

## COMPOSER INTERVIEW

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# Products of Our Own Histories: An Interview with Linda Kouvaras

*Maurice Windleburn*

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Linda Kouvaras is a Melbourne based composer, pianist, and musicologist and Associate Professor position in Musicology at the University of Melbourne. Kouvaras completed her BMus(Hons), MMus, and PhD in Musicology at the University of Melbourne and has composed music in both popular and classical styles. She co-authored songs for the Punk/New Wave band Voxpop with Richard Ward in the early 1980s and has since produced compositions that favour text-setting, the use of piano, and extra-musical associations. Her work incorporates elements of postmodernism, neo-tonality, and popular styles.

Kouvaras has recorded many of her works on the Move Records label and for the ABC, including *Kouvaras: Piano Works*, performed by herself, and *The Sky is Melting*, performed by the Rothschild-Riddle Duo. Kouvaras has been an artist-in-residence at the Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Estate, Bundanon, NSW, on four separate occasions (1999, 2000, 2001, 2010) and her compositions have been performed at the National Composing Women's Festival, the Melbourne Fringe Festival (2001), the Port Fairy Festival (2001, 2002), and the Perth New Music Week (2001). She has had multiple works commissioned by performers, including

*Distant Lullaby*, for Deviani Segal and Linda Thompson, and *Secrets of the Amphitheatre*, for Ian Holtham. As a musicologist, she has published work on contemporary music, postmodernism, Australian music, and the relations between gender and music. Her book *Loading the Silence: Australian Sound Art in the Post-Digital Age* (2013) is published by Ashgate and in 2014 won the IASPM-ANZ Rebecca Coyle publication prize.

In 2017 Kouvaras was commissioned by the Melbourne based ensemble Plexus, consisting of Monica Curro (violin), Philip Arkinstall (clarinet), and Stefan Cassomenos (piano), to compose a work based around the idea of 'provenance'. The composition that ensued was entitled *After Before: Provenance Fantasia*. Kouvaras took this recent work as the point of departure when we discussed her compositional methods. Two short extracts are appended.

**The theme that prompted the commission of this work was 'provenance'. Could you say a bit about the commission of this work and how the work embodies this idea of provenance?**

Plexus ensemble has a theme that they organise their recitals around. They do a series at the Melbourne Recital Centre annually and the theme usually starts with 'P'. The brief was to do anything you want related—as broadly or as directly as you like—to the concept of provenance. So, I thought that I'd put musical allusions to music throughout the piece that had really sparked a fire within me, and also to them. I asked them what had really kindled their musical interest from a young age. The clarinettist Phillip Arkinstall said he liked popular, raggy kinds of music; Stefan Cassomenos, the pianist, who used to be in my classes at Uni, didn't nominate anything, so I thought I would give him one of the earliest pieces I learned as a piano student: John Thompson's *The Bee* from *Teaching Little Fingers to Play*. When I was about six, I just loved its second-inversion minor arpeggio after the sort of 'buzzing' chromaticism. So, I did an extemporisation on those two suggestions in a couple of passages in my piece. With Monica Curro, I assumed she might select a solo violin concerto, say, the Tchaikovsky or the Mendelsohn, but no, no, no; it was emphatically *not* solo violin-based—it was Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. My opening theme, therefore, the motif that comes back, has a reference to the Bartok. Continuing my own formative musical moments, I was given a music box when I was really young, perhaps three or four years of age, and it had the *Habanera* theme from Bizet's *Carmen*, which now also has strong feminist resonances for me! I threaded an allusion to it here and there through the work as well. Then, because we are all Australian, I had to include some *Waltzing Matilda* thematic references as well.

**Because 'provenance' refers also to a record of ownership and, since the performers are in a sense helping to compose in that they provide you with some of the allusions you use in the work, who 'owns' it? That is, how do you understand the divide between composer/performer here? Do they become co-composers in any sense?**

No. Definitely not! They told me what they liked—they give me a ballpark if you like—and I went on to decide the rules of the game and where to put the sonic goalposts. I determined what shape the ball was, and how many players were in the game. They didn't give me a theme; they didn't then get back to me and say, 'Oh, actually, I like it done this way better, or whatever.' It was a very broad collaboration. Curro said 'I like Concerto for Orchestra,' but I decided which bit of Concerto for Orchestra I would take the reference from. It wasn't that

Plexus dreamed up a theme, they just mentioned the work by someone else; I didn't quote it directly. I was very careful not to have any direct quotes. Because, even though I call myself a post-modernist, I tried that at first and thought, 'no, it's too crude,' and I wanted it to be more veiled and more my own, as a true *modernist* genius should. I was worried about copyright too! I did actually look into that: luckily, everything I made reference to was out of copyright, so even if someone says 'oh, that's so obviously blah blah blah,' I'd be covered legally. But as for the originating voice, I would put myself as 100% the originator, as much as anyone can call themselves the originator of anything in a post-modern world, because of course we are all a product of our own histories—which is kind of the point of the provenance theme.

**In the programme notes for this work, you say that *After Before* is a 'meta-perspective for the provenance of western art-music itself.' Can you elaborate on this? In what way do these subjective music histories of yourself and the performers relate to the objective history of music?**

What do you mean by objective?

**Well, I suppose the influences you and the performers have are not in themselves the provenance of western art-music, but a subjective relation to western-art music, which has its own objective provenance.**

Well, western art-music certainly has a chronological provenance, or a chronological unfolding, a way of being, an ontology, but the point about the 'meta' aspect I was trying to make, especially with the clarinettist liking popular music and feeling a little bit squeamish about it—not in a very marked way; he wasn't blushing or telling me not to tell anyone—was that there is that divide between high and low. He was embodying that in the way he responded to the question. In a postmodern sense, when you do mix up not only high and low but eras and styles, you can't avoid but gain a meta-perspective. Because in a sense you've got this style commenting upon that style when it is juxtaposed and decontextualized from its origins.

You might say, 'Oh, Carmen next to Scott Joplin, well, yes, it's all music,' whereas music can be very factionalised and people's prejudices can come to the fore when discussing what is the higher form of music, what is aesthetically more exalted. By adopting a post-modern ploy of mixing it all up, you've got that discourse operating in the background where *Waltzing Matilda* might 'comment on' Bartok: they are vaguely contemporaneous but from totally different universes. Just as that piece—and other post-modern pieces like it—might do that, might make that meta-perspective, we are all a walking meta-narrative on music because we don't all (some of us might, but very few I imagine) like only one composer or only like one era. Certainly, the modernist idea of what is valorised—and that doesn't pertain only to twentieth-century modernism but classical music ever since the modern age—has made that divide between high and low as a start. Post-modernism has tried to call those hierarchical standpoints into question, and it *has* been called into question, but it's still there.

**So, in this case the history of western-art music is filtered through you subjectively and comes out almost de-historicised?**

Yes, that's right. Being born when I was, I'm out of chronological step with Bach and yet ... we play Bach.

**This privileging of the subjective body that writes its own history reminds me of ideas related to *écriture féminine*. Whether or not it is the case with this work, do you think there is such a thing as *musique féminine*?**

I certainly know that there are attributes that people ascribe to music along gendered lines. Whether there is a genuine *écriture féminine* is a bit of a moot point I think, because women absorb society as much as men do. Now when you make your aesthetic choices—I'm going to compose in this way—is that because of the gender you are or the comment you are trying to make? And I think you can compose with gender awareness and be a guy who identifies as heterosexual and determinately write something that is delicate and soft and high pitch with the sort of crude assignations of feminine style, but you might do that in a conscious way or you might do it unconsciously and turn around and go, 'Oh my gosh, I hope everybody doesn't try to emasculate me.' I think music and gender are very intertwined, but I don't know if there's a 'pure' feminine 'voice.' I can certainly identify with an urge to want to write in a certain way and of having to go through a struggle—which both men and woman composers and all others in between might feel—because, arguably, modernist qualities are valorised over post-modern, and by that I'm branching out to mean masculinist qualities are valorised over so-called feminine qualities.

You have your complexity—that's man's game—and you've got your extreme dynamics and perhaps more louds than softs; it was quite codified at the beginning of the twentieth century and it's certainly been broken down over the last hundred years, but it's still there in the background and I think some composers still feel squeamish about writing something that might, for want of a better word, sound 'nice.' So, there's still that modernist/masculinist idea of challenge and pushing, which is not to be denigrated just because it's been associated with patriarchy, but it shouldn't be the be-all-and-end-all. Even I as a card-carrying feminist—and not wanting to be squeamish about anything—even I was careful to make the piece kind of my own and not have direct quotations because even when I did do the direct quotations in the earlier draft I didn't feel as good about it as I did latter when I took it a step further and put more of myself in it.

The sorts of writings that were identified as *écriture féminine* twenty or thirty years ago are hard to translate into music. Suggestions came up that it is cyclical because women have cycles—well men sort of vaguely do, too—and there's not one climax point and all those sorts of clichés, but then you think of minimalism done by all those straight white men and think, well, no. Then again, maybe they were doing their own kind of masculine revolt against patriarchy! So, it can be argued in many different ways and I don't think there's just the one answer to that question. It's all about how you react to what you may consider to be prevailing norms and how much you are willing to go against what you consider those norms to be and what you might consider to be at risk if you do. You look at the composers, whether they're male, female, het or non het, over the years, particularly with the dawning of post-modernism where a lot of the composers had been writing in a validly modernist, Serialist style, who woke up one morning and said 'I can't do this anymore.' They found new ways with tonality, going against and worrying about what their peers would say and getting a lot of flak because they were very successful in the academy with their modernist approaches and were accused of selling out and losing the plot. Just on Facebook yesterday,

Michael Hannan posted a picture of a score from his writing from 1973 and he wrote in the caption, 'Well I don't relate to that music anymore, it's very serial but the handwriting was quite neat.' And that's a mild tip of the iceberg when you look at when Richard Meale went tonal after being so successful in his atonal writing. And then other people still finding spark and joy and their universe in atonal music and they don't feel that they're being ushered into it but are genuinely excited by what they do. For me, it's about life being short and doing what gives you the juice.

**The programme note also referred to as a Platoesque soundscape. I am curious what exactly this means?**

Buried in that is Plato's idea of 'proper' music: avoid the Dorian mode because it will emasculate you, for example. So yes, gendered ideas of music going all the way back to those times and ideas of what's correct music and what's not correct music and just playing in a vague way with those sorts of ideas. Also, I tried to have some sections that felt archaic and might have come from some ancient world.

**That's interesting because I assumed it was to do with dialogue and the dialogue between the genres in the piece.**

Oh, yes that's nice; I like that. I'll use that, with no attribution. No, I'll attribute you if I get around to it. Though that might be Socratic as well?

**Well, yes, if it was the case I was going to ask: is one genre Socrates, then? Does one genre in fact dominate or win out in the end.**

That's a very good question. To answer that, if someone were to ask me, how do you determine what wins out in music, the usual answer is, you look at the ending or the beginning. For example, what key is it in? So, Beethoven's Fifth starts in C minor, but the last movement is in C major; we say it's in C minor because it starts in C minor; but in other pieces you might be left thinking—especially if there's been some sort of *tussle*—who has the last word? Whatever theme is the lingering last sonority after the double bar-line at the end, perhaps. I think it was my *Carmen* reference point that won in the end so, chicks ruled!

**Though is there also something slightly egotistical there? Since *Carmen* is a theme or tune from your history.**

Definitely. You can't quash your psyche; your subconscious will win out.

**Why did you include a gong?**

The gong was there to supplement the ancient pastiche music, so it comes in every now and then to anchor the piece as a whole. When I was talking with the players they told me what instruments they had, and that they also had recourse to crotales, but I misremembered that when I got around to starting to write, and I wrote for gong! But they got hold of a gong because they play with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and can get anything, anytime. At the end, it was just a sort of tying-together sonority and I simply like the sound of it, but when I first introduced it, it was just to give that more antique flavour.

**Another thing in the score—at least towards the beginning—are directions as to how the performers should act towards one another and the clarinettist seems somewhat ostracised!**

Yes, because he's representing the popular / art music divide (that persists despite the vaunted levelling out of PoMo), and just because of his character. But, just on that previous point, after my big *Carmen* flourish-climax at the end I think there's a bit of a return to the Bartokian gesture and indeed all the 'allusory' motives, all stripped back to their essence and played in counterpoint with one another. So, in the end it's music—in the beginning and in the end it's music, with the associative signifiers all but dissolved, or at least 'forced' to 'play' together—and even though we are making music as humans, when you discover music you are aware that it's a thing that sounds in the air that isn't a person, even though people make it; it's almost like music exists away from people—and of course you need people to compose it and hear it and sing it and play it—but it does feel like a separate thing from people (and goes on to last beyond human lifespans). That would be my final point here: *music* rules.

#### **About the author**

Maurice Windleburn is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of Melbourne, researching the file-card compositions of John Zorn.

**Figure 1.** Linda Kouvaras, *After Before: Provenance Fantasia* (2017), p. 1

This is a transposing score

## After Before: Provenance Fantasia

for PLEXUS

**Linda Kouvaras**

$\text{♩} = 88$  *Molto espressivo, rubato*

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Violin *Con sord.*  
*mp*

Piano

8 (Pno)  
*mp* *f* *mp* *p*

B $\flat$  Cl.  
*f* *mp* *p*

Vln.  
*f* *mp* *p*

Pno.  
*p* *UC*

12  
*UC* *UC* *UC sim.*

*After Before: Provenance Fantasia* © Linda Kouvaras 2017

This score edited by the composer, 2017

AVR041

Figure 2. Linda Kouvaras, *After Before: Provenance Fantasia* (2017), p. 7

59

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Pno.

61

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Pno.

65

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Pno.

♩ = 84

*Bees buzzing (chaotic, non-Metronomic ad lib.)*

*mp*

*ff*

*mp*

*mf*

*ff*

*\**