

Igniting the Flame: Documentation and Discourse

Danielle Carey

Australian composition, without a doubt, has blossomed in the last few decades. The Australian Music Centre now represents over 450 composers and sound artists from across Australia. Among these creative artists are talented, award-winning and internationally recognised individuals: we are certainly a creative nation. One would expect – given the international prestige of a select few and the sheer size of this group – a plethora of documentation and discourse surrounding their music. Yet, despite this creative output, there isn't an equally vigorous discourse to match. Put simply, we aren't really talking much about what we are creating.

In a society where sport is clearly valued more than the arts (and let's not mention the revival of sedition laws currently lingering; threatening our very creativity!), the minute space afforded to Australian music composition in the press is almost always taken up with the marketing and promoting of events – generally as a means for survival. And in this media-driven age – where worth is increasingly driven by economic value – when we do actually discuss music, it seems to be almost purely in biographical terms. For example, rather than focussing on what a composer's music actually sounds like, more attention is given to the amount of commissions or awards they have accumulated and who has performed their works.

Of course, a composer's background is important, and the impact of publications such as Roger Covell's seminal *Australia's music: themes for a new society* (1967) attest to this. But I think that we need to move beyond this type of documentation if we are to ensure a healthy and vibrant artistic community. We need more critical discussion. And when I use the term *critical* I'm certainly not talking about a resurgence of the so-called *Style Wars* of the '90s. (Indeed, slanderous comments

and personal attacks can be nothing but detrimental to an artistic community!) Perhaps a better way to phrase this is: serious discussion – where ideas are questioned, reflected upon and openly discussed. By being open to this type of discourse we allow ourselves to be inspired; we learn from other aesthetic viewpoints; new directions are formed; more music is understood; histories can be created (or re-created); and perhaps

most importantly, we establish a solid foundation for the survival of our artistic community.

But with whom does this responsibility lie? Should journalists and critics be fighting for more space in newspapers and magazines to ensure an abundance of

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good quality writing about music? Should they be looking elsewhere? And what exactly should they be writing about anyway? Do Australian musicologists have an obligation to document and critique the music that immediately surrounds them? What about Australian composers and sound artists? Where does their responsibility lie? Should they be participating in the discourse surrounding their own artistic work? Should they be taking more of an aesthetic stance? Or is their role simply to provide exceptional music?

These are certainly interesting questions with myriad problems worth discussing and, in order to begin addressing these, this issue is devoted to examining some current documentary processes surrounding Australian composition. What follows is a small collection of writings – a snapshot, if you like – drawn from various events that took place (or continued) across Australia during the course of 2005. These include research projects, conferences, talk fests, radio programs and music journalism. This collection is by no means definitive, but it does highlight some interesting trends and gaps within Australian music discourse –

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matters which can be addressed more closely in a subsequent issue of *Sounds Australian*.

A Musicologist's Territory?

When one thinks about who should be contributing to Australian music discourse, the answer might seem evident. After all doesn't a musicologist's job description involve researching, critiquing and evaluating music? The musicology symposium, held at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in April 2005, explored – amongst other questions – the role musicology plays in today's society. The enormous criticism musicology has suffered for its reluctance to engage in Australian music discourse was one of the concerns it addressed – and this matter is rampant throughout this issue. **Andrew Ford** is upfront in his accusations, arguing that there is absolutely no excuse for musicologists ignoring their own culture.

But is there an excuse? **Richard Toop** certainly thinks so. Reflecting on the

questions explored during the forum (for which he was the moderator), Toop wonders whether composers actually want musicologists engaging in discourse about their music. In his experience, 'self-obsession' among many Australian composers (at least those in his own generation) prevents discourse from actually happening. Arguing about or criticising Australian music is not culturally acceptable – composers take it too personally. As a result they are often reluctant to defend their aesthetic viewpoints.

In terms of writing about music, Toop suggests personal preference is important. He believes Australian composers need to compose music that intrigues him before he will consider writing about it – this has been his motivation for writing about Michael Smetanin, Liza Lim, Mary Finsterer and Georges Lentz for example.

Composers aside, Toop is adamant that discussion about music must also take place amongst 'non-professionals'.

After all, doesn't the survival of new music depend on its listeners? He believes arts practitioners have a responsibility to initiate such conversations, but worries that in Australia such opportunities are limited.

Talk Fests

'Talk fests' such as the musicology symposium provide the perfect public forum for stimulating debate and critical discussion primarily because they have the advantage of allowing immediate response to any proposed idea or argument. The annual national conference of the Musicological Society of Australia (most recently held in September 2005, Sydney), for example, provides an opportunity for musicologists to present papers, and discuss issues in both formal and informal settings.

As to whether it furthers discourse about Australian music – that obviously depends on who is there and what they choose to talk about. While Australian

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music was discussed in various papers at the 2005 conference, the meeting demonstrated that musicologists, as a whole, are currently more interested in historical European music than the music of their own culture. Is this an example of cultural cringe (as Ford puts it)? Or are the majority of musicologists simply more genuinely fascinated by European music?

A conference that did focus entirely on new music (most of which was Australian) was the 2005 Inaugural Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference held in Perth during October. It offered a combination of formal papers, artist talks and performances all within the context of a music festival which, as artistic director of TURA New Music Tos Mahoney (2005) said, gave it 'real reference'.

Similarly, the Encounters festival (held in Brisbane, April 2005) concentrated solely on the theme of interaction between European and Australian Indigenous music cultures, and, like the TURA festival, presented a diverse collection of performances, papers and discussion. Vincent Plush (2005), curator of the festival, boldly claims that this meeting establishes a 'very high standard' for Australian music meetings. Liza Lim, however – in the keynote address at the TURA festival (published here) – criticises the lack of discussion about the actual nature of these interactions. Lim makes an interesting point; theories of colonisation and power (to use her example) were virtually non-existent.

Cross-cultural interactions were discussed from various viewpoints across all three forums. Lim, for example, spoke directly about the cross-cultural aesthetics arising from Australian composers engaging with Indigenous culture. Central to Lim's argument is a belief in 'correct cultural exchange'. As such, she argues that

Western composers need to continually question (and therefore reconsider) the way they choose to interact with Australian Indigenous cultures.

By taking Peter Sculthorpe's *Dijile* as a case study, Steven Knopoff, who spoke at both the MSA conference and the Encounters festival on this topic, argues that one must critically examine the way composers have actually used Indigenous music before being able to make any

authoritative judgments. Although aware of many ethical dilemmas in cross-cultural appropriation, he believes that there are positive sociological benefits occurring as a result of Australian composers utilising Indigenous music for their own artistic means – although he does agree that collaboration

might be a more suitable approach. For Lim, collaboration is the ultimate interaction. She argues that 'true' collaboration should – at the very least – involve requesting permission and payment for time.

Anne Boyd disagrees, arguing that

context is a crucial factor when considering the use of Indigenous material in Western Art composition. Her paper at the MSA's Conference (a version of which is reproduced here) defends the use of Indigenous music

in her own works and argues that it is entirely appropriate given the universal message she was aiming to convey. Boyd's argument primarily stems from her belief in the 'transcendental nature of music'. For Boyd, music is not owned as it 'belongs to the hearts and minds of everyone who hears it'.

Boyd, passionate about discussing music, hopes that her paper will initiate

some further dialogue about Australian music. She expresses grief over the 'woefully slim pickings' comprising Australian music discourse.

Re-establishing Australia's Musical History

According to sound-artist Robin Fox, it is the interdependence between practitioners within our small artistic community that results in such poor discourse. He believes that research needs to be more critical in its approach. In a recently published article, Fox's frustration with existing documentation is clear, where he complains that:

the persistent use of these [demographic] issues to compare Australian music to European (and later American) norms has frustrated any chance of investigating the unique qualities that such a demographic is bound to produce. The preoccupation with validating attempted mimicries has virtually suppressed individual and organised attempts to synthesise Australian experience into a coherent musical or aesthetic idiom (Fox 2002, p. 20).

Fox's current paper reveals a history of Australian experimental music where

a significant historical thread of influences and shifts in aesthetic intent occur within the Melbourne community. Alternative perspectives on Australian music history such as Fox's are important for establishing a thorough understanding of Australia's music

traditions.

Like Fox, PhD student Kate Bowan demands that critical interpretation is crucial for Australian music research. As such, her dissertation provides a strikingly different perspective to the established history of music prior to 1950. She believes Australian music must be 'understood on its own terms' as this will expose its own web of history.

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Her research and analyses on the musical works of composers Roy Agnew and Hooper Brewster-Jones demonstrates that there was actually an Australian counterpart to European modernist developments. This is an interesting perspective given that many current composers adamantly reject any association or lineage with European modernism.

Postmodernism

Postmodern critiques of art have – by their questioning of authoritative and patriarchal canonic systems – enabled new forms of discourse to emerge that engage much more critically with Australian music. This seems to be slowly having an impact on music documentation in the area of music history.

The rejection of European modernism was largely a consequence of many composers' preoccupation with consciously developing a sense of 'Australianness' in their music. This is just one of the many issues that musicologist **Linda Kouvaras** and cultural theorist **David Bennett** raise in a survey sent recently to numerous composers, performers and critics. With the aim to document the way practitioners currently understand and relate to the concept of postmodernism, Kouvaras and Bennett were recently awarded an ARC grant for their research project 'Postmodernism in Australian Art Music'. They argue that since postmodernism has had such an enormous impact it is crucial to expand postmodernist discourse to include Australian music. Furthermore, they find it quite alarming, given the richness of postmodernist discourse in other art forms, that music studies – particularly Australian music studies – have been reluctant to embrace such analytic methods. What impact will this project (still in its early stages) have on stimulating music discourse in Australia? It will be interesting to see the final results.

Music Journalism

Interviewing composers in a public forum is another obvious method for

stimulating further discourse about music and **Andrew Ford** does just this in *The Music Show*, his regular Saturday morning radio gig on ABC Radio National (eg. during the TURA new music festival he interviewed Liza Lim). In my interview with Ford (what better way to discover the motivations of a regular interviewer than to give him a taste of his own medicine!), he suggests that his primary motivation for broadcasting and writing¹ is to help bring about a 'culture of listening', which is something that he feels Australia lacks.

Amongst other things, Ford laments that there is no 'culture of review or analysis' in Australia's music community and is alarmed that most music journalism focuses on music 'personalities' to the exclusion of the actual music itself. Considering that music journalists compete with their sports counterparts – championing our sport heroes to a nation of passionate fans – this is almost justifiable. But editor **Keith Gallasch** thinks otherwise. In the keynote address he gave at the International Critics' Symposium in Brisbane 2003, Gallasch dreams of the arts writer and reviewer being the hero – 'championing the arts'. His current paper comments on his role as editor of *RealTime* (a national magazine focused on innovation in the arts) where he strongly encourages writers to engage in more critical discourse and so contribute to the 'long-term' documentation of Australian music. For Gallasch, writing about, commenting on and evaluating music is crucial to its existence – music creation and our response to it are equal halves in the arts experience.

Conclusion

This small collection of papers, interview and discussions clearly demonstrates that long-term documentation and discourse is currently taking place in Australia, but, given the overall despair inherent in the following pages, it is clear there is simply

not nearly enough of it. Musicologists, composers and critics must engage more with the exceptional (and perhaps even the not so exceptional!) ideas that exist in Australian music itself – questioning, reflecting, discussing, praising, and exchanging ideas – these, I think, are all

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absolutely crucial for an artistic community. To this end, this issue provides a springboard for a more detailed inspection of these matters in a future issue. Furthermore, I hope it sparks the intellectual curiosity of

practitioners and encourages them to respond to the ideas and critical discussions that already exist within the Australian musical landscape. When asked to 'predict future directions' in Australian composition, Damien Ricketson (1999, p. 31) – composer and presenter of Ensemble Offspring – hoped for a 'renaissance of the narrative': imagine the possibilities!■

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Notes

1. Ford released his *In Defence of Classical Music*, ABC Books, in 2005.