

Discourse: Muffled, Muted, Muzzled?

Richard Toop

Earlier this year, at the Sydney Conservatorium, there was a public symposium on the current role of musicology, especially in Australia - "Local, Global or Cyberworld: Musicology Here and Now" - and one of the issues raised was: "Why isn't there more discourse about current Australian music?" It's a recurrent question, and it comes from many sources: from composers, music lovers, sometimes even from musicologists. Since I was chairing the symposium, my business was to elicit the views of others, rather than expressing my own; in this *Sounds Australian* context, I can be a little less inhibited. I think there are some simple answers, some of them rather unappetising, but I'll come back to these later, and also try to suggest what role musicologists might usefully play, in relation to other interest groups.

First, I need to ask: "what, in this context, do we mean by 'discourse'?" It's one of those typically 'academic' questions that understandably elicit groans all round. But here I think we do have to address it, so as to discover whether what our complaining factions want is really discourse (which I'll provisionally define as the free interchange of ideas, whether consensual or conflictive), or something else. Discourse, for example, is usually *not* about slavishly praising someone (though there's nothing wrong with advocacy!), or emphatically denouncing them: on the whole, these are both forms of monologue. Nor does it have to be a synonym for debate: perhaps it is 'like minds' who gain the most from discourse, since they can refine their positions through seeing them viewed from a slightly different angle.

So does it matter whether a particular 'discourse' is essentially positive or

negative in tone? It's natural that any composer would rather be praised than criticised. And yet, every time I go back to Europe, I am reminded that for many composers, it's precisely by arguing with them that you show you're really interested in their work (if you are totally opposed to what they do aesthetically, and happen to meet them, you engage in a polite social 'freeze'). Of course, not all

European composers feel this way, especially as they get older. For example, I don't think Stockhausen and Kagel would welcome that kind of intellectual jousting these days, though they certainly did back in the fifties and sixties, and even the early seventies, when I first knew them. Kagel in particular really enjoyed engaging

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in public debate (perhaps, in part, because he was so good at it!).

Significantly, the assumption here was always that the musical works were, in part, manifestations of something that went beyond (or at least outside) music. In European music 30 years ago, a principal focus was a 'political engagement', which almost always involved some kind of quasi-Marxist dimension and, in the immediate wake of the Baader-Meinhof terrorists, had some particularly problematic aspects. So one was constantly challenging, not just the individual art work, but also its motivation. The danger here was that the critique became self-seeking: that it said more about the critic's social discontents and resentments than it did about the art in question, and Stockhausen in particular became the object of some quite bizarre, psychotic attacks within Germany during the 1980s. Now, it seems to me, things have settled down, and proper discourse (which doesn't rule out intermittent vitriolic polemics) has been resumed.

In Australia, I have to say, it's very

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different, and the difference is not something that can be blamed on the Howard government: it seems culturally generic among the Caucasian composer-population with which I have most contact over the past three decades. It was apparent from the moment I hit Australia (or vice versa), in the last days of the heady Whitlam Era. Even then, when young composers enjoyed a level of support inconceivable these days, it soon became clear to me that they regarded almost every argument, every criticism concerning their own work as an attack *ad hominem*. So serious discussion (as I saw it) was off-limits: one could argue about the merits of a third party, but that's about as far as discourse went. I don't think that generation (my generation) has ever progressed beyond this self-obsessed view, which is a generic obstacle to discourse (with the composers, that is).

When it came to young composers in the early 1980s – at least the ones I had contact with, such as Michael Barkl, Gerry Brophy, Ric Formosa, Michael Smetanin and Michael Whiticker – it was a different story. Perhaps because they were at the beginning of their careers, they were far more open. A lot of my discourse took place in pubs and inexpensive restaurants. Compared to then, I guess, “I don't get around much any more”, but I think that's also true of younger colleagues, and students too: duty completed, they rush home to get on with domestic, artistic or other matters.

On the other hand, I should stress that useful discourse about new music doesn't have to directly involve composers! As a slightly reclusive ‘professional’, I suppose it's natural that most of my conversations, whether here or overseas, are with other professionals: composers, performers and musicologists. But that does have a certain ‘goldfish bowl’ element: what's really important is that comparable conversations should

constantly be taking place between non-professionals, i.e. the concert-goers on whom the health of the new music situation ultimately depends. Yet I think that we professionals have a certain responsibility in ‘seeding’ such conversations, not only by drawing attention to works we admire, abhor, or are left a little cold by. Above all, we need to sketch a social and artistic context.

That might seem to be the natural role of the critic, and indeed so it is. But a critic has to have (a) something specific and significant to refer to – a book, a live performance or a recording – and (b) an editorial environment that actually fosters a level of comment that goes beyond a brief ‘event review’, upon whose individual phrases agents can descend like starving vultures. And in Sydney, at least, I don't see any sign that

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this is the case for either (a) or (b): there are few significant premieres, and little scope to comment at length on what few there are. If Peter Sculthorpe writes a *Requiem*, for example, or Ross Edwards a new

symphony, isn't that worth at least 1000 words of comment, not just on the works, but on the cultural trends they exemplify? Similarly, if Liza Lim has a major orchestral work premiered in Paris, or at Frank Gehry's new concert hall in Los Angeles, doesn't that deserve (a lot) more than passing mention?

This is, alas, a cue to bite the hand that's feeding me this opportunity to express my views, namely the Australian

Music Centre. If there's one place that could serve as an initial focus for advocating all that's best in Australian music – as seen from many different viewpoints! – it would be this journal.

Once upon a time, I think that was the case. But then came Dick Letts's ‘medium-range plan’ (I think that's what it was called), which sought to vastly increase the number of Australian composers gaining official recognition, and although undoubtedly well-intentioned, I think it was a cultural disaster. In effect, it created a situation where even the compositional

Drover's Dog felt entitled to the same level of representation as established figures. So if the Australian Music Centre went out on a line to praise one composer (and art is, after all, based in part on the notion of exceptional achievement), it could reckon with the instant acrimony of 200+ other constituents, and this is no way for an institution to survive. But on the other hand, if it seeks to advocate art by muzzling aesthetic convictions and differences, this too seems like a ‘path to nowhere’.

Sure, fundamental(ist) aesthetic differences can have ugly outcomes. Older readers may remember the ‘Style Wars’ issues of *Sounds Australian* in the early 1990s. Of themselves, these represented the opposite of discourse: they had a substantial component of hate-mail, of yobbo Molotov cocktails being lobbed indiscriminately, by modernists and anti-modernists alike, at whoever was perceived as being the ‘enemy’ (not quite as vile as recent events in Cronulla, but generically not dissimilar). I took no part in this ‘debate’, and in fact it marked the point at which I largely retreated from engagement with the Australian ‘new music scene’, at least at a verbal level. Yet there was one outcome, also in *Sounds*

Australian, that seemed to me to offer the possibility, if not of ‘reconciliation’ then at least of real discourse, namely the couple of *Sounds Australian* issues featuring “An Emotional Geography” curated by Chris Dench and Ian Shanahan. Though Dench and Shanahan were clearly identified with a hard-line modernist view, they went out of their way to elicit aesthetic statements from a wide range of composers. Alas, there was no significant follow-up.

For me, the whole idea of advocating outstanding talent (as I or others perceive it) is enormously important. Initially (and perhaps enduringly), it sets a standard, which might be technical, aesthetic, social, or some combination of these. Twenty years ago, there was still a small group of ‘canonic’ Australian composers whom it was natural to write about, and there were some significant up-and-coming talents (as well as neglected older figures) whom it was a pleasure to advocate, not least because there was the possibility of a positive

cultural response that could benefit them.

Now, it’s very different. Forget Newton: in music, the new (perhaps not so new) law of Australian cultural thermodynamics seems to be: “for every (aesthetic) reaction, there is an unequal, and overwhelmingly hostile/resentful reaction”. We have a local situation of endless Kathes and Kims, all howling “Look at MOI!!”, and frankly, unless one’s a musicological neophyte glad to get even a bruised toenail in the door, selective advocacy seems like an invitation to gratuitous abuse – it’s just not interesting, let alone attractive.

So what do I do? Every now and then I find myself (along with my musicological colleagues) being ‘challenged’ by composers to devote more of my energy to writing about Australian music. My response, for better or worse, is to reverse the challenge. I say: write music that, at least momentarily, persuades me to set aside my (for me) absorbing, and internationally recognised, work on

figures like Stockhausen, Ferneyhough, Ligeti, Kurtág etc., and I’ll consider it. Leaving aside several New Grove articles on Australian composers (which were, after all, commissioned, but which I could have declined), I’ve recently written program notes for CDs of works by Mary Finsterer and Georges Lentz, simply because I liked the music so much. I’ve also ‘volunteered’ articles on Michael Smetanin (*Musik-Texte*) and Liza Lim (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*), and written a dictionary entry on Gerry Brophy for *Komponisten der Gegenwart*, for the same reason. Why all these German contributions? Because the editors and their readers really want to know about this music; it’s not a pretext for them to just sit around and bitch. Could that also become true here? As Ghandi said of the concept of Western Civilisation, it would be nice. Think about it! ■

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