

## Concluding Remarks

This is my second book on an aspect of Australian music. The previous book stopped at the end of the twentieth century, and concentrated on music for solo piano. The present book pushes the chronology up to the year 2010 and focuses on the piano as a member of a chamber music ensemble. In both cases, I have drawn upon my personal career and interests as a composer and pianist, as well as somebody who cares passionately about the future of what we might loosely label 'art music' produced in this country. My perspective, therefore, is of one who has actively participated in the making of music in Australia ever since my family brought me here in 1951. This is not theoretical pontificating: I have lived my subject for the past 60 years!

Both books attempt to trace the imprint of modernity on Australian music since the serious beginnings of our art music—somewhere about the time we began our historical journey as a nation. Pre-Federation music has not engaged my attention, not because I do not know about it, but largely because I have so little of it that is of any intrinsic merit. The graph of music that pushes the envelope, attempts to say something profound, tries to lift the human spirit, and avoids lazy conventions, slothful thinking and comfortable conformism has fluctuated over the years, naturally. It probably reached its peak somewhere approximately two-thirds of the way through the twentieth century, and then went into a slow but steady decline. At the same time, even though the thread of modernity has been slender, it is important to note that it was always present, which gives me heart, because currently it has dipped yet again.

Support for the arts has always been necessary: our history is not long enough to trace patronage by the church or by aristocrats, but we have instead experienced support from various government sources, and that, needless to say, varies with the political climate and the predominant ideology. It is currently under siege, and, in general, composition has been lurching towards pop, rock, techno, rap, and so on—whatever is popular and is earning brownie points for the composer.

We have experienced periods of political correctness, political incorrectness, jingoism, playing the patriotic card, playing the multicultural card, playing the populist card, various 'isms', flirting with Asian culture...have I missed any? These things come and go by their very nature, but what is more serious is that the trends are mirrored in our educational institutions and particularly in our tertiary educational institutions. There was a time—seemingly eons ago—when our tertiary training of musicians was unashamedly elitist and exclusive, looking for the highest talents and then creating an environment for that level of talent to go as far as possible. At least now it is no longer necessary to go abroad to 'finish' one's musical education, but something more disturbing is happening.

The word 'elite' has one letter too many to be a dirty word, but otherwise it is certainly a forbidden word. Our music education at tertiary level has now drifted more and more towards generalist rather than specialised degrees, and we are in danger, therefore, of losing the cream on top when we produce the bottle of milk. Training high-level musicians is expensive, and has always been the case, since so much depends on one-to-one teaching, and that is precisely what is under fire. Most tertiary institutions have teaching weeks numbering about 26 out of 52—that is, we are pretending that we can train musicians by teaching them for only six months of the year. This, as any good teacher will tell you, is manifestly impossible and untrue. Those same good teachers have found ways to subvert the system, but technically they are breaking the rules; others just shrug and give in to the rules. The culture of the country is the loser in the end.

As I write this, the Australian Music Centre, which was founded when the graph I wrote about was at its highest, is now fighting a rearguard action for its very survival, and is being amalgamated or absorbed into the Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA). I am certain that the reasons behind the move are financial, but it is also a symptom of the very serious illness that I am writing about, and would have been unthinkable only some years ago. There was also a move, very recently, to close down the Australian Academy of Music—the Government backed away only because of the hue and cry that followed this announcement—but my feeling is that it is now only a question of time; the crime of this institution was no doubt that it was too elite.

The performance record of government-funded bodies such as our symphony orchestras is, as far as Australian content is concerned, on the downward slippery slide. The orchestras are now independent and have to make money. 'Putting bums on seats' is the colloquial way of putting it. Australian music that does get programmed is short, easy on the ear, requires minimum rehearsal and is calculated to please as many people as possible. Intellectual challenge and confrontation are not on the agenda, because they do not pay. With other institutions, lip-service to Australian music is the order of the day. You slip in a piece between the approved canon pieces; hopefully it will not cause any measurable waves, and if you are really lucky, it will be pink and fluffy as well. I predict that in future, music historians will see our present as a kind of Dark Age.

Writing this book—and therefore being aware of who is out there and producing—I have noticed a tendency that is disturbing. It seems to me that the number of active composers in this country is declining. I am not speaking of natural attrition here, but rather of promising composers of only some years back who have dropped out of the profession, completely or in part, for obvious reasons. They have to pay the rent, like anyone else, and the amount of work out

there has noticeably dwindled. This needs statistical surveying to be proved, but it seems clear to me, observing the comings and goings in the profession over approximately the past decade and a half. As I write this, we are in the middle of an election campaign, voting day being only two weeks hence. When the current Labor Government won power three years ago, the arts community expected a change to occur for the better. Actually, what occurred was nothing. Nothing altered in any dramatic way. My feeling is that it does not matter who wins in two weeks. For the arts, and for music and music education, not much difference will be experienced either way.

One of the referees for this book wrote in his/her concluding remarks: 'The encyclopedic format distorts the hard reality that only some works have gained and maintained currency', and later: 'we will see whether posterity got it right after all.' The first statement might well be correct, but it is absolutely necessary to have a broad survey to be able to arrive at some conclusions about the overall tendencies. As for posterity (depending on what time span you mean by such a term), it is now manifestly clear that our immediate posterity certainly got it wrong as far as Australian music of the early and middle twentieth century were concerned. The big names of that era are now but footnotes in our history. Personally, I expect a similar fate for some of our current media darlings. The same referee also complained that 'more could have been written about' certain composers. I agree: more could have been written about almost every composer in the book, but in this kind of effort a line needs to be drawn somewhere, sometime. The book is intended as but a beginning, a spur to further study and analysis of the genre.

Since I am a hopeless romantic, and a product of a system that taught music as a high calling and the province of only a few privileged and gifted individuals, my belief system stays in place. I still firmly hold to the view that music has a high spiritual function and that what the good fight is about is recognising the power of music to accomplish that very objective. It is far beyond music as a mere entertainment. It can change the world.

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