

# The Malaise of (not just) Australian Music

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*{I intend the following to be a bit of a philosophical bombshell that at least gives pause for sober (and ultimately objective) thought to any composer who reads it. In my view, the most important thing any composer - 'student' (how I hate that appellation!) or otherwise - needs to know, is WHY they do what they do, and then to come clean about it. My brief diatribe focuses upon what I see as the current lack of honesty or integrity in a large cross-section of music composition, both in Australia and elsewhere, that purports to be 'serious' or 'Art', that purports to genuinely add to the great edifice of Western Art Music. Doubtless it will enrage some (good! ... they're probably the culprits whom the article fulminates against!), but I hope I don't give an overall impression of being some kind of bigoted crackpot. It's just that I've devoted a large part of my life and a great deal of energy to the multi-faceted creation of music, which is, to me, a sacramental act that must be taken absolutely seriously by all of its practitioners lest it be defiled. Compromisers are defilers: not everybody who encrypts musical symbols onto a page of manuscript paper is a composer, either. Music is, after all, a phenomenally powerful, mysterious, magical and transcendental expressive medium, fully capable of transforming the very lives of those who engage with it. Given that, don't you think it deserves to be treated seriously, with reverence, by the composer/shamans who produce it?}*<sup>1</sup>

Concert music in America is currently inflicted by an aesthetic that threatens to kill it off, or at least that aspect of it which is a continuance of the tradition of 'Serious Art Music'. The spurious notion that 'artistic worth' should be equated to the ability to put backsides onto concert-hall seats is all too prevalent. Commercialism: where does this permit the expression of true individuality? Of strong and strikingly original

statements? Both of these, I claim, are mandates that any composer who aspires to musical greatness must achieve! Surely the act of serious music-making lies beyond a primary consideration of commercial reward? Populism instead demands mindless conformity, and a pandering to the public weakness for nostalgia (which is fuelled by the all-powerful, money-hungry media).

I contend that such sloppy philosophical beliefs founded upon pseudo-populism are infecting the attitudes of Australia's composers (and funding organizations - not to mention instrumentalities like the ABC) to an alarming degree. But why 'pseudo'-populism? Do the Brisbane neo-pastoralists or those Adelaide composers who write what is, for example, basically pastiche-Debussy, really believe that they are reaching - and inspiring - a wider audience than the most intransigent of Avant-Gardists? If so, then they are utterly deluding themselves. For the public, rightly, believes that the original (hence originality) is the best; pale imitations don't cut it: 'give me Debussy any day'.

The public is a paradox. It is both ignorant and hypocritical - witness, for instance, the hostile reception accorded to the music of Georges Bizet during his own lifetime, as well as the public's complete about-face of attitude after the man was dead ... and there is no reason to believe that the situation is any different now - but, at the same time, discerning. The public has always had an uncanny ability to detect compromise and dishonesty in music: artistic compromise and dishonesty makes bad Art! And I say to you that many of the plethora of Australian reactionaries, pastiche-artists, 'Post-Modernists', pseudo-populists and other imitative types, are **terrible** artists, lacking in integrity and honesty. They have a hidden agenda. They strut about as if they have intentionally created 'great' and 'serious' art-works, but what they **really** want is to seduce the nostalgia-hungry masses, through

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<sup>1</sup> Opening quotation (in italics) from correspondence to Newton Armstrong, 29th April 1991. Italicized interjections from an unpublished writing, *Manifesto* (October 1990).

the media, with derivative music that is essentially light and filmic, achieving shallow, worldly 'success' (their ultimate aim) into the bargain. And they don't have the courage to admit it! Their music is grey and banal. These opportunists try to have it best in both the 'serious' and 'popular' milieux (which are to all intents and purposes mutually exclusive) whilst lacking the talent, spirit, drive and vision to honestly pursue one particular avenue relentlessly. In consequence, their music fails on both counts - it falls between two stools.

How can these charlatans be identified? One can begin their exposé and rout thus: amongst older composers belonging to the Avant-Garde of the '50s and '60s - a musical genre that was definitely in the ascendant at that time - they composed rather half-hearted, mediocre examples in order to be accepted by their colleagues, to be fashionable, to be 'IN' . . . not for any meaningful self-expression. But when, in the '70's, there was a resurgence of tonality and Neo-Romanticism, and a backlash against the Avant-Garde, these trendy, self-aggrandizing 'artists' became turncoats by instantly renouncing their former adopted language in favour of the new fashion ... surprise, surprise. The younger fakes are to be found amidst that most vocal and talentless group of composers advocating the New Conservatism.

*{True artistic creation . . . is infinitely far removed from the currently predominating musical and sociological values: indeed, a sad indictment of our culture. These false values are naively based upon economics and cosmetic 'security', in which the lion's share of acclaim and worth are automatically ascribed to all Art that is viewed simplistically as being 'populist' merely because it finds itself complacently upon received, long-venerated or readily-understood musical languages and traditions, and so clothes itself smugly in pseudo mass-communication. Those 'creators' of such façade-Art who lack or deny real vision, honesty and integrity, but, whilst purporting to create 'the real thing', merely seek superficial (perhaps pecuniary) success for themselves instead, are doomed to obscurity, for they debase and defile the Sacred by denying the ethical imperatives of true Artistic creation. Historically, these disingenuous simpletons, these unethical hacks,*

*will hang themselves. (I am also reminded here of Edgard Varèse's lovely dictum: 'The modern composer refuses to die!' Maybe he meant 'modernist'?)}*

One such simpleton recently wrote a highly paranoid and apoplectic letter to *Sounds Australian* posing the question 'Which is more relevant: Xenakis or Nelson Riddle?'. Forgetting for one moment the wrong-headed notion of 'relevance' (a false view of musical historicity), I would argue that the scientifically-based complexity of Xenakis, arising from his singular attempt to construct a personal cosmology, at least provides a much more accurate metaphor for reality.

*{Science: 'systematic and formulated knowledge, the pursuit of this, the principles regulating such pursuit . . .' Cosmology: 'study or philosophy of universe as an ordered whole' [The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary].}*

Over the last few millennia, science has unfolded models of the Universe which embrace ever-increasing degrees of complexity. Each successive cosmological model has (eventually) filtered through to the populace as a 'paradigm shift' that alters our collective psyche, that changes the very way we think. Theories of Gravity (cf. the hierarchical pitch-gravity of Classical tonality), Quantum Mechanics, Relativity (cf. Schoenberg's dodecaphonic system of pitch-relativity) and the more recent Chaos Theory have even changed, progressively, the meaning of 'science' itself! Such areas of human thought can therefore provide infinitely rich - and real - analogies or paradigms for the creation of music: music that is absolutely 'relevant' because it aspires to replicate the complexity of the Cosmos (as we know it), and so touches us with its palpable realism.

*{Some of these scientific paradigms, perhaps from Mathematics, Astrophysics, Quantum Mechanics or Chaos, I try to invoke in my own music, at every architectonic level. Most importantly, this should naturally permeate the music's very sound-world for the listener, so that the composition perceptually becomes a metaphorical mirror filled with intricate structural hierarchies that could perhaps be interpreted as an (admittedly gross)*

*simplification, essence or symbol of the infinite architectonic nature of the Cosmos. In this regard, all of my music is therefore a religious celebration, a desire to share and unite, an invocation, a response in awe [Pascal: 'The Eternal Silence of Infinite Space terrifies me']. It is also complex. But how much more complex is our everyday reality, our mind(s), and the unity of the Cosmos itself? (James Joyce beautifully encapsulated this truth-concept with his neologism 'Chaosmos'.) Example: my composition Cycles of Vega is within its conceptual dimension, concerned with a particular long-range quasi-cyclic astronomical process ('precession'). It therefore utilizes extended and complex multi-level cyclic transformations within the timbral, temporal and frequency domains: these operations are scientifically codified in Cyclic Group Theory. Its instrumentation (bringing to bear 18 windchimes in particular) physically exemplifies Chaos Theory through its inherently stochastic acoustical behaviour. Macroscopically, its sound-world evokes an extremely unearthly, timeless, cosmic, astral state: the work is intended to celebrate the grandeur of the Universe.*

*All of this, however, is not to say that my compositional processes, with (despite?) their scientific overtones, aren't 'intuitive': here, intuition, truly, is invoked everywhere! Moreover, it seems to me that Science/Art actually strikes a delicate balance between reason and the intuitive. Musical composition always deals with [intuitive] choices.}*

The history of Western Art Music has certainly shown a strongly consistent and progressive growth in musical complexity, both at the structural level and within the music's acoustical surface. (Notice that I **don't** automatically say 'development', since that term is loaded with subjective connotations which here would inherently link complexity with musical worth - although for me, this equivalence is often valid: brainless, moronic or simple-minded musics I definitely find worthless.) Consequently, the current batch of 'simplicists', whether they realise it or not, are defying completely their own tradition's aesthetic - at their peril.

As a necessary digression at this point, I should like to clarify that I have not launched into a tirade against the genuine, honest and

visionary populists, like Prince, Miles Davis or Frank Zappa. They are realising their vision openly and energetically. And good luck to them if their work is popular and financially successful. Their work is good because it has **integrity**. It does not compromise. Nor am I damning old musical constructs such as tonality *per se*. I can immediately think of four Australian composers - Robert Allworth, Anne Boyd, Bruce Cale, and Eric Gross - who have made some use of this by now hackneyed war-horse, but each, through the pursuit of their own personal truth, has nonetheless forged an expression of real individuality and originality.

*{[On originality]: Since I seek Truth . . . how can I be satisfied with secure, established, second-hand musical syntaxes? Part of this endless theosophical search involves forging one's own creative path, and this entails continual 'experiment'. Not a self-seeking, self-serving experimentalism, but one that is pregnant with vision, Spirit, meaning, sincerity, expressivity, giving and integrity: aspiring to create Art that is genuine; Art that will continue to reach out, to challenge, to move, to uplift, and to bind us together in meta-communication, because through it, you too might find a common spiritual ground in some aspect of your own personal Truth; Art that will change your reality; Art that is, and (hopefully) will remain, thoroughly alive.}*

(Such aspirations for the creation of Art yield two important corollaries which are almost universally overlooked by pseudo-populists: the supremacy of **qualitative** aspects of an audience's experience over the merely quantitative - reaching and deeply affecting a solitary human being through exposure to a work of Art is a far greater cause for celebration by the Artist than the superficial entertainment or amusement of a larger public body; and the eclipsing 'Arrow of Time and Space' that allows the Artwork's message to emanate outwards geographically and reach Humanity into the future, well beyond the isolated and frozen instants of a single restricted artistic event which impinges upon only a small group of people at a particular place.)

My friend and colleague Robert Allworth I have heard frequently exclaim that, for him, it doesn't matter whether a piece of contemporary

music is 'original' or not, only that it has something to 'say'. Whilst, like Stravinsky, I retort by observing that something can be 'said' only within a linguistic context, that music transcends mere language, and so is incapable of 'saying' anything, let us persist with this dubious concept for the moment.

Composers who, in cloaking themselves with false artistic security, are content to tinker mainly with received musical languages and formulae, surely have nothing new to 'say'; they are merely repeating, or, at best, paraphrasing the musical utterances of their composerly ancestors. What is the good of that? Where are their own musical personalities (if any) shining through?

If a student writes an essay quoting or paraphrasing, without acknowledgement, the work of some other scholar, then they are

adjudged to be guilty of plagiarism. Are not these aforesaid sonic tinkers merely plagiarists then? They are certainly not true composers! (Their dishonest behaviour shows that they fundamentally ignore the Creative Act's ethical dimension.)

In this, history is on my side. Almost without exception, the composers who have survived the ravages of time, whose work is remembered with reverence, whose work is **alive**, whose work is **great**, have been those who have made fresh, strong, honest, daring and authentically **original** musics. The rest have, deservedly, been forgotten and neglected. The unethical hacks of today can therefore look forward to a well-earned obscurity in the future. Great music is shielded by honesty, authenticity and - I maintain - true originality. Discerning audiences can tell the difference . . .

*Art that is experiment will live.  
Art that is security will die.*

*Theodor Adorno.*

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### Some further reading:

Konrad Boehmer, 'Dwarfs after Giants?', *Interface*, vol. 12 (1983), 23-31.

Konrad Boehmer, 'The Death of the Maestro?', *Ossia*, no 2 (1990), 4-6.

Benjamin Boretz, 'On thinking about various issues induced by the problem of discovering that one is not a "composer", and that the space which one inhabits musically is not "America"', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 27 no 2 (Summer 1989), 38-42.

Warren Burt, 'How to Be a Great Composer', *New Music Articles*, no 1 (1982), 17-20.

Chris Dench, 'Metalogue', *Sounds Australian*, no 29 (Autumn 1991), 17-20.

Chris Dench, 'The Pattern Which Connects', *Ossia*, no 2 (1990), 26-30.

Anthony Gilbert, 'Squaring the Sacred Triangle', *Ossia*, no 2 (1990), 10-18.

John Rahn, 'What is valuable in Art, and Can Music still achieve it?', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 27 no 2 (Summer 1989), 6-17.

Rainer Rochlitz, 'Language for One, Language for All: Adorno and Modernism', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 27 no 2 (Summer 1989), 18-36.

Derek Strahan, 'The Vultures Descend', *Ossia*, no 2 (1990), 6-10.

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