

The early letters of Miriam Hyde

Karen Johnson reads some of
the correspondence of a great
Australian musician

The old suitcase lay closed on the table, waiting to reveal its treasure. And what treasure lay within. Bundles of old letters lovingly tied with faded ribbons lay nestled in its depths. These were the letters written home by composer and pianist Miriam Hyde to her family in Adelaide, while she was studying at the Royal College of Music in London from 1932 to 1935. Her parents, having been asked to keep the letters, placed them in the suitcase, in which they were to remain for some 70 years, being stored variously in the rafters of a garage and under a bed. The letters were acquired by the Manuscripts Collection of the National Library in September 2003. They provide an insight into aspects of Hyde's early musical development and in equal measure, a fascinating portrayal of life in London in that period.

Music was an important influence in Miriam Hyde's life from an early age. Her mother, Muriel, played and taught piano, her aunt, Clarice Gmeiner, played violin, viola and harp with the South Australian Symphony Orchestra, and her younger sister, Pauline, played violin and was a talented singer. Improvised musical games were a common form of entertainment in the family, instilling in the young Miriam musicianship skills which, combined with her studies, were to set her firmly on course for her later career as a pianist and composer.

Hyde's early piano tuition was undertaken by her mother. Then in 1925, at the age of 12, she was awarded an Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) scholarship to study at the Elder Conservatorium of Music, Adelaide, under the tutelage of William Silver. In 1931, after completing a Bachelor of Music degree at the age of 18,



Miriam Hyde was awarded a three-year Elder Conservatorium of Music Scholarship to study at the Royal College of Music in London. In August 1932 she set sail for England in the *SS Corfu* and it was from this ship that she wrote the first of her more than 150 letters home.

Hyde's first letter to her family opens, 'Here I am at sea, on my lone voyage to the other side of the world' and philosophically urges them to 'think of each day as being nearer to my return, rather than further from my departure'. Some three weeks later she writes wistfully, 'I can picture you at present having supper, perhaps round a fire!' However, it is clear that this was a trip Hyde very much wanted to undertake. She declares, 'I have been waiting for this to come since I was eight. Never for one moment have I regretted the step that I have taken, and wherever it leads me, or whatever becomes of me, you must know that it has been my greatest wish fulfilled to be even starting this journey!'

Letters of the voyage over to London are filled with the excitement of all the new sights Hyde saw. She was remarkably adventurous for someone who had not travelled before and made the most of every opportunity to go ashore, avidly soaking up the local sights and culture and then writing at great length of all her experiences. She was thrilled with her first sighting of Colombo, writing 'It felt like Christmas morning to me. I had waited so long to see

'Lessons finished for the day'. Miriam Hyde, with the Royal College of Music in the background, c.1934

Papers of Miriam Hyde; Manuscripts Collection, MS 5260/Box 6/folder 41

Colombo, and went to bed last night with the feeling of having hung my stocking in readiness for all its surprises. This morning it was full, bulging and overflowing. Never shall I forget this first thrill of the East! Hyde's amazement at new sights continues with an entry in a shipboard journal she kept and which accompanies the letters, where she records, 'A sudden awareness that I really was in the Red Sea crept all over me, and I tried hard to believe it—that Arabia lay on my right and Africa on my left. The Red Sea! ... I wanted to cry at the very joy of it.'

Hyde's attachment to her family is evident in the fond words she writes. It seems that through her letters she was attempting to include them in every aspect of her life while they were apart. Her letters brim with vitality and convey the excitement and enthusiasm with which she so obviously embraced life in London. The letters contain details relating to every aspect of her day-to-day life: shopping, clothes she had sewn, meals, buses or trains she had caught, sights she had seen, and people she had met. Her news is often supplemented with quick sketches, lines of her poetry (she was later to have three books of her poetry published), photographs, postcards of places she has visited and newspaper cuttings. Each letter follows on from the last in diary-like form, producing an amazingly detailed record of her entire time overseas. They often open with statements such as, 'Dearest mother, where did I leave you last week?—undecided about the recital I think! And: 'Now let's get back to last Wednesday night and work up to the present in more or less of a sequence.'

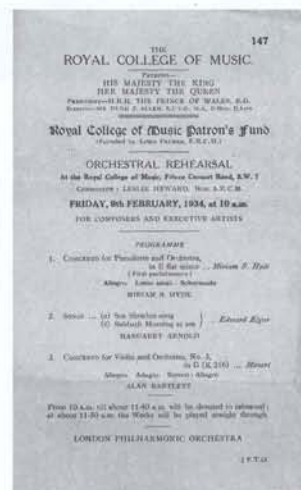
In her enthusiasm conveyed and the level of description she provides, Hyde's letters are reminiscent of those which Nettie Palmer wrote home from Europe to her family some two decades earlier. With her detailed and often witty observations, Hyde's letters transport the reader to another time and place. She wrote home once a week and most letters were over 20 pages in length, with several over 40 pages and one of 52 pages. The depth of detail that Hyde crams into each letter creates a snapshot of life in London in the early 1930s.

Hyde's studies at the Royal College of Music, where she studied under Howard Hadley, Arthur Benjamin, R.O. Morris and Gordon Jacob, predictably form the main

focus of all her letters. Those recounting her first few weeks report that she has fitted in well and seems able to cope with the expected levels of study. She was very pleased to be told by an examiner that she had perfect pitch. Weekly descriptions of her progress, including teachers' comments, discussion about music she was studying, the progress of her own compositions—including her concerto—and preparation for exams, fill the letters. Hyde often produced roughly sketched bars of music to illustrate a piece of music she was learning.

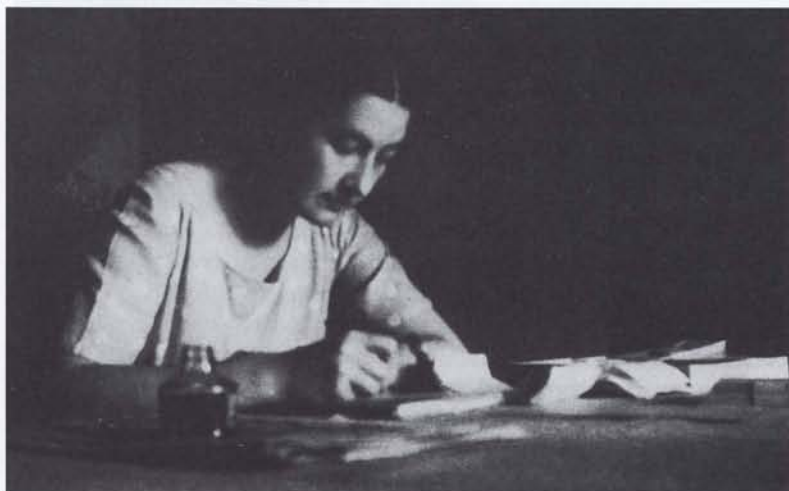
Enthusiasm for her music shines through Hyde's letters. She writes, 'I am happy because ... I would not ever be happy without my work', and her dedication to her work is illustrated when she reports, 'I've just finished 8 hours practice for the day!'. Similar comments occur throughout the letters. Yearly reports on her progress are included with the letters and it is clear from the remarks of her teachers that she made a great success of her time at the college. At the end of Hyde's first year at the college, she was joint winner, with John Sykes, of the Arthur Sullivan Prize for Composition, receiving half of the £10 in prize money. Her delight at being so acknowledged is evidenced by the fact that she spent six shillings and eight pence—a vast sum given her very tight budget—on cabling the news to her family back home.

Hyde's early strong sense of confidence in her own ability and individuality as a composer is illustrated when writing to her mother about her dilemma in deciding which teacher to select for Composition lessons in her second term at the College. She confides, 'The things I feel moved to do seem to act all right generally, and I am not



above:
Program advertising first performance of Miriam Hyde's *Piano Concerto No. 1* on 9 February 1934
Papers of Miriam Hyde; Manuscripts Collection, MS 5620/Box 1/folder7

below:
Miriam Hyde at work in her student digs, London, 1930s
Reproduced from *Complete Accord* (Sydney: Currency Press, c.1991)
Courtesy of Miriam Hyde



INTERNATIONAL TELEGRAM

Y.E. 6.
FOR QUICK SERVICE USE THE TELEGRAPH.
 PLEASE TURN OVER.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT.
RECEIVED TELEGRAM
 The first line of this telegram contains the following particulars in the order named.

Office of Origin. Words. Time Lodged. No.

BEAM SA 9 LONDON 11 10TH 11-40AM

TELEPHONE TO x 2320

To: LG STEAMSHIP
 ADELAIDE

RECORDED
 x 2320
 9.14.34
 Rm

PERFORMED CONCERTO PATRONS FUND YESTERDAY REPORTS GRATIFYING
 HYDE

3-18AM AG

Telegram, dated 11 February 1934, sent by Miriam Hyde to her parents following first performance of her *Piano Concerto No. 1*
 Papers of Miriam Hyde; Manuscripts Collection, MS 5620/Box 10/folder 66

going to have anyone un-Miriamizing me! A further illustration of her sense of self worth is her request to her parents to 'Keep all my letters won't you? Because they are my only records of what I have done here, and must serve for the book that I might write some day.' Hyde was to publish her autobiography, *Complete Accord*, almost 60 years after this was written and her letters did, indeed, form the basis for writings about her time at the Royal College.

In September 1933, Hyde gave her first recital at a club in Holland Park. Her letter about the occasion brims with every possible detail, beginning with what clothes, jewellery and makeup she wore, how her hair was done and then all the news of the actual recital itself, of which she writes, 'I had a lovely happy thrilling evening.' Of another recital in November 1933, Hyde writes, 'I felt in the first flights of happiness and have never enjoyed playing more; really got lost in the music.'

On 9 February 1934 there was much excitement when Hyde's *Pianoforte Concerto No. 1* was performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Leslie Heward. Her letter home, written the next day, bubbles with the thrill of the occasion. She had arranged a practice session on her own, which she hoped would familiarise her with being on stage, writing that she 'practised away looking up at an imaginary Mr Heward, trying to coincide with an imaginary orchestra'. Of the performance itself she writes, 'It was simply glorious to be playing with orchestra again, and they were so clever. I thought they read it wonderfully well ... They did things I wanted as did Mr Heward and it was quite an inspiration to

be playing it with the real sounds about me ... One of the biggest thrills was to hear [Leon] Goossens playing the oboe solo! She records that 'There was applause between the movements and a most enthusiastic response at the end; clapping and bravos.'

It is clear that letters to and from home were an important lifeline for Hyde. She often writes of her frustration with mail delays which prevented her from hearing news of home and, almost weekly, makes comment about having to rush to finish her letter in order to 'make the mail'. It took the letters up to 10 weeks to arrive from home, but once they arrived in London it was the other extreme, with four mail deliveries per day, the first being at 7.00 am. In these days of instant communication it is easy to forget that it was not so long ago that letters were the sole way of communicating with loved ones, and when Hyde left her family, it was with the knowledge that she would not see or speak to them for over three years. The tyranny of distance is starkly illustrated when, in March 1934, through an accumulation of circumstances including the pressures of study and the high expectations she placed on herself to achieve, Hyde suffered a nervous collapse. It took her mother eight weeks to get to England by boat to be with her. There is a break of some three months at this stage in the letters, as Hyde's mother stayed on in England for a number of weeks overseeing Hyde's recuperation and then enjoyed some time sightseeing. With her mother's departure, Hyde recommenced her weekly letters home.

Hyde managed to lead a very active social life and had the opportunity to attend numerous concerts and recitals. The excitement of being exposed to such talents is communicated through the letters, which often contain details of the performers and concert programs, together with any criticisms she has of the performances. She was thrilled to see Rachmaninoff play, having managed to secure a seat looking down onto the keyboard so that she had 'an excellent view of his hands. The technique is absolutely colossal ... It is the most brilliant playing you could hear; it glitters like Moiseiwitsch's at his most entrancing, but it has a greater depth and, one feels, intellectuality.' Hyde was so taken with the performance that she and her friend decided to wait at the stage door

after the concert in the hope of seeing him and were thrilled when he shook their hands. Other performers she saw included Yehudi Menuhin (conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham), Medtner, Giesecking, Cortot, Backhaus, Elman, Toscanini, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Elizabeth Schumann.

In addition to attending performances, Hyde went out for tea or meals and to stay in the country homes of friends as well as having short holidays further afield. As with news of studies, the letters are full of detailed accounts of all social occasions and holidays, together with evocative descriptions of everyone she met, such as this of the wife of Dr Basil Johnson: 'very very charming; tall and thin and rather dark, with a pretty mop of cut grey hair, which makes her head look like a beautiful Persian cat's.'

Hyde spent her first Christmas with relatives in the country, and writes home in detail of having strung ivy through the stair rails and draped fresh holly over pictures and mantle piece, the food they ate and the presents she received. It appears from the list that the most popular gift of the times was handkerchiefs. (In fact, the next year she would write to her mother, saying 'It might interest you to know that I have 125 hankies; almost one gross!') At 3.00 pm on Christmas Day the King's 'heart-to-heart talk' to the Empire was broadcast on the radio and she writes that they all stood up, saying that they 'just felt we must', something almost unimaginable today.

It is clear from the letters that Hyde had to exist on a very tight budget. Before she left, her local community in Adelaide held fund-raising events to raise money to go towards expenses her scholarship would not cover and which her parents' circumstances did not allow them to meet. She documents the cost of everything to do with her day-to-day existence: rent, food, laundry, travel, clothing, concert tickets and meals out. Literally every penny had to be accounted for. However, she approached her budgeting with good humour, writing: 'I thought I'd have cauliflower; saw a little dear in a shop, just big enough to hold in one's hand. But it was a little dear in more than one respect. Four pence. So I bought half a pound of sprouts instead for a penny halfpenny, and now I can see I shall have a good many meals of sprouts—sprouts boiled, sprouts fried etc.' On another occasion she writes of

daydreaming and missing her bus stop and having to catch a bus back, only to discover that she had paid one penny to travel one stop, exclaiming: 'How I grudged it!'

In a reflective mood, not long before she was to return home, Hyde muses that not many people understand the single-mindedness it takes for artists to attain their goals. She writes gratefully to her parents: 'what sacrifices you have made to let me try to do it! I hope you'll think it's worth it when you hear me play again, or when you hear some of my orchestral things.'

The reward for their sacrifice must surely be found in the fact that from these humble beginnings, Miriam Hyde has gone on to enjoy a long and successful career as both a composer and a pianist. In 1980, she received an OBE and in 1991 an AO for services to music. In her 80th year (1993) Macquarie University conferred upon her an Honorary Doctorate and in 1995 she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship in Music, Australia, by the Australian Music Examinations Board in recognition of her outstanding contribution. In 2003, tributes for Hyde's 90th birthday included a celebratory concert of her works, organised by the ABC and presented at the Eugene Goossens Hall in Sydney. Hyde was further honoured on 12 July 2004 when she received the award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music at the Australian Performing Rights Association and Australian Music Centre Classical Music Awards held in Sydney.

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Greg Power (b.1974)
Miriam Hyde's letters, with her suitcase
Papers of Miriam Hyde; Manuscripts Collection, MS 5620

