

A Closely Woven Fabric

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“The Real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible fragments of our imagination.”

Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology of Perception.
Routledge Classics 2002, page xi.

“We hear the alien quality of the non-human in our music and the humanity of music in nature.”

David Dunn. Nature Sound and the Sacred,
www.daviddunn.com/~david/ Page 1.

A Whiff of Decay

In the early 1990's with a group of friends, including the late Jamie Fielding, we saw Boulez conduct contemporary music at the Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House. Although we were interested in the music, someone in our row had trodden on dog shit. The distraction became so ludicrous for Jamie and me we became wracked by laughter, which the more we tried to stifle, the worse it became. The red and white-wood seats were linked, so our vibrating bodies rocked the entire row – after 10mins of unsuccessful attempts at control we had to leave.

You could say this was juvenile behaviour, but in our defence, it wasn't the whiff that was funny, it was its insertion into the ritual the players and audience were involved in – its focus on the star conductor. Smell broke the spell and allowed us to see the ritual for what it was to us, ridiculously obsequious.

In the 1970's at the same hall, a Japanese Noh performance, which I'd been looking forward to for

weeks, was destroyed for me when the Sydney audience laughed inappropriately, (usually the moments when the percussionists produced vocal/drum interjections). I was annoyed by the audiences ignorance, (probably just as annoyed as people were at Jamie and me) - but amusement is revealing.



Figure 1: Photo by the author from a trek to the Budawangs 2006.

With music, we enter a parallel world with which ritual helps us engage. But ritual must resonate appropriately with time/space or run the risk of

ridicule. You cannot assume powerful performances from another realm will translate re-contextualized. Both performances should have been edifying examples of high art, but were seen as ridiculous by some audience members.

Most “serious” music-making in Australia focuses on content, while the contexts are stultifying or inappropriate. It seems like an inelegant way to proceed.

Plonk Culture

Rituals that we have plonked from the northern hemisphere are largely irrelevant to Australia and end up as powerless, or worse, ridiculous. When it comes to so-called serious music, there's nothing post about our colonialism.

(There are some obvious examples of stuff that isn't, Ross Bolleter's ruined pianos, Amanda Stewart's super-language-collider, Alan Lamb's wires, Thembi Soddell's sampled-psycho-scapes, Carolyn Connor's clear-lighted cocky-attacks – all comfortable in this place and all largely disregarded by the institutions that are supposed to be about serious music.)

And most of our halls, like the above mentioned Sydney Opera House Concert Hall, (a great building from the outside), are classics of plonk culture in themselves – they have very little appropriate resonance in twenty first century Australia. (And they're often confused acoustically).

So we have double plonks, the places themselves are inappropriate and most of the events struggle with context.

What contexts have currency in Australia? What places have the power to frame sonic art in this country in an appropriate way.

Quinkans

As a counterpoint to the two examples above, sometime in the 1990's I had an experience that convinced there were better contexts.

In a valley in Cape York - Quinkan Country, (named after the strange and mysterious figures in the rock art in the escarpments), there were a number of 'grey nomads' (or SAD's {See Australia and Die}) around a camp fire after dinner, and they asked me to play a tune. So, in a cliché of what Aussies are meant to experience, (but it's guaranteed very few ever have), I played music into the still night. Against the subtle low frequency drone and sudden fire-cracks, sounds bounced off the trees and the valley's escarpments, and in this setting, I thought these ordinary Aussies grasped the music's ambition.

If you were to view their travel as pilgrimage, and that day as visiting a sacred site then it's not surprising they were open for an experience of ambition. They didn't seem to mind that there was no 'tune' in any conventional sense, and they grasped that this performance was inclusive of the entire field. The fire, owl calls, dog shit, or laughter about it, couldn't have undermined the process – it would've been a part of it. And in this context, old debates, tonality or atonality, complexity or minimalism were thankfully side-stepped - music experienced afresh.

Australia has unique geography, history, weather, flora and fauna, and all the elements conspire to create wonderful sonic environments. This is true of our forests, Sydney's sandstone formations, desert clay pans of far west NSW, down the Todd River in central Alice, or amongst the boulders of Tibooburra. If you can plunge into these worlds and play with the elements, then you engage with the place in a way that we rarely, at other times, do.

This engagement is instantly understood by those who attempt to know the place - perhaps this has always been one the major functions of music. Just as birds delight in space through sound, there is a delight in finding appropriate human sounds to resonate in space. Inherent in this is a deep listening to space. This complex activity defies easy analysis - it doesn't begin with thoughts, but with our bodies engagement with place.

In this state, the world neither surrounds nor is surrounded by musical sounds – they're intertwined - through the music we can be woven into the world. The camp fire experience convinced me that in this intertwining, exploratory music, in this continent, could engage with Mr and Mrs Average in a way that we can never achieve in a concert hall.

And between the music and the world, it's possible that we can catch sight of a pre-established harmony, or natal bond, and I'd been looking for some place to begin since about 1970.

First Contact

I must have been 12 or 13 on a family holiday to the Warrumbungles. On the top of a Mountain I played flute below the eagles, aware that the content shouldn't be Mozart or Jethro Tull – the things I could play. I should play something else, something more appropriate.

Later in the 80's, at Dark's Forest near Wollongong with the sound recordist Rik Rue, we made field recordings and he encouraged me to play. Trying to express to him the difficulty of creating material in

that space. I said. "I don't know what to play." He thought that was stupid – "just play".

Largely what I played was appropriated from other time/spaces – it felt alien. This material made some sense in a concert hall, an art gallery or an inner city squat, but standing on the sandstone, listening to the frogs, I felt musically empty – and that was a good place to start.

The sandstone rocks exposed my faux experimentalism for what it was, displaced and derivative, with no sense of place. You can use the same criticism of most 'serious' music produced in Australia.

Tradition

Of course, people have been playing and singing out into these landscapes for thousands of years - no one can convince me that we have a good reason to break with this tradition and box the sound in - but it doesn't feel right for an exploratory musician to play within Aboriginal song traditions. Despite Germaine Greer's promptings, it's a tricky thing to claim Aboriginality. But in her essay, "Whitefella Jump Up" (Profile Books, page 19), she indicates a way forward.

"If we climbed out of the recreational vehicle and sat on the ground, we might begin to get the message that we can't afford to hear, the message that, since contact, Aborigines have never stopped transmitting. The land is the source of everything..."

Through the simple act of sitting down, listening and playing there is hope we can find appropriate music, and perhaps gain an inkling of the experiences musicians have had in Australia for thousands of years.

In disregarding the local, we do music a grave disservice. Music is never just about human beings, it has always had an inherent connection to place. Much new music behaves as if it could have been created anywhere and that it can be judged outside of context.

Jacques Attali says in 'Noise', (University of Minnesota Press, Page 134):

"We are all condemned to silence unless we create our own relationship with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we create. That is what composing is."

Much of what passes for composition in Australia has missed this point. It has failed to position itself within the world we live in here, modelling itself

12,000 miles away in concert halls in Europe, a jazz club or loft in New York or Berlin, or a music cafe in Tokyo.

And many of our music traditions have been informed by recordings, which are inherently decontextualised.

Radio Space

The medium that led me to explore the idea of creating a body of work outside the studio or concert hall was radio. And that's appropriate. Radio has never been boxed in.

In 2006, recording a set of pieces for the ABC, "A walk in the Budawang with my Saxophone", I spent a hermetic 15 days in these rugged mountains - there are dramatic architecture-like spaces, caves, crevices and a hidden valley – it is a wonderland of natural acoustics.

Using two recording devices, two stereo mikes and a solar battery recharger I spent my days there playing and recording often on both recorders simultaneously to get multichannel impressions, and synched up later on computer. In 2007 Splitrec released a CD of these recordings, "Through Fire, Crevice and the Hidden Valley" (Splitrec 17).

It was important to play. There are many field recordists "capturing" natural environments but something happens when you take yourself from behind the microphone and enter the field.

In Dark Brothers Cave in the Hidden Valley, the rock walls behind are a complex set of wind-sculptured surfaces, and across the narrow valley stand other sandstone walls. There are hundreds of trees between these walls, and they give multiple layers of reflection. It's a complex resonant space and wonderfully conducive for playing music. Infinitely more satisfying than the boxes I play in the city.

On the surface it looks like this is "solo" music, but there are other forces at work and there are palpable outcomes to accepting the entire field in the "work".



Figure 2: Photo by the author from the Budawang Mountains 2006.

From behind the microphone, the quite recordist sees him/herself as being separate from the time/space – an observer, and that's not a position I can accept.

“man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.”

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*,
Routledge Classics, Xii.

In June 2008 back in the Budawangs recording and playing again for the ABC, I produced “Co-existence”, which is a radio manifesto of my ideas about music in these spaces. From my diary entry towards the end of the trip I say:

“It's been a week now - it's late Autumn, so the nights are long - plenty of time to muse, and the majority of the day is night – the darkness makes me live in a sonic world. I haven't seen another human face in that time, including mine. This absence of humans and mirrors allows me to drift towards another world, populated by the face of the moon, the birds, the wind. What I learn out here, and what I hope to bring back, is to tune in more closely to what is really here.

To retain more intimacy with what will best nurture our nature.”

In the Flesh

Derek Bailey in an interview in 1991 said to me about recording,

“It's a curious and quite striking by-product (of improvisation).”

While committed to recording, I agree with Derek - it creates something else, related to the original event. So while I've engaged with recording projects like the ones above, it's been important to get others to come and listen, in the flesh. Below I list some events that, in my mind, create an appropriate context in our country for music and communal listening.

In April 2010 TURA New Music presented their 4th Sounds Outback at Wogarno Station, Mt Magnet, Western Australia, with performances by myself, Alan Lamb, Ross Bolleter, Jon Rose and Hollis Taylor. To sit in the dirt and listen to Ross Bolleter playing three ruined pianos at midnight underneath the southern sky was to place his project in it's most cogent setting.

In a related and complimentary activity Anthony Magen has been leading soundwalks around Australia for nearly a decade, asking the participants to cease talking, walk together and listen to the world. He's taken these at the Now now festivals and recently in June 2011 at the Melbourne International Jazz festival.

For six years now The New Music Network has been producing concerts in the Kuringai National Park in Northern Sydney. On a large tessellated rock that has commanding views of Pittwater at the beginning of the peninsula called West Head, we've played with groups of six or seven musicians each year for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon as West Head Project. This rock has been a cultural centre for a long time - amongst the tessellations are engravings of emus, kangaroos, whales, fish and boats or shields. The sound there is clear and precise, carrying easily over a distance.

In March 09 West Head Project travelled to Tasmania for “A Walk on Maria Island” as part of the Ten Days on the Island Festival. With collaborators Monica Brooks and Dale Gorfinkel, I was in residence on the island for 10 days, playing and walking together. For the last 2 days we took audiences on a sound walk and at points along the way we performed for them. We've produced a CD of this event, “a closely woven fabrik” splitrec CD 21.

On Sunday 20th June 2010 the Seven Thousand Oaks festival produced 'Touch at a Distance' in the grounds of the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne,

with installations and performances by myself, Ross Bolleter, Matt Chaumont, Alan Lamb, Rosalind Hall, Dale Gorfinkel, Phil Samartzis and Anthony Magen. Despite drizzle and cold a large number of Melbournites spent the day wandering and listening.



Figure 3: Photo: Vivian Spadaro from Bogong AIR Festival 2011.

In February 2011 the AIR festival in Bogong Village in the Victorian Alps was curated and organized by Phil Samartzis, with performances by Slavek Kwi, Natasha Anderson, myself, Rosalind Hall, Alice Hui-Sheng Chang, Eric La Casa, Dianne Peacock and Philip Samartzis.

Despite atrocious weather, events went ahead and listeners braved the elements to experience unique site-specific work.

Bogong provided the most powerful sound of the weekend as one of its trees cracked and speared the path around the dam, while nearby many of us were deeply drenched in rain, playing and listening. I'd argue it was the permeability of our play that allowed so many of us to hear it in the music.

David Dunn has said in *Nature, Sound and the Sacred*,

"[...] music is not just something we do to amuse ourselves. It is a different way of thinking about the world, a way to remind ourselves of a prior wholeness when the mind of the forest was not something out there, separate in the world, but something of which we were an intrinsic part. I think music may be a conservation strategy for keeping something alive that we may now need to make more conscious, a way of making sense of the world from which we might refashion our relationship to nonhuman living systems."

www.daviddunn.com/~david/writings/termova.pdf

By sitting down, listening to, and sounding out into this land we aim to add sounds that don't feel out of place - that aren't ridiculous. These are unique often wonderful acoustics, our in-place solutions should therefore be unique. In these time/spaces the music intertwines with all the elements present – it can be woven into the world. Making stuff that isn't out of place and that is part of a greater whole, at this point in time, is surely what we all have to aim for.