

## Obituary: Naomi Cumming (1960–1999)

*Malcolm Gillies*

The death of Naomi Cumming in Brisbane early in the New Year was as unexpected as it was tragic. Just starting out on a new venture as a senior lecturer—after many years as a research fellow in Melbourne, New York and Adelaide—she was excited by the opportunities for teaching and postgraduate supervision although, naturally, a little anxious as to how much she would be able to maintain the high level of international engagement which she had forged over the last few years. We, at the University of Queensland, looked forward particularly to her contribution to the flourishing PhD programme in Music. I, personally, was looking forward to the proximity of that probing mind, that breadth of theoretical and philosophical knowledge, and the virtuosity of her seminar delivery. Anyone who had witnessed Naomi in recent lectures or seminars could not fail to be struck by her capacities of *ex tempore* utterance.

That quality of Naomi's mind had just before Christmas been recognized in Indiana University Press's contracting to publish her recently completed book, *The Sonic Self*. This book will be Naomi's greatest intellectual legacy. Beginning with her own experiences as a violin student in Hobart and Melbourne, she soon entices the reader into consideration of the meaning of 'voice' in music and, thereby, to ponder seminal questions of musical subjectivity. A preview of her many-sided approach is seen in her article on the subjectivities of the 'Erbarne dich' aria from Bach's *St Matthew Passion* (*Music Analysis*, 1997), which had just been awarded the Society of Music Theory's Outstanding Publication Award. The awards committee lauded it as 'one of the most comprehensive accounts of how we interpret and, at times, identify with implied subjectivities in both vocal and instrumental music.' The best we can all do to celebrate Naomi's short life is to share in her mind by reading her work.

## Recollections of Naomi Cumming, Scholar and Friend

*Jonathan D. Kramer*

The world of music scholarship lost one of its leading thinkers when Naomi Cumming died. She had an extraordinary intellect, and her published writings remain her significant legacy. Those of us privileged to know Naomi personally had the opportunity to interact with not only a deeply thoughtful and intelligent person but also a woman of uncommon wit and kindness. As a parting tribute to this great woman, I would like to share a bit of her personal side, by printing some excerpts from her e-mails to me. I hope she would not mind my sharing her private side.

I first met Naomi at the conference of the International Musicological Society in Melbourne in August 1988. I recall sitting next to her on a long coach journey, during which we discussed the thinking of Leonard Meyer, on whose work she had written her dissertation.

Naomi and I remained in sporadic contact over the subsequent years, until I invited her to be a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University for the academic year 1992–93. During the nine or ten months she spent in New York, Naomi attended a wide variety of seminars and concerts, and shared her knowledge with Columbia's music faculty and postgraduate students.

We next met at the Music Analysis Conference at the University of Lancaster in England, in September 1994. Subsequently Naomi helped set up a lecture and concert tour for me in Australia. We exchanged some thirty e-mails before I finally went to Australia in May–June 1995. Naomi invited me to speak at the Centenary Conference of the Faculty of Music of the

University of Melbourne, for which she planned a day-long session on music theory. Naomi and her husband Anthony were most hospitable to me and my wife Norma.

The following excerpts from three communications show Naomi's growing interest in musical semiotics, a bit about her family, her concerns with the effects of war on individuals and families, her gentle humor, and her developing ideas as she worked on her article 'The Horrors of Identification: Reich's *Different Trains*,' which appears in *Perspectives of New Music* 35.1 (Winter 1997). I have also included Naomi's tragically ironic enthusiasm about her new job with the faculty of the University of Queensland in Brisbane, a position she never began owing to her sudden death.

Fri, 19 Aug 1994

Dear Jonathan,

The conference [I will attend] in Paris is the 'Fourth International Congress on Musical Signification' sponsored by the Institut d'esthétique et des Sciences de L'Art and the Institut Finlandais a Paris (9–13 October at the Finnish Institute in Paris)...The ostensible theme is 'Universals in Music'...but is not limited to that. I am speaking on concepts of the 'subject' in music in relation to Kant's notion of synthesis. I got the idea from Kevin Korsyn's article on Kantian Epistemology in Schenker. I thought that the notion of synthesising events in time to form a virtual unity comparable to the (possibly illusory) unity of a human subject (a very pre-post-modern idea) did not have to be restricted to Schenkerian contexts of musical explanation. In any case, David Lidov warned me not to speak about Schenker in Paris unless I planned to come with a revolver in my pocket!... (At this point they are expecting me to turn up as 'Monsieur Noomi Cumming.' I never realised how convenient a genderless title like 'Dr.' could be at times. Do you think that I should avoid embarrassing them and reveal my gender? I haven't done it because I'm rather looking forward to the joke.)

I'll be visiting my grandmother (aged 93!) and younger sister in York for a few days after LancMAC, then going down to London, where I'm staying with some distant cousins until 3 October, so we will indeed be there at the same time, and it would be very nice to meet up with you and Norma.

Naomi

Mon, 27 May 1996

Dear Jonathan,

Thank you for telling me about your own experience of dealing with the Holocaust. I found your account of your very grandfather's escape from Russia quite gripping. Only a couple of weeks ago I went to a lecture by a member of our history department who has been trying to reconstruct his own parents' history, their escape from countries that are now part of Slovenia, I think. The tales are so tragic! His mother had always told him that she was the only survivor of her whole town, so it was very difficult for him to trace anyone who could tell him about her family. Finally, he found a memo from a Russian SS officer, saying that all the inhabitants of this town had been destroyed, with only one family escaping—his parents' family, his mother a little girl. As a historian, this man is documenting both his parents' memories, as emigres, and the facts as far as he can reconstruct them. It is an interesting study in memory and corroboration. (I have no doubt that such memories have an effect on the identity of the children of survivors, who were only children at the time of the war. I grew up with stories of my own parents as children traumatised in the bomb shelters of London, or evacuated to Wales. It makes world trauma not seem so far away.)

Thinking about semiotics and postmodernism: I think that a musical process, such as an ostinato, or features such as melodic 'gesture' (e.g. the vocalised gestures taken by Reich as the basis of his melodic material in *Trains*), can be interpreted semiotically as embodying specific types of motion, or affective nuance, while allowing that listeners may assume a variety of different subject-positions in relation to them. Mobility in subject-positioning is something that I have found myself better able to explore by drawing on some of the Lacanian theorising (Kristeva, Žižek). A rhythmic process—as in the Reich—which entrains a listener's bodily motion to its own 'groove' has the potential to offer either passive enjoyment or a feeling of 'entrapment.' (Associations are made in the Lacanian-Kristevan literature with feelings of being enclosed by a m/other; a regressive experience which may be felt as comforting or as horrifying.) Feeling the latter (as I have observed some people to do) can lead to attempts at making an interpretive move in the direction of objectifying the motion, saying that it is just representative of a train, for example. Another option is to 'frame' the event by making stylistic comparisons. I assume that a pomo. stance allows for mobility of interpretive positioning, without making value-judgements on it, but it does not thereby neutralise the semiotic content of the musical process (better described, perhaps, as its range of potentialities).

Re. strikes and shutting the university down: We have a new Federal Government, in case you haven't heard, and cuts in university funding unprecedented since the 1960s are being threatened. On Thursday we have a national strike of academics and students! There will be a picket-line outside the conservatorium building, so I'm told, and our graduate seminar has been cancelled. I find it difficult to go public myself, but I'm entirely sympathetic to the cause. The upshot of it, for me, is that my survival in academia is more precarious than ever.

Naomi

Wed, 30 Sep 1998

Dear Jonathan

Anthony says he will join me [in Brisbane] after about a year. In the meantime, I will commute home for a weekend as often as I can, and be home for the semester breaks. Anthony and I have only just had our own home built, on the outskirts of Melbourne, and from that point of view it is a bad time to be moving again. We were just getting to enjoy having our own place... I did apply for another fellowship, which would allow me to stay in Melbourne, but at this stage in my career, it would probably be wiser to take a 'proper job' and learn to do all those things that I don't practice so much as a research fellow—like teaching and administration. The position in Queensland will allow me to do a fair amount of graduate-supervision, as well as teaching general courses and carrying on my research.

All the best,  
Naomi

The position Naomi was looking forward to never materialized, as she died soon after moving to Brisbane to begin working at the university. Her would-be students there have tragically been deprived of the experience of working with one of music's great minds. They, like the rest of us, are immeasurably impoverished as a result. At least, some of us have warm personal memories of Naomi Cumming—a small comfort in the face of grief, but all that we have.