

## COMPOSER INTERVIEW

# Illuminating the *Dark Side*: An Interview with Brenton Broadstock

*Linda Kouvaras*

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Over the last fifteen years, I have been an avid follower of the music of Brenton Broadstock, Associate Professor and Reader, and Co-ordinator in Composition at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne. I have commissioned and recorded a work for piano, *In the Silence of Night* (1989), performed his piano music on a number of occasions, and written several articles about his music and liner notes for two of his CDs. An interview at this point seemed a good idea, Broadstock having recently returned from an extended composing sojourn overseas. In 1998, he spent three months composing in Italy on fellowships given by the Civitella Ranieri and Rockefeller Foundations. In 1999, he received the prestigious Don Banks Award from the Australia Council, which enabled him to compose for the year, including visits to the USA (Indiana University), England and Russia.

I wanted to know whether and/or how this time overseas had had an impact on his artistic direction. I was also interested to see whether his perceptions of the existence of 'Australian-ness,' in music and in general, had changed since we last spoke of these matters some years ago. This interview was recorded on 24 August 2000 at the University of Melbourne's University House over a glass of their finest, then transcribed and edited.

I asked Brenton what he set out to achieve compositionally on his overseas residencies.

I had a major orchestral commission to fulfill from Andrew Wheeler and the Krasnoyarsk Symphony Orchestra in Russia. It could be as long as I wished, but it had to be a major work, and it became my fifth symphony, *Dark Side* (1999), recorded by Wheeler and the KSO and soon to be released, along with the other symphonies.<sup>1</sup> I started planning each of the movements in Italy and finished the work in America.

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<sup>1</sup> Brenton Broadstock. *Five Symphonies*. Etcetera/Chandos KTC2026, 2000.

**Did you go to Italy with any preconceived musical ideas?**

Yes, some. I had sketches for a piano piece—which never became a piano piece—but which I wanted to develop further, and this became the basis of the Scherzo. Then there was a short piece for saxophone that I'd written which came to replace what I had begun for the opening slow movement, which I scrapped completely! I tripled the length of the saxophone piece and developed the chief ideas in it. I'd started the first version of the slow movement in Italy, and I'd spent a lot of time on it, and it's always agony to scrap music you've spent a lot of time on, but it's the nature of the enterprise. It's not an unusual occurrence!

**Can you recall what it was that you felt was not working?**

It's difficult to say now, but I think it was just that sense of it not gelling; it didn't seem to 'go' anywhere, or should I say I couldn't make it go anywhere that I was happy with!

**Did the experience of being in Italy itself affect your writing in any way?**

It's difficult to assess that really, but I do not believe that it did, directly. I think that the main thing, and the most positive aspect of it, was that I was working in isolation, and the surroundings were most conducive to creativity. Both places are set up as artists' colonies, and are fully operative to support artists in their work. Artists are catered for in terms of meals and lodging, and of course I had no teaching or administrative responsibilities in Italy, unlike my time in Pennsylvania,<sup>2</sup> where I was expected to give lectures on my work and generally fulfill an ambassadorial role. The opportunity just to concentrate on one's work is invaluable.

**Please describe the surrounds of the artists' colonies.**

I was totally steeped in Italian culture and history. I was staying in a thirteenth-century castle, overlooking a valley on the Via Appia, one of the main ancient Roman roads, which had probably seen the Romans marching through on their way to conquer the world. So one gains an incredible sense of western history as one drives along and everywhere there are ancient hilltop towns, one after another. Now, whether all of this directly influenced my writing, I cannot say, but it was certainly lovely to be situated in such beautiful and ancient locales. I did not 'borrow' anything from Italian culture, musically.

**I'd like to talk about where you stand in relation to the search for or development of the 'Australian voice' in art-music composition. I recall you telling me after your previous residency in Pennsylvania that you were struck by the comments of some Americans who had spent some time in Australia. They were describing their perceptions of the Australian national character. You agreed with their perceptions of us as exhibiting 'a directness in expression,' 'rawness,' 'brashness,' and a slight sense of a lack of 'sophistication,' and that these qualities translated into the nature of Australian composition. Do you still believe these summations are applicable?**

Yes, I do. Mind you, these qualities can arguably be seen in any amount of music from other parts of the world too, but it's probably particularly appropriate for Australia. For example, I can certainly perceive these traits in my music and in the work of many other Australian

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<sup>2</sup> Broadstock spent six-months' study leave in 1993 at Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

composers. I think these traits apply to the work of Peter Sculthorpe, Anne Boyd, Barry Conyngham, and also to Mary Finsterer; indeed they apply particularly to the stream of composers which came through the teaching of Sculthorpe rather than through that of Richard Meale, because Meale is much more European in his outlook, yet even so, I think that there are works of Meale which have that certain Australian quality as well. But there are others not in this tradition who have what I believe is an Australian sound, such as James Penberthy and George Dreyfus, and the recent music of Gerard Brophy.

**Can you elaborate on what might constitute a lack of musical sophistication?**

It's elusive and hard to quantify, and indeed I find the notion of what is Australian in music extremely problematic and difficult to pin down.

**Yet you obviously perceive something there that *can* be termed distinctly Australian.**

Yes, I do, but it is incredibly difficult to define. Also, it is very unfair to describe these Australian characteristics as unsophisticated, as I believe Australian composers can match technically any other composers in the world. If you listen to contemporary French music, Italian music, and even English music, there is a sophistication of sound, an attention to minute detail, and a difference in the *quality* of sound in those countries. It's partly to do with that European sense of *order* which Australians are not quite as concerned about. Look at Sculthorpe's music, and mine as well: there is a certain lack of *structural* sophistication (and I don't mean this to be a negative comment); pieces tend to be much more sectionalised; they might be bridged but the sections are clearly definable. I am in fact trying in my recent work to move more towards a through-composed, continuous approach to writing. There's also a feeling of brashness of gesture, simplicity of gesture, in Australian music, generalising again, of course; much of my music has this quality and also that of Mary Finsterer and James Penberthy. European music tends to adhere more strongly to strict principles of orchestration which produces a more refined sound quality, whereas it's my perception that Australian composers do not do this to quite the same extent. There are other elements, such as sparseness of texture, repetition, simplicity of structure, certain ways of orchestrating, the use of timing and silence, the use of indigenous and Asian pitch materials and a focus on external Australian influences, such as place and events, that do define, albeit elusively, an Australian 'sound.'

**Do you think that Australian composers feel freer than their European counterparts about the way they want to use sound?**

Yes, there's less of a sense of tradition in that regard, for us. European orchestration principles produce what can be described as a 'nice' sound, a 'beautiful' sound.

**What about European composers who want to extend the timbre of the orchestra and might employ extended techniques? Is that still different?**

Well, I see that as being part of that sophistication.

**But it might not produce 'nice'-sounding orchestration.**

No, indeed, but I think what I mean by sophistication *includes* developing the sound of the orchestra, as well as trying to produce a 'nice' sound. I'm thinking of Lutoslawski, for instance, who did try and push the genre structurally and in terms of orchestration. Yet his music still

has what I see as a French penchant for producing beautiful sounds. He wanted indeed to produce lovely music, aurally acceptable music.

**By that do you mean music that doesn't grate?**

I think so: music that manages to bridge the gap between the past, tradition, and the future; I believe Penderecki does that now too—he tends to write music that is still very much rooted in the past but still looks to the future as well.

**Is this what you're interested in achieving too, that bridge between tradition and innovation?**

It has been a constant concern of mine. One of my major influences has been Lutoslawski's music, and of course Sculthorpe, and much of Sculthorpe's music comes from Penderecki's approach to writing. I want to write music that is still strong in traditional terms, in the sense that it grows out of a tradition, but also that looks to something *beyond* that tradition.

**Were you seeking to move away from what might be considered a typical Australian sound, looking for greater sophistication, less brashness, etc?**

No. I do not believe that that would be possible. I am probably in many respects an unrefined, brash sort of person anyway! And I think that comes out in my music. I am not a European, I am very much of this country, and my music reflects this.

**Are there Australian composers with less direct means of expression who do not exhibit these traits so starkly?**

Previous generations of composers were far more strongly influenced by European approaches: Alfred and Mirrie Hill, Clive Douglas, Robert Hughes, Margaret Sutherland and John Antill.

**And contemporary Australian composers? Are there any whose music makes you surprised when you hear it, knowing that they are Australian? What about Carl Vine?**

He's an interesting case. I might describe him as being a recent 'Australian urban composer.' And I don't mean that in a pejorative way. He is someone who has developed an urban sound.

**Barry Conyngham has been described this way too.**

Yes, but I think Conyngham is still part of the Sculthorpe landscape tradition; the landscape is just more focused on cities.

**You've already mentioned Mary Finsterer and Anne Boyd; what about other female composers?**

There are many excellent female composers, who don't have that macho brashness, but who have forged a different, and equally valid, kind of Australian sound: such as Margaret Sutherland and Helen Gifford, and more recently, Moya Henderson, Liza Lim and Elena Kats-Chernin. Also, highly significant are composers like Sarah Hopkins and Ros Bandt whose response to being Australian is really quite unique.

**How about the younger generation of composers, such as Stuart Greenbaum and Matthew Hindson?**

Yes, they, and others of their generation, come more from a popular music tradition, which is still an urban, rather than a landscape one. In Vine's case, it is perhaps a more European urban tradition. By that I mean music which reflects living and survival in the suburbs of a big city;

a more contemporary view based on production, on technology and commercialism and possibly that there's no sense of meaning or purpose other than living for the moment.

**But doesn't Vine say that there in fact is a programme to his music, but he prefers not to spell it out?**

Yes, and that is his choice. But why deny a sense of purpose? I think that is a modern, urban response.

**One of the most important aspects of your compositions has been the programmatic catalyst for them, hasn't it?**

It's not that I'm completely comfortable about providing programme notes to my music, it's just that it's what the music is *about*. I don't want the compositional exercise to be making people guess what the music's about; it's not like a crossword puzzle, hoping that people will somehow put all the clues together. I mean, if there *is* a meaning behind what one's written which one is trying to portray, then a programme note makes sense. I also believe that a composer has a responsibility to contribute not just music, but ideas, idealism, and purpose, not just to add more entertainment value, but also to attempt to improve life in any way possible.

**And furthermore, isn't one of the main reasons for your wanting to compose, or the initial pre-compositional impetus for your works, your social conscience?**

It certainly has been an extremely important part of my work, yes. I see this as being a connection between where I live and what I do as an artist, and that this connection is something which should be made known to people.

**Let's talk about your compositional development over the last five years or so. Have there been any changes in your musical language?**

Yes, I do believe there have been. My music really changed with *Celebration* in 1994. I started using more direct language, similar to that in the fourth symphony of 1995 and the fifth symphony, and *In a Brilliant Blaze* (1993).

**And would you say that this is particularly evident in the slow movements?**

Yes. I think the language has been simplified somewhat, but there has been a great concern to develop structure and fluidity of ideas and especially sound colour.

**I find that term 'simplification' of musical language a little problematic; it does not account for the potential for effect on the listener, which is often anything *but* simple or facile. I don't necessarily see a connection between very intricate, atonal music—which might be described as complex or even belonging to the so-called New Complexity school of composition—and a complex effect on the listener, or the converse: that music which is tonally-based, like yours for instance, will therefore have a simple effect on the listener.**

Maybe a more appropriate way of describing it is a *more direct expression*, using a language that a more general public can relate to a little more easily than to atonal language. My musical language is not atonal, it never has been, but it has tended in the past to be dissonant, and I guess there is now a lessening of that dissonance. But I must say that I am not doing this to appeal to a wider audience; it is more a personal empathy with the sound-world; I like those

sounds, they appeal to me, and I am comfortable with what I am writing. Perhaps it is the onset of old age and much of the aggressive young man is dissipating!

**Would it be fair to say that this tendency towards lessening of dissonance, or a refinement of communication, let's say, started in 1988 with *Toward the Shining Light: Symphony No. 1*?<sup>3</sup>**

It would, and also the piece for piano which you commissioned in 1989, *In the Silence of Night*;<sup>4</sup> both contain a very direct means of expression. And since then, there has been a gradual decline in the use of complex dissonance in my works, with the exception of one or two digressions, such as symphonies two and three in 1989 and 1991, when it was necessary for the purposes of the extra-musical meaning.

**Is there now a greater sense of narrative in your music?**

Well, I think narrative has always been there.

**Is it now more emotionally rather than cerebrally based, then?**

Yes. I come back to the sense of *direct expression*: perhaps it can affect people emotionally much more quickly, and in a positive way, because the nature of the language is less cerebral. This is not only to be seen in the harmonic means, but also the instrumental means, so that the extended techniques and rhythmic qualities—whilst still being rather raw and unrefined in many respects—are now more direct, I think. However, I still spend a lot of time planning works, often mathematically, but I don't think of this as being cerebral, just simply technique.

**Another change or intensification of your writing in recent times has been a greater output in writing for brass.**

Indeed. In fact in the last few years my writing direction has pushed more towards writing for brass band. The lack of opportunities in the orchestral arena of late has meant that I've done other things. One has to find other means of expression, and some of my brass band music has been picked up in recent times and performed at two Australian brass band championships and commissioned in Europe for championships there and several pieces have come out on CD,<sup>5</sup> which has been very pleasing. So I'm starting to become known in brass band circles in Europe too, which is very exciting.

**What is it about brass bands that attracts you as a composer?**

I'm a 'bandee' from way back. I grew up in brass bands, so I have a deep-seated affinity for brass; it's really where my love of music was born. It's certainly my first knowledge of classical music, which was through arrangements for brass bands. So I'm very comfortable with the medium. I'm a brass player too, so I love writing for brass.

**Why have the orchestral opportunities diminished over recent times?**

That's a question that could well be directed at the various symphony orchestras around the country! But in the last few years, after Tony Fogg left his position as the Chief Program

<sup>3</sup> Recorded on *Toward the Shining Light: Orchestral Works by Conyngham, Broadstock and Banks*, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, cond. Richard Mills (ABC Classics 426 807-2, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Kouvaras has released two recordings of this piece, one on *The Team of Pianists*, Hamilton (Move MCP 042, 1990) and the other on *Bright Tracks* (Move MD 3204, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Fortuna* is the title track on *Fortuna: Australian Brass Band Classics*, The Kew Band (ABC Classics 465173-2, 1999).

Director of ABC Music, and with the recent breakdown of the old ABC orchestra network, which has now become Symphony Australia, we now have a situation where the orchestras tend to be much more independent in their funding base and consequently in their choice of programming. They've therefore started making decisions based on what's considered to be marketable rather than under the old system where it was under the ABC charter to support local output. There's not that imperative any more. So Australian music has tended to fall off the edge of the concert stadium.

**Why is there no longer that imperative?**

It was taken out a couple of years ago; there used to be a seven percent Australian content legislation that was scrapped. The whole question of supporting Australian work has diminished, not just with regard to music but also in other media. In the advertising industry, for example, the only advertisements that were shown in films were those which had been made in Australia, and those made overseas had to have a substantial component in them that was Australian: all that's gone now too. It's part of the economic rationalist strategy that asserts the 'level playing field' of free trade; this says that if other countries cannot come here and compete freely, then obviously we cannot in turn expect to go over there and compete freely. Which I suppose is fair enough, but it does mean that Australian music suffers because we don't have the profile to withstand the barrage of external competition.

**Is it the same all round the country?**

It's noticeable in Melbourne especially (I suppose because I live here), less so in Sydney; Queensland and Perth fare reasonably well because both of those orchestras in recent times have had composers in residence, which helps. Melbourne has not had a composer in residence for the last six or seven years.

**How were composers in residence selected?**

There was an advertisement that went out, composers applied and were selected by a panel.

**Why has the system in Melbourne ceased?**

I really don't know; a management decision I guess.

**Have orchestral commissions generally declined of late?**

Yes, they have. There seems to be a swing away from conventional composition toward so-called experimental or fringe arts, multi-media, popular forms like jazz and folk and rock, and there's also been a swing away from composers toward performers. I think this is evident in what used to be called the Don Banks Composition Award which is now called the Don Banks Music Award, so it is now open for *any* musician of *any* description in the country, and last year it was given to an Aboriginal pop singer. Similarly, there was a festival called the Australian Composing Women's Festival and this has been changed to the Australian Women's Music Festival, so again the composer part has been removed. I think this has always been a problem in music: composers have always been secondary to the process of performing, to ensembles and institutions, rather than to individuals and composers, and this is not the case for funding in other artforms.

**How about the dissemination of Australian music through CDs overseas?**

It's very difficult for Australian compositions to get distribution overseas, even ABC Classics has very limited distribution. The only way to achieve any decent level of overseas distribution is to get onto a label such as Sony or Naxos, and for an Australian composer that's extremely rare, almost impossible in fact, but it has been done; Michael Easton, for instance, has an excellent CD of his music out on Naxos.<sup>6</sup>

**Can you see things improving?**

I'm afraid not. First, the whole economic rationalist ideal has gone too far and has seeped into the culture. Second, I don't think Australian art culture is ever going to be of any great significance, unfortunately. We're just too swamped by American culture and sporting culture for us to be appreciated to that level where we can make substantial money from art. Even the internet is going to be completely saturated by any 'composer' who can produce music with technology and make it available digitally. This is a mixed blessing; it may give control to individuals and let them operate independently of big companies, but who exercises the quality control, who referees the product and keeps the standard high? Public taste?

**Is the situation healthier overseas? Did you get a sense of what it's like for contemporary Italian composers?**

Actually, I don't know. I have to admit I took the opportunity to compose and to immerse myself in only my own music, for a change, so I didn't do any networking!

**Let's return to the reason for your overseas sojourn and talk about the content of *Dark Side*, which is perhaps the most directly autobiographical work of your symphonies to date.<sup>7</sup> *Dark Side* is perhaps more 'about' you yourself than any of your earlier symphonic works. In what ways musically does the work reveal the nature of its producer?**

The title comes from a quote from Mark Twain: 'Everyone is a moon and has a dark side that he never shows anyone.' Musically, it refers to earlier orchestral and chamber works in my output, and it touches on very early influences, such as pop music, from my band days. So it pulls together pieces from the 'dark side' of my past and blends them with the present. It is a piece which encapsulates my near-obsession with duality; the different possibilities and potentials that we all exhibit. But the 'dark side' is not meant to refer to anything sinister, just simply that we all have a hidden side to us; a part of us that is indefinable, that is private, our island of existence, our individuality, our inner self that can never really be known by anyone else. So, I think the piece reflects my personality very well; it is meditative, quiet and intense but also rambunctious and driven; the music of a true Sagittarian!

<sup>6</sup> Michael Easton, *Orchestral Works*, State Orchestra of Victoria cond. Brett Kelly (Naxos 8.554368, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Even including the very personal *Toward the Shining Light*: Symphony No. 1, written eleven years before the fifth symphony, which relates almost programmatically the birth of Broadstock's first-born son Matthew, the gradual realisation that he was severely handicapped and the acceptance of his condition. Broadstock wrote that it is this acceptance that is the 'shining light' of the title; sleeve notes, *Toward the Shining Light*. See also Brett Johnson, comp. and ed., *An Introduction to Brenton Broadstock's Toward the Shining Light*, SSO Teaching Kit 5 (Sydney: ABC, 1989) and Lesleigh Thompson, *The Title Toward the Shining Light as an Influencing Factor on the Basic Form and Structural Components in Broadstock's First Symphony*, MMus (Comp.) thesis, University of Melbourne, 1994.