4. Translating the tradition: the many lives of *Green Bushes*

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Audio samples relating to this chapter are available online at:

Transcribed below are the words of *Green Bushes*, as sung by Sally Sloane in Australia, to which I refer throughout this essay.¹

*The Green Bushes*

(Sung by Sally Sloane and recorded by John Meredith in 1956)

As I went a-walking one morning in spring,
To hear the birds whistle and the nightingale sing,
I spied a fair damsel, so sweetly sang she,
‘Down by the green bushes where ’e thinks to meet me.’

‘Oh what are you loitering for, my pretty maid?’
‘I’m a-loitering for my true love, kind sir,’ she said.
‘Shall I be your true love, and will you agree
And forsake the own true love and go along with me?’

‘Oh come let us be going, kind sir, if you please,
Come let us be going from under those trees.
For yonder is coming my true love, I see,
Down by the green bushes where he thinks to meet me.’

But when he came there and found she was gone,
He looked all around him and cried quite forlorn,
Saying, ‘She’s gone with another and quite forsaken me,
So adieu to those green bushes for ever,’ cried he.

‘Oh I’ll buy you fine beavers and fine silken gowns,
I’ll buy you fine petticoats flounced to the ground,
If you’ll prove loyal and constant and free,
And forsake your own true love and go along with me.’
Sounds in Translation

‘I want none of your petticoats nor your fine silken walls/robes [printed as robes, sounds like walls]2
I was never so foolish as to marry for clothes,
But if you’ll prove loyal and constant and true
I’ll forsake my own true love and go along with you.’

[Last verse from the other three field recordings]
‘I’ll be like some schoolboy, I’ll spend all my time in play,
For I never was so foolish as to be lured away.
No false-hearted young girl shall serve me so any more,
So adieu to those green bushes, its time to give o’er.’

The transmission of folk songs provides a continuous demonstration of sounds in translation. In the early twentieth century, the process of oral transmission of traditional music was revolutionised with the use of recording devices such as the phonograph adopted by Australian-born Percy Grainger. This recording activity marked the translation of the music of a small community into the musical language of a much broader audience3 not obliged to listen to the song by geographical and social origins or emotional connections with the singer. By mechanically recording folk songs and translating the melodies into notated art music, Grainger was separating the living folk song from the ritual transmission of the oral tradition. The melody remains recognisable as the folk song, but the distinctive stamp of the original singer disappears. While Grainger’s method demonstrates one process of sounds in translation, I am interested in the relevance of folk song as a reflection of the minds of its singers, an investigative process that also acknowledges the use of sound recording in contemporary folk song transmission. This chapter examines why and how I have used recording technology to investigate the rituals4 of performance connected to domestic routines associated with the oral tradition, and to participate in the continuing life of the song through my own recorded performance. There are three parts: the first is an exploration of the historical sources of Green Bushes and the symbolism in the song; part two examines Sally Sloane’s versions of the song in relation to James Porter’s (1976:7–26) ‘conceptual performance model’, in which he states, ‘Whatever “the song” is, its identity cannot be demonstrated, nor other features such as its existence through time fully delineated, until we are able to trace that identity in the mind of the singer or a number of singers’ (p. 11).5 Part three relates this theory to my recording of Green Bushes, in which I seek to integrate the influence of the singer I learned the song from (Sally Sloane) into my version.

Part one

From the earliest printed sources, about 1816, Green Bushes crossed and recrossed boundaries of musical genre and culture, from the oral tradition to the popular
ballad press, from the theatre into Western art music and carried across the world through the oral tradition to continue its life through the lives of its singers in Australia. *Green Bushes* was documented (<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm>; <http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/Olson/index.html>; <http://www.folkinfo.org/topic.asp?topic_id=301>) in field recordings and notations of the oral tradition in Ireland, England, Canada, Nova Scotia and the United States, and it was published in many broadside ballad versions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and in New York. Mrs Fitzwilliam sang it in John Baldwin Buckstone’s play *Green Bushes* (1845) and the performances of this play in England, Australia and America either revived the existing song or encouraged transmission of the new version as it was sung in the play. The Bodleian Library Broadside Ballad *Sweet William*, with instructions directing that it be sung to the tune of *Green Bushes*, was printed between 1813 and 1838, and *Among the Green Bushes, Catnach (London), 1813–1838* (<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm>) predates the use of the song in Buckstone’s play. Peter Kennedy in *Folk Songs of Britain and Ireland* (1975:378) gives six field-recorded versions and 26 printed versions, some of which are transcriptions of field recordings or notations. Taking into account the evidence of the broadsides and other related versions of the song—*The Cutty Wren, The Queen of May, The Shepherd’s Lament* and *Sweet William* through either melody, theme or related lyrics—and the many Broadside cross-references to songs related to *Green Bushes*, I would agree with Kennedy (1975:378) that ‘we can presume it was traditional long before it was used by Buckstone’.

Documentation for published versions of the song is comprehensive, implying that it enjoyed wide popular circulation and performance. *Green Bushes* has engaging narrative complexity and there is great potential for the singer to invest their personality in the performance. The story engages the listener and, at a deeper level, the narrative links the audience to the song through the characters, who represent archetypes,

‘felt’ as embodied forces, pulling this way or that, intersecting points in a network of linked relationships, driven by passion to their destiny. By comparison with the invisible but strongly felt network that links them and the Fate that controls them their personalities do not matter. (Muir 1965:157)

The protagonists’ lack of personality allows the listener to empathise with the emotional web acted out in the course of the song by the male and female characters. Symbolism in the song connects the singer and listener to the past. *Green Bushes* epitomises the ability of orally transmitted folk music to enable singer and listener to experience a sense of belonging to an all-encompassing pattern of fate and relationships, while simultaneously recognising that the song
is a reflection of these patterns. Singer and audience ideally form a community of shared meaning in the course of the performance.

It is a circular narrative. A man out walking in spring sights ‘a fair damsel’ singing ‘Down by the green bushes where he thinks to meet me’. In Sloane’s version, the woman sings a song that attracts the new suitor ahead of the old one: perhaps a test to see who arrives first? Possibly these are references to some other, earlier layer of magical meaning and ghostly, revenant lovers, which have been simplified over time. He asks what she’s waiting for and she tells him it is her true love; he offers to take the place of the man she’s waiting for. When she sees her old lover coming, she leaves with the protagonist. The lover arrives and realises he’s too late. Meanwhile, the first man offers the woman fine clothes to entice her to commit to him, but she explains that all she wants is his fidelity. In the final verse, the old lover announces himself cured of the attachment to the woman. In the melodically related broadside, *Sweet William*, the woman is rewarded for her faithful wait by her returning sailor lover with many rich and exotic gifts. Is the girl really ‘false hearted’ or is she simply tired of waiting for a lover who would prefer to be off adventuring? Or has her ‘true love’ died and is returning as a revenant lover? This is a possible interpretation given the emblematic meaning of the nightingale mentioned in verse one as a messenger from the dead or transformed loved one, and the association of the colour green with death and the supernatural. The symbolism in the song offers the possibility of many different interpretations.

The colour green has numerous symbolic meanings. ‘Green language’ and ‘language of the birds’ are associated historically with ‘oblique writing styles used by alchemists and other mystical initiates’ (Stewart 1977) and this symbolism could have played a part in the early evolution of the song. Certainly, the ambiguities in the narrative suggest the possibility of changeable meanings. Green is a colour associated with the dead in ballads (Wimberley 1965:242) (for example, *The Wife of Usher’s Well* and *Green Gravel*) as well as with virginity, deception and disguise adopted to test a lover’s fidelity. At the most fundamental level, even if unaware of the traditional meaning of these symbols, singer and audience are able to connect these references to their own experiences through imagery that evokes memories. It is the ambiguity of folk song narrative that ensures its appeal to a wide range of listeners and singers. The symbolic references and the melodic patterns of *Green Bushes* convey the idea of a recurring pattern of relationships.

Grainger collected two versions of *Green Bushes* in England, as part of an extensive, pioneering field recording to notate disappearing traditional English folk songs. He was inspired to use technology to capture the subtleties of ornamentation and phrasing peculiar to the oral tradition of singing English folk
music by Madame Leneva’s notations of Russian folk-art songs collected with a phonograph at the turn of the century (Slattery 1974:43). Grainger wanted to exploit the extraordinary wealth of musical ideas to be harvested from rural England for translation into Western art music. His translations of these folk songs helped popularise the music in a way that altered the originality and spontaneity of the version recorded from his informants. Writing in 1908, Grainger described his English folk song collecting experiences:

When I first started collecting folk-songs with the phonograph, in the summer of 1906, in North Lincolnshire, I was surprised to find how very readily the old singers took to singing into the machine. Many of them were familiar with gramophones and phonographs in public houses and elsewhere, and all were agog to have their own singing recorded, while their delight at hearing their own voices, and their distress at detecting their errors reproduced in the machine was quite touching. (Grainger 1908:147)

Grainger was describing the transition of music that evolved as part of a discrete community’s musical life performed by a soloist for her/his community into traditional music performed and rearranged in a manner that was never envisaged by the original ‘composers’ or traditional performers. Suddenly, because the performance was captured by a recording apparatus and became replayable, ‘errors’ mattered. In a live performance tradition, deviations from the ‘perfect’ rendition of the song were and are the life of the song. Grainger also viewed these songs as common property, available for translation by anyone into another musical form. On at least one occasion, he hid under an old woman’s bed to record a song he particularly wanted, knowing full well that she regarded it as her exclusive possession (Slattery 1974:48). Unlike Joseph Leaning and Sally Sloane, who learned their version by listening to another singer, then made the song their own, Grainger tried to make the song the property of all listeners through translation into the much broader, de-personalised language of Western art music.

This is a sample of Grainger’s recording of Joseph Leaning singing Green Bushes (refer to Audio 4.1) and its lyrics:

As I was a-walking one morning in May,
To hear the birds whistle and see the lambs play.
I beheld a fair damsel so sweetly sung she,
Down by the green bushes where she chanced to meet me.
‘Come let us be going kind sir if you please,
Come let us be going from under the trees
For yonder he’s coming, he’s coming I see,
Down by the green bushes where he thinks to meet me.’

(Leader LEA 4050 LP, mono UK, 1972)

Grainger’s work, *Green Bushes (Passacaglia on an English Folksong)*, repeats the verse for eight minutes while the orchestral accompaniment becomes increasingly extravagant. The elaborate instrumental arrangement represents a paradox given Grainger’s love of the unaccompanied vocal tradition he was recording and his declaration that ‘[t]he old folk-singers were not limited to the harmonic poverty of instruments’ (Slattery 1974:45). For all Grainger’s attention to the detailed ornamentation and phrasing that made *Green Bushes* significant within the context of the oral tradition, these subtleties have disappeared in his orchestral arrangement. Perversely, Grainger based his setting ‘on a version of *Green Bushes* noted by [Cecil Sharp] from the singing of Mrs Louie Hooper of Hambridge, Somerset’ and used his own recording ‘to a lesser extent’ (Lewis 1991). Grainger believed that the rhythmic structure and repetitive melodic pattern of the song connected the music to the past. This was the essence he sought to capture and translate into his own work, but it was not the kind of transmission operating as part of the oral tradition. In his program note for a performance in 1930, he wrote:

*Green Bushes* strikes me as being a typical dance folk-song—a type of song come down to us from the time when sung melodies, rather than instrumental music, held country-side dancers together…In setting such dance-folksongs…I feel that the unbroken and somewhat monotonous keeping-on-ness of the original should be preserved above all else. (Lewis 1991)\(^{10}\)

Perhaps the greatest appeal of the song was its ambiguous modality, enabling Grainger to overlay ‘a harmonic treatment covering a range of seven or more keys’ (Lewis 1991).

Music of European origin, such as *Green Bushes*, remains a strong vein in Australian folk music, and the variations that occur here reveal much about the evolution of a distinctive folk music. The transmission of folk song in Australia represents exchange between men and women and men and men, through relationships such as father and daughter, wife and husband, mother and son as well as sharing songs between networks of friends, receiving music by post in remote locations and learning new items from travellers, in the way that Sloane learned *Green Bushes* from Jack Archer, an itinerant railway worker.

**Part two**

*Green Bushes* is an important example of the introspective ballads that contrast with the more popular, diversionary Australian folk songs such as *The Rybuck Shearer, Click Go the Shears* and *Botany Bay* favoured in the bush band repertoire.
Like Catherine Peatey’s versions of *The Bonny Bunch of Roses* and *The Female Rambling Sailor*, they provide not only a continuing link to a European cultural background, but a framework adaptable by the singer to express their own emotions and to reflect their personal place in patterns of relationships. Folk song, like myth,

no matter how ancient its origins or its subject matter, is always concerned with contemporary relationships, here and now…its value lies not in its truth to any actual past whose reality we can establish or disprove but in its present usefulness as [a] guide to values and to conduct. (Small 1998:100)

The existence of *Green Bushes* in the repertoire of Australian singer Sloane demonstrates how life circumstances and relationships between the singer and another musician result in transmission and survival of the song. These living links demonstrate the operation of tradition as defined by the Australian scholar Barry Macdonald:

a) shared repeatable activity or complex of activities…and b) the activation of a certain spiritual/emotional power in the relationship-network of those involved in the collaboration. This power is produced by, and in its turn, generates the conscious desire for the activity, its objects (for example, particular songs, styles or stories), and the relationship network itself to persist—just as they had in the past, so on into the future. (Macdonald 1996:16)

Tradition enables a singer to learn a song from the past and send it on into the future through a performance provoked by feeling, and the transmission of the song *Green Bushes* demonstrates this process. James Porter’s (1976; see also Gower 1968) ‘conceptual performance model’, which he designed to analyse Jeannie Robertson’s singing of the Scottish ballad *My Son David*, is a particularly useful tool for understanding this pattern of folk song transmission as sounds in translation. Porter proposes that traditional singers choose certain songs as favourites because they deal with issues that are important in their lives, consciously or unconsciously. Their performance of the song reflects this in subtle ways.

[T]he singing of a ballad cannot be viewed simply as an act in which a text (understood to mean a ‘story’) is set in motion by a singer with a tune, but as a complex, existential process in which units of both cognitive and affective experience are embedded. (Porter 1976:17)
The following discussion of Sloane’s version of *Green Bushes* is based on four different performances recorded over a number of years by two collectors:

- 1953 NLA TRC 2539/5 recorded by John Meredith
- 1956 NLA TRC 4/19 recorded by John Meredith
- c1957 NLA TRC 2539/79 recorded by Edgar Waters
- c1960 NLA TRC 4/13-14 recorded by John Meredith.

Sloane’s version of *Green Bushes* is consistently slower and more legato than the Leaning version recorded by Grainger: ‘[h]allmarks of this performance are the pure, unemotional vocal style, long lyrical phrasing and the relaxed tempo that draws the listener in to the story’ (Waters 1957:6, 1957:3). In fact, the tempo, while rhythmically flexible, is consistent with that of a tactus or resting heartbeat of roughly 63 beats a minute, a fundamental reminder of the interrelationship between singer and song. In the field recordings of *Green Bushes*, melodic subtleties are not obscured by instrumental accompaniments and imposed arrangements. Modality and vocal nuances are evident in the recordings. As manuscript notation cannot capture the subtleties of rhythmic variation, or the textural effect of Sloane’s phrasing, the best illustration of these characteristics is a sound sample of the longest six-verse version of *Green Bushes*: TRC 4/19 recorded in 1956 by John Meredith (see lyrics above).

I have endeavoured to gain an understanding of the connection between Sloane’s life and the words of the song—what Porter (1975:9) describes as ‘understanding the musical process in formation, from the inside as well as the outside’. Meredith and Anderson (1979:173) noted that Sloane learned *Green Bushes* from Jack Archer when she was twelve years old. The song remained a favourite with Sloane in her adult life and was recorded by several different collectors who visited her. *Green Bushes* was important to her for many reasons. First, Archer must have been a significant personality in her childhood to pass on a song that remained so vivid for Sloane throughout her life. To learn this lengthy seven-verse song at the age of twelve would have taken dedication and I suggest that the resolve to learn it arose out of Sloane’s affection and/or respect for the original singer.

The emotional conflict described in the song could well have resonated with Sloane’s own complex family situation. Her mother, Sarah, left her biological father, Tom Frost, and lived with William Clegg. Sloane adopted Clegg as her surname, Clegg’s name appears on her marriage certificate and that of her sister, Bertha, and she had written permission from Clegg for her marriage to John Phillip Mountford (Lowe 2003). This suggests a changing dynamic between Sloane and the two most important men in her early life; the loss of her biological father through her parents’ separation and the stepfather who took responsibility for the daughter he gained through the relationship with her mother. Loss and belonging in relation to significant male figures are important themes in her life.
In the late 1940s, Sloane remarried and her second husband, Fred Sloane, forbade her mentioning the name of her ex-husband. Once again, an intriguing ambiguity about the terms of separation from the original husband continues a family pattern begun by Sloane’s mother, a pattern that occurs in the words of Green Bushes. If we accept traditional folk song performance as ritual, the connection between Sloane’s life experiences and the song is evident:

During the enactment of the ritual, time is concentrated in a heightened intensity of experience. During that time, relationships are brought into existence between the participants and the model, in metaphoric form...In this way the participants not only learn about those relationships but actually experience them in their bodies...sometimes to the point where the psychic boundary between the mundane and the supernatural world breaks down so that they leave behind their everyday identity. (Small 1998:96, italics in original)

Sloane’s itinerant childhood influenced her musical repertoire of old traditional songs of European origin, Australian bush songs and popular music from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her early exposure to many different musicians and the influence of her musically talented mother gave her versatility and a breadth of repertoire to match her powerful personality. Sloane accepted the influence of the paranormal in life, as her account of the Leopard Boy attests, in relation to the death of the bushranger Ben Hall and the song she sang commemorating this event. The symbolism in the traditional songs she sang is a notable feature of her repertoire.

Green Bushes is a song rich in symbolism derived from the lyrics that are remnants of earlier related songs. The simplicity of the song allows the symbols to create a link between mythology and medieval culture and the endurance of these influences in the folk stream. While it is impossible to know what images Sloane saw when she sang the song, an analysis of the words offers a guide to the power of the song that has kept it alive in the oral and written tradition for probably more than 200 years:

The starkness and simplicity of folksongs is deceptively simple, for all extra material has been discarded; yet the powerful images are never weakened or lost...If the life symbols were not present the song would have disappeared long ago...The literal reading of the ballad plots often conceals an older and deeper flow of images which should be re-examined as a sequence of pictures, in much the same way as dream or visionary sequences appear to the inner eye. (Stewart 1977:27, 46)

In Sloane’s version, remnants of past singers remain in the distinctive phrasing and her pronunciation. Only one word (verse 7: ‘false heart-id’) is clearly identifiable as a reproduction of Archer’s cockney accent, and this sound in
translation represents the powerful personal relationship that placed the song in Sloane’s repertoire. The influences from other singers in the lineage of the song remain as anonymous ghostly imprints.

In the four field recordings identified above, Sloane’s performance varies each time with phrasing, word choice and changes from a four-verse version to a six-verse and a seven-verse version transcribed in Meredith and Anderson’s book *Folksongs of Australia and the Men and Women Who Sang Them* (1979:173). The comparative process is hampered by the fact that tape speeds are variable because of the age of the original equipment and the fact that user copies are on cassette, which results in speed variations between tape players used for listening. I believe, however, that Sloane’s pitch remains relatively consistent in each performance, with E above middle C as the tonic. This takes into account the speed problems of Meredith’s tape recorder in the 1956 version, which gives a slightly lower pitch for the starting note. The following comparison describes the differences between the versions of *Green Bushes* using my transcription of the words reproduced above as reference.

- TRC 2539/5, 1953: verse 1, verse 3 as verse 2, verse 3, and verse 7 as verse 4. This version has a more regimented rhythm and has less freedom in the delivery.
- TRC 4/19, the 1956 version, is an outstanding performance with the verses flowing from 1 to 6 in sequence. The phrasing is longer and the vocal line sustained. There are kitchen noises at the beginning: a faint slosh of dishwater and then the groan of a drawer closing, shuffling movement and the way the voice volume waxes and wanes indicates head movement until a comfortable posture is found and the song gathers momentum. There is an audible drone, possibly the tape machine motor, but it sounds more like a refrigerator to me. It provides a useful harmonic reference point. There is a feeling in this performance that in the course of the song the singer leaves the domestic realm and enters the ballad world created by the narrative.
- TRC 2539/79, 1957: verse 1, verse 3 as verse 2, verse 3, and verse 7 is verse 4. Sloane’s foot is audible tapping as a pulse or tactus, speeding up and slowing with her delivery of the narrative.
- TRC 4/13, c1960: there is a clock ticking in this version at about double the speed of the pulse or tactus in the song. Once again, the foot tapping is audible and the hint of pages rustling in a slight moment of hesitation between verses 2 and 3. Was she reading from a version that she had written out?

The different versions demonstrate two different styles of performance: two ways of translating the original narrative. In the shorter versions, Sloane has more detachment from the lyrics and the longer song sounds as if she is totally immersed in the narrative. This is typical of folk music as music that takes on a
different shape and style to meet the requirements of the situation in which it is sung. The four-verse version captures the essence of the plot with a balanced structure of two verses for introduction and proposal and two verses for the old lover to discover the woman’s change of heart, condemn her decision and move on. It is in the line ‘no false-hearted young girl shall serve me so anymore’ that we hear Archer’s accent mirrored in Sloane’s pronunciation of ‘heart-id’ (refer to Audio 4.2). The six-verse version has a different message. The woman has three verses in which to consider the proposal and reject the old love, the old love has one verse to lament and the woman has the final two verses to clarify that she doesn’t want material gifts; she wants immediate companionship and an end to ‘loitering’.

Sloane sang a wide range of songs as well as the introspective songs such as *Green Bushes*: ‘treason songs’ about Ben Hall and Ned Kelly (so-named because the police would not tolerate references to these heroes that might incite the masses to protest), bush songs such as the *Flash Country Shearer*, or *The Springtime it Brings on the Shearing* as it is also known, and the old ballads she had learned from her mother and grandmother.

**Part three**

My interpretation of the song *Green Bushes* (Audio 4.3) is part of a CD recording project conducted in collaboration with musician and sound artist Ian Blake, which seeks to translate the essence of Australian women’s cultural identity captured in field recordings of the 1950s and early nineteenth-century transcriptions while creating music that adds something new to the continuing tradition. The recording, titled *Cantara*, was made in the spirit of the research advocated by Leslie Shepherd:

> It is true that informed and accurate scholarship is essential in ballad study, but it must be brought to life by actual experience of the folk tradition. More can be learnt from listening to a traditional ballad singer than by studying texts, and active participation in singing and dancing adds a dimension to academic study. Furthermore, some philosophical and metaphysical background is essential in a field that constantly reflects the changing beliefs of past generations. If we can learn to experience what lies at the heart of the ballad we shall resolve many of the questions that harass academic study. (Shepherd 1962:36–7)

While this research dates from the 1960s, the proof of Shepherd’s assertion is in the personal investigation of his technique and I have certainly learned more about *Green Bushes* and the other songs sourced from field recordings by learning it to perform than I could ever have appreciated by a detached examination of the field recordings and analysis of the texts. This investigative technique offers a key to at least partially unlocking the identity of the song ‘in the mind of the
singer or a number of singers’ (Porter 1976:11) based on a ‘conceptual performance model’ (Porter 1976) of Sloane’s relationship with Green Bushes described in part two of this chapter. Using unaccompanied field recordings as evidence and inspiration, I recorded a selection of songs sung in Australia using the vocal melody to determine the arrangements, abandoning the instrumentation associated with a bush band ensemble or the commonly used folk guitar accompaniment that imposed a rhythmic structure on the melodies. An extension of Shepherd’s directive about active learning of ballads was my decision to listen critically to the background sounds in field recordings and treat them as an integral part of the information to be gleaned from listening to archival tapes and singing the songs. The sound world created by domestic noises and captured on the field tapes is an essential part of my research. These background sounds provided important clues about the domestic world that shaped the way in which women used and use their music. These sounds have been translated into the arrangements of selected folk songs to take on symbolic meanings. For example, the drone of insects is often heard in the background of field recordings. The swarm of bees heard in the segue between tracks 1 and 2, A Bhanarach dhonn a Chruidh and As Sylvie was Walking, signifies the transition of these women’s songs from the Old World to the New. In the English and Celtic folklore of the women who brought this music to Australia, bees represent messengers and the bee swarm has a very Australian sound evocative of hot summers in which loud insect drones accompany most activities. Technical effects support the symbolic nature of the sound art and capture something of my era, a record of the ‘state of the art’ (of sound-art technology) to pass on through electronic sounds in translation.

The domestic sounds of dishes, clocks chiming, flies droning and teacups clinking communally are common accompaniments to the music recorded on field recordings. These noises inspired me to recreate sounds from my own memories of my mother’s activities at home—the sound of pinking shears cutting out fabric on a dining table was one example—to bring my performances of the songs to life as part of my domestic world. Careful listening also provided clues about how women pitched the starting notes of their songs from familiarity with the resonance of the room and how ambient domestic noise provided a musical accompaniment for songs.

I spent many hours in my own kitchen with a digital audio tape (DAT) machine and an extremely sensitive microphone recording the noises that made that particular sound world and listening back to them. Water simmering in saucepans, the click of the stove thermostat, the sound of scrubbing vegetables, the drone of the fridge, water pouring out of a down pipe after rain and birdsong through the kitchen window are samples of these sounds. As my familiarity with the ambient sounds of my kitchen increased, so did my ability to accurately pitch the starting note by ear for songs I was learning from the field recordings.
when I was in this environment. Singing these songs blended with the daily rituals of cooking and cleaning. It became clear that the oral tradition was partly about learning the songs or the tunes by ear and also partly about relating them to sound reference points in one’s own environment and time and this knowledge informed my translation of *Green Bushes* into a new recording.

My version of *Green Bushes* was learned from Sloane’s singing on the field recordings discussed earlier in this chapter. I chose this song above others in her repertoire because it had the feel of a very old song and because when I heard her version, I heard that the song was ‘singing Sally’. So familiar is she with the words that singer and song have the one meaning, the rhythmic pulse of her performance matches a resting heartbeat, communicating a contemplative mood. I am intrigued by the ambiguity of the narrative and the added dimensions provided by the symbolism. The ‘choir’ that introduces my version of the song is there partly to acknowledge the anonymous influence of past singers on the song and partly influenced by my interpretation of the symbolism in the song: the nightingale as the embodiment of the spirit of a loved one and the colour green representing supernatural presences. Having my vocal performance translated through contemporary digital technology into a wax cylinder recording highlights the transitory nature of any performance. For the duration of *Green Bushes*, whether it is Grainger’s *Passacaglia* or a live performance, there is an interaction between the old version and the new, the past and the present and implicit in this is the transition of the song into the future.

The introduction to *Green Bushes* is constructed from melodic fragments treated in various ways: the song begins with a fragment of the melody time stretched in Digital Performer, the process repeated several times so that artefacts of the processing generate a warbling drone, combined with another melodic fragment that has been subjected to ‘Thonk’, a deliberately uncontrollable granular synthesis program (Email communication with Ian Blake, 15 April 2006). The idea was to convey through sound art the notion that a folk song performance coalesced out of fragments of many other songs sung by many other voices at different times—past present and future: indeed, through the action of sounds in translation. Following this fragmented introduction, more disciplined voices emerge as another layer of electronic manipulation treats a small part of the melody with a stereo ‘ping pong’ delay leading to a ‘choral’ layer constructed from the first line reversed with pitch and format shifted to a fourth and one octave below the original. These are edited in detail to create the suggestion of an unknown but somewhat Gaelic-sounding language, placed in a highly reverberant space (Blake 2006). Again, the desired sound image was that of vanished voices from singers past, with a hint of Irish influence as documented in the sources for *Green Bushes*, all converging as the song reassembled itself in the present. The original performance of the song proceeds: the warbling drone and delay layer continues, fading slowly.
The song settles into an apparently straightforward unaccompanied ballad performance, but a band pass filter is being slowly applied along with samples of record surface noise, electrical hum and the odd scratch. There is a slow transition to the sound of a wax cylinder recording, fading into scratches and static, ending with the merest hint of granular ghosts. (Email communication with Ian Blake, 15 April 2006)

In the treatment of *Green Bushes*, my interpretation of what Grainger described as the song’s ‘unbroken…keeping-on-ness’ (Lewis 1991) explores the connection between the past and the present, by choosing an accompaniment created by using repeated vocal samples of the original performance as texture and rhythm. I am also exploring the idea of the supernatural inhabiting the song, represented by fractured voices. The vocal line echoes Sloane’s phrasing, her nuances and her remnant of Archer’s English accent. Sloane’s distinctive upward vocal portamento to the top E an octave above middle C and the downward swoop a fourth to the B below accentuates the inner core couplet of each verse leading to the melodic and textual resolution in the last line of the stanza, and this I have replicated in my performance. I have maintained Sloane’s pronunciation of ‘there’ in the line ‘But when he came there and found she was gone’, because it emphasises, rhythmically, the critical moment, which almost sounds—‘the-re’—like a wrinkle in time when the original lover arrives at the green bushes. It was also important to reproduce Archer’s ‘false heart-id young girl’, adding a further dimension to the process of transmission: my voice translating Sloane’s, as she translated Archer’s, who translated his source singer, who were all translating the narrative of the lover’s triangle told and retold in the unending cycle of *Green Bushes*.

**Conclusion**

My version of *Green Bushes* acknowledges the lineage of the oral tradition by including explicit references to the version of *Green Bushes* I learned from Sloane. For reasons that have been suggested above, the song was important to Sloane to learn and to continue singing throughout her life. Sloane’s version appeals to me because of the personal links to significant people and because it offers audible links to the older variants through Jack Archer, from whom she learned the song. Porter’s conceptual performance model offers a framework for investigating the interaction of *Green Bushes* with Sloane’s life experiences and facilitating understanding ‘of the musical process in formation, from the inside as well as the outside’ (Porter 1975:9). This is the sense of ‘keeping-on-ness’ that I have tried to capture in my recording through the use of sound art and a performance that reflects the nuances of Sloane’s unaccompanied version.
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<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/joseph.taylor/>


**Sound recordings**


Meredith, John 1953, National Library of Australia Field Recordings, NLA TRC 2539/5.


**Endnotes**

1 This is my transcription from the field recordings.

2 This is not a far-fetched possibility for Sloane to have sung ‘silken walls’, as wealthy people did in fact cover their walls with silk rather than wallpaper or paint.

3 Grainger wrote, ‘I firmly believe that music will some day become a “universal language”. But it will not become so as long as our musical vision is limited to the output of four European countries between 1700 and 1900. The first step in the right direction is to view the music of all peoples and periods.
Mrs Coobung Mick, whose husband betrayed Hall to the troopers, was carrying a child at the time of this.

9 'I was never able to get any information regarding him, or even his name. When I raised the topic, Sal would lay her forefinger to her lips and silently shake her head' (Lowe 2003).

10 Stewart (1972:17) also comments on this quality of the melody: 'the compelling chant form of the melody of _The Cutty Wren_ [the version he quotes is identical to Leaning’s version of _Green Bushes_]—with its hypnotic call and response pattern—is far superior to the text that it expresses. Thus it is possible that powerful forms of music may help in the retention through time of poetry linked to them.'

11 The version of _Green Bushes_ sung by Sloane used on the Wattle record released in 1957 was compiled from two or more ‘takes’ so that the full seven verses were represented (Personal email communication with Dr E. Waters, 18 June 2006).

12 'Between certain times of the year, one chosen man superseded the present “king” usually by killing him. The victim represented the light part or waking year, his successor the dark season, or waning year. The story never ends, for the goddess brings the light-brother back to life in the spring, at the end of the dark-brother’s reign…The resolving element in this perpetual struggle is the Goddess (in _Green Bushes_ this is the “Fair Damsel”) who restores…Poetically she sings the song of life, and all living things respond to her music, including her chosen dead lover’ (Stewart 1972:17-25).

13 In Meredith and Anderson (1979), this is transcribed as ‘where she thinks to meet me’, but Sloane sings _he_. Both pronouns are found in the printed sources, representing different interpretations for different singers.

14 ‘Ritual, then, is a means by which we experience our proper relation with the pattern which connects, the great pattern of mind. We cannot, of course, know the pattern which connects any more “objectively” than we can know anything outside ourselves. Knowledge of the pattern, as of everything else, is a relation between our inner mental processes and what is outside us’ (Small 1998:130).

Porter has developed a conceptual performance model based on analysis of Jeannie Robertson’s singing of the ballad _My Son David_. He analysed nine recordings. ‘Distinctive features became apparent at once, features which seemed on rehearings to recur as major interdependent wholes. The nine recordings could be grouped into a three-stage diachronic model…The structural element which does emerge as fluid during this period is a textual one’ (Porter 1976:12–13). This fact is true for Sloane’s singing as well. Sloane’s recordings of _Green Bushes_ were all made in her home, while Jeannie Robertson was recorded singing _My Son David_ in her home and in concert situations. This fact and the importance placed on the background sounds in Sloane’s field recordings are the essential differences in my analysis of her singing compared with Porter’s methodology.

6 In _The Owl Service_, Alan Garner (1976) explores the way in which the power of the legend of Math, son of Mathonwy, Gronw Bebyr, Gwydion and Blodeuedd, creates an unending cycle in the Welsh valley where the story belongs. The story must be played out again and again through the contemporary lives of those who match the roles of the central characters in the tale.

7 In Meredith and Anderson (1979), this is transcribed as ‘where she thinks to meet me’, but Sloane sings _he_. Both pronouns are found in the printed sources, representing different interpretations for different singers.

8 Stewart describes the cyclical myth, which could underlie _Green Bushes_: ‘the folk theme has remained constant to the elements of the act, which derives from the worship of a Mother-Lover-Goddess in whose control all life, all death were held.’ _Green Bushes_ is linked, like _The Two Brothers_ discussed by Stewart, ‘with the early ritual practice of the Sacred King and his Tanist Brother and Successor…at a certain time of the year, one chosen man superseded the present “king” usually by killing him. The victim represented the light part or waking year, his successor the dark season, or waning year. The story never ends, for the goddess brings the light-brother back to life in the spring, at the end of the dark-brother’s reign…The resolving element in this perpetual struggle is the Goddess (in _Green Bushes_ this is the “Fair Damsel”) who restores…Poetically she sings the song of life, and all living things respond to her music, including her chosen dead lover’ (Stewart 1972:17-25).

9 See Wimberly (1965:46) for ‘the Nightingale as messenger between lovers’; an ‘Otherworld Bird’ (p. 160); and the soul in the shape of a nightingale (p. 50).

10 Stewart (1972:17) also comments on this quality of the melody: ‘the compelling chant form of the melody of _The Cutty Wren_ [the version he quotes is identical to Leaning’s version of _Green Bushes_]—with its hypnotic call and response pattern—is far superior to the text that it expresses. Thus it is possible that powerful forms of music may help in the retention through time of poetry linked to them.’

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12 ‘I was never able to get any information regarding him, or even his name. When I raised the topic, Sal would lay her forefinger to her lips and silently shake her head’ (Lowe 2003).

13 John Meredith relates Sloane’s story about Ben Hall’s sister, the mid-wife who delivered Sloane. Mrs Coobung Mick, whose husband betrayed Hall to the troopers, was carrying a child at the time of the bushranger’s shooting (said by some to be Ben Hall’s) and when the child was born it had thirty-two spots on it, and that child was exhibited throughout the length and breadth of Australia for show purposes [as the Leopard Boy]. The spots were supposed to correspond with the thirty-two bullet wounds in Ben Hall’s body!’ (Meredith and Anderson 1979:165;

<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/joseph.taylor/>).

14 The songs recorded are: _A Bhanarch Dhonna Chruidh, As Sylvie was Walking, The Bonny Bunch of Roses, The Stockman’s Last Bed, The Female Rambling Sailor, Reedy Lagoon_ and _Green Bushes_.

15 I have re-ordered the verses as shown below:

As I went a-walking one morning in spring,
To hear the birds whistle and the nightingale sing,
I spied a fair damsel, so sweetly sang she,
'Down by the green bushes where 'e thinks to meet me.'
'Oh what are you loitering for, my pretty maid?'
'I'm a-loitering for my true love, kind sir,' she said.
'Shall I be your true love, and will you agree
And forsake the own true love and go along with me?'
'Oh, I'll buy you fine beavers and fine silken gowns,
I'll buy you fine petticoats flounced to the ground,
If you'll prove loyal and constant and free,
And forsake your own true love and go along with me.'
'I want none of your petticoats nor your fine silken robes
I was never so foolish as to marry for clothes,
But if you'll prove loyal and constant and true
I'll forsake my own true love and go along with you.'
'Oh come let us be going, kind sir, if you please,
Come let us be going from under those trees.
For yonder is coming my true love, I see,
Down by the green bushes where he thinks to meet me.'
But when he came there and found she was gone,
He looked all around him and cried quite forlorn,
Saying, 'She's gone with another and quite forsaken me,
So adieu to those green bushes for ever,' cried he.
'I'll be like some schoolboy. I'll spend all my time in play,
For I never was so foolish as to be lured away.
No false-hearted young girl shall serve me so any more,
So adieu to those green bushes, its time to give o'er.'