


By Sue Smethurst

SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

Photography Julian Kingma



Her virtuoso performances in the streets of Melbourne have been delighting crowds for years. What is Natalie Trayling's story?



t's dusk on a late autumn day and a river of suits is flowing along the streets of Melbourne. They scurry along immersed in their own busyness, heads down and eyes glued to phones, jostling towards Flinders Street station – until a ghostly figure stops them in their tracks. A large crowd has gathered around the elderly busker hunched over a keyboard. Time has twisted the woman's body. The bones of her back curve angrily skyward and long strands of wispy white hair fall around her weathered face. Draped head to toe in black, she is a haunting yet fragile figure. Her fingers poke through the cuffs of an oversized men's shirt in readiness to play.

Although painfully knuckled and knotty, the second those fingers touch the keyboard they burst into life, waltzing with gusto across the keys. She launches into a brilliant Beethoven arrangement, with a few of her own touches. It's Chopin next, Nocturne in E flat major. There's no sheet music to refer to; every note and complex phrase is stored somewhere in her soul.

Then she begins to play music of her own, making it up as she goes along, drawing inspiration from her audience: a smile or a frown, perhaps a vacant stare, will direct the mood of the music and where her fingers take her. She's never played this piece before and never will again. In that moment, those gathered, some wiping away tears, witness the musical genius of Natalie Trayling. The homeless virtuoso.

This gifted pianist would be at home on stage in any one of the world's great auditoriums, but for much of the past two decades she has instead chosen to live and share her life's work on the streets of Melbourne, for no money and no fanfare. Now 84, and having recently moved into a bedsit (the first roof over her head in years) Natalie is still stopping the city in its tracks almost every day, setting up her keyboard when and where her heart takes her, rain, hail or shine. "I feel at home on the street," she says. "I love performing, it's something I need to do each day, I need to be out there among people, among life, in the freedom and openness. When I'm out here I feel I am at one with the world and it is the best feeling. It brings me joy."

Melbourne's love affair with Natalie Trayling began in the 1990s when she wandered into the David Jones department store one day and randomly began to play its grand piano. She'd been living in a motel in Brunswick, playing the piano in the window of a nearby music shop, until one day she arrived there to find the piano sold. "I figured there must be a piano in the city somewhere so I began walking there to find one," she explains. "Along the way I stopped a man and asked if he knew of a piano anywhere in the city. He told me there was one at David Jones and gave me directions, so I kept walking and there it was."

For years she was a daily fixture at the store, her arrangements of the classics and her own unique compositions often drawing large crowds. But few knew that when the store closed each night, Natalie disappeared onto the streets, often sleeping in parks and gardens, until dawn when the store opened for her to play again. "I'd find a park bench somewhere and sit and think, 'I'm home.' I was always terribly cold at night, but in the morning I'd feel the sun on my back and I'd be happy again."

Gifted: Natalie Trayling

Natalie Trayling was born and raised in Perth; her parents, Steve and Anna Miolin, were ethnic Croats from Yugoslavia who'd settled in Australia prior to World War II. The day Natalie started school was the first time she'd ever heard a word of English. She was born a "free spirit", she says. Her earliest and most vivid memories are of experiences with nature and music: the day she saw the ocean for the first time, and the day she clapped eyes and ears on a piano. "Something struck me immediately," she says of that morning at Sunday school at a church near the family's Guildford home. "It wasn't just the wonderful sound, but also the smoothness and shape of the piano that fascinated me. I begged my mother to let me learn music, but we couldn't afford it. Being a child, I kept asking and asking and she kept saying no, so eventually I gave up."

Her parents were both musical: Steve played the trombone and Anna sang opera. Anna was destined for the Conservatorium in their native Yugoslavia, but marriage, family and a new life in Australia intervened. "There was always music around the house," Natalie says. "My mother's voice was beautiful and she sang a lot."

Natalie's affinity with music deepened after a school excursion to see the 1945 film *A Song to Remember* about the composer Chopin. By the time she reached Santa Maria College in Year 5, she was desperate to learn the piano but the working-class family had no means of affording lessons. "One day, one of the nuns approached me in the playground," Natalie recalls. "She told me that my mother had been [there] to discuss music lessons. This was a big thing for my mother to do – she barely spoke a word of English, so it would've taken great courage to front up to the nuns."

Sister Mercy told Natalie that the school had agreed to provide music lessons for virtually no charge. "My parents paid 1 shilling and 4 pence, the price of one single lesson, for 10 weeks of lessons, twice a week! It was very generous and I'll always be grateful. I took to the piano instantly and I practised at school every day and it's been a great love of my life ever since."

By the end of her first year of lessons, Natalie had passed all of her exams and was achieving honours. From the age of 10 she was the official organist at the church, playing for weddings, funerals, baptisms and weekly mass. Around age 12 her talent caught the eye of renowned Australian composer Sir Bernard Heinze, who arranged a musical scholarship at the college so that she could continue learning to play. By age 15 she was offered a scholarship to the Royal

Academy of Music in London but she knocked it back because her family couldn't afford the travel and living expenses that would have entailed. Instead, she graduated from Santa Maria College with a diploma of music at the age of 17.

From then on, Natalie's music and life followed an unconventional path. This fragile bird needed to stretch her wings, so she left Perth and spent several years travelling around Australia with an entertainment troupe, touring every corner of the country. Eventually she drifted to Hobart, where she met Denis Trayling, an abalone diver. They married and settled in Southport and started a family. Denis built a stunning clifftop home overlooking the ocean for them and their four children, Matthew, Kerin, Jo-Ann and Nathan.

Natalie adored family life but the demands of four young kids meant little time for professional music, although she still played and composed at home whenever she could. In 1965 she submitted a book of her songs to the National Archive so that they could be used publicly but she would be acknowledged as the creator or the work.

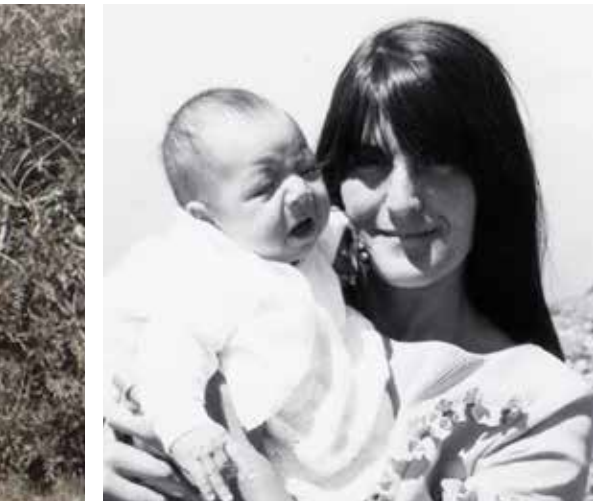
However, it won't surprise anyone who has heard Natalie pouring her soul out over the keyboard that tragedy lingers in the background of her life. Her adored daughter Kerin, when she was just six years old, was killed in a car accident outside the family home. "Mum was never the same," says her eldest son Matthew, now 56. "It changed all of our lives and all of us. Mum started going to church and became quite religious and the family began to change. It was a horrific time. Prior to Kerin's death it had really been the perfect childhood."

Kerin's death was just the first of a series of heartbreaking events that ultimately tore the family apart. Youngest child Nathan, a promising junior sportsman, suffered depression and spiralled out of control. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Denis and Natalie divorced soon after. Then they lost their second daughter, Jo-Ann, to cystic fibrosis at 22 years old. In a final, cruel blow, the home they'd all once happily shared burnt to the ground.

"Mum packed up and moved to Melbourne with Nathan," Matthew says. "She walked away from everything. They lived in hotels or on the streets, she never contemplated getting another house. She didn't want any ties to anything; she was totally transient. That was her way of being free, so we had to let her go, as difficult as that was.

"She remained good friends with Dad and he tried to help her. So did I. We arranged a house for her in Melbourne but she refused to live in it





Solace: Natalie, from top, with her parents and siblings; with Matthew, 1968; in 1983; today

– she’d made her mind up about how she wanted to live and nothing would sway her. She begged us to let her go.”

For years Natalie spent nights here and there in motels and shelters or on the streets, while Nathan was in and out of mental health institutions. She found solace and purpose playing a piano anywhere she could find one – music shops, council offices, old community halls. If there was a piano around, she could sniff it out.

One evening while staying at the Victoria Hotel she discovered a dusty piano tucked away in a corner of a mezzanine floor, unused and unloved. She took the covers off and began to play, to the delight of hotel guests, who thought she was a paid performer. The hotel owners were so impressed they gave Natalie accommodation in exchange for her performances. She lived there for several years.

In 2008, when she was 73 years old, Denis suggested that she head outside and start busking to take her music to a bigger audience. He helped her buy a smart Roland keyboard, which she still uses today. On that first day she wheeled it out and set up in an arcade. A nearby shop let her plug her cord into their power socket. “From the moment I started playing I loved it,” she recalls. “I was home. I felt completely at peace. It felt incredible having people stand and watch me. It made me feel good.”

She didn’t have a hat for donations, and didn’t want one, but people insisted on leaving money for her. “It wasn’t about money or people giving me money, it was about the connection I made with the people. It was pure and absolutely joyful.”

Natalie has been busking ever since, a much-loved and often misunderstood musical treasure, surprising and delighting Melburnians with her random appearances. Matthew helps transport her equipment around and she plays on the streets most days; it might be for half an hour, an hour, or half a day, depending on where her mood and the music takes her. The only time off has been for hospital treatment for chronic anaemia; the staunch vegan admits she doesn’t look after herself too well, and has needed several lengthy bouts of medical treatment. These days the body is fast failing but the willing mind more than makes up for a few creaky bones.

And she has won some impressive fans. “She is an original talent and she deserves to be taken notice of and enjoyed,” says renowned classical pianist Gerard Willems AM, who taught for years at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Like so many others, Willems – the first Australian to

have recorded all 32 of Beethoven’s piano sonatas – stumbled upon Natalie performing on Little Collins Street one day. “I heard her play the Adagio movement of Beethoven’s *Pathétique* Sonata as well as *Widmung* of Robert Schumann arranged by Liszt,” he says, adding excitedly, “then arranged by Trayling!”

Willems noted how she had adapted her playing to her age and the physical condition of her hands. “The harmonies and melodies were true to the original but she improvised in a free gypsy style with extra *fiorituri*, extra octaves and a sprinkling of arpeggios! I could’ve listened to her all day. It is clear she is someone who has been seriously trained,” he says.

Natalie has been invited to play in prestigious theatres and offered good money to perform many times, but she refuses; she won’t even record her own material. “We got access to a studio to record her,” Matthew says, “but she’d barely set foot inside when she turned around and walked out. She just didn’t feel comfortable, so that was that.”

Last year the Melbourne City Council invited Natalie to play the grand organ in the town hall, the largest organ in the southern hemisphere. Thousands of empty chairs surrounded her, which would have filled with ticket-paying fans in a heartbeat – had Natalie allowed them in. “She just refuses [to take payment],” says Matthew, “and over many years we’ve learnt that when Mum makes her mind up, nothing will sway her. She is a bird and she has to be able to fly.”

With Natalie’s blessing, though, Matthew filmed one of her street performances. Like she has done every day, she composed a piece of music on the spot, playing to where her mood and her fingers took her. Since uploading it to YouTube it’s been viewed more than nine million times.

Prompted by the passionate response, Matthew now films most of her performances and she has developed a following on the YouTube channel he established in her name. Natalie doesn’t own a computer or a phone, and she’s not particularly fussed by the attention. “It makes no difference to me if one person or one million see me,” Natalie says. “I just love performing. You can bring the beauty of the world out in a single note and if I can make one person feel something when they hear my music, or if I can make them feel good in that moment, then I’m happy. I do what my mind and my heart want me to do.”

For the people’s pianist, the streets of Melbourne will forever be her stage, and its people her song. ●