Experimental Music in Melbourne:
A Definition and Historical Overview

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Defining Experimental Music

> … any attempt to classify a phenomenon as unclassifiable and (often) elusive as experimental music must be partial.[1]

The term 'experimental music' is, in almost every sense, a metamorphic one. Any attempt to define its parameters seems to result in a series of qualifications that serve only to obscure the meaning of the term. This is primarily because the very nature of an activity is defined largely by its context, that is, a combination of its physical, temporal, political and aesthetic geographies. The simple implication of this is that experimental music in Melbourne in 1975 will most probably manifest itself in very different ways from experimental music in Barcelona in 1994. In this instance, the term is confused geographically (different issues confronting artists in a European city as opposed to Melbourne) and temporally (compare, for example, the difference in available technology between the two dates). Warren Burt points to this problem in a 1993 article in which he compares the aspirations of a be-bop musician in 1940s Harlem to those of an experimental artist in Australia today.[2] Both are arguably experimental but, given the temporal and political contexts of each, this experimentalism will manifest itself in very different ways. Also, and perhaps most importantly, what is considered experimental in one context is not considered experimental in another.

Aside from these geographies, the term 'experimental music' is equivocated further when questions are asked about the focus of the experimentation itself. Music is a multifaceted, multi-dimensional art form and any one facet/dimension can be the subject of enquiry. A microtonal composer may experiment with pitch, an instrument builder with timbre, a visually driven composer may experiment with notation (the visual interface that occupies a prominent place in Western art music history), and a politically minded composer may wish to experiment with the socio-political implications of music and its performance. Some composers may

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[1] Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1974), 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) 4.
[2] Warren Burt, 'Some Musical and Sociological Aspects of Australian Experimental Music 1963-1993,' *Sounds Australian* [Journal of the Australian Music Centre] 37 (1993): 38-47.

address all of these parameters. Given these subtleties it is clear that, before any discussion of experimental music is undertaken, a concise definition of the term needs to be formulated. This definition must hold relevance for both the physical and temporal geography outlined for this research, without becoming so specific as to exclude more generally formulated views. The following pages will problematise the term and offer a definition of the type of experimental music that forms the subject of this article.

The intricacies associated with defining just what experimental music is are not new. Michael Nyman, in his ground-breaking text *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (see fn 1), makes a distinction in the opening pages between experimental music and the music of the avant-garde. The distinction relies heavily on the philosophical impulsion of each camp and has become an important means of differentiating between these often overlapping phenomena. According to Cage in 1955 (heavily quoted by Nyman in the opening pages), avant-garde composers are interested in 'making a thing upon which attention is focused.' In the same passage, he differentiates experimental composition thus:

> Where, on the other hand, attention moves toward the observation and audition of many things at once including those that are environmental—becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive—no question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures can arise (one is a tourist), and here the word 'experimental' is apt, providing that it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown.[3]

Two issues arise out of this description of the experimental that are fundamental to an understanding of experimental music. First, the notion that experimental acts should not be 'later judged in terms of success and failure,' and second, that an experimental act is one 'the outcome of which is unknown.' These notions have become synonymous with experimental music and are used as positive statements of, as well as attacks upon, the experimental aesthetic. The broader implications of these two ostensibly simple ideas will be discussed separately, and in reverse order.

Unknown Outcomes
The idea that the outcome of a composition can be unknown is perhaps one of the most radical and misunderstood notions of Twentieth Century musical thought. To render the outcome unknown is not, as many people assume, to remove it entirely from the composers list of priorities. Experimental composers still inhabit the world of sound and it is usually sound that results from their activities. What is significant is that the outcome is no longer the primary focus of the composer's attention. The emphasis has shifted to the process via which the sound or outcome is produced. The focus is redirected to the experiment itself rather than its conclusions. Nyman explains that:

> Experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined time-object whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a situation in which sounds may occur, a process of generating action (sounding or otherwise), a field delineated by certain compositional 'rules.'[4]

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[3] Nyman, *Experimental Music* 1.
[4] Nyman, *Experimental Music* 3.

It is this shift in emphasis that has precipitated a fundamental revision of the ways in which we understand musical processes, and has also led to an explosion of new processes which are continuously being formulated to answer new questions generated by new technologies, situations and ideas. There is an important difference between a music that aspires to, and focuses on, an object of art, and a music that draws attention to the creation of an object or situation of art. The system that focuses on the object will tend to revere the tools (notation for example) with which such objects have been formed over centuries, and maintain contact with the forms inherent in great objects created in the past. These tools and forms are more easily available to us now than ever before and widely disseminated in the form of scores and recordings. A system that occupies itself with a process, the result of which may or may not be an object of art, will necessarily engage with, and question, these tools, re-contextualising them or disregarding them depending on the nature of the experiment at hand.

That an institutionalised study of composition retains (in most institutions) a focus on orchestration and traditional notation, and that this mode of communication and organisation has become increasingly redundant for experimental composers and performers, goes some way to explaining the relatively antithetical relationship that exists between experimentalists and the academy.[5] This antithesis is exacerbated given that traditional modes of analysis work in reverse teleology to the process of composition. That is, analysis begins with the object (score or performance) and examines it in detail to determine what the compositional processes were, or to quantify certain formal aspects of the work. In relation to experimental music, this is probably an invalid avenue of enquiry as any given performance will often be unique, as in the realisation of graphic scores, improvisation and chance-determined events. The role of the score has changed so drastically that it may not hold all the answers to questions about form and process.

Success and Failure

The idea of the unknown outcome can be adequately dealt with by shifting the emphasis of an analysis in sympathy with the compositional focus. However, the notion that experimental music should not be judged using the accepted binary of success and failure is problematic for analysts and historians on, perhaps, a more fundamental level. Ros Bandt's philological approach to the definition of experimental music is relevant here. She points out that 'the word experiment is derived from the Latin verb *experior*, "to try"… probably also related to the Greek *peira*, the noun for "attempt".'[6] Both of these derivations point to the importance of the process. They imply that the outcome is at least uncertain or ambiguous but, more significantly, they demonstrate that any classification or evaluation of experimental music based on the success or failure of outcomes is inappropriate. This poses serious problems for researchers, archivists and historians accustomed to the fact that history, for the most part, has been a record of success and failure. If to experiment is 'to try' (not necessarily to succeed) and history is a record of success and (therefore) failure, how can the history of experimental music be recorded? It would seem that the traditional criteria for historical relevance, which

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[5] Although it could be argued that this tension has been mitigated since the 1960s, it is the opinion of the author that this antithetical relationship is still very much alive.
[6] Ros Bandt, 'Experimental Music,' *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. Warren Bebbington (Melbourne: OUP, 1997) 206.

would require a judgement as to the success or failure of an act or work, assumes the primacy of the outcome in determining significance or value and is, therefore, largely irrelevant to the experimental.

To avoid this preoccupation it is possible, once again, to examine the process rather than the outcome. However, the problems persist when attempts are made to ascribe validity *ex post facto* to any one experimental process over another. To ask whether or not an inquiry is, or was, valid, is to qualify the idea of 'to try'. To try is to test validity, so, if validity is assumed, there is no need to try. It seems that the application of the success/failure criteria would be fatal to experimental music and will therefore be avoided as a paradigm in this discussion.

This position, if construed literally, could lead to a situation where any action undertaken by an individual that makes an attempt to engage with a process where the outcome is unknown to that individual can be called experimental. In order to narrow this particular field of enquiry, this article is concerned primarily with experiments that challenged or extended, whether intentionally or unintentionally, established musical ideas and practices. To aid in the clarification of this distinction, John Whiteoak differentiates between 'problem-solving' and 'problem-finding' experimentalism. This article is concerned, for the most part, with the latter, which, as Whiteoak points out, involves 'musical exploration as a highly valued process in itself.'[7]

Context

Extrapolating from these general observations it is possible to say that problem finding experimental music is primarily an exploratory activity undertaken to test the validity and explore the parameters of (musical or non-musical) processes, situations and/or ideas. Nevertheless, these criteria are inadequate if they are considered in a contextual vacuum. Having considered the notion that what is experimental is determined largely by both physical and temporal geographies, there is one overarching contextual issue that seems to bind these activities together, regardless of when and where they occur. This issue involves the placement of works in 'otherness' to, or even in active negation of, established models for aesthetic and musical discourse (language) and/or practices that have gained (through repetition and validation) a certain acceptability.

Experimental music gains impetus from the tension of its position at the periphery of the acceptable or mainstream, and ideas, once experimental, that are subsumed into mainstream culture, quickly lose appeal for the experimental musician for whom dialectic is paramount. These notions are examined by Burt who uses the ephemeral space (or context) of the promotional concert poster to discuss the issues surrounding context. He argues that experimental music searches for a context, and that once an avenue of enquiry finds one, it becomes a 'product for a defined market.' In what Burt refers to as the age of 'economics as theology,' he posits that experimental music could even be considered 'advanced market research.' His concluding remarks are perhaps the most illuminating with regard to the aesthetic position of the experimental artist:

> there always remains a significant proportion of musicians, in whatever idiom, who keep asking questions, not just about the social applicability of musical idioms, but

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[7] John Whiteok, *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836-1970* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999) xv.

about the nature of asking questions themselves. And it is this ever changing group of musicians who keep coming back to the alternative spaces the factory, the park, the community arts network and the art gallery for one more go at not only searching for a context but for the much more uncomfortable task of investigating what the meaning of context is, in and of itself.[8]

It is this position outside of context that politicises experimental music and is fundamental to understanding its objectives. Also, such political repositioning will inform, to some extent, the aesthetic value of many works written in the experimental idiom. The emphasis on political thinking relates particularly to what Chris Mann calls 'art as political science.'[9] This phenomenon was of great interest to composers in 1970s Melbourne and is manifest in many of the experimental works composed during that decade.

To add this political/contextual premise to Nyman's and previously stated definitions the following is proposed: problem finding experimental music is primarily an exploratory activity undertaken to test the validity and explore the parameters of (musical or non-musical) processes, situations and/or ideas which, in themselves, pose questions about established and accepted musical contexts from a position outside of these contexts. The remaining task is to relate this broad definition to the specific temporal and physical geographies that form the boundary of this discussion, that is, the development of experimental music in Melbourne up until the formation of the La Trobe music department in 1975. What follows is a brief overview of experimental music in Australia designed to illustrate two key points. First, that the avant-garde needed to be established before a community of experimentalists could emerge. Second, that, for a short time, this institution (La Trobe) and the community arts network CHCMC (Clifton Hill Community Music Centre) were working together to forge an Australian experimental music identity.

Australian Experimental Music: A Contextual Overview
The following synopsis is in no way intended to be a comprehensive statement about experimental music in Australia or Melbourne before 1975. It merely serves to contextualise the material that appears in the body of this article, and, to highlight a selection of important events, and examine some of the difficulties that shaped this early period in the history of experimental music in Melbourne.

Previous Publications
Writings on the general history of Australian music consistently refer to issues of isolation, population and the newness of the nation in order to explain a relatively backward cultural position in comparison to Europe and the United States, particularly up until 1970. The available material is far from extensive and a significant proportion of the books published on Australian music, and particularly Australian composition, have been in the form of composer biographies. Prominent examples include James Murdoch's *Australia's Contemporary Composers*, Callaway and Tunley's *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century* and, more recently, Brenton

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[8] Promotional poster advertising the Solo Concerts that ran from the 4 to 7 February 1988 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Melbourne. Ros Bandt, private collection.
[9] Chris Mann, electronic correspondence, 2000.

Broadstock's *Sound Ideas*.[10] The record for experimental music is considerably worse, with the first substantial publication, *22 Contemporary Australian Composers* (another set of biographies), released as late as 1988.[11] A brief inquiry reveals that this lack of publication is not proportional to the prevailing levels of experimental activity, particularly from the mid-1960s onward. Recent publications have moved to redress this imbalance, notably *Arias* by John Jenkins and Rainer Linz, the final chapters of Whiteoak's *Playing Ad Lib* and Ros Bandt's recent work *Sound Sculpture—Intersections in Sound and Sculpture in Australian Artworks*.[12]

The little that has been written about Australian music, and composition in particular, has had the frustrating yet necessary tendency to focus on demographic issues. There can be little doubt that these issues have had a significant impact upon the development of (mainstream and experimental) music in this country, but the persistent use of these issues to compare Australian music to European (and later American) norms has frustrated any chance of investigating the unique qualities that such a demographic is bound to produce. The preoccupation with validating attempted mimicries has virtually suppressed individual and organized attempts to synthesise Australian experience into a coherent musical or aesthetic idiom. The prevailing issues, however, are deeply ingrained in the psyche of a displaced European nation, removed from a geographical and cultural context, which it attempted to reconstruct in the Asia-Pacific region.

Roger Covell's *Themes of a New Society*, written in 1967, is perhaps the first attempt to articulate Australia's musical evolution and is very conscious of Australia's colonial attitude. Covell points out that: 'Each ship was an almost religious renewal of the colonists' membership of European civilization.'[13] This image of colonial Australia resonates powerfully with the later fetishism for international trends that persisted in the Australian musical establishment well after material was arriving by ship. Covell gives another pertinent example of the colonial attitude in his discussion of the lecture series conducted by Percy Grainger in Australia and New Zealand during 1933-35. As part of this tour, Grainger, arguably Australia's first experimental composer, lectured on topics that included early music, world music (ethnomusicology), and early experiments in microtonal music. Covell points out that these Australian lectures were rather coolly received, given that the audience consisted of 'a body of musicians largely immersed in the notion of music as one of the gentilities of civilization.'[14] In such a climate it is hardly surprising that examples of early Australian experimental music are rare, and that the attempts which were made have been, until recently, largely ignored by the musical establishment.

Covell's 1968 publication acknowledges two of the pioneers of Australian experimental music, Henry Tate and Percy Grainger, outlining the fundamentally different approaches that each took to the formation of a uniquely Australian musical language. Tate was a pioneer in the study of Australian ornithology and believed that the incorporation of native bird song

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[10] James Murdoch, *Australia's Contemporary Composers* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1972); Frank Callaway and David Tunley, eds, *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: OUP, 1978); Brenton Broadstock, ed., *Sound Ideas: Australian Composers Born Since 1950* (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1995).
[11] John Jenkins, *22 Contemporary Australian Composers* (Melbourne: NMA Publications, 1988).
[12] John Jenkins and Rainer Linz, *Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre* (Melbourne: Red House Editions, 1997); Ros Bandt, *Sound Sculpture: Intersections in Sound and Sculpture in Australian Artworks* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2001).
[13] Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967) 65.

and the sounds of the Australian bush into musical composition could be a logical step toward a truly nationalistic voice. In 1924 he published a manifesto entitled *Australian Musical Possibilities*.[15] Covell describes the difference between Grainger and Tate as the difference between an 'internationally minded, publicly eccentric virtuoso and [a] provincial enthusiast.'[16] However extravagant, this comparison does make the important distinction between Tate's nationalism and Grainger's preoccupation with more fundamental musical problems. Far from searching for a uniquely Australian music, Grainger's pursuit of what he called 'free music' had far greater implications for the entire Western Classical Music canon. He was proposing a beatless music, composed using layers of gliding tones capable of spanning all possible microtonal intervals. His free music sketches or scores show that these tones would intersect and overlap with great fluidity, creating an impulsion free from the strictures of what Grainger called 'harmonic morality' and metered rhythm. Sadly, these visions were only partly realised in Grainger's lifetime and his revolutionary musical ideas remained largely ignored by the broader Australian musical community.

Recent research conducted by Australian composer Paul Doornbusch has revealed another little known aspect of Australia's pioneering work, this time in computer music. His research shows that the CSIR Mk1 (later called CSIRAC), 'one of the world's earliest stored program electronic digital computers,' was programmed to play musical tunes as early as 1951.[17] Doornbusch points out that scientists in complete cultural isolation, without any input whatsoever from musicians or composers, undertook this remarkable work as an experiment in computer programming. Doornbusch goes on to argue that the lack of musical input confined the computer's musical tasks to the reproduction of popular tunes of the day. Ironically, when the computer was moved from Sydney to Melbourne in 1955, Grainger himself used to walk past it frequently, completely unaware of the machine's existence and capabilities.[18]

Computer and Electronic Music Technology: Innovation and Resistance
Pioneering work in music technology continued in Australia particularly in the design and manufacture of the Fairlight Computer Music Instrument (CMI). Peter Vogel and Kim Ryrie founded Fairlight Instruments with additional design by Anthony Furse. The CMI was one of the world's first digital sampling devices. It allowed for the recording of real sounds for digital manipulation and playback. A prototype was installed at the Canberra School of Music in 1975 at the request of composer Don Banks, and the system entered the international market with great success in 1979. Artists from diverse fields, like pop musician Stevie Wonder and film director Stanley Kubrick, were among the early purchasers of the system, attracted to the Fairlight by its powerful potential for the digital manipulation of recorded sound among other features.[19] In Melbourne, the Victorian College of the Arts was the first institution to install a Fairlight CMI.

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[14] Covell, *Australia's Music* 100.
[15] Henry Tate, *Australian Musical Possibilities* (Melbourne: Edward A. Vidler, 1924).
[16] Covell, *Australia's Music* 107.
[17] Paul Doornbusch, 'The Music of CSIRAC,' *Waveform 2001: A Digital Musics Conference* [Proceedings of the Australasian Computer Music Association Conference, July 2001], ed. Gordon Monro (Sydney: School of Contemporary Arts, University of Western Sydney, 2001) 25.
[18] Paul Doornbusch, 'A Missed Opportunity for Grainger, Music and Australia,' *In a Nutshell* [Newsletter of the Friends of the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne] 8.2 (2000): 13.
[19] Nigel Nettheim, 'Computers and Music,' *Oxford Companion to Australian Music,* ed. Bebbington 144; 'Fairlight CMI' *Oxford Companion to Australian Music* 210.

Both CSIRAC and the Fairlight CMI are indicative of the scope and quality of Australia's contribution to experimental music technologies. The development of these groundbreaking machines demonstrates a fundamental willingness to extend conventional ideas and techniques in exploratory ways. This, combined with the radical ideas of Tate and Grainger, demonstrates that there is a strong foundation for experimentalism in Australia that began to develop with increasing speed over time. On a negative note, however, these were relatively isolated events and acts of innovation that occurred within a broader cultural environment of reliance and colonial behindism. Emerging from the computer laboratories into Melbourne in the 1950s, it appears that the practice of experimental music and the teaching of innovative musical ideas was in a state of inertia in tertiary institutions. It was only due to the work and engagement of individuals like Felix Werder, Margaret Sutherland and Dorian Le Gallienne, among others, who formed groups like The Camerata Society, that concerts of new music were performed at all.[20] Other individuals, like Kevin McBeath, were compensating for the inadequate coverage of new musical ideas in the tertiary institutions by providing Melbourne audiences with the rare opportunity to hear twentieth-century repertoire that equally did not have a voice in the concert halls of the day. McBeath's organisation, the Society for New Music, was founded in 1949. For seven years the society organised listening environments where recorded works from Europe were played to an audience.[21]

By comparison, in post-World War II Europe, the explorations of the serialists and the work of electronic music pioneers were held in relatively high regard. Electronic studios were set up in Paris and Cologne, and radio orchestras across Western Europe commissioned numerous new works. In Australia there were no electronic music studios, few orchestral commissions and virtually no institutional infrastructure for the teaching and practice of new music. The history of one of the first significant Australian electronic music studios highlights this lack of institutional support. In 1964, Henk Badings, a visiting Dutch composer to Adelaide University, conducted, with the sponsorship of the Phillips Corporation, a series of seminars on electronic music. Peter Tahourdin came to the same university from England two years later, and endeavoured to capitalise on this initial impetus. However, in the absence of any commitment from the university, Tahourdin was forced to convince a local entrepreneur, Derek Jolly, to purchase a large modular Moog synthesiser for his own studio, and allow student access to the equipment for teaching purposes.[22]

This kind of resistance to technology was not the case at Columbia-Princeton in the late 1960s, where Milton Babbitt had been working on the unique RCA synthesizer, fully funded, since 1959. It seems that, in the Australian climate of the 1950s and '60s, there was less focus on the experimental, as the agenda was to establish the avant-garde. To this end, the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) began (in Sydney the mid-1950s, and considerably later—not until 1965—in Melbourne) performing avant-garde European and, to a lesser extent American, works. Although the early programs concentrated more on repertoire from the earlier part of the twentieth century, the 1960s saw the performance of many post World War II works from Europe and Australia.[23]

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[20] Joel Crotty, 'The Entrepreneurial Spirit of George Dreyfus,' *Sounds Australian* 55 (2000): 19.
[21] Helen Gifford, 'Subliminal Co-ordinates … Drawing Threads,' *New Music Articles* 7 (1989): 6.
[22] Peter Tahourdin, unpublished interview with Robin Fox, 1 May 2000.
[23] Greg Dobbs, 'Professor Donald Peart and the Sydney ISCM,' *Sounds Australian* 55 (2000): 12.

The Late 1960s and Early '70s: The Influence of Keith Humble

Keith Humble's return from Paris in 1966 provided an injection of energy into the experimental music scene in Melbourne. Humble drew together the loose threads of existing experimental activity under the banner of The Society for the Private Performance of New Music (SPPNM). Concerts and workshops were held in the, then neglected, Grainger museum, which was soon to house the University of Melbourne's electronic music studio. The decision to house the studio in the museum was a conscious attempt, on Humble's part, to recognise that there was continuity between Grainger's experimental outlook and the subsequent exploration of electronic music in Melbourne. These activities, combined with the Proms series of orchestral concerts, headed by John Hopkins from 1963 to 1973,[24] and the return of David Ahern to Sydney from Europe, where he had studied with Stockhausen and worked with Cornelius Cardew's scratch orchestra,[25] brought the activities of the European and American avant-garde and experimental schools of thought forcefully into the public domain in Australia. More importantly for the development of Australian experimental music, however, was the influence that these acts of exposition would have on the practice of future experimental artists. They provided the springboard for the experimental activity that began to flourish in the early 1970s.

Although these developments were promising, the avant-garde was far from fully established at a tertiary level. Australia's relatively late recognition of electronic music as an important aesthetic and theoretical development provides an illustration of this. In the Australia of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, electronic music was seen to be the same as both experimentalism and avant-garde music. The history of electronic music in Australia shows, once again, that individuals working in isolation, and without institutional support or sense of community, conducted pioneering work until, in the mid 1960s, studios began to emerge in the institutions. Two relatively well documented innovators were Val Stephen, a physician who constructed electronic pieces at home throughout the 1960s,[26] and Bruce Clarke, whose experiments with oscillators in the late 1950s resulted in the Jingle Factory, Australia's first commercially viable electronic music studio.[27]

By the early 1970s, electronic music had been one of the most significant areas for research and experimental activity in Europe and the United States for at least a decade. In 1971 Humble, with the assistance of colleagues Ian Bonighton and Jean Charles François, among others, organised a national conference entitled 'The State of the Art of Electronic Music in Australia,' with international guest Milton Babbitt. The conference, hosted by the University of Melbourne, provided a timely reminder of the neglect of both electronic music generally, and tertiary education in the area of music technology, in Australia at that time. The papers delivered exposed a dire situation. It seemed that the electronic music activity in primary and secondary schools rivalled, and in some cases, even surpassed, the work being done at a tertiary level. In addition, the papers indicated that the few institution-based electronic studios that did exist were under-funded and under-staffed.

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[24] Gwen Bennett, 'John Hopkins and the Proms,' *Sounds Australian* 55 (2000): 14.

[25] Ernie Gallagher, 'AZ Music,' *New Music Articles* 7 (1989): 9.

[26] Val Stephen was one of the first Australian electronic music composers to be released on an international label. His piece *Fireworks* appeared on a 1966 Folkways release entitled *Electronic Music*. See Thomas Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1985) 176.

[27] Warren Burt, 'Electronic Music,' *Oxford Companion to Australian Music* 195.

Jean-Charles François, Humble's colleague from his time in Paris, made the following nine scathing observations about musical life in Australia at that time, and the problems facing experimental music, in his paper 'Electronic Music is Education:'

1. there are no professional composers in Australia;
2. there are no professional performers either;
3. in the universities there are no electronic studios with permanently employed people working full-time in the studio;
4. there is no research program in music education;
5. in the universities there is a complete lack of concern in musical problems on the part of other departments and vice-versa;
6. there is no electronic studio at the ABC;
7. recordings at the ABC are bad jokes;
8. FM in radio transmissions does not exist yet; and
9. contemporary music making is very low.[28]

These harsh comments were made with agitation in mind and are not included here as concrete statements of fact. They do, however, illustrate the frustration felt by both avant-garde and experimental artists at this time, particularly those attempting to function at an academic level.

The Early 1970s and Ron Nagorcka

Despite these shortcomings, problem-finding experiment in music was beginning to ferment in reaction to, or in symbiosis with, the increase of avant-garde activity at an institutional level. By the early 1970s, Humble's educational groundwork at Melbourne University was having a direct effect on the experimental music scene. Of particular significance were the activities of a small group of composers, including Ron Nagorcka and Dan Robinson, who had studied composition under Humble and François in the late 1960s. Not only was there a dramatic increase in activity in the early 1970s, but the existing activity was validated, empowering a community of experimental artists who began to collaborate and develop. This interaction between artists fostered a confidence that precipitated further growth in activity, and also an awareness of identity and individuation from the European and American mainstreams. The conference of 1971 (discussed above) highlighted definite institutional problems, however, outside of these institutions, an independent experimental music scene was gathering momentum.

Of Humble's students from Melbourne University, Ron Nagorcka was particularly active during the early 1970s. As early as 1971, Nagorcka had been instrumental in forming the experimental group '2³' (2-cubed) which performed music and music theatre pieces written predominantly by its own members. In a short, unattributed statement about the group that appeared in the papers, they are described as:

a group of people who are interested in experimenting with music and who meet in Carlton. They are concentrating on voice sounds like John McCaughey's chorus in the

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[28] Jean-Charles François, 'Electronic Music is Education,' *The State of the Art of Electronic Music in Australia Conference Proceedings* [Melbourne, 9-13 August 1971], ed. Agnes Dodds and Ian Bonighton (Melbourne: Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, 1971) 18-23.

Bacchae. They are influenced by John Cage and his credo of 'music is everything and everything is music.' On Friday December 10th, at the Student's Church in Queensbury Street, they are giving a performance of their work. It is not called a concert on purpose and the music is mostly improvised. A variety of instruments are used as well as voices, including electronics, clickers, kazoos and a gong.[29]

The program for the concert (see Figure 1) demonstrates the extent of Humble's influence. Both Nagorcka and Robinson were composition students in his first series of composition classes at the University of Melbourne in the late 1960s, and both Bonighton and McCaughey had been influenced by Humble through collaboration both academically and artistically. The concert was not recorded and little documentation remains about the pieces themselves. It is clear, however, that Bonighton's *Criticisms* involved instructing a group of vocalists to 'shout, whisper, chant and sing selections from the works of music critics.'[30] Also, a condensed version of the score for Nagorcka's *Chunder Music* (Figure 2) reveals the theatrical nature of the performances, as well as Nagorcka's leaning toward a flexible approach to scoring for improvising ensembles that would inform his compositions well into the late 1970s.

Other events staged by the group include Nagorcka's experimental musical *Regret Vanishes*, and a large scale collaboration with the experimental wing of the Australian Cello Society entitled *CELLOMUSIC 1 + ABC/XY + MUSIC FROM THE PAST (COLLAGE) = (2^3 + E.C.S.) (APATHETIC ANOMOLY 1 + (CRITICISMS / IB))*, also by Nagorcka. *Regret Vanishes* separated the audience at Melbourne's La Mama theatre into three distinct groups. Each group accessed the venue through different doors to see what appeared to be three different shows. The sound of the performances and audience responses from each room informed the performances in the adjacent rooms, creating a loop of audience intrigue. The work had the potential to play on the audience's voyeuristic curiosities, especially by causing them to wonder whether the performance in the other room was more interesting than the one they were viewing.

Continuing the theme of simultaneity, Nagorcka's composition for the experimental section of the Australian Cello Society is essentially the simultaneous performance of a number of discrete works. The program notes (reproduced below as Figure 3) provide some explanation of the work, and a fuller description appeared in the *Herald* on the 4 April 1973, where Nagorcka explained the ostensibly complex formula for the work by breaking it into separate components: 'There are four compositions which can be played together or separately. One is for cello (Cello Music), radios (ABC-XY), television sets (TVs) and record players (Music from the Past).'[31] The second half of the equation points to the performers (2^3 and E.C.S), and Apathetic Anomaly refers to Nagorcka's role in bringing the works together as a composition. The word 'Criticisms' refers to the previously mentioned piece of the same name written by Bonighton for the ensemble in 1971. Nagorcka acknowledges his debt to Cage, citing *Imaginary Landscapes* as inspiration for the work. His re-envisioning of the Cage score extends the original radio piece so as to include the manipulation of contrast and brightness controls on television sets. The work was performed on Saturday 18 April at the auditorium of the Royal Park psychiatric hospital.

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[29] *Melbourne Times* 8 December 1971.
[30] John Hamilton, 'Cop this Crazy Concert,' [Melbourne] *Herald* 4 April 1973.
[31] Hamilton, 'Cop this Crazy Concert.'

Figure 1. 2^3 concert program, 10 December 1971

PROGRAM

EEEEE!	--	Ron Nagorcka
Haiku	--	Dan Robinson
Criticisms	--	Ian Bonighton
But Peer	--	John McCaughey
Mitosis	--	Bob Maxwell

Interval

Chunder--Music	--	Ron Nagorcka

"2^3" wishes to thank Fr. Jim Brady for his kind
permission to use the Students' Church this
evening.

Front Cover -- Condensed score of "Chunder--Music" by
Ron Nagorcka.

Figure 2. Ron Nagorcka, *Chunder Music*; condensed score
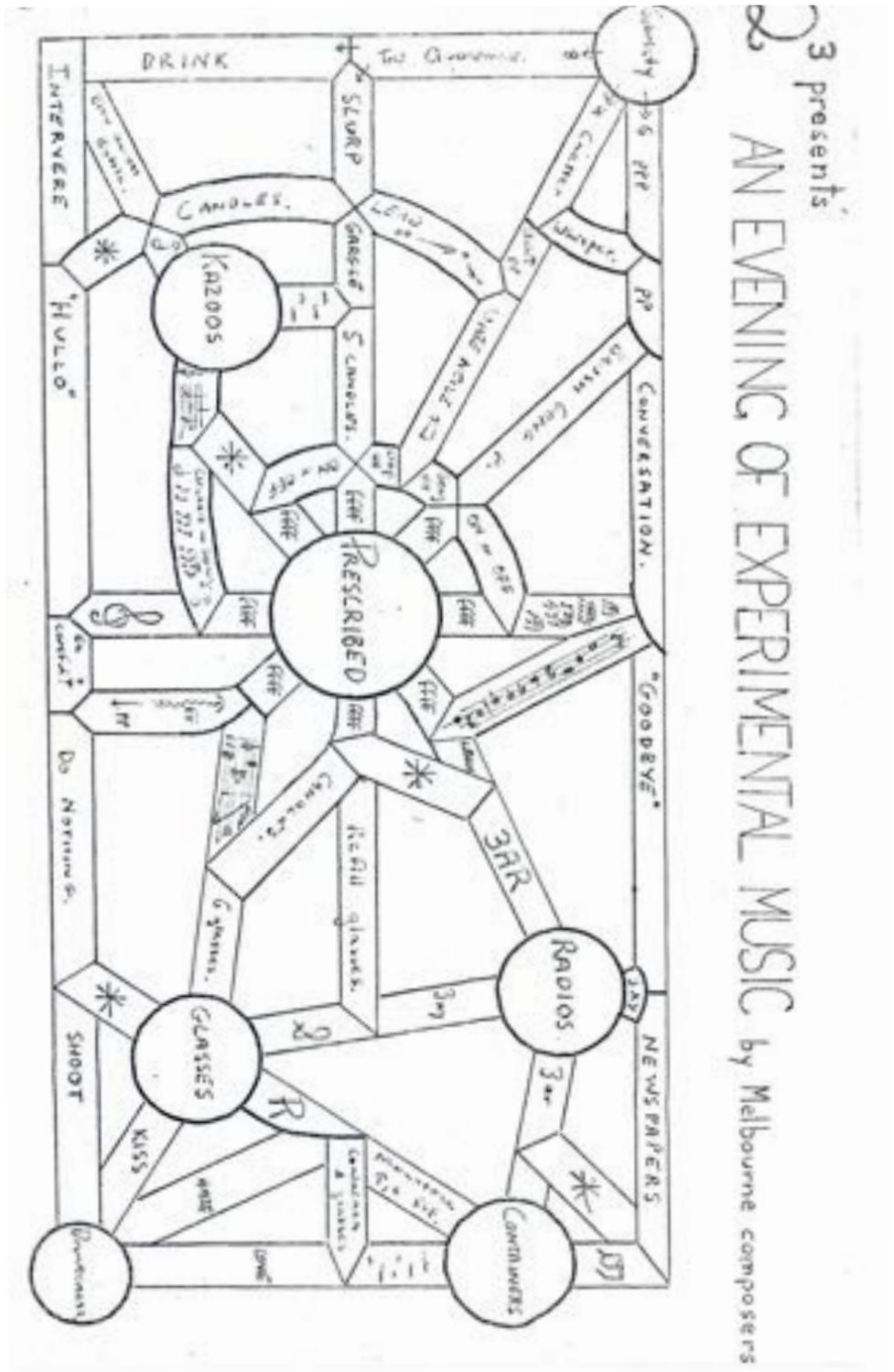
Figure 3. Program notes, 14 April 1973

PROGRAMME NOTES.
RON NAGORCKA (Born 1948)

'CELLOMUSIC 1 + ABC/XY + TV's + MUSIC FROM THE PAST (COLLAGE)
= (2³ + CCS)(APATHETIC ANOMALY 1 + (CRITICISMS / IB)).

This work was composed this year by Ron Nagorcka especially for the experimental section of the Australian 'Cello Society.

'Cellos, radios, television sets and record players are used in many combinations. The left side of the title-equation contains four pieces written so that they can be performed simultaneously in any combination. In this particular performance they will be performed by 2³ (two cubed), an experimental music/theatre group, along with members of the 'Cello Society's experimental section.

This will be the first performance of "Apathetic Anomaly 1", which the composer defines as "an irregularity which does not attempt to say anything". "Criticisms", by Ian Bonighton (1971), which was written for 2³, will be performed during Apathetic Anomaly 1.

The composer has, in his own words, "strictly defined the parameters of sound, and of live and electronic theatre, in which the randomness of our age is permitted to operate".

ERNEST JOHN MOERAN (1894-1950)

Moeran was an English composer of Irish descent. Early in his career he studied with John Ireland. He is said to have been greatly influenced by Delius, but according to J.A. Westrup his greatest love was folk music. He also provided settings for poems by A.E. Housman, James Joyce and Seamus O'Sullivan. His major works include a symphony, a sinfonietta and several concertos. He also composed choral works, piano pieces and some chamber music. To quote one commentator: "Moeran was very self-critical and fastidious; thus his production was never very great. His temperament was distinctly lyrical, and his melodiousness has been traced back to his Irish origin.

IAN BONIGHTON

Well known in the Australian musical world, Ian Bonight is represented twice in tonight's programme. His "Criticism" (1971) is contained in Ron Nagorcka's "Apathetic Anomaly 1", and he has written the 'cello settings for the two Yiddish songs that end the programme. Last year he received his Doctorate in Music from the University of Melbourne, majoring in composition.
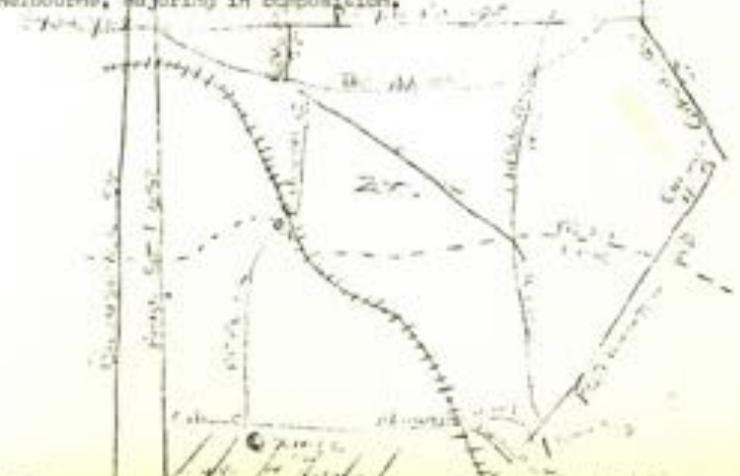
Activity was also vibrant during the early 1970s among the free jazz community and the jazz / art-music cross-over groups that were the extension of experiments conducted by jazz musicians and visual artists in the mid to late 1960s. John Whiteoak's *Playing Ad Lib*, particularly in the final chapters, provides excellent documentation of these activities up until 1970. Between 1972 and 1974 the New Improvisers Action Group for Gnostic and Rhythmic Awareness (NIAGGRA) played regular Monday nights at La Mama theatre in Carlton. The group's primary line-up consisted of trumpet, bass, percussion and saxophone, but this was frequently expanded to include other performers including compositional linguist Chris Mann.[32] The performers, Jeremy Kellock and Bruce Woodkock among others, worked predominantly from the jazz perspective moving into free improvisation. The poster, reproduced in Figure 4, demonstrates the groups interest in the organization of sound. The notion that 'sounds may be organised / sounds also organise' presents the duality of composition and improvisation. The definition of improvising outlined on this poster also has cosmic (that is, 'influence other than earthbound') overtones.

Nagorcka, writing in the *Melbourne Times* in April 1973, makes a distinction between the jazz improvisations of NIAGGRA where 'the form of the music is pre-determined' and those of another Melbourne-based improvisation group, Crucible. The latter was a larger ensemble incorporating drums, double bass, flute and clarinet, amongst other traditionally jazz-oriented instruments, also extending their instrumentation to include a zither and didgeridoo. Nagorcka argues that, although Crucible demonstrates a greater freedom from traditional form, they rely heavily on rhythm for continuity. He concludes with the statement: 'Both groups tend to be too co-ordinated in their approach. The players need to free themselves from each other and from the sounds so that the music will structure itself more effectively.'[33]

The New Music Centre

Perhaps the most important attempt, in the early seventies, to establish an organised approach to, and venue for, experimental music was the formation of the New Music Centre (NMC) in 1972. Founded by Peter Mumme, Chris Mann, Douglas Lawrence, Ron Nagorcka, John Seal, Walter Billeter, Dan Robinson and others, the centre was originally housed in a Flemington church hall designed for community access. After a struggle for funding, which involved becoming associated with the Melbourne branch of the ISCM to increase the Centre's credibility,[34] the centre moved to Hosier Lane in the city.

According to an article that appeared in the *Age* on 6 October 1973, the aim of the NMC was to provide 'studio and workshop space for musicians working in a contemporary or electronic vein … as well as a library and reference centre.'[35] The article goes on to point out that the funding allowed the NMC to establish Australia's first public-access electronic music studio devoid of any institutional affiliations and there were even plans to set up a printing press. Unfortunately, it became impossible to maintain this initial momentum. The group of organisers became increasingly frustrated with the Melbourne City Council who, on the basis

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[32] Jenkins, *22 Contemporary Australian Composers* 124.
[33] Ron Nagorcka, 'Jazz Improvised, Gentle,' *Melbourne Times* 4 April 1973: 4.
[34] Chris Mann, unpublished interview with Robin Fox, 19 May 2000.
[35] Wendy Arnott, 'Center Must Go to New Quarters,' *Age* 16 January 1974: 19.

Figure 4. NIAGGRA concert poster (date unknown)

of complaints from the Melbourne Theatre Company and Masonic Club, refused to grant the NMC a permit to use the Hosier Lane premises as a music venue:

> In 1970 the council refused a permit for a discotheque in the same Hosier Lane building. Apparently three years later it can make no distinction between live, all-night rock and roll and the purpose of a central base for contemporary Australian music.[36]

In the face of these bureaucratic frustrations, and the fact that both Mann and Nagorcka were heading abroad, the NMC gradually lost momentum and ceased activities altogether. For a short period the NMC formed the nucleus of Melbourne's experimental music scene, organising numerous concerts and providing free access to equipment and ideas. A complete history of the group and its activities is yet to be written.

The lasting and most important imprint left by this venture was a general recognition of the fact that a large proportion of experimental music making occurring at the time fell outside the avant-garde umbrella of the ISCM (the financial association forged between the ISCM and the NMC was not a strong one). Furthermore, there was the realisation that this activity needed to be organised or co-ordinated. It was this impression that was to have a significant impact on the development of experimental music throughout the rest of the 1970s.

Conclusion: La Trobe University

In Melbourne in the years following the NMC (1975–79) there was a unique duality in the locality of experimental activity. For at least a decade previously the avant-garde had been considered experimental (through the activities of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) in the 1960s for example) and in 1975 the avant-garde was only just beginning to stake a major claim at an academic level. However, the foundation of the La Trobe Music Department in 1975 was more than an exercise in avant-gardism. The department represented a rare attempt to create a truly experimental situation in an institutional context. Given that university music departments in Australia had been based on the traditional model of the conservatorium, the formation of the La Trobe department constituted a major shift in the study of music in this country. At the same time, a decidedly non-academic experimental music forum, the anarchic Clifton Hill Community Music Centre (CHCMC), was providing a location for an experimental music that largely rejected any institutional ethos. The CHCMC was particularly opposed to the tendency of the academic institutions to create hierarchies and to discriminate between works on the basis of the conformity of their outcomes to a rigid system of syntactic rules. The interesting thing about this situation is that, at this point in time (1975–76 particularly), the academic institution and the community-based experimental art-music movement were following a similar trajectory. Certain key figures facilitated this cross-over, particularly in the area of electronic music which was in a period of transition in Melbourne due to increased access to equipment and knowledgeable practitioners. It is often the case that experimental activities exist in juxtaposition to institutional or academic fields of enquiry. This relationship is problematised by the fact that the early years of the La Trobe University Music Department were essentially experimental and yet still provided a dialectic point of reference for an anti-establishment experimental music community.

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[36] Arnott, 'Centre Must Go.'

It remains to be seen whether the La Trobe University music department and Clifton Hill Community Music Centre's significant attempts, however disparate in motivations and resources, to address this need for cohesion were successful. Certainly, the 1980s saw a more coherent and rigorous approach to experimental music with the publication of the NMA series of journals and Australian experimental feature at the Paris Rostrum of 1983. Many of the champions of Australian experimental music throughout the 1980s and '90s, and even today, could trace an influence back to the hotbed of experimental music-making activity that was taking place in this country in the late 1960s and early 1970s.