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# Contemporary music in Australia: a composer's-eye view

"The swagman with his hilly is camped by a billabong." The romantic image has survived in Walking Matilda much like marmalade at an English breakfast. The reality was - is - rougher than jam: flies and loneliness and sweat for a start, and a 'swaggie' who is as often a mean, amoral, cantankerous 'drop-out' as he is a loveable eccentric with coxys swinging from the brim of his hat.

In an article about contemporary music in Australia it might seem a pointless digression to discuss the personality of the swagman, the rigours of bush life and even the music of the early settlers. But to explain why I do not believe there is such a thing as Australian music per se, it seemed only sensible to provide an historical and social perspective. I do not intend to be an accurate historian and will use fantasy and folk-lore - an Australian characteristic, perhaps - to aid a sense of evolution. Facetiousness is not intended.

Long before British colonisation the aborigines had lived as nomadic hunters celebrating tribal ritual in corroborees, complete with the now ubiquitous didgeridoo. That indigenous heritage was met by ignorance or indifference by most musicians for more than a century. The creation of Corroboree in 1946 (a ballet by John Antill) is regarded as the first conscious musical link with heritage. No Australian composer since then would wish to forget it.

It is unlikely that convicts were allowed the luxury of musical instruments in the first voyage of 1778. Soldiers sent to guard them were probably not so much deprived as disinterested. Accordions, tin whistles, 'fiddles' and pianos remained basic instrumental fare for at least a century. Composition as such did not exist. New words were set to favourite jigs and ditties of the British Isles which described the voyage, the arrival and the way of life. These rapidly became the 'bush songs' or folk inheritance of the settlers, broadcast by itinerant swagmen throughout the country and remembered by succeeding generations for their nostalgic rather than musical value.

On small settlements, where 'cow-cocky' farmers suffered reverses with a remarkable lack of bellyache, entertainment was rude by necessity:

"Joe gets the old concertina out, Kate plays descant on the tin whistle and Ma picks up her skirts and prances round like a pegasus in a circus ring, banging the kettle for a drum. Dan sings about life in the bush to the tune of Blue Bells of Scotland."<sup>(1)</sup>

Amongst more affluent colonists, there existed a type of settler who was anxious to affect some of the gentilities he or she had known, or wished to know in

England: a fondness for musical soirées or an English Christmas dinner in a temperature of a hundred degrees:

"The governor's wife has recently received a Broadwood grand piano from England...

"Miss Wilhelmina Matthews will perform a new sonata for pianoforte by Mr. Isaac Nathan(2) and an arrangement of La Sonambula, souvenir de Bellini, by Mr. W. Vincent-Wallace in a concert at Government House next week. Madame Hilda Riley will sing arias from Mr. Mendelssohn's Elijah and also Songs of Home by Mr. Thomas Baker!"(1)

Settlers, both wealthy and poor alike, clung to familiar European concepts of what makes a song, a sonata or an evening of music-hall on the gold fields. Only the literature, the spoken language, dress, certain architecture and paintings reflected a radically changed environment. This is understandable. As art forms they are less abstract than music and mutations are more easily observed. A composition was not thought respectable unless it replicated the successful formulae of works from abroad. Intimidated, skilled musicians produced dull, fashionable stereotypes, although a history of 'tinkle' music and conservatism is not peculiar to Australia.

It is unfortunate that geographic isolation did not bring a sense of adventure, and ironic that since radio, television and the jet, our closer physical contacts with East and West have encouraged individual artists to ignore current fashions if it suits them.

The inherent danger of such freedom to choose and reject is a tendency to reject rather than choose. Although it is natural for the Australian composer to assimilate Eastern ideas and techniques, it is ridiculous to pretend that, by doing so, he or she can eschew the European tradition. Our civilisation, whether we like it or not, is solidly European in origin. An umbrella rejection of that inheritance would be artificial and dishonest. This temptation to forget the knife and fork applies to European or American artists as much as to Australians at a time when the western world seems fascinated by all aspects of oriental culture. It should perhaps be pointed out that, in terms of ethnomusicology and its effect upon composition, Australia, and more particularly Sydney University, anticipated this trend a decade before the rest of the world.

A potentially greater danger than the denial of one heritage is the simple fusion of two or whatever number is involved. The superficiality of an instant mix of East and West could lead to 'Hong-Kong-Hollywood' pastiche or, as happened in one Far Eastern country, My Fair Lady harmonised in root positions only. Extreme examples certainly, but the fact that they can occur, like unplanned 'mickey-mousing' in a film, is worrying.

Are there any characteristics which could justify the term 'contemporary Australian music'? It would seem more logical to describe characteristics of individual Australian composers, because identity springs from not one but many schools, or alternatively, remains too personal and idiosyncratic for a rag bag of labels.

It is true that a growing number of composers favour the Polish (?) fashion for protracted clusters, an absence of rhythm and melody creating a sense of timelessness. Cynics would call it stasis. This method, aided by the elasticity of proportional notation, has a strong following partly because of its lack of specificity.

The listener may be directed (usually by the title of the piece) to link sound patterns with visual images of events in Australian history or aspects of the landscape etc.. An impressionist technique, though it may be visually evocative, does not insure national characteristics in the music, though it may well be a characteristic of the composer, as it was with Debussy or Ravel.

Similarly, an electronic, mixed media or music/theatre work which contains explicit textual, visual references to the country (perhaps including an ensemble of didgeridoos, recorded sounds of dingoes howling, film of Ayers Rock or Indonesian gongs amongst the violins) does not automatically imply an Australasian technique of composition.

It is paradoxical and perverse that, at a time when nationalism is losing its significance, certain Australian composers should feel an obligation to prove 'ethnicity'. Possibly when there have been several generations of Australian composers, instead of two or three, or when we can feel more secure about remaining in home territory to live, study and compose, the uneasy search for a cohesive, 'national' school will cease.

If it is the function of living Australian composers to serve as guinea-pigs for the future, so be it. Personally, I believe that the diversity of styles which flourish at present is healthier than a state of uniformity.(3)

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#### Notes

- (1) Fictional examples.
- (2) Isaac Nathan (1790 - 1864) is generally acknowledged as having been the first professional composer in Australia.
- (3) For further information on contemporary music in Australia and details of the most important Australian composers see James Murdoch, Australia's Contemporary Composers (London 1972).