

depauperate species

Larry Polansky

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(Liner Notes for Ron Nagorcka's double CD on Pogus, 2014)

Ron Nagorcka is an Australian composer, naturalist, organizer, eco-warrior, virtuoso performer and, happily, a close friend of mine who has lived much of his life on top of an almost unreachable, densely forested mountain home in Tasmania with his partner, the naturalist/writer/photographer Sarah Lloyd. He built their house from stone. It is arrived at via what can't even euphemistically be called a "road" (a "track" whose 2 or so kilometers Ron somehow manages in a Subaru, though it's faster and easier on one's body to walk it). They get their drinking water from what may be barely (and euphemistically) called a creek. Their mountain is in the remote north of a sparsely populated island roughly the size of West Virginia.

I first met Ron in Melbourne in 1996. I'd heard about him from mutual friends like Chris Mann and Warren Burt, and about his work in the "Melbourne experimental scene" in the 1970s. Ron had relocated to Tasmania long before we met, and had mostly dropped out of musical sight. But he sometimes returned to the main(is)land. Even better, he invited me to visit him on Black Sugarloaf mountain.

I have visited several times over the last 15 years, both for musical reasons and because it is an extraordinary, indescribable place. Similarly extraordinary and indescribable are Ron and Sarah. To get to Black Sugarloaf you can cross the Bass Strait on an overnight ferry from Melbourne to Devonport. On deck in the early morning hours, you are alone with the antipodal constellations of our small planet. In Tasmania, Ron and Sarah have taken me to see night herons (who never showed) and birds of all sorts, playtpuses and lagoons full of water fowl. I've spent evenings dining on Ron's wallaby stew in their magical house, spent mornings listening to the dawn chorus with Sarah, and been covered with leeches while trekking in their dense wet forest (my daughter Anna has never

forgotten that experience). Daily existence on Black Sugarloaf is as singular as Ron's music.

I've been privileged to work with Ron as a musician on a number of occasions, in "Tazzy" and in the United States, and have been an advocate for his work. Ron's music unexpectedly synthesizes an olio of traditions and influences into an innately stubborn coherent vision (and Ron the composer is nothing if not stubborn) — that but for his deep compositional insight would be clumsy and exploitative. His pieces are complex — rhythmically, tonally, formally, and even programmatically in their use of natural sounds — and weave together: sophisticated rational tuning systems; electronics; Aboriginal music; natural sounds (which he sometimes meticulously transcribes as well as recording them himself as part his and Sarah's naturalist work together); a deep knowledge and feeling for Baroque music; and his accomplished playing on didjeridu and keyboard. Each of these perpendicular ideas somehow intersects at a mysterious locus that is a "typical" Ron Nagorcka piece. His pieces are like songs from a songwriter who has ignored the entirety of music history and theory except for the really interesting parts.

The ordinary has been excised from his work (and, not incidentally, his life). Like his home, which impacts the forest as little as possible, there's no dross, very little glue, and no concessions to what the Shakers would call "the world". Ron refabricates composition from the thorny and beautiful bedrocks of history and sound.

When one drives from Devonport to Biralee (Black Sugarloaf's "town"), one passes Dolerite Road on the right a few kilometers before the "track" up the mountain. One day, walking up that track (my preferred mode of transportation, considering the alternative), Ron said we were walking on Tasmanian dolerite, one of the hardest rocks on earth. It could be that living on top of that stone has imbued Ron with a geological quality, or perhaps he was born with it and simply found appropriate footing. His music sounds like it was written not on paper or in some computer notation program (which it is), but in petroglyphs.

I began to gain a deeper sense of Ron's visions and skills as a composer when I started playing his music. Ron has written a number of pieces for fretless electric guitar, such as *Colluricincla Harmonica*, and the early 21st century masterpiece *Artamidae*, (which is finally available thanks to Pogus). The fretless guitar makes it feasible, albeit risky and a bit quixotic, to play the complex just intonations, notated (in his earlier music) by a combination of colors and numerical gradations (and, thank heavens, meticulously made practice tapes). Playing these challenging pieces made me realize that they were the creation of a composer with all the time in the world to make it right and tight. Ron's music is complex, but not "complicated" — it makes perfect sense if you're willing to give it even a fraction of the thought and attention the composer has paid to it. He doesn't stint on ideas or the hard work required to realize them. He's dolerite-tough on himself, and the result is a music that's always new.

When we first played *Artamidae* with the Downtown Ensemble in New York City, we did several concerts around the northeast. At first, the intonations, the complex rhythms and time signatures, the ensemble work, and the recalcitrance of the fretless guitar made me, well, fret. But I'd look over my stand at my bandmates, and there was Ron, at his sampler, with a rack of tuned didjeridus in front of him, playing his complex keyboard parts simultaneously with the difficult (and exhausting) didjeridu counter rhythms. All the while, he helped keep us together and precise, with a close ear to his score and what we were playing. I felt downright lazy, or as Sarah would say, like a "bludger." But Ron is no bludger, he's the "real deal" (or the Aussie translation thereof).

All this is to say that this CD — any CD of Ron's music — is long overdue and much welcomed.

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