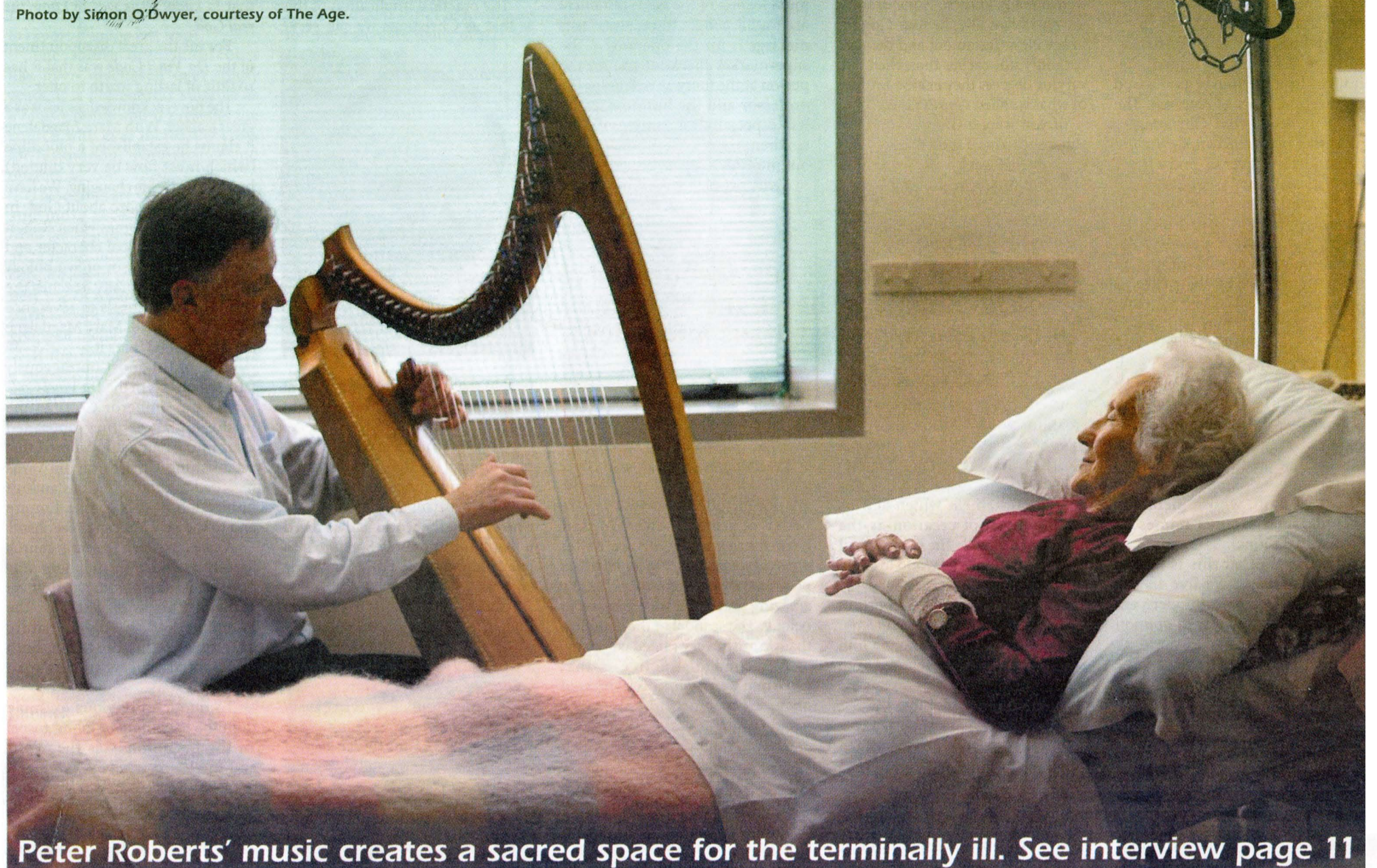


# TMA

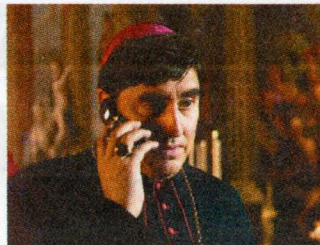
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Photo by Simon O'Dwyer, courtesy of The Age.



Peter Roberts' music creates a sacred space for the terminally ill. See interview page 11



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HEALING SUPPLEMENT

## Harpist bridges the gap between life and death

by Beryl Rule

IT SEEMED PETER ROBERTS had everything: a happy marriage, two lovely daughters, a successful furniture and interior decoration business and a very comfortable home. He was a practising Christian and took great joy in listening to and making music. At 45, he should have been on top of the world; instead, he felt an emptiness which had persisted for several years.

"I kept asking myself, 'What am I doing here?'" he recalls. He knew that "he had come to the end of being who he was" but had no idea what to do about it.

The answer came in a clipping which a friend thought might interest him; it told of a training program in the United States where music was being used to help people achieve a peaceful passage at the end of their lives. This was called music thanatology, and Peter felt extraordinarily drawn to it.

"I thought that if I got to 50 and hadn't at least tried to do this I would regret it, so I opted for a safe choice," he said. "I decided I would do the course by correspondence. But then I found out it couldn't be done that way. It would have to be done in a hospital in Missoula, a little town in Montana, at the edge of the Rockies and it would take two and a half years."

Although this all seemed too hard Peter sent off an application anyway, and a month later was accepted for an interview. He flew to Montana for a week over Easter, walked into a thanatology class and was totally overwhelmed by the beauty of the singing and the harp music. He knew now this was what he wanted to do – but what about his family?

His wife had a part-time job she enjoyed; his older daughter was in Year 11 and starting VCE. What would this disruption mean to her education? Where would the family live? How would they support themselves? These were big and worrying questions which, when a letter arrived to say he had been accepted for the course, had to be confronted. Then, bit by bit, things

rather amazingly fell into place. One of the lecturers in the course had a friend who was going to Japan and wanted to let his very pleasant house, but at a rent the Roberts could not afford unless they let their own house, which, in rather unusual circumstances, they did. It was also necessary to sell the car, but they were almost due to leave and still there had been no takers. Peter went to ask a business associate for

was a happy one for the family. They became very close to one another. Katherine, the older daughter, left behind the pressures of VCE and enjoyed going to a Senior High School and then to University. For both girls, the experience "opened up their world".

Among the many demanding studies of the course – which included anatomy, physiology, psychology and hospital procedure

savings to support themselves overseas and with thanatology virtually unknown in Australia, no-one was asking for Peter's services.

"I had to educate people first," he said. "I've travelled everywhere to conferences, speaking about thanatology. I realised I couldn't make a living unless I did something else so I taught harp and built harps too."

In any case, he does not like charging families or individuals for

ers in his work.

Peter stresses that he does not play simply to soothe or entertain; the music is "prescriptive", fitted to the needs and responses of the patient. Before playing for anyone he finds out as much as he can about their condition and state of mind, and throughout each vigil he has to be sensitive to their reaction. He only plays by invitation, using Celtic music, Gregorian chants, and his own compositions; he tries to avoid music familiar to patients as that can carry its own distracting associations.

His aim is to "bring something beautiful to a difficult situation" – to people who may be very frightened of death, or grieving at their impending separation from family, or in distressing pain. Relatives are welcome to remain in the room while he is playing and share the experience with their loved ones. He plays to "create a safe environment of peace and tranquillity" and most important of all, to help people feel ready to let go.

A recent report evaluating Peter's work drew on six case studies of patients for whom he had played. One man, Robert, who had been in great



Peter Roberts brings peace to a terminally ill patient and his wife. Photo by Simon O'Dwyer, courtesy of The Age.

ideas – instead the man bought the car, sight unseen.

"It was hard trying to explain to others why we were leaving when I barely understood myself," Peter says. "I could only tell them I was being drawn, that there was this deep yearning inside me. My sister-in-law said, 'It sounds as if you are being called.'"

His wife, Jeanette, was hugely supportive, because she feared he would be ill if he didn't make a change. His younger daughter Ellise thought it would be "great if we can see Disneyland". Somehow, they were off.

Although the money was a constant concern the time spent overseas

– Peter had to learn to play the harp, the chosen instrument for music thanatology.

"The sound doesn't affect the nervous system – it is very gentle," Peter explains. "And the harp is a very transportable instrument to take into hospital wards. I don't use a concert harp. Mine comes up to my shoulder. It has nylon strings which give a particularly warm sound."

In 1997 the family came back to Geelong and Peter remembers being viewed with some suspicion: "People seemed to be saying, 'who is this fellow with the harp?'"

Money was in short supply as the Roberts had had to dip into their

his playing. The ideal, he says, is for a music thanatologist to be part of a palliative care team attached to a hospital.

This year he was made a member of the staff at St John of God Hospital, Geelong and a Hospice grant enables him to play for the terminally ill at no charge. Recently he was contacted by a man who heard his playing several years ago. This man had been visiting his wife in hospital. She subsequently died and he has now set up a philanthropic foundation – the Merrin Foundation – in her memory. A grant from this foundation money is going to make it possible for Peter to come to Melbourne to train oth-

despair and distress, found that the music transported him to a place he called "the Haven". Eventually he was able to reach this place by himself, without the help of Peter or his music. When that happened, Peter felt his work was done. Robert had located and claimed a sacred space where there was no fear.

Like Robert, Peter has come on a journey from sadness and uncertainty to a place of joy. He may be less well off materially, but he is doing what he was meant to do and has found the reason he is here.

Contact Peter Roberts at [peter@robertsmusic.net](mailto:peter@robertsmusic.net) or [www.robertsmusic.net](http://www.robertsmusic.net)

**"Peter plays to help people feel ready to let go."**