

Preface

Some years ago, when my book *Australian Piano Music of the Twentieth Century* was first published, there were still certain perceptions in place concerning our 'art music', especially the music coming from the earlier part of the century, which was often badly preserved, researched, or even understood. It seemed axiomatic to many earlier musicologists that Australia—being a long way from the centres of European music and thought—lagged painfully behind in information and particularly in the unfolding of the exciting avant-garde of Europe and the United States. Quite naturally, with the advent of the computer age, such claims became patently absurd. It was clear that whatever Australian music was or was becoming, it was not due to a time lag, but rather to a direction dictated by the current identity of the Australian psyche.

The myth of the tyranny of distance was, however, still somehow tacitly understood to represent a general truth. *Australian Piano Music of the Twentieth Century* did, however, demonstrate that our leading-edge composers, even early in the century, were well informed and aware of what was taking place elsewhere. It might have taken a little longer, but the information was there, and was certainly absorbed.

True, we had our share of conservative, stodgy and unadventurous souls, eager to please—but doesn't every culture?

Running parallel with the writing of the above book was a publication project of Australian 'heritage' music, with me as general editor. To date, this venture has produced approximately 70 scores by major Australian composers, including early modernist works unknown to the majority of Australian musicians and music lovers. As far as I am concerned, the rediscovery and publishing of worthwhile Australian music are the most valuable parts of this research. My books are merely a personal commentary on some of the works. I certainly call it as I see it, but beyond that, I do not claim any superior understanding of the vast field.

All this was possible thanks to support from the Australian Research Council (ARC). Just a week before writing this, I completed a recording of Hooper Brewster-Jones's *Bird Impressions*—a significant series of some 73 pieces for solo piano, using his personally notated calls of birds as thematic material. Brewster-Jones captured calls of Australian birds in and around his hometown of Adelaide and on the property of his friend the painter Hans Heysen. All these works had lain in the Barr-Smith Library in Adelaide for a long time; they were composed in the early 1920s—an idea that came to Brewster-Jones 30 years before Messiaen issued his bird-inspired works. Brewster-Jones's manuscript

was a mere scrawl, just barely decipherable. The point was that he put together these works—which would have been considered experimental in Adelaide at that time, and have startling moments even now—purely for himself. There was no fine copy ever made, so nobody ever performed the pieces. The ARC grant allowed me to pay a research assistant to spend some months typesetting the works, which were then published by the excellent Keys Press in Perth, and have now been recorded for the first time in complete form. They will now become part of the *Anthology of Australian Music* issued by The Australian National University, overseen by the School of Music, and going back to the heady days of the bicentennial celebrations. Such projects—a researcher’s dream—are possible only with financial support. We can change the erroneous perspective of our own history, and cancel the image of pretty, post-colonial, cheaply nationalistic as peculiar to our musical culture.

I have taken the liberty of using first names when writing about some composers; this is not name-dropping on my part, but simply a quiet declaration of the fact that I knew those composers on a first-name basis and we were friends and colleagues. No disrespect is intended. Neither does a more formal mode of address mean anything other than my knowledge of that particular composer was professional, not personal.

Limitations were, of necessity, imposed on the material to be surveyed. First of all, a decision was made to look at only those chamber music scores that had a piano part. This seemed a logical and comfortable transition from the previous book, which dealt with solo piano music only. Then, we decided to include vocal repertoire: this immediately opened a Pandora’s box, since the amount of parlour-music songs with piano accompaniment was impossibly huge. As well, many choral works with piano simply used the keyboard as a doubling instrument. A selection process was then imposed that favoured including songs or song cycles that were somewhat akin to German Lieder—that is, the content was almost always serious, the use of words had literary merit, and the piano part was not merely a vamping accompaniment, but was integral to the music argument. Moreover, as in the previous book, here, we were searching for adventurous pieces with an often-demanding keyboard part. In general—again repeating the aesthetic pose of the previous volume—we were looking for a modernist thread in Australian chamber music. I am happy to shoulder the blame for a stance that was, in the end, unashamedly idealistic, perhaps romantically so. To me, this type of elitism implies a high level of craftsmanship as well as an intent generally linked to presentation in the concert hall; it includes a personality generally more concerned with inward exploration than with outward ostentation. Not every composer in this book fulfils such criteria; some have been included because of their high profile in the community, and not perhaps due to their artistic achievements. We, like most countries, have our

share of composers—whether from early in the twentieth century or much more recently—who unashamedly write to please at all costs, are politically correct and repeat themselves endlessly. There is room for them, of course, but as Mr Pickwick so eloquently put it, ‘not in *my* cab’.

Composers are, despite all of the above, pragmatic folk, so it is not surprising that the chamber combinations most utilised were ones that mirrored the availability of instruments, personal connections or music composed for particular events and commissions.

A similar, but slightly less onerous, quandary manifested itself when we began to search for works for piano duet, or for two or more pianos: there was, not unexpectedly, a huge volume of pedagogic works for piano duet, continuing the traditions of composers such as Diabelli, sometimes with one part for the ‘teacher’ and another part for the ‘pupil’. Most of these works had to be omitted to save us from becoming submerged. Once again, it is not a case of feeling superior to such material.

The Australian Music Centre has now an active and informative web site (an important one of many—see the Database for further information) that provides biographical material on composers as well as much other supplementary information. Given this current state of easily available online information, we decided that it was no longer necessary to provide raw factual data that are easily accessible elsewhere. This was not the case only some few years ago. It was endlessly fascinating to revisit composers written about in the piano book some years ago, and to note artistic continuance, an aesthetic shift or composers dropping out of the field altogether. It was a little like catching up with family members after some years.

I like the precept that a picture is worth a thousand words. In a book on music, surely a representative music example says things about a composer that would take many paragraphs of laborious prose to convey. As a practical musician, I find such examples leap out of the page at me, and the sound of even a short fragment is like tasting a wine. I have, therefore, liberally sprinkled the text with music examples in the hope that the ‘tasting’ will inspire readers to go and find the complete work.

I should add here that the entry on my own chamber music, written by Teddy Neeman, was not in any way influenced or supervised by myself. Marguerite Boland liaised with Teddy over the entry, and I insisted on knowing nothing about the contents of the entry. Indeed, as I write this Preface, I still have no idea what is in this part of the book. Teddy, as an ex-student and a brilliant musician, is uniquely qualified to the task.