3). Two years later Hart took up a position at George Marshall-Hall's Conservatorium in Melbourne during the director's prolonged absence overseas. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that Hart's decision to abandon "the primrose path of dalliance," had been undertaken so as "to follow his art more seriously" (14 Dec. 1912, 5). Among his works from this period are two song cycles - one containing fourteen songs written to words by Robert Herrick, and the other a seven song collection to the words of William Blake.

In 1912 Hart was invited to play with the Sydney Amateur Orchestral Society, then under the direction of Alfred Hill. Their relationship was such that the two men played together on numerous occasions and later founded the Australian

Opera League in an attempt to establish not only greater opportunities for local composers and musicians but also an Australian operatic tradition. The following year the position of Director of the Marshall-Hall Conservatorium of Music was offered to Hart after acting head, Eduard Scharf, left for the University of Melbourne Conservatorium. The decision to make a commitment to both the Conservatorium and to Australia in effect became a turning point in Hart's professional career. He saw not only the possibility of establishing a truly Australian school of music, in the way that George Grove and Hubert Parry had done for English music with the Royal College of Music, but realised that it was an opportunity to get his own works performed.

The first of Hart's Australian-written operas, completed in 1913, was *Pierrette*. This was staged, along with Alfred Hill's opera *Giovanni*, in Sydney and Melbourne the following year. Both operas were presented under the auspices of the Australian Opera League. Unfortunately although both works were well received by critics and the public alike the AOL was put on hold soon afterwards when the war was declared, and never managed to be revived afterwards.

By 1915 Fritz Hart's Conservatorium of Music had attracted the patronage of Dame Nellie Melba, and under her guidance it became an acclaimed singing school. The close professional and personal relationship between Hart and Melba also accounts for the Conservatorium becoming a significant part of the Australian music landscape for many years. Around this time, too, he involved himself in numerous facets of the art music industry including, for example, acting as a judge for the first Musical Association of New South Wales annual prize for composition (BC: 8 Dec. 1917, 2). He also continued to devote his attention to the Conservatorium, to public performance and to his own compositions for the remainder of his time in Australia.

In 1927 Hart was appointed conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO), a position he held until 1933. The *Age* wrote of him during his second year at the helm of the orchestra: "Impetuous in his ardour, Mr Hart imparts an infectious enthusiasm that lays slack and conventional thinking low. A high standard is clearly regarded as requisite for the presentation of important works to a public certain to find its musical conscience quickened" (16 July 1928, 11). Hart's association with the MSO, then still an amateur organisation, saw a variety of innovative ideas put into practice, several of them being supported financially by businessman and philanthropist, Sidney Myer. Hart organised regular concerts for the orchestra during this period, with these being well supported by the Melbourne public. Numerous, too, were charity concerts in aid of societies such as the Workless Winter Buffet and the Unemployed Bureau in St Kilda in August 1928. By the early 1930s, however, competition from the rival Melbourne University Conservatorium (then under the directorship of Bernard Heinze) and the effects of the depression created conditions that led to the gradual decline in the fortunes of Hart's school and both the MSO and his Conservatorium were eventually absorbed into the Melbourne University Conservatorium. Thereafter Hart began a series of visits to Hawaii as guest conductor of the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, which in 1936 turned into a permanent position, along with a professorship at the University of Hawaii. He retired as conductor of the HSO in 1949, dying later that same year aged seventy-five.



Source: National Library of Australia

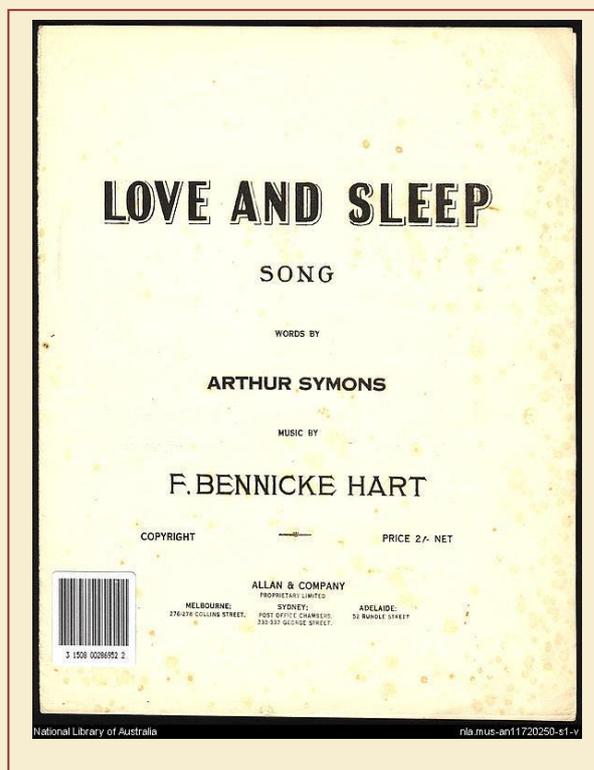
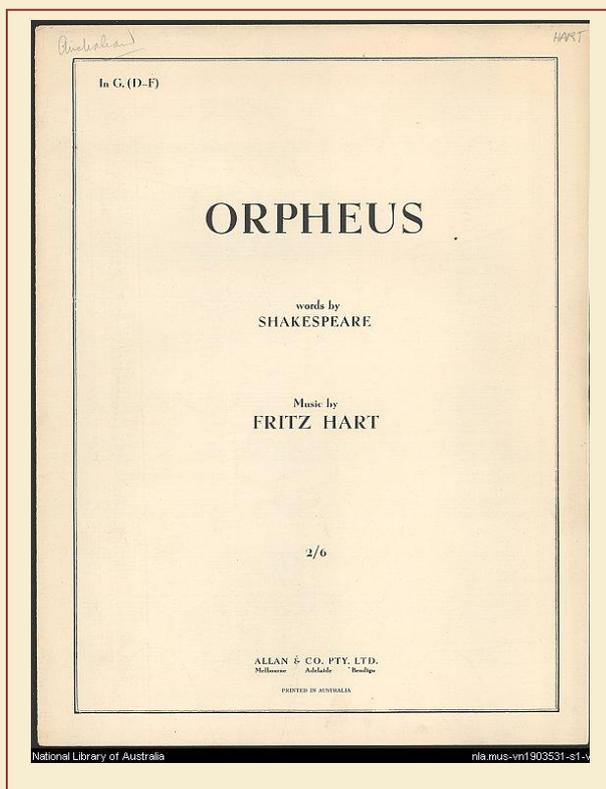


Source: State Library of Victoria

Of Fritz Hart's twenty operas as composer, beginning with *Pierrette* in 1913 and ending in 1947 with the Hawaii-composed work *The Vengeance of Faery* (1947), seventeen were written in Australia. Among the best remembered today are his *Deidre* operas, *Deidre of the Sorrows* (1916) and *Deidre in Exile* (1926). His other operas are: *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1914), *Riders to the Sea* (1915), *Ruth and Naomi* (1917), *The Fantastics* (1918), *Malvolio* (completed in 1913, but not staged until 1919), *The Travelling Man* (1920), *The King* (1921), *Esther* (1923), *The Woman Who Laughed at Faery* (1924), *The Forced Marriage* (1928), *St George and the Dragon* (1930), *The Nativity* (1931), and *Isolt of the White Hands* (1933).

As a composer, Fritz Hart left a large legacy of other successful works behind, with most of these also having been composed in Australia. No doubt the influence of singing (and singing teachers) within his own pedagogical career played a vital role in the five hundred or so songs he wrote (Hart has claimed that he wrote as many as two or three hundred more, but burned many of them). Peter Tregear argues that the 495 that still exist in documented form, "makes Hart the

most prolific of English art song composers of the twentieth century" ("Songs," 59). Some of his more popular works in this area include: "The Song of Mary" and "The Gilly of Christ." As a teacher he was also responsible for playing a significant part in the development of hundreds of successful composition students, several of whom, including Esther Rolfe, Margaret Sutherland and Peggy Glanville-Hicks all, became leading Australian composers in their own right. As well as being a composer, music director and noted conductor he wrote several unpublished novels and the lyrics to many of his own songs. A volume of his poems was published in 1913 under the title, *Appassionata: Songs of Youth and Love*. At least three of his poems also appear in the *Bulletin*.

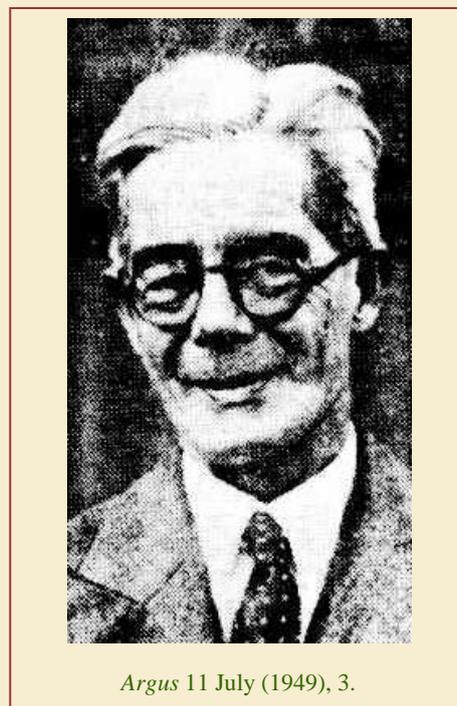


Source: National Library of Australia

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

(written during his residency in Australia)

- 1910:** **A Knight for a Day** [musical farce]
- 1914:** **Pierrette** [opera] • **The Land of Heart's Desire** [opera]
- 1915:** **Riders to the Sea** [opera]
- 1916:** **Deidre of the Sorrows** [opera]
- 1917:** **Ruth and Naomi** [opera]
- 1918:** **The Fantastics** [opera]
- 1919:** **Malvolio** [comic opera]
- 1920:** **The Travelling Man** [opera]
- 1921:** **The King** [opera]
- 1923:** **Esther** [opera]
- 1924:** **The Woman Who Laughed at Faery** [opera]
- 1926:** **Deidre in Exile** [opera]
- 1928:** **The Forced Marriage** [opera]
- 1930:** **George and the Dragon** [opera]
- 1931:** **The Nativity** [opera]
- 1933:** **Isolt of the White Hand** [opera]



Argus 11 July (1949), 3.

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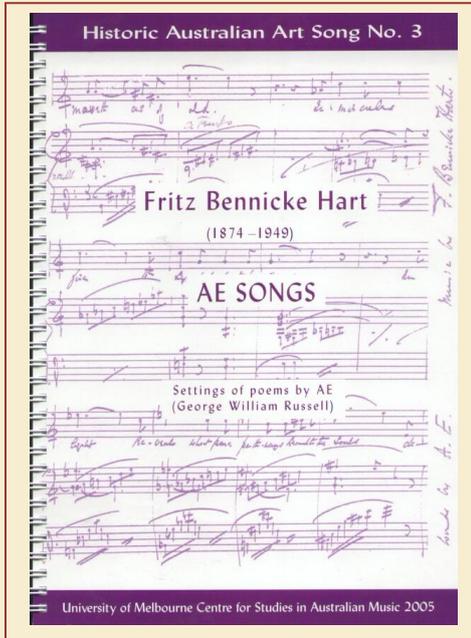
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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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