

# Preface: Music and Antarctica

Arnan Wiesel<sup>1</sup>

## Music and Antarctica

Sound and nature are inseparable. Silence and nature are inseparable. These parameters of our world are often neglected. ‘Sonically, an extraordinary silence embraces much of Antarctica. In this regard, my most profound listening was inward. Sitting on a scree slope in the Taylor Valley, on a windless afternoon, the only sound I heard was that of my pulse, a dull thud and swish against the hood of my parka.’<sup>2</sup>

The Antarctica Music Festival and Conference at The Australian National University’s School of Music on 25–29 June 2011 generated a great sense of excitement. Concerts at the festival included the dawn performance of John Luther Adams’ ‘Inuksuit’ at the James Turrell Skyspace in the Australian National Gallery, the inspired playing of harpist Alice Giles, the movement of dancer, animator and choreographer Lisa Roberts, and the cold magic of Norwegian percussionist Terje Isungset with his monolithic ice instruments in front of a capacity outdoor audience at the School of Music in Canberra, in 0°C on a winter’s night. The conference ‘Antarctica — Music, Sounds and Cultural Connections’ on 27–29 June 2011 was unique in celebrating the theme of music in Antarctica. This volume presents papers from the conference.

Humans have been attracted to the polar regions for centuries. Consciousness of sounds — in particular, musical ones — has not been at the forefront of our aims in polar endeavours, although listening to and appreciating sounds (including the sounds of silence) *has* been a source of support and comfort, and a basis for social rituals, there as elsewhere. The Antarctic environment, with its extremes of climate and environment, offers great potential for creative achievements, including those in the world of music and sound.

Douglas Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911–14 was the first Australian-led expedition to Antarctica. It crystallised Australia’s interest in the southern continent. Our involvement has brought cultural and emotional challenges, as well as political and scientific ones, as Tom Griffiths writes in

---

1 Mr Arnan Wiesel, pianist and former Head of Keyboard, ANU School of Music, Arnan.Wiesel@me.com.

2 Quin, Douglas, ‘Antarctica: Austral Soundscapes 1997–1998’, dqmedia, <http://www.dqmedia.com/articles/austral.pdf>.

this volume. 'Antarctica does not only prompt logistical, political or intellectual questions; it implicates and challenges our humanity,' he says. In the years 2011–14, the centenary of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition stimulated many intellectual and creative celebrations. This volume is the result of one such celebration.

The diaries of meteorologist Cecil Madigan show the importance of music and sound for members of the expedition. In a small society isolated from external contacts, even the sound of morse code, far removed from the more obvious musical elements of English, could be regarded as part of the men's vital rituals of communications.

Crossing boundaries between performing arts disciplines and other mediums is not new, but the 21st century offers us the possibility of new approaches through a new suite of technological tools. In the concerts of the 'Antarctica and Music' Festival and Conference, dance, harp playing, natural instruments and sound recordings used various applications of modern technology.

Silence is an important element of any sonic environment. In Antarctica the almost constant sounds of extreme winds and blizzards affect the human spirit and behaviour. On the rare occasions when the noise of the wind dropped completely at Commonwealth Bay, men paused, initially at a loss to say what had changed.

In this volume, Mark Pharaoh discusses the loss of silence from Antarctica with the arrival of the radio and morse code, as well as other technological sounds of the era (especially the indoor ones), while in her project *Antarctica: Music From the Ice*, artist Cheryl Leonard uses the natural found objects and sounds of the Antarctic Peninsula.

In *Thulia: a Tale of the Antarctic*, artist and scientist Elizabeth Truswell examines the earliest Antarctic poem and its musical setting. Shakuhachi player, polar explorer and scholar Rupert Summerson writes in *Nankyoku no kyoku* of the cultural life of the Shirase Antarctic Expedition of 1910–12 — almost contemporaneous with Mawson's expedition but far less well known, despite its intersections with Australian history. With New Zealand artist Claire Beynon in *A Vast Scale*, Summerson also canvasses responses to imagery and music chosen to evoke Antarctic.

Music historian Jeff Brownrigg discusses the roots of the first music known to have been composed in Antarctica, on the relief expedition by Captain Gerard Doorly on the *Morning*. Dictionary-maker and historian Bernadette Hince discusses an occasion on which Gilbert Kerr of the 1902–04 Scottish National Antarctic Expedition played his bagpipes to a seemingly curious emperor penguin, a moment captured in photographs and often discussed since.

Harpist Alice Giles has a personal account of giving a concert in Antarctica, an extraordinary experience given greater depth by her connection through her grandfather Cecil Madigan with the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, whose centenary prompted the festival and conference. In the concert she used words from Madigan's diaries, songs, hymns, music mentioned in the diaries, and music written by contemporary Australian composers for the occasion. Another Antarctic Arts Fellow, dance artist Tina (Christina) Evans, writes of capturing the movement of Antarctic ice through dance.

Literary scholar Elizabeth Leane canvasses the relationship between sound, music and literature in an Antarctic context. She deals particularly with poetry because, as she says, 'poets tend to be interested in sound'. Writer Craig Cormick's short story *And I may be some time...* takes us to the world of Lawrence ('Titus') Oates, 'alone on the ice tonight' with the shrill song of the wind.

Composer and teacher Patrick Shepherd discusses his Antarctic-inspired work and that of three other New Zealand composers — Chris Cree Brown, Phil Dadson and Gareth Farr. Sound artist Philip Samartzis looks at the work of sound artists in extreme locations. Works such as Douglas Quin's *Antarctica* (1998) and Peter Cusack's *Baikal Ice* (2003), he says, provide 'insight into remote and inhospitable environments that are usually inaccessible to the rest of us'. In *Antarctica: 'Surround Sound'*, glaciologist and writer Stephen Nicol provides a counterview to the belief that Antarctica is 'a colourless, sterile environment where the only sound is the howling of the wind'. And writer Jesse Blackadder seeks to explore 'a different kind of Antarctic silence ... the silence of the earliest female travellers to Antarctica'.

'As you travel south you experience a moving away from the density and complexity of human culture', says writer Stephen Martin. 'Into this sense of change and sensory confusion tumble the sights and smells and sounds of one of the world's most extraordinary places'.

Folk musician and historian Bruce Watson writes of the music made at Australia's Antarctic bases, little of which has been published or systematically studied.

The number of artists looking to Antarctica as a source of inspiration is growing. Some presenters at this festival and conference had received Antarctic Arts Fellowships from the Australian Antarctic Division, which each year supports creative endeavours based around Antarctic subjects through these fellowships.

This is the first volume dedicated to the subject of Antarctica and music. One of the responsibilities of musicians is to bring individual creative elements to our society. I hope that the work represented here will encourage other Antarctic-inspired music and sound.

## **Acknowledgement**

Sincere thanks from the editors and contributors for the excellent work of the ANU Press editors David Gardiner and Emily Tinker, designer Nausica Pinar and indexer Beth Battrick, to the ANU Publication Subsidy Committee for funding an index, and to the School of Music for funding author copies of this work.

This text is taken from *Antarctica: Music, sounds and cultural connections*, edited by Bernadette Hince, Rupert Summerson and Arnan Wiesel, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.