

Introduction

Spirit of Place, Spiritual Journeys

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This is a country that is at once staggeringly empty and yet packed with stuff. Interesting stuff, ancient stuff, stuff not readily explained. Stuff yet to be found (Bryson, 2001: 22).

The staggeringly empty country that is Australia is a powerful landscape of vivid skies, ‘blue as a coma’ (Winton, 2003: 193), ocean spray, mysterious boab trees (Figure 0.1), a dark red interior and the most dazzling of white sands – once seen, it remains etched in the mind (see Colour Plate 1). ‘The luminous dunes, the island, the lagoon with its seagrass and coral outcrops, the low, austere heath of the hinterland’ (ibid.: 17), ‘that cerulean blue water and above it the ultramarine sky’ (Carey, 2001: 39): these sights are singular even to the least rhapsodic of gazes. The country is also packed with music, much of which is yet to be found by a wide audience, and much of which takes landscape as a sound source, both literally and ritually (Boyd, 2004a). There is a verve and vitality in Australian music that is linked to the surroundings, and Australia’s brilliant, undiffused light casts its beams over the music.

This landscape has always been central to the visual arts in Australia, and equally acts as the potent condition against which many poems and novels unfold. In music too, composers have drawn inspiration both from the landscape itself and the fauna it supports. Not every composer connects strongly with the ‘Australian landscape and elegy approach’ (Smalley, 2004), but there is an overriding sense of musicians having an imaginative connection with the immediacy of the physical environment and a general acknowledgement that landscape has to play a part in shaping the music of the country. Carl Vine (*b.* 1954), for example, believes that looking out at the Indian Ocean as a child growing up in Perth has inevitably coloured his musical output. Vast journeys he has undertaken, such as the drive across Australia’s Nullabor Plain, bestow ‘a different sense of your place in the world’ (Vine, 2004), even though there might be no immediate and apparent connections with the ensuing music in programmatic terms.

There is no geographical or spiritual consistency in the landscape that is Australia, rather it is a diverse place stimulating a wide range of responses. Sydney-based composer Paul Stanhope (*b.* 1969), for example, sees himself as ‘relating to

time and place, that might not necessarily be the physical landscape of the outback or the bush ... but aspects of just what is around us physically' (Stanhope, 2004). He thinks of his music as a 'personal geography, personal dreaming sites' (ibid.) that he likes to explore, connecting with Australia's history, its cities and the sea. As an example, his song cycle *Sea Chronicles* (1999), concerns the relationships between people and the sea: its beauty, danger and immediacy.

The aim of this book then is to look at some of the ways in which composers and performers have attempted to convey a sense of the place that is Australia through musical means. It does not purport to be a comprehensive or historical account of music in Australia and its connections with place. More exactly, it offers 15 different perspectives on the ways in which music and the Australian landscape are intertwined, embracing diverse approaches, compositional styles and topographies, from north to south, Pacific to Indian coasts, island bays to inland bush, from open seas to rolling countryside and a colonial heritage (Colour Plate 2). It is an extraordinarily rich subject and one that has engaged not only the country's residents but which has also provoked views from immigrants and visitors (Michael Finnis's evocative pieces with Aboriginal titles and Kate Bush's 1982 'The Dreaming'). Issues of national identity are an integral part of the study, with indigenous responses to place examined alongside music from the western symphonic, choral, operatic and chamber repertoires and film and ballet scores. Some chapters focus on a single figure (such as the study of Colin Bright's psyche of place in Chapter 2), or a single work (Chapter 7, which considers Peter Sculthorpe's opera *Quiros*). Others, for example Chapter 1, explore a range of musics. Chapter 8 moves into questions of place and performance, with a discussion of the importance of location in Dhalwangu ritual song, Dhalwangu people forging a sense of place in the heat of musical performances in an ongoing and dynamic process of social reproduction. Within this book there are of course numerous important figures, genres and styles omitted for reasons of space.

From composers, performers and communities there are many different, always vibrant approaches to place, spirituality and music, and a divergence between those perspectives that are local, precise, miniature and those that are national, generic and large-scale. Examples of the former include Aboriginal songs, which tend to be closely allied to a particular moment and a particular location. An example of the more global and large-scale might be Barry Conyngham (*b.* 1944), whose instrumental music, and particularly that for orchestra, frequently contemplates the 'intimidating grandeur' of Australia's landforms and 'the subtlety of its changes', his 1988 ballet score *Vast* depicting the oceans, coasts, deserts and cities of Australia. Chapter 1 considers both the precisely located and the broad perspective, looking at the music of four radically different composers in order to demonstrate how they have reacted in deeply spiritual and individual ways to the Australian landscape.

The art of observation is one that pervades the work of many composers, an art in which they are allied to their painter contemporaries, who see with a peculiar

intensity. Rather as a painter such as Western Australian artist Howard Taylor (1918–2001), for example, addresses the ‘particular visual problem of shadows and structures’ (Dufour, 2003: 14), a composer such as Peter Sculthorpe addresses the particular compositional problem of finding musical structures and means to capture landscape. Taylor’s primary interest was in ‘the simple use of materials ... to recapture experiences gained from a long-lasting absorption in forests and trees’ (Taylor, 1968 in Dufour, *ibid.*: 18). Similarly, Ross Edwards’s (*b.* 1943) engagement with the insect sounds of bushland on the New South Wales coast finds an outlet through tiny, repetitive motifs.

Fig. 0.1 Boab trees in Kings Park, Perth, 2004



While the use of rural Australia is a powerful image today, with many writers concentrating on what they term ‘earth language’, it is not a recent concept in Australian music. The composer, Fritz Hart, born in England in 1874, emigrated to Australia and in an interview of 1914 set out his view that somehow the spirit of the country, ‘its bushland, its hills, its delicate shades in landscape, colour, life, everything ...’ would come to infuse the creator and the creative process, to create works distinctively Australian. Ironically he also considered it ‘absolutely impossible for a school of Australian creative music to arise that is not founded directly upon British music’ (Hart in Hudson, 1914: 328). In the period from the late 1930s until the late 1950s, Clive Douglas (1903–77) consciously aspired to achieve a genuinely Australian musical idiom through his attempts to depict the character of the Australian landscape via the evocation of Aboriginal legend, language and music, as discussed in Chapter 5. Chapters 9 and 10 of this book consider the impact of a European and Celtic inheritance on music before 1950. Chapter 11 focuses on British responses to the Australian landscape in Ealing films of the 1940s and ’50s.

Much of the twentieth century has been concerned with the search for a musical identity that is unequivocally Australian. The earliest role models were European, with Australian composers studying above all in Britain and in Germany, with London and York attracting many figures in the 1970s, and still continuing to draw composers to live and work for short periods. Yet there are tensions in these relationships, and some Australian composers have an ambivalent attitude to Europe. Some look to Asia, others to indigenous Australian musics.

John Antill’s (1904–86) most famous work, *Corroboree*, which has been widely played since its first performance in 1950, is generally considered to be a significant moment in Australian music, based on Aboriginal rhythms as notated by Antill after first attending a ritual Aboriginal corroboree at La Perouse, south of Sydney, in 1913 and subsequently pursuing research on the subject of Aboriginal music and collecting recordings. His work and this piece established a growing awareness that this music lies at the heart of the country, and offers a valuable resource in terms of rhythm, melodies and timbres. For example, Stanhope’s early pieces use Arnhem Land fragments of melody re-imagined – the shapes are recognizable but radically reinterpreted, rather as Scottish composer Judith Weir (*b.* 1954) utilizes fragments of folk materials. The timbres of Aboriginal musics have also been highly influential, with the drone of the didgeridu assuming a widespread significance.

Asian music has had an increasing impact on Australian music, specifically south-east Asian approaches to pitch, such as the use of simple pitch sets within a harmonic language. It has become a ‘metaphor for saying this is really our geographical place in the world. We are much closer to Asia, therefore we should look to it, listen to it and be influenced by it’ (Stanhope, 2004). In terms of the Australian landscape, Asia and indigenous musics, Peter Sculthorpe (*b.* 1929) has been a central and seminal influence, even where he has not directly taught young

composers. Anne Boyd talks of his imprint as being ‘all over’ her work (Boyd, 2004a), not only in terms of his compositional influence but in the music he has introduced to her, notably Japanese *gagaku*, with which music she formed an instant relationship on account of its landscape of ritual and sorrow’ (Boyd, 2004a). Stanhope describes ‘aspects of harmony, texture and space’ (Stanhope, 2004) in his music as having been influenced by Sculthorpe’s aesthetic outlook and his attempt to find a way between two worlds – the European one and the country that is Australia, ‘being physically removed from Europe and its landscape’ (ibid.), close to the United States in some way, notably in the urban, bustling energy that can be heard in the music, and yet different.

Fig. 0.2 Paddington houses, Sydney, 2004



While Sculthorpe has chosen to live in the Woollahra district of Sydney, which, like its neighbour Paddington, has streets of beautiful colonial houses (Figure 0.2) and periodically to take trips to the wilderness of Tasmania and the Northern Territory, or to dream the landscape, other figures may have more immediately physical affiliations with place. Composer and environmentalist Ron Nagorcka (*b.* 1948) has immersed himself in the heart of the Tasmanian rainforest, living in a solar-powered, self-built house in Birralee, where his garden is the surrounding forest (Figure 0.3).

Many composers talk of relating to a specific place. Ross Edwards spent seven years living in a village in Pearl Beach, on the New South Wales coast:

those seven years were absolutely crucial for me because we lived near a National Park – Brisbane Water round the Hawkesbury Estuary – I walked through the park all the time and that actually defined my soundworld ... from the sounds and events and relationships that took place in the National Park a language has gradually built up ... I was very aware of creating a periodicity, of rhythmic cells ... so that is the place I relate to ...' (Edwards, 2004).

The Blue Mountains have become a region of great significance to Edwards and he often travels there to focus on composition.

Several chapters in this book thus explore the intimate connection that people have with the land. Chapter 4, for example, explores how public unrestricted or secular performances such as *walaba* and restricted or sacred Dreaming songs called *kujika* are used by the Yanyuwa people of the Northern Territory as a mechanism to name and know their country through musical expression.

Fig. 0.3 Ron Nagorcka's forest surroundings, Tasmania, 2004



It is not only the look of the land that entices: it is impossible not to listen to the land, when the ‘paddocks thrum with cicadas, crickets, birdwings. Up from the creek comes the chirr of frogs’ (Winton, 2003: 86). It is a ‘great all-embracing sound ... a layered music, dense but deeply flowing, that was clipped insects rubbing their legs together, bird-notes, grass-stems chaffing and fretting in the breeze’ (Malouf, 1999: 11). David Malouf, a creator of finely-wrought moments in time and place, goes on to describe the transformation of a visible place into ‘another form and made accessible to a different sense. An expansive monotone, its excited fluting and throbbing’ (ibid.). The fact that he relates the aural to the visual and literary is something that poet Les Murray does too, using musical terminology to convey the sense of sound inherent in the landscape.

Anyone who has ever been to Australia will be aware that this ‘all-embracing sound’ is a constant, both in the country and in the city. On a hot night the sounds of the undergrowth reverberate all around you, and resonate too in recorded real-time soundscapes, such as those created by David Lumsdaine (*b.* 1931) in New South Wales, for example, *Lake Emu* (1990); in the use of recorded insect and bird sounds within broad musical frameworks; in sampled insect sounds; in specified and quite exact representations in the tradition of Messiaen; in the transformation of natural sounds into non-specific melodic and rhythmic patterns; and in songs whose texts engage with insect life, most notably Aboriginal songs.

Birdsong, too, has a very distinct place in Australian music, and for Aboriginal songmen birds are often the form in which their spirit ancestors speak to them. Some composers think of birdsong not in literal terms, but as a metaphor, and attempt to convey shape rather than transcribe a particular birdsong in the manner of Messiaen. Thus in the music of Ross Edwards, for example, it is clear that a sudden melodic interjection is the essence of birdsong, though not a specific named bird. Birdsong can also be the sound that marks the point between life and death – in Sculthorpe’s 1979 *Mangrove* the sudden appearance of birdsong after a period of marked time, and subsequent move to a different musical time, indicates a transition to a different spiritual place, the movement between worlds. In David Lumsdaine’s music the birds are there in a sense ‘almost to create musical organization through social organization, through all the interrelationships between the birds and their environment which sets up a structural quality...these birds too are emblematic of the spiritual relationship between himself and the Australian country...’ (Boyd, 2004a), while Ron Nagorcka names specific birds in the titles of his compositions and is fascinated by the intricate detail of different bird calls, insect noises and the sounds of tree frogs.

The Australian landscape is often used as an icon for spiritual and sometime political concerns. Mystical relationships are played out not only with the land but also with muse-like figures. Anne Boyd, for example, has been drawn to the words and experiences of Lady Sarashina, a middle-class Japanese woman born in 1008 who made spiritual journeys to visit temples across Japan and wrote of her experience, published in English as *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollection*

of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan (Sarashina, 1989). This is a work that Boyd has returned to repeatedly, and which has inspired a musical work of the same name. David Tacey has written of the preoccupation with a search for an Australian spirituality (1995: viii), particularly on the part of poets such as Les Murray. This book goes some way towards addressing the quest for spirituality in music, with Chapter 3, for example, arguing that the new spirituality inclination in the music of three women composers is intimately connected to the place of its composition, recognizing the spiritual power of the Australian landscape and its association with the feminine.

While many composers look to the land, others, such as Matthew Hindson (b. 1968) and John Peterson (b. 1957), have turned to the city and the industrial history of Australia. Hindson's 2003 string quartet, *Industrial Night Music*, is a response to the steelworks at Port Kembla, near Wollongong, south of Sydney, with a 'mecchanico machismo' intended as a musical articulation of mechanical and industrial processes.

Bush and city have been cited as being two of the principal concerns of composers. The dualisms of mountain and valley, populated east coast and empty interior, light and dark, pale and rich, body and spirit, reality and unreality are an essential part of the makeup of Australia, its words and its music. David Tacey has written of the oppositional attitudes towards the landscape as being either demonic or paradisaical. The prevalent white attitude to the bush in the 19th and early 20th centuries was inherently fearful, with the Australian inland perceived as alien, desolate, brooding:

For the bush as heaven (or Arcadia, a lesser kind of heaven), we have 'Banjo' Paterson, Henry Kingsley, Katherine Pritchard, and the Heidelberg School of painters. For the bush as hell we have Henry Lawson, Marcus Clarke, D.H. Lawrence, Patrick White, and the paintings, for instance, of Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan (Tacey, 1995: 111).

While hell and heaven are perhaps an extreme manner of describing musical dualisms, Ross Edwards has himself categorized his music as falling into two contrasting styles, the one austere and hermetic, his 'sacred' style, the other 'characterized by rhythmic buoyancy and obsessive, chant-like repetition', his 'maninya' style (Edwards, 1992a: 25). He talks of having grounded his music in the natural environment, and having 'evolved a highly subjective method of topographical symbolism' (ibid.). Writers have connected with the radical contrast between stasis and movement as a way of evoking extremes of sensation, with thrumming sand dunes inducing a 'sort of overheated swoon while the world teemed.' (Winton, 2003, 193).

This sense of contrast is apparent in the music of Paul Stanhope, whose 2001 *Two Movements for Solo Violin* comprises two oppositions: 'Dance for the White Spirits' and 'Lament'. The dance is based on the Aboriginal belief that the first westerners that were encountered were 'white spirits'. The piece is deliberately ambiguous – maybe a welcoming dance, perhaps one of warning. The lament is a

looking back and weeping on some of the more shameful elements of the history of the country – and an attempt to apologize and provoke thought at the time of writing, the centenary of Federation. The opening bars of the first movement were reworked into Stanhope's Second String Quartet, *Dancing with Strangers* (2004), based on the history of the first meeting between Captain Arthur Phillip and the local Mermaid Aboriginals. The initial optimism of that meeting eventually failed miserably, and the piece is a metaphor that the two cultures should keep on dancing in conciliation.

One of the quintessential examples of dualism in music as discussed in this book is Sculthorpe's 1977 work, *Port Essington*, which features in Chapter 12. A further dualism is the opposition of the populated big cities of Australia and the emptiness and the loneliness of the wide open spaces beyond those cities. This sense of isolation can be experienced even on the populated Queensland coast:

Over behind him, where all this swampland drained into the Pacific, were dunes, shifting sand held together with purple-flowering pigweed and silvery scrub; then the surf – miles of it. You could walk for hours beside its hissing white and never see a soul. Just great flocks of gulls, and pied oyster-catchers flitting over the wet light, stopping, starting off again; not at random but after tiny almost transparent crabs...He had a map of all this clearly in his head...(Malouf, 1999: 2).

For figures who grow up in isolation, such as Anne Boyd, who spent her childhood in the outback, the landscape can assume a Mother role, on to which ideas are projected. Where the sense of space is enormous, and where landscape becomes inspirited, every tree, every bird becomes significant. Boyd's subsequent journey towards meditation and Buddhism is perhaps a natural outcome of that early isolation. Barry Conyngham too has always been acutely aware of Australian isolation, a topic that is discussed in Chapter 13.

Music's affinities with the visual aspects of the Australian landscape are often manifest in timbral terms. Perth-based, Polish-born Dominik Karski (*b.* 1972) describes his music as being 'about quality of sound' (Karski, 2004), his interest being in timbre, and he exploits instrumental registers and techniques. Many of his works explore movement in a broad sense, 'exploring the nature of life' (*ibid.*), whether this is through stillness or movement, as in works such as *Streams of Consciousness* (2000). Colour through timbre has been an essential part of the work of Gerard Brophy (*b.* 1953). A different use of colour can be seen in the scores of Ron Nagorecka, where sampled natural sounds are combined with synthesizers using 'just intonation' and sometimes didgeridu, as seen in his score for the piece *Galah*. These works are written using essentially ordinary notation, coloured according to pitch alterations, bringing the sparkling sounds of the forest into an otherworldly arena. 'What I generally do is get the bird on to the keyboard, listen to it slowed down and get an idea of the rhythmic patterns, the sort of melodies it's singing, do an analysis, and after I've done that for a while there are musical ideas in it, and once there are enough musical ideas in it I just forget about

it and write the music' (Nagorcka, 2004). Actual bird sounds thus become transformed into musical patterns woven into a rich timbral web.

Many of the examples given in this Introduction concern the music of native-born Australians, working in the western art music tradition, but there is also a rich vein of music, some of which features in this book, that has come from immigrants or visitors. Chapter 6 draws on an extraordinarily rich archive of photographs, recordings and memories to portray the music of the Jewish community of Shepparton, Victoria, where *Lubavitch* traditional and ritual melodies were imported from Russia and Poland, and which have been retained into Melbourne's present-day Yeshiva community. The volume ends in Chapter 15 with a penetrating examination of how singing mediates Yolngu understandings of spiritual experience in north-east Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory of Australia. It explores how the power of ritual singing and dancing emanates from an ancestral landscape and seascape and extends a spiritual awareness of ecology in Christian musical genres. In particular, it examines the nature of *place-essences* and how these are conveyed through musical structures in traditional and Christian Yolngu songs. The argument takes as foundational the fact that all Aboriginal knowledge is practised and thus spirituality is embodied, experiential and performative, arising from an indigenous ecological awareness; that the compartmentalization of traditional Aboriginal song genres from Christian songs does not appear in a dualistically exclusive fashion in Arnhem Land; and that Christian musical discourses arise directly from an inherently unique Yolngu 'spirituality' that is distinct from New Age concepts of spirituality. Thus, the chapter questions whether understandings of Aboriginal Christian music and dance can ever be considered apart from a prior appreciation of the particularities of Aboriginal identities and relationships to place. Thus the book ends where it began, with a consideration of the complex connections between music, place and spirituality.