

HEAVEN SENT

Peter Roberts is Australia's sole practitioner of music thanatology, the gentle strum of his harp providing dying patients a sense of peace and awe that only music can bring. **Danny Lannen reports**

The sweet, simple and distinctive sound of Brahms' Lullaby glows through the public address system at Geelong's St John of God Hospital.

It reaches into all corners of the building and in an operating theatre, a surgeon smiles beneath his mask.

In offices and at nursing stations, staff pause fleetingly and register fresh warmth of heart.

In the quiet of a room, surrounded by family members in vigil, a person nearing the end of their life is filled with a feeling of understanding which defies explanation.

The lullaby heralds to all that something wondrous has happened. A baby has just been born.

It will sound more than 1100 times each year at St John of God. After each birth the midwife privileged with having assisted, will press the button to play the recording and spread the joyous word.

The music comes from the harp of hospital therapeutic musician Peter Roberts and reactions are profound.

Staff still feel goosebumps each time they hear it and patients testify that, however briefly, the music transports them to a different place.

Hospital director of mission and pastoral services co-ordinator Patricia Boom says one patient had summed up the effect of the lullaby by saying that it gave sense of awe and mystery.

"Sometimes patients in hospitals are not in a good space, there was a sense when they heard Brahms' Lullaby that it gave them sense of hope and here at St John of God we celebrate new life," Mrs Boom says.

"It's part of our mission statement that life is precious, care is based around holistic approach and having the lullaby has enhanced that."

Peter Roberts introduced the simple celebration to St John of God after having heard similar in the US. Its magic is testament to his standing as a man distinctly in his own field.

Peter operated Roberts Interiors in Geelong for 16 years before making a profound choice to be more and to do more in his life.

He retired to study at 48 and his choice was to take his family to America for 2 years while he absorbed the power in music thanatology, playing for the seriously ill, the dying and their friends and families.

Peter's choice was inspired. He is reluctant to say it was a calling, but it was.

"When I heard about this course in America it was one of those 'ah' moments," he says. "It was like a beacon for me to get over there. There was a sense of being drawn to it."

So he went and studied and returned to Australia armed with a harp and a heart and started to play.

Peter Roberts is alone in Australia as a specialist in his field and has grown his mission to embrace the broader purpose of music in medicine.

He plays not only for the dying and the ill but also for the living at St John of God.

His work might relax the fretful patient before surgery or calm families and friends and he loves playing for babies in the critical care nursery where monitors show that the music improves the infants' breathing and oxygen levels.

Peter carries his Celtic harp from room to room, corridor to corridor. He has always had an intuitive ear and inclination for playing music and singing, but the harp is the only instrument for his work.

"It tends to radiate rather than project so if people are feeling vulnerable you can play very softly," he says.

"It is also polyphonic, I can play chords or melody and I can sing to it."

"The training I did was in harp and voice and silence."

And the silence is so important.

It is the sacred space where the harp takes people.

It might be in the lingering pause between the gentlest of touches on the strings or perhaps the place of reflection people drift into as Peter finishes playing and wordlessly leaves the room.

"If you start to describe it you spoil it," Peter says. "I think it's best not to have words, that's the mystery and that's where I am attempting to direct people, into that very special, secret place."

"You're creating a space that will fall naturally into a beautiful silence."

"For me it's like watching a fire burn down. You're going into that silence where you don't have to say anything and that's where wonderful things happen."

Peter receives letters most weeks commending and thanking him for his work. After having played for the dying, families often ask him to continue the reverie at the funeral.

He loves his work and as director of the non-profit Institute of Music in Medicine he hopes to share its vocational reward with others.

"The broad vision for this is to create a training program," he says.

"Not for musicians but for others with heart and disposition for this type of work."

"We have a curriculum being drawn up and have an association with the US, and this is going to happen in Geelong."

He hopes to bring a counterpart from the US to help with training.

Peter makes harps for himself and others and has also designed and sells a small almond-shaped reverie harp which people can play for themselves or others.

The less able can hold it to their chest and play as they lie in bed. Carers can play instead of just sitting and Peter remembers witnessing a sweet connection grow after having coaxed a brawny dad to play for his infant child in the critical care nursery.

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Peter Roberts plays his harp to babies in the special care nursery at St John of God Hospital. Photo: Alison Wynd

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The harp sells in America, Canada and Japan.

Peter's work and mission received a major boost this month when he became joint annual winner of a Tattersall's Enterprise and Achievement Award. The win came with \$25,000 for the charity of his choice – the Institute of Music in Medicine – and \$5000 for him and wife Jeanette.

An award citation acknowledged his vision, determination and strength in helping others.

"Peter's work is unique," it said. "He is one of a kind. He is currently the only person in Australia practising music thanatology."

"The live harp music and voice in vigils that Peter provides to dying patients gives them a sense of peace and sanctuary."

Peter said the award win from a field of 12

contenders who had done "incredible things" – including Geelong's Tim McCallum – was humbling, very exciting and extremely affirming.

And something else struck him.

"One thing I noticed, I was so pleased with the number of people who are delighted on my behalf in hospital here and through things like Rotary clubs," he says. "I had no concept of who knows what I do and that was something very pleasing."

There is no mistaking the ethereal qualities of the music as Peter plays. Warmth surrounds and sense of calm prevails.

"I play to people's breathing," Peter says. "Then hopefully I leave them with that feeling where where they find their equilibrium and their healing."

"That's what the music can do." **GI**