



Heartsong: the creation of a story book duet

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[Jane Ray](#) [1]

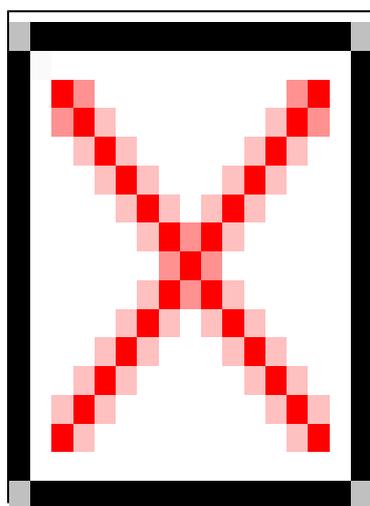
Article Author:

[Kevin Crossley-Holland](#) [2]

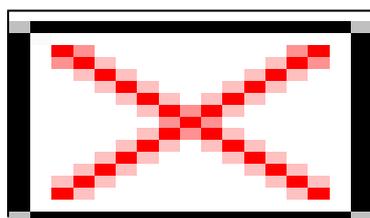
[214](#) [3]

Byline:

Jane Ray, Kevin Crossley-Holland and Antonio Vivaldi in harmony



[Heartsong](#) [4] is the first collaboration between Jane Ray and Kevin Crossley-Holland, and is inspired by stories of the orphaned girls who grew up in the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, and by the music of Antonio Vivaldi. Here the two describe their book and its creation.



Jane:

Kevin Crossley Holland's writing is a gift to the illustrator, and I was honoured when he expressed an interest in working on a book with me. We thought long and hard about what this book should be ? Kevin sent me ideas, I sent him ideas. There were meetings and discussions, ?what if??s and ?how about??s ? But nothing quite seemed to ?click?, to fit, to feel absolutely right ?

Then I unearthed, from the back of my mind, fragments of a potential story that had begun to form itself on my first magical trip to Venice some years before.

A few scribbled notes in my sketchbook recalled an afternoon in the Vivaldi Museum where I had found a great leather-bound book, listing all the babies left at the Ospedale della Pietà, the orphanage in eighteenth century Venice, where Antonio Vivaldi was music master.

Name after name was scrawled there in long columns in a spidery hand. The last entry on the open page was Laura ? no: 317, born 1724. I don't know why that name, that particular little life, so touched me, but my head and my heart were captured, filled with questions as to who she was, who she became.

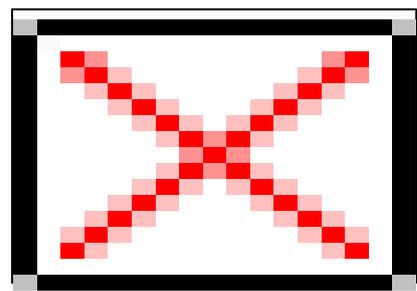
I filled a sketchbook with drawings ? shadows and reflections, the soft greeny grey of the water, terracotta in the sun, the face of an abandoned little girl. Elements of a story crept in ? a beautiful city filled with sound: lapping water; bells and birds; street cries; and of course music, always music. At the heart of these ideas was a song flowing through the story like the dark canal waters.

And the child, Laura, silent, alone, motherless.

I tried to pull the threads and fragments of the story together, but somehow it eluded me. I could ?see? the story ? the pictures were alive in my imagination. I knew who Laura was, and what she looked like. But the story itself, Laura?s story, refused all my attempts to organise it, kept slipping into the shadows ? Frustrated by my lack of progress, I had shoved the sketches to the back of a drawer.

Tentatively, I showed my notes to Kevin. I knew that he loved Venice with a passion, and hoped that something in my jottings might appeal to him.

He knew exactly what to do. He took the scraps and the fragments, discarded some, created many others. He knew immediately who Laura was, what the shape and tone of the story should be. His knowledge of Venice added substance and atmosphere, and his power as a storyteller created the perfect home for Laura.

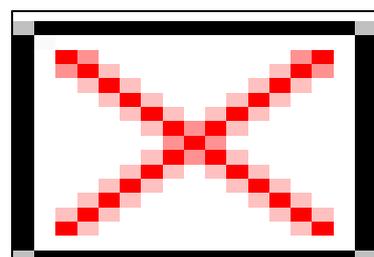


So, unexpectedly, here it was ? the book that we had so long wanted to make.

When I read his first draft I knew that it was exactly right. The pictures, the colours, the light and the shadow that had all been rattling around disconnectedly in my mind?s eye, now fell into place, an accompaniment to Kevin?s lyrical writing.

Working in this somewhat unorthodox way has been, for me certainly, a real joy. It has required both Kevin and me to abandon any sort of egotistical ownership of the story. I don't feel that it belongs to us ? it was a story that was waiting to be discovered, in the shadows, in that great leather bound book, in the music of Antonio Vivaldi and in the deep canal waters of Venice.

It has been a privilege to tell it.



Kevin:

During my writing life, some of the most fruitful chapters have been with artists working in other disciplines: the composers Nicola LeFanu (we made an opera for children, **The Green Children**) and Sir Arthur Bliss; the artists

Charles Keeping (**Beowulf**) and Norman Ackroyd. But my collaboration with Jane Ray has been the most unusual and rewarding of them all.

This is partly because, out of long admiration and fondness for each other's books, we simply knew that we wanted to work together ? but without knowing what or how. I remember talking in a London club to Jane about possible projects. She politely reviewed the five possibilities I'd brought with me, admitting them all as candidates, before introducing her own ? a story turning on Laura, one of the young girls in the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice. To be honest, I think I ~~know~~ once (without quite saying so) that this would be the one!

Looking back now, there seems a certain inevitability, or anyhow rightness, to our choice. As Jane so beautifully describes, the foundations of **Heartsong** are music and Venice, and these have long mattered to each of us. Jane used to play the cello and has the most lovely singing voice, while in my case, my father was a composer and musicologist, and I'm one of those few poets to whom classical music matters as much as literature. And again, like Jane, I've made repeated visits to Venice, following the footsteps of Arthur de Caldicot and Gatty.

Our little orphan Laura is mute. And yet, just as Jane first conceived, a touching and unforgettable song flows through the heart of the story. Quite remarkably, each of us knew intuitively what this song would be ? and I don't think I'm spoiling anything by saying that it's **Domine Deus**, the fifth movement of Vivaldi's **Gloria in D** (RV589).

When Jean Jacques Rousseau heard the girls of the Ospedale, it was almost too much for him! ?I can think of nothing so delectable or touching as this music: the wealth of artistry, the exquisite taste of the songs, the beauty of the performance ... What pained me were the cursed screens, which only let the sounds escape and kept hidden from me the angelic beauties who made them.?

To my mind, **Heartsong** contains some of Jane's very finest work, and I think this is because her great skills have been underpinned by research and long gestation, and by such obvious tenderness and deep care, such love for Laura. When a book is published, the creative part is done and dusted. But although I can't quite explain it, I know Laura's story has not let go of either of us. As if there were more to say ... more to play and sing ...

Heartsong [4] is published by Orchard Books, 978-1-4083-3606-9, £9.99 hbk

Page Number:

8

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