

Dan Bendrups and Graeme Downes, eds. *Dunedin Soundings: Place and Performance*

Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011

ISBN 978 1 877578 22 9. 171pp.

Reviewed by Tony Mitchell

This collection of essays showcases a relatively new genre of academic writing on practice and performance as research, as theorised here in the opening essay, 'Practice and Performance as Research in the Arts,' by Suzanne Little, a lecturer in performance studies at Otago University. Otago housed all the contributors to this book, although two of them, including one of the editors, have since moved back to Australia. A similar volume of more exploratory essays, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, edited by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, and advertising itself as 'the first book to document, conceptualise and analyse practice-led research in the creative arts and to balance it with research-led practice,' was published in 2009.¹ This featured academics from the University of Western Sydney, covering new media, dance, creative writing, music, theatre and film. *Dunedin Soundings* confines itself to music practices, and situates itself firmly in Dunedin, although a number of its contributors come from elsewhere. Most of the essays, to varying degrees, offer a kind of autoethnography related to living and working in Dunedin. This cold and relatively small university town at the bottom of the world is of course most famous for the 'Dunedin sound.' This term was applied in the 1980s to rock music by groups such as the Clean, the Chills, the Verlaines, Straitjacket Fits and the Bats, which was released on the now-revived Flying Nun label, and which bestowed a minor indie cult celebrity on the city. This moment is represented in this volume by Graeme Downes, who is still releasing albums with the Verlaines after more than thirty years, as well as being a senior lecturer in what is colloquially known as the 'rock degree' at Otago. As Dan Bendrups points out in his introduction, Flying Nun epitomised a New Zealand-based do-it-yourself ethos that has permeated all forms of music production, nourished by Dunedin's isolation and remoteness. Suzanne Little characterises Dunedin as also nurturing a 'strong concentration of practitioner academics in a small geographic space and the city's status as a firmly established and highly innovative arts space and incubator' (p. 27).

Important local arts practitioners strongly associated with Dunedin include writer Janet Frame, whose only book of poems, *The Pocket Mirror* (1967), was largely set in Dunedin, and who lived in the Maniototo region south of Dunedin; Australasian composer Gillian Karawe Whitehead, who lives on the Otago peninsula; and Māori visual artist Ralph Hotere. Bruce Russell—noise musician (his internationally recognised band the Dead C also has a long history); editor of a recent book on New Zealand experimental music, *Erewhon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand*;² and founder of the Xpressway and Corpus Hermeticum labels—also has a long association with Dunedin, although he currently resides in earthquake-challenged Lyttelton, outside Christchurch.

¹ Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, eds, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2009).

² Bruce Russell, ed., *Erewhon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand* (Auckland: Audio Foundation/CMR, 2012).

The first section of the book, entitled 'Music, Communication and Community,' leads off with Downes, who is noted for his musicological approach to rock composition, especially in his 1993 PhD thesis on Mahler and his nineteenth-century antecedents. Here he analyses two of the Verlaines' songs within an inch of their lives, while managing to convey an enormous breadth of both musical and songwriting influences, from Wagner and Beethoven to Randy Newman. He also offers a succinct but detailed stylistic and musicological breakdown of the main features of the groups involved in the 'Dunedin sound' (p. 43).

Shelley Brunt and Henry Johnson describe the activities of the university's Pusparwarna gamelan ensemble, which is overseen by Joko Sosilo, a central Javanese puppeteer. Its performances of both traditional Javanese and new New Zealand compositions, in the interests of a 'new politics of transcultural celebration' (p. 66), serve to de-exoticise gamelan as well as practising community engagement.

Bendrup, a trombonist who made a significant contribution to the Verlaines' 2011 album *Untimely Meditations*,³ and journeyman British bassist Robert G.H. Burns (whom I once spied playing on a float in the annual Dunedin Santa parade; no relation to Dunedin's Scottish patron poet) relate the history of their jazz-Latin fusion group Subject2Change, analysing three of the group's compositions. Surprisingly, they do not mention the involvement in the group of another Otago academic, Ian Chapman (author of a book and CD under the name 'Doctor Glam'), who was playing the *hung*, a spherical shaped metal percussion instrument played with the hands and developed in Switzerland, when I saw the group live in Dunedin a few years ago. Bendrup and Burns claim that Dunedin's 'condensed and somewhat isolated artistic environment ... allowed us to undertake musical experiments that, for commercial or other reasons, we may not have had the opportunity to undertake in other places we have lived and worked' (p. 68). These experiments included recording freeform improvised music with a visiting Portuguese percussionist Pedro Carniero, who was in the country playing with New Zealand's best-known contemporary composer, John Psathas.

John Egenes, a US folk and Americana musician employed at Otago as an 'executant lecturer' (that is, a practitioner freed from the responsibility of doing research) and local session musician, reports on a collaborative folk album recorded on the internet with musicians in the US, Copenhagen, Dunedin and Auckland. He does not mention or attempt to analyse any particular examples, instead lauding the importance of remixers, stating: 'I'll probably learn more from making music than I ever did from my music teachers' (p. 88). I have rarely heard a remix that didn't either totally subvert or obliterate the distinctive characteristics of an original track, so one wonders where he is headed. Two of Egenes's songs, one a rather corny hillbilly song celebrating his Facebook page, the other a conventional country music instrumental, can be accessed via the website associated with the book;⁴ neither shows signs of having been remixed.

In 'Reflections from a reformed Exile,' Trevor Coleman, the pianist and trumpeter with Subject2Change, offers a relatively straight autoethnography of his professional music career, which reads rather like an extended curriculum vitae; it ranges from Dunedin to Berklee, Munich, where he worked with a British expatriate comedy duo Freiburg, and back to Dunedin,

³ The Verlaines, *Untimely Meditations* (Auckland, Flying Nun Records, 2011).

⁴ *Dunedin Soundings—Place and Performance*, <www.otago.ac.nz/Music/about/otago029004.html>

where he now works as a film composer for travel documentaries. The website includes an excerpt from one of his soundtracks, a conventional sub-Hollywood orchestral composition with shades of 'mickey mousing'.⁵ For Coleman, although 'Dunedin is a wonderful place to focus on composition ... too much isolation from the rest of the world can lead to stagnation' and he continues to travel when occasion beckons.

The section entitled 'Music History and Local Identity' starts with local composer Anthony Ritchie, who quotes a critic's description of him as 'one of New Zealand's most approachable composers' (p. 103). He discusses and analyses his settings of works by well-known New Zealand poets, in the tradition of foundational NZ composer Douglas Lilburn's celebrated 'rough and folk-like vernacular' song cycle *Sings Harry*. Lilburn's 1946 Cambridge (NZ) music school lecture, 'A Search for Tradition,' quoted at least twice in this book, is by far the most often cited source in New Zealand music writing. Ritchie suggests the rising fifth used by Lilburn is a distinctive feature of New Zealand music, and associates it with solitude:

Certain characteristics of Dunedin ... seem to me to be distinctive: the bleakness of the weather and a sense of introversion and reflection associated with said weather. It is often said that many creative people emerge from Dunedin because they have to spend much of their time inside, away from the cold! (p. 114).

Two of Ritchie's rather genteel European art music song settings are included on the book's website, and don't sound like 'rough and folk-like' vernacular, despite being by larrikin poets James K. Baxter (once a Robert Burns Fellow in Dunedin) and Sam Hunt. Ritchie's setting of Māori poet Hone Tuwhare's 'Tangi' makes 'no attempt to reference Māori chant or waiata ... it is a simple song with a simple vocal line enhanced by piano' (p. 107). One can only ask why, as it ends up sounding like a simple English pastoral song. This, incidentally, is the sole reference in the entire book to Dunedin's Māori population. Tuwhare, also a Burns Fellow, lived in the Catlins region of Otago, and died in 2008.

Peter Adams, who has worked at Otago for twenty years and describes himself as a 'musical leader in the local community' (p. 157), recounts his adventures with the local Dunedin St Kilda Brass Band, for whom he composed the 'virtuosic' *Concerto Burlesca*. This is, he claims, the world's first concerto for violin and brass band: 'the isolation and smaller population base of Dunedin ... prompts such unusual collaborations' (p. 117). His main influences appear to be American, from Copland to gospel, blues, and the theme from the *Simpsons*. The result sounds as if it could have been composed almost anywhere in the western world in the 1920s or 1930s.

British-born John Drummond is professor of music at Otago University, where he directed an opera a year for twenty years from 1976. He contributes two chapters. In 'The Creative Artist as Research Practitioner,' he compares musical research to scientific research, referencing Bach, Wagner, and the University of California's computer program composer Emily Howell, along with Newton, Einstein, David Garrick, Seurat and microbiologist James Watson, all in the interests of proving that it's all about process, not product; 'the creative artist provides the pudding, but lets others discover its tastiness' (p. 40). This rather flies in the face of the self-analysis of some of the other contributors to this book. Drummond also provides an account

⁵ A reference to film music that attempts to synchronise with the action on screen.

of the composition process of his opera *Larnach*, based on the life of a nineteenth-century Dunedin politician, who built a castle that he named after himself, and shot himself in the Wellington Parliament Buildings in 1898. Drummond changes the location of the suicide to Larnach's family home, which seems rather drastic, and refers to Aristotle's pity and terror as well as his three unities and Sophocles' *Oedipus* along the way. There are no excerpts from the opera on the website, but Drummond claims that Wagnerian *leitmotifs* play a prominent role, along with 'a heavier use than normal (for me) of the lower winds' (p. 137), so it seems rooted in nineteenth-century romanticism.

This is followed by an account by Judy Bellingham of her recreation in costume of a number of nineteenth-century songs composed by amateur composers in the Otago region. I recall seeing her performing some of these at a lengthy concert in Marama Hall showcasing Dunedin music at a New Zealand Musicological Association conference some years ago, and being persuaded by my companion to go out for a break during their execution. Most of them are exceedingly patriotic, and of little musical interest, but they are now available on a DVD. Bellingham assures us that she 'had no thought of gaining celebrity status or financial gain' (p. 147) through the project.

Finally, Chills manager and Otago University student and venue manager Scott Muir provides an unashamedly personal essay about how he came to set up the website *Dunedinmusic.com*, which is a valuable resource for local musicians. For him, Dunedin is a city with 'stease—teenage speak for style and ease,' and strong mutual support, whose student 'churn' provides a constant source of renewal (p. 153).

Dunedin Soundings, as befits an in-house publication, is perhaps ultimately of interest mainly to people in the region who want to find out what its music academics are getting up to. It showcases a broad range of musical practices, but much of the musical output is of limited interest beyond its creators, and the essays range from scholarly to personal. Whether they amount to 'a new interdisciplinary research nexus' (p. 28) remains to be seen.