

Meetings on the concert hall stage

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Can an indigenous worldview be expressed through the symphony orchestra? Can the symphony orchestra, the repository of European musical thought, serve as a vehicle for the expression of indigenous aspirations?

ORCHESTRA DREAMING, which was presented at the Adelaide Festival in 1998, canvassed and celebrated the ways in which indigenous and orchestral music can meet, acknowledging the mutual innovation, adjustment and resolution which makes that meeting possible.

In March 1998, Symphony Australia*, jointly with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (ASO), presented *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* as part of that year's Adelaide Festival. *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* could be claimed as the first concert devoted to the theme of a meeting between Aboriginal and European orchestral music. It is appropriate that this concert be considered at Adelaide's Musical Visions conference which takes place some months after the event (June 1998), and has the twin themes of popular music and Arnhem Land performance traditions.

Each of the works on the *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* program - Peter Sculthorpe's *Kakadu*, Richard Mills' *Earth Poem/Sky Poem*, and particularly, the new work premiered in this concert, *Music is our Culture* (the product of a joint compositional effort by four Aboriginal musicians and one white composer) - spoke to this issue of musical engagement in some way. *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* saw the combining of orchestra with traditional Yolngu music from the Top End. *Music is our Culture* acknowledged a modern Aboriginal musical culture in western popular forms. *Kakadu* however is a purely orchestral piece.

In effect, the program traced a history of engagement from relatively early techniques of quotation and utilization by European composers (*Kakadu*); to a slightly more venturesome juxtapositioning (*Earth Poem*); to a near synthesis (*Culture*).

Peter Sculthorpe's music, for example, maps a European-Australian nationalism which has gradually come to acknowledge Aboriginal precedence in this land. Early Australian art reflected a view of Australia as a vast emptiness, of the bush (in D.H.Lawrence's words) 'waiting... waiting... hoarily waiting'. But for what? The entrance of people? There were always people here, people who had named every hill, creek, soak or swamp, and Sculthorpe's music has gradually apprised itself of that reality. *Kakadu* also makes use of the first Aboriginal tune to be taken down by Europeans, members of Baudin's expedition in 1802. In expectation of a continuing rapprochement between black and white performing traditions, it was appropriate that *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* began with a piece which quotes the first example of Aboriginal music to find its way into European cultural consciousness, from a composer who has done so much to turn the western orchestral repertoire to face this country.

Just as Sculthorpe's music sees an advance on earlier engagements with Aboriginal culture, the two remaining works on the program displayed a more involved collaboration between Aboriginal Australian and European Australian musicians.

Richard Mills' *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* was devised in consultation with Djamina Gurruwiwi and the Galpu Wilderness Dancers And Elcho Island Dancers at Milingimbi and Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) in the Northern

Territory, back in 1993/94. The work juxtaposes orchestral music with songs taken from the repertoire of the Galpu clan of Elcho Island in Eastern Arnhem Land. The overall effect is one of collage; the music of both cultures expressed in their own way. In *Music is our Culture*, on the other hand, the first work for symphony orchestra by indigenous Australians, Aboriginal and European musical traditions intermix.

On paper, a fusion of the European symphony orchestra and Aboriginal music looks incredibly ambitious, if not impossible.

Consider that we associate classical orchestral music with polish, clean intonation, the ironing out of logical kinks. It's a style of music which aims for seamless development. Real life rarely seeps into orchestral performance, as it does into traditional Aboriginal ritual, where the proscenium could be considered to be the entire tribal domain, the time-scale eternity.

At a deeper ideological level, the orchestra, or more particularly its central repertoire, expresses a European goal-oriented view of the world - a sometimes avaricious compulsion to reach constructed climaxes. It is music which reflects the concerns of a society which has to a large extent engineered its environment.

Or at least it is when we are talking about orchestral music of the 18th and 19th centuries. There are aspects of 20th century orchestral culture, which augur well for future associations with Aboriginal music - aspects related to the way the resources of orchestral music have been opened up this century so that orchestral music can abandon a formal analogy with argument, and express the experience of the moment, notions of stasis, looser structures. Couple this with the fact that popular Aboriginal music these days embraces western techniques - many of the basic tools of European composition (chords, harmonically-shaped melodies, simple forms) - and we have the basis for technical collaboration.

Yet, even considering the way orchestral music has been freed up in the 20th century such that it can incorporate outside influences, there would seem to be few natural meeting points between European and Aboriginal cultures. One assumes that we are talking about a fusion of the orchestra with *traditional* Aboriginal music. *Music is our Culture* saw the combining of orchestral music with a more modern, urban Aboriginal sound.

Music is our Culture developed out of a need felt by the then ABC orchestras to engage with Australia's indigenous music-makers: to produce a piece which is a genuine expression of the artistic aims of indigenous musicians in response to working with a western classical orchestra. A work which helps reshape western music-making with the benefit of indigenous insights.

When this idea first surfaced, Symphony Australia's Artistic Administrator, US-born Sam Dixon, struggled for months with the difficulties of finding a meeting point between the cultures. When the project was first broached with Jenny Newsome of Adelaide's Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, she suggested some guidelines which were more likely to guarantee an authentically indigenous orchestral work, a *real* improvement on the usual 'appropriation':

- the work to be created collaboratively by a team who were to initiate creative ideas all the way through;
- the team to comprise musicians who are conversant with modern popular styles;
- the abandonment of a requirement for the orchestra to be treated as a monolith, and

- the acceptance of words and dance as essential musical elements.

She proposed a team comprising four musicians of different indigenous backgrounds:

1. Jardine Kiwat, from North Queensland, of Torres Strait Island descent, a fusion guitarist, singer, drummer and songwriter;
2. Grayson Rotumah, from northern NSW, also a guitarist, of Bandjalung and Melanesian descent;
3. Kerry McKenzie, a virtuoso didgeridu player from north central NSW, of Gamilraay descent, and
4. Jensen Warusam, a Torres Strait Islander, the only traditional person in the team, a former dancer with Bangarra and NAISDA, who also has knowledge of NE Arnhem Land styles.

How to assist this group compose for orchestra became the next question. Chester Schultz, an Adelaide composer with extensive experience in the language and musical revival of the Nunga people of Adelaide - and possessing arguably the most extensive knowledge of, and sensitivity to, traditional and 'Contact' Aboriginal music of any western-educated composer - assumed a unique role of facilitator, editor, orchestrator, translator, researcher, scribe and co-composer. A role requiring more self-effacement than the average composer is prepared to submit to. Richard Mills, composer of *Earth Poem/Sky Poem*, was engaged as Consultant Conductor for the workshop period and first performance.

Symphony Australia asked for a 30-minute work comprising song, dance and text, an ensemble of indigenous performers and an orchestra of no greater than the ASO's establishment strength (triple woodwind, a string strength of 12-10-7-6-5, brass, harp and percussion). A pre-recorded tape track could complement the live performance.

As important as the team was, *Music is our Culture* is as much a product of its method of composition which involved weekly or twice-weekly meetings of the composing team and workshop-rehearsals with orchestra roughly every two months.

In weekly sessions during 1997 the team grappled with issues of the participants' heritage, the mixing of musical styles, the solving of technical problems, how to express the conceptual themes musically, the peculiarities and possibilities of the western classical orchestra. Musical segments were sketched and at one stage the team experimented with the use of a 4-track cassette recorder in order to hear and evaluate more easily the approximate sound of multi-layered music which they could not, for practical reasons, play 'live' themselves. Significantly, musical ideas tended to come up as a 'storyline' evolved and the group grappled with linking the visual images.

How the team worked with orchestra is a question of much interest. The first couple of orchestral sessions consisted of testing various instrumentations of material composed in traditional and graphic notation and seeking out meeting points between Aboriginal and European instruments - essential for the team to get to know the palette that they were to deal with. At one stage in the first workshop in April 1997, Schultz asked Kiwat what other percussion instruments he might want to hear, and Kiwat replied, "Whatever earthy sounds there are to go with lumut, warup, kulups and bilma, [the Torres Strait slit and hourglass drums and shakers and Arnhem Land clapsticks which the team brought along to the session]". In June, Richard Mills set a deadline for presentation of the complete piece in sketch form, and the composing team played the work as a quintet in

August. Thereafter, orchestral workshop sessions became more a matter of testing the orchestration and weighting of fully composed sections. It was a time for Schultz to change gears - from discreetly allowing the piece to evolve out of the discoveries of the indigenous creators, to pressing for firmer decisions about the orchestration, albeit negotiating agreement at every stage.

The path of such collaboration is not exactly smooth. For example, it's fair to say that at the beginning of the project the Aboriginal musicians were unaware of such 'givens' of orchestral culture as the firm dependence by orchestral musicians on notation - this was solved partly by finding musicians within the orchestra who were prepared to improvise and partly by Schultz assuming the role of educator/guide. Another ongoing conflict was the need to balance orchestral deadlines with the composing team's need for thinking space. Schultz concedes the creative potential in such tensions, but feels that the workshop structure was insufficiently different from the usual 'Young Composers' Workshop', where the composer is already fully trained, has an ear for orchestral sounds, and comes along with a nearly complete score which is then just tweaked into shape. Mills, on the other hand, believes that the project was "wisely planned because there was time to explore and experiment without leaving the orchestral musicians sitting around in call-time twiddling their thumbs".

There was always an issue of the degree to which traditional elements should be included. Symphony Australia was mindful of the fact that audience members would expect something sounding familiarly aboriginal to emerge. In part, Kerry McKenzie's didgeridoo guaranteed that. But, as the only traditional man in the group, Jensen Warusam most keenly felt the pressure to introduce traditional elements. "This was an issue often discussed by the guys", said Schultz, who pointed out that three of the team are far removed from the traditional past. He agreed however, that without the hints of tradition visible in Warusam's choreography, and the use of certain instruments, there would have been a lack of poignancy; the message of dislocation might have been less dramatic.

In the end, the team fulfilled their brief, producing a half hour work for orchestra, indigenous musicians and dancers (Warusam and non-Aboriginal Juliette Bland). A narration (culled from the team-members' recorded accounts of their experiences) was read by actor, James Muir. Despite my partisan position, I regard *Music is our Culture* as one of the most successful fusion pieces in the repertoire. It not only conveyed the experience of Aboriginal people in the modern world, but blended a large array of styles, moving easily from one genre to another. Interestingly, the orchestra was not subjected to unusual formations or complements in the end.

I would ascribe the success of the work to the following ingredients:

- (i) a judicious combination of talents
- (ii) a productive structure for the creative process, providing:
 - (a) plenty of opportunity for the team to thrash out their ideas, but also opportunities for testing interim results, with editorial input by Mills and myself as the commissioner's representative
 - (b) a series of deadlines at stages along the way
- (iii) getting the creative process the right way round; working out what *needed* to be said first and letting the piece evolve rather than rush too soon into a musical scheme

It is gratifying to Symphony Australia that team-members benefited from this project. When Jardine Kiwat first

saw the full orchestra he thought, “How the hell am I going to keep everybody busy?” Then he realized he didn’t have to. “*Music is our Culture* stretched me in terms of working with a large group, not only thinking of something for everybody to do, but how to rest them. Now [when I’m working with my own group] I’m always thinking of a bigger picture.”

Music is our Culture premiered as part of *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* at Thebarton Theatre, 13 March 1998 to an audience whose response *The Australian’s* critic, Stephen Whittington, described as “rapturous”. In the closing minutes of *Music is our Culture* you can get some idea of the power of the piece. Though a team of five composers devised the work, it seems to tell one story, that of being stolen from traditions. There is a poignancy in the predicament of the ‘stolen person’ as the narrator tells us of life in the city at the end:

It’s hard to go back...

Hard to go forward...

Hard to know why.

We’ve changed,...

I know I have,

looking for my traditions

in another man’s place.ⁱ

At this point, musically, the high harp, warup, didgeridoo and orchestra combine to produce a unique instrumental sound, an authentic contribution to the tonal palette of the orchestra from voices that are new to the medium. The last seven or so minutes are perhaps the most poetic moments in a piece which is full of poetry. Despite the ‘realistic’ concession that Reconciliation has not yet been achieved, the music adroitly inserts hope beneath the understandable skepticism.

Part of the success of *Music is our Culture* derived from the blending of a modern urban Aboriginal music with orchestra, blending styles where blend is possible. But the *ORCHESTRA DREAMING* concert raised a potentially more difficult problem. Richard Mills’ *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* attempts a combination of western orchestral music with *traditional* Aboriginal music.

Mills’ *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* came out of a 3-month residency at Milingimbi and Elcho Island in the Northern Territory (NT). It was commissioned by the Darwin Symphony Orchestra and first performed by them in December 1993, subsequently opening the new NT Parliament House in Darwin in 1994. The recent performance by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra was the first outside the Northern Territory.

Mills sees *Earth Poem* as a vision of the world of the Yolngu. Traditional songs about brolgas, crocodiles and magpie geese are embedded in an orchestral framework which basically describes the passing of a day, the orchestra providing an environment for songs from two series, one of which according to Steve Knopoff

involves a cluster of spirit-beings centered around Banumbirr the Morning Star... The other series is an inland series related to the travels of the Wawilak Sisters and (for the Galpu, though not all clans who sing Wawilak songs) the great ancestral snake, [Wititj].ⁱⁱ

In traditional practice these songs would separately follow various prescribed sequences depending on the context in which they were being sung. In *Earth Poem/Sky Poem*, however, the orchestra basically acts as a frame for a roughly chronological presentation of the song-subjects. It is a spectacularly simple solution to the question of how to combine these two very different musical traditions.

I. Prelude

Yidakayi (Calling Songs)

II. Star music

Banumbirr (Morning Star Song)

Star Sonata (solo flute, clarinet)

III. Sunrise

IV. Land music

Wānga (Land) *Man'tjarr* (Leaves)

Ngatha (Food Gathering) *Gurtha* (Fire)

V. Cloud music

Cloud Sonata I. *Mangan* (Cloud Song) Cloud Sonata II

VI. Animal and bird music

Gurrumatjji (Magpie Geese) *Bāru* (Crocodile)

Bul'manydji (Shark) *Weti* (Wallaby) *Gudurrku* (Brolga)

VII. Storm

Waltjan (Rain) *Gapu* (Water) *Wata* (West Wind)

VIII. Sunset

IX. Nocturne (solo violin)

X. Postlude

This is not to say, however, that *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* is a more ambitious or sophisticated piece than *Music is our Culture*. *Music is our Culture* grappled with issues of far greater social and emotional complexity. With five musicians exchanging their stories and talking and conferring over an 18 month period, it is no surprise that *Music is our Culture* also resulted in a more integrated union of elements. Yet, *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* attempts to combine musical styles which do not have obvious commonalities; to bring them together across what must be one of the greatest gulfs between cultures in the world.

It could be asked what degree of insight listeners gained into the complexity of Yolngu musical culture from this piece. For one thing, the appearance of 'painted-up' performers dancing in front of an orchestra was a constant

reminder of the contrast between the two cultures - it was impressive in its clashing exoticness. Listeners also got to hear traditional music in a context which promoted the drama, colour and rhythm of the songs. The orchestral setting, with such devices as storms and nocturnes, also enhanced the impression that these songs are very much linked to the natural world of the Yolngu.

However, the audience probably would not have gained a deeper understanding of the musical processes at work in the Yolngu songs. Few listeners would have been aware, or become aware, of the ways in which Yolngu song men juggle textual phrases or melodic alternatives.

That said, the work was still the result of a laudable amount of cross-cultural negotiation, sometimes at a deep, if not immediately apparent, level. Most obviously, there were long orchestral interludes in which the Galpu Dancers had to improvise choreography utilizing traditional movements from their song repertoire.

Behind the scenes, negotiation with traditional performers provided an object lesson in cross-cultural interaction for concert administrators accustomed to dealing with classical music professionals.

One of the ways in which Mills adjusts to the Yolngu way of doing things in *Earth Poem* is to make use of two principal singers, one to represent each of the two moieties (or halves) into which the Yolngu divide their world. It's a world in which animals, humans, plants - *all things* - are either dhuwa or yirritja. Thus there are two main singers in *Earth Poem*. A dhuwa singer sings of subjects that are of the dhuwa moiety (eg. shark); a yirritja singer may sing only of what is yirritja (eg. crocodile). The work reflects this division throughout, and Symphony Australia therefore had to make sure that the Galpu Dancers brought down singers from each of the tribal moieties. *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* signaled the first time a Symphony Australia contract has specified that a touring group supply 'one (1) singer of the dhuwa moiety, one (1) singer of the yirritja moiety'.

As well, the difficulty of knowing exactly who would turn up was a new experience for classical music administrators. The program booklet (even the airline tickets) listed certain singers based on the *likelihood* that they would be able to appear. However, when the time came for the group to depart for Adelaide, certain members who had been earmarked to perform had to stay behind on Elcho to fulfill ceremonial obligations. Substitute performers had to be found, and discussions then had to take place to ensure that these 'understudies' could perform the traditional material according to custom and descent and other considerations.

Such efforts are worthwhile in order to give musicians the chance to perform together and let them and their audiences begin to appreciate each others' craft, but even in the surface details of *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* - as a musical product - there is something blatantly challenging and promising about the way both cultures are paired. In many ways *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* is a work of great beauty in that both cultures express themselves uninhibited by the other. There is a real sense of sharing the limelight - the Yolngu dancers are the feature when their songs are being performed; the orchestra has generous opportunities to shine. Both cultures can come together it seems to be saying, and it can be as simple as this.

But would Yolngu people regard *Earth Poem/Sky Poem* as 'ganma' — to make use of a Gumatj clan term which describes the confluence of salt water and fresh water in tidal estuaries, and, more importantly, symbolizes for them their concept of the meeting and coalescence of difference? Well, I can't speak for Yolngu people, but I do see tempting clues to the possibility that musical meetings could be achieved at deeper structural levels, should

they be desired. I'm not prescribing anything here. European and Aboriginal musicians could probably (and would need to want to) come up with better ideas than I can.

But there is the possibility of meeting at the level of creative invention, I would have thought. After all, the Yolngu possess a tradition of manipulating musical and symbolic material. Songmen select their textual phrases from a repertoire; there is sufficient variability in the accompaniments of clap sticks and didgeridoo and the overlapping patterns of voice, sticks and didj to sustain long-term interest. And just as the symbolism of shared song subjects can be used to connect different strings of traditional songs, could not the manipulation of symbolism serve as an analogue to western music's key modulation? There is among the Yolngu of Yirrkala, as Steve Knopoff points out (1992), an understanding of human creation, and a tradition of creating new songs (Yuṭa manikay) out of traditional material. Aren't there grounds then for sitting down and talking about collaborations with our fellow citizens of the Top End?

And are we limited only to the Yolngu? Ethnomusicologists have always recognized a degree of creativity in Yolngu music-making; but have tended to dismiss this possibility in regard to the people of the Western Desert. Taking the lead from T.G.H. Strehlow, the common wisdom has been that desert music is a repertoire learnt from rote; that there is no modern-day creativity. As Strehlow once put it, as if sealing the question for ever in relation to the Arrarnta people, the thoroughness of their forefathers in commemorating the landscape in song and verse had left them "not a single unoccupied scene which they could fill with the creatures of their own imagination (Strehlow 1947)."

My own experience, however, suggests that the process of learning Central Australian songs is more a matter of *re-creation* than rote repetition; the young singer learns the techniques by which s/he may deduce the method of applying text to each song line's melody shape. Articles by Catherine Ellis and Ken Hale support this contention (1984).

As for a creative repertoire fixed for all time in the Dreamtime, one still hears of new verses being 'dreamt'. Sure the fact that the new material needs to well up from a realm remote from human activity, apparently impervious to human intercession, has ramifications for orchestral deadlines, but there is still a degree of creativity in traditional Central Australian music which could serve as a basis for collaboration. And Centralians are not fazed by working in our ways. Jenny Newsome tells the story of old *tjilpis* from the tribal lands up in northern South Australia correcting the part-singing of CASM students. How? Because they were recalling what they'd picked up about voice leading when they were in the Ernabella Choir.

Finally, why should our orchestras engage with these indigenous musics?

Well, Béla Bartók, who went out with a wax cylinder phonograph to record Eastern European folk music in the early years of this century, found that the richest music resulted from the so-called 'clash of cultures'. Australia hosts some of the most contrasting cultures on the face of the globe. Surely, when one considers the range of Aboriginal music that exists here (from the various traditional musics still being performed, to modern popular manifestations), there is much potential to explore.

But the best reason simply is this: we live in this land. The centre of our existence is here. Should we not have a repertoire that tells us how Sydney Dwarf Apples flower more prolifically after fire, or that the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo comes into Alice just before rain? The institutions and traditions which were brought here from

Europe must adjust to the new environment. In the matter of our musical institutions, we must learn from the native musical traditions.

We live in Australia. We must sing about Australia. Or as they might say in Eastern Arnhem Land:

*Ngilimurru Australia ga nhina. Ga ngilimurru balang Australia-dhi dar'taryun*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Reference

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Strehlow, T.G.H. 1947, *Aranda Traditions*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

* **Symphony Australia**, formerly ABC Concerts, is the service organisation for the former ABC orchestras - the Sydney Symphony and Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland, Tasmanian and West Australian Symphony Orchestras.

ⁱ *Music is our Culture*: narration - Jardine Kiwat, Grayson Rotumah, Kerry McKenzie, Chester Schultz and Jensen Warusam.

ⁱⁱ Steve Knopoff, personal communication, 15 April 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to Dr Michael Christie, of the Northern Territory University, for correcting and improving my Dhuwala.