

A COMPOSER'S DIARY ABROAD. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

SOME NOTES ON NEW MUSIC IN AUSTRALIA: MELBOURNE AND PERTH

(Introduction: From June 1988, to July 1989, I ~~was~~^{was} accompanying my wife on a research project in Indonesia, the purpose of which is to study and document contemporary music by Indonesian composers. This article is the first about some of my musical experiences in Asia -- LP)

and the Southern Hemisphere

MELBOURNE

In August-September, 1988, I left our temporary home in Surakarta, Central Java, and had the good fortune to spend a few weeks in Australia (Melbourne and Perth) giving concerts, workshops, talks, and finding out about the contemporary music scene. In Australia I met many composers and artists, and heard a lot of music. The following is a selected "diary" of what I learned about experimental music in Australia, especially in Melbourne, and to a lesser extent, Perth. This is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of music in these places. Many fine composers and groups are not mentioned here for lack of space and because I didn't get a chance to hear them or learn much about their work. For a more comprehensive picture, I would recommend John Jenkins book 22 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS (see references below). However, since information on and recordings of Australian music are difficult to come by in the U.S., I thought that even a description of even a more or less

"random" selection know would be interesting to other readers.

One of the reasons for my trip to Australia was to attend the Symposium of the International Musicological Society (SIMMS) and Festival of Music, a large week long conference, directed by the Australian ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi. The conference focused on some interesting areas of musicology, ethnomusicology, and "Music Since 1960" (which, I suppose, included me and the other composers). In addition to over a hundred talks and papers, there were three concurrent noon performances each day, of everything from computer music to Aboriginal didjeridu playing, and a major concert every evening. This conference was an excellent excuse for me to hear a lot of new music by Australian composers, and to talk at length with many of these composers about musical ideas "down under".

The Festival included some extraordinary performances. On the second night, a Melbourne based contemporary music ensemble, PIPELINE, gave one of the finest and most enjoyable new music concerts I've seen in a long time. Pipeline's members include Simone de Haan (trombone/artistic director), Graham Hair and Kathryn Selby (piano), Daryl Pratt (percussion), and Mardi McSullea (flute), as well as a few other performers. For this concert they were also joined by composer, text-sound artist, thinker and poet Chris Mann (more about him later) for a newly commissioned piece by Warren Burt for electronic tape, speaker (Mann) and ensemble. Both Pratt and McSullea are well known in the U.S, having lived there for some time and established well-deserved reputations as virtuoso interpreters of contemporary music. De Haan, Hair, Selby and the rest of the ensemble are equally virtuosic,

and the entire ensemble is extremely sensitive, and more, has a great deal of fun performing the music (something that is missing in a lot of contemporary music ensembles in the U.S. and Europe). Pipeline performed more or less conventional contemporary pieces, by composers including Donald Martino, Wolfgang Rihm, and others, but what was fascinating for me was their enthusiasm and ability even in the pieces that didn't interest me much. Mardi McSullea and Kathryn Selby played Jonathan Harvey's NATARAJA for flute and piano with technical brilliance, and a kind of youthful ebullience that belied the work's tremendous difficulty. I felt the same way about pianist Michael Harvey's performance of Donald Martino's FANTASY I for solo piano -- Harvey navigated the intensely seriousness dense 12-tone textures with such aplomb and non-pretension that the feeling was less of a "new music concert" than of a spontaneous improvisation. I tremendously enjoyed hearing them play every piece, regardless of the music itself (!), and wished we had more groups like this in the states -- musicians of the very highest quality who were also energetic, entertaining, and interested in the performer and audience enjoying themselves during the concert.

The most interesting piece to me on this concert was by a young Australian composer, Richard Vella from Sydney. Vella is a composer of electronic, instrumental and theater music, and also one of the important figures behind the founding of the independent new music publishing/recording enterprise NMA (more about this below). Vella's FIVE SONG STUDIES ON A MELODY was elegant, moving, complex, and seemed to distinguish itself from the other Australian works on the concert by not being purely imitative of

European or American styles or techniques. (For more on Vella, and to where to obtain his music, see John Jenkins' book.)

In the United States and in Europe, Melbourne is known for its experiments in text sound music, sometimes called sound poetry. This is perhaps largely due to the extraordinary work of composer and performer Chris Mann, who gave a noon concert at the Festival along with American-born but Melbourne based composer Warren Burt. Mann performed his mammoth text piece "OF COURSE" (which he distributed in newsprint to the audience), to Burt's electronic tape accompaniment and live mix. I had seen Mann perform before (several years ago, I invited him to Mills College in Oakland, where I teach), so was not surprised at the dynamism, virtuosity, and absolute spellbinding energy of his reading. Yet I had not seen Mann for some seven years, and I was astonished to see (and hear) how much his performance had actually developed. His timing, focus, delivery, and control of dialect, intonation, phrasing, and overall dramatic effect are like no one else that I know of in the English language. "OF COURSE" is a 45-minute text without breaks, a non-stop barrage of words full of puns, double puns, word-plays on every imaginable form of English (and as Mann would probably correct me, Australian -- the first thing he said to me when he picked me up at the bus station in Melbourne, after I'd spent the last several months in Java speaking mostly Indonesian, was: "Larry, I want to make it clear at the beginning that even though we speak the same language, we don't speak the same language"). Forty-five minutes of Mann's high energy amplified reading, seemed, if anything, too short for the quality and interest of the piece.

Mann is certainly one of the best known young Australian composers here in the U.S, especially in the experimental music community. John Cage has also been interested in Mann's work, and one of Cage's recent works for solo violin ("Eight Whiskus") takes its title from a Mann text. Later in the week, at the Astra choir concert (see below), another of Mann's work was performed, again a collaboration with Burt, and this was also quite interesting (but lacked the natural and convincing performance of Mann's own reading). Mann's work is well-represented by NMA (see below), and I would encourage U.S listeners to find out more about this important and original Australian musical thinker.

Earlier in the week, Kenneth Gaburo, an American composer who has been a big influence on music in Melbourne, gave a performance of a large piece for solo reader, titled "LA" (published in the recent issue of Perspectives of New Music devoted to the work of composer James Tenney). It was interesting to hear Gaburo and Mann perform in such proximity, since the two composers have so much in common, but each draws on his own culture to a great extent for the sources of his text.

I was able to attend several other concerts at the Festival. Two concerts of computer music, unfortunately, and surprisingly, included no live electronic music! Of special interest was a performance of Aboriginal music for didjeridu and voice, performed by Martin Warrigal and Robert Daly, a duo from north-west Australia. Daly and Warrigal sounded great, but looked a bit uncomfortable in a room full of musicologists. The musicians also

were the only people wearing down jackets in the air conditioned room -- it's a bit hotter in the Outback I suppose! The last night of the Festival was devoted to a concert by the Astra choir, an eclectic choral group run by a very interesting Melbourne performer named John McCaughey. This was a fascinating event. In keeping with the themes of the Festival (ethnomusicology, particularly in southeast Asia, historical musicology, and contemporary music), McCaughey led this large group of semi-professional (but very well rehearsed) singers thru a seamless evening of primarily monophonic music from all over the world, including: Gregorian chant, Thai songs, Vietnamese fishing tunes, and Sundanese (West Java) Majapat poetic songs. For the non-western music, the choir was joined by Thai, Vietnamese and Sundanese artists, and McCaughey made beautiful and tasteful arrangements of these difficult multi-linguistic tunes, in a variety of tuning systems, for his choir. The second half of the concert was devoted to contemporary music by George Brecht, Chris Mann and Warren Burt, and Donald Martino.

This is just a small sample of the concerts I heard. One of the more interesting concerts, which unfortunately I was not able to attend, was a dance-theater evening devoted to the Ramayana story as it is manifested in different parts of southeast Asia (India, Thailand, and Java). Margaret Kartomi and the Music Dept. of Monash University should be congratulated for this very innovative idea!

In general, the papers delivered at the conference may not be of much interest to ~~the~~ readers -- they were largely academic, and highly

specialized. However, several of the paper sessions concerned the history and current state of music in Australia, and I made a special effort to attend these in hopes of getting more of a feel for the musical environment. One of the most useful papers in this regard was Warren Burt's "high-speed history" of experimental music in Melbourne, a subject that desperately needed this kind of documentation. Burt has lived in Melbourne for over ¹³ ~~12~~ years, and has been an active concert organizer, radio producer, composer, and participant in the experimental music scene, so he was well-qualified to comment on its history. His talk crammed more history, information, and names into 15 minutes than I would have thought possible. When he publishes this paper (hopefully in the Proceedings of the conference) it will be the most important reference for those interested in the evolution of experimental music in what is certainly one of the most active and unique centers in the world. Some of the other topics that came up in these "music in Australia" sessions were the role of women in music in Australia, and the unusual hegemony of Sydney (and to a lesser extent, Melbourne) over the musical history and politics of Australia. (* Burt's article is now scheduled for publication in the journal: Leonardo: International Journal of Arts, Sciences and Technology)

Regarding the former topic, I was surprised to hear almost universally (especially from women!) about the problems of institutional sexism that exist in this small country (even though geographically, Australia is the size of the United States, it only has about 16 million people). Australia seems to have a surprisingly small percentage of women music faculty members in its universities, and an equally notable small percentage of women composers. Some of the most interesting exceptions are: instrument

builder/improviser/composer Sarah Hopkins (from northern Darwin); ^{Caroline} ~~Carolyn~~ Wilkins; a composer/sound sculptor and installation artist from Melbourne named ^{Ros} ~~Rez~~ Bandt; and Jane O'Brien, a teacher, musicologist, and noted scholar on the music of Australia's seminal composer Percy Grainger. I had the good fortune to meet and talk at length with both Bandt and O'Brien, and was impressed with their eloquence not only about their own work, but about the social and political situation in their country. Bandt seems to be one of the more active composers in Melbourne, and is also among the most well recorded * (see below, for the address of MOVE Records). NMA Tape #4 (see below) is dedicated to the work of many of Australia's important women composers, including Sarah Hopkins, ^{Caroline} ~~Carolyn~~ Wilkins, Vineta Lagzdina, and others.

* Bandt is now in the U.S. as a guest composer-in-residence at Rollins College in Florida.

In Melbourne I was also fortunate to meet many other new music composers. Alistair Riddell, a young composer currently completing his Doctorate at LaTrobe University (an academic center for computer music in Australia), was one of the most interesting to me. Riddell has, very deliberately, sought to continue the work of Conlon Nancarrow in using player pianos to achieve super-human rhythmic, contrapuntal, and melodic effects, as well as to implement complex formal structures. However, Riddell takes Nancarrow to heart when the latter states that were he a young composer starting out today he would of course be working with computers. Riddell has built several computer driven player pianos to implement his ideas. They work well, and the music Riddell produces (aside from his profound technical achievements in software, hardware, and in his construction of computer controlled piano actions) is extraordinary to hear.

One piece I heard by Riddell, "Black Moon Assails" (1987), uses the strings of the piano as sympathetic vibrators, so that they are not actually struck but are more or less amplified in resonance by his computer controlled solenoids. In Riddell's own words: "The sound is produced by the strings making contact with oscillating (200 Hz.) electro-magnetic solenoids. Since the period of the oscillation does not vary, changes in pitch or timbre are achieved by varying the power supply duration within the solenoid's duty cycle. The importance of this is that the pressure exerted on the string can vary, resulting in pitch and timbral changes." This is similar to the way Nicolas Collins in N.Y. reverses the magnetic field of guitar pickups so that they resonate the strings, rather than simply amplifying them, and also to some of the new work being done by the Toronto composer Gordon Monahan (for example on his album called "Fiano Mechanics"). However, Riddell's music and ideas are all his own, and his technical prowess is of such a high level that I expect he will soon emerge as one of the most interesting composers around.

I have already mentioned Chris Mann and Warren Burt, but a few more words are in order about their place in the scheme of things in Melbourne, and in Australian music in general. Mann's work is difficult to describe briefly because of its richness and complexity, and because his elliptical ideas and elusive use of language. However, he seems to be one of the most universally acknowledged influences on experimental composition in Melbourne (and to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Australia). On my second day in the city, Warren Burt handed me a copy of John Jenkins' essential

work, 22 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS, and I was surprised to see how many of these young composers stressed Mann's sound poetry and performance techniques as having given them important ideas. In addition, There is a widespread feeling that Mann's work suggests a unique and important direction for Australian avant-garde music.

Mann is also a kind of "whacked-out" latter day Australian Mark Twain, in that many of his bits of poetry and pieces seem to find their way into people's language and thoughts. His works are full of some of the best one-liners this side of Henny Youngman. Some of my favorite "Mannisms" are: "In the latter half of the twentieth century, being a victim is a legitimate form of publication" (from THE RATIONALES), "Success is the cheapest form of censorship," and his version of composer Herbert Brun's definition of experimental music (Brun: "Music we don't like yet"), "Experimental music is not problem solving music but problem seeking music." A recent book review by Mann (called "On not having read..." the book in question) contains: "Where work makes sense, unionise sense (where capital is organised, strike);" "How odd of God to flog the news;" and, best of all, "The advantage of art over life; art is not restricted to good ideas."

Warren Burt is also an important Melbourne figure, as an energetic concert organizer, producer of a local new music radio show, an important journalist (see his interview with Boulez in the references for an example of his unique but highly literate writing style) and, surprisingly, as one of the few people in Australia (along with Rik Rue in Sydney) using live

art/science group, International Synergy (in New Mexico), and Ron Robboy, legendary founder of The Big Jewish Band, an avant-garde Klezmer fusion ensemble. Burt has recently been on tour in the United States, where he appeared at New Music America in Philadelphia with his giant tuning forks. Burt's music spans a lot of genres, and he is one of the most prolific composers I have ever encountered!

For reasons of brevity I will mention only two of the many other composers who I was lucky enough to meet and get to know. Rainer Linz is the founder and director of what I think is one of the most important New Music publishing enterprises (especially for readers of OPTion) in Australia: NMA (New Music ~~Australia~~ ^{Articles}). NMA is the publisher of: Jenkins' book (an absolute must for anyone interested in what's currently going on in this continent, and the best place to start); several other artworks (including Chris Mann's "THE RATIONALES"); a periodical called NMA magazine (5 so far), which is similar in spirit and quality to the Canadian periodical MusicWorks; and various tapes (including works by Linz himself and almost every other young experimental composer in Melbourne and Sydney). Linz' NMA is a completely independent, artist-run, and very interesting enterprise, and is one of the essential ways that interesting music in Australia gets distributed. *

* NMA materials are now distributed ^{in the U.S} by Frog Peak Music, Box 9911, Oakland CA 94613

besides from Chris Mann, who convinced me that Australian English has very little to do with Californian. Although I'm not sure I understood a word of what Jercher said to me in the several conversations we had (the high quality of Australian stout may have contributed to this communication problem), I did get lucky and see him spontaneously improvise one of the most moving and strange political songs that I've ever heard, about an Australian migrant camp called Bonagilla, where Jercher was born. Later, I wished that I'd had a tape recorder running. Jercher is a guitarist who gave up traditional playing (jazz, etc.) for more experimental musical ideas, like his work with sound environments for children in out-of-the-way places (he is currently building something in Tasmania).

PERTH (and Adelaide)

I took the train from Melbourne to Perth, a three day trip through what Warren Burt called "the second most desolate place on earth" (When I asked him where the most desolate place was, he answered: "A little north of there"). On the way, the train stops in Adelaide for half a day, and there I got to visit the Australian Network for Art and Technology (^{ANAT}~~ANAT~~), directed by Francesca da Rimini. ^{ANAT}~~ANAT~~ is an organization which is attempting to coordinate artists working with advanced technologies, and is instrumental in supporting a lot of important work in Australia. ^{ANAT}~~ANAT~~ shares a loft space with an organization called EAF (Experimental Art

Foundation), which is a group of visual, performance and text artists who are quite active, and important for keeping interesting art alive in Adelaide. ~~ANAT~~ ^{ANAT} was involved in a special issue on Art and Technology of the Australian visual art journal, ARTLINK, which is highly recommended (see references below).

Perth, besides being a beautiful port city, and former site of the America's Cup race, has a small but dedicated and innovative new music scene, mostly catalyzed by Tos Mahoney and Lynn Mitchell of EVOS Music. EVOS is an independent new music organization which does everything from producing concerts, festivals and records to running new music programs and camps for children. I was greatly impressed by the scope, energy, and vision of their organization, especially in light of the much talked about isolation of Perth, and Western Australia in general, from the main centers of Australian musical activity.

Perth is full of energetic and interesting experimental music, almost all seemingly connected with EVOS in some way. EVOS brings in many outside composers, both Australian and not. Some of the "native" Perth composers are also interesting. Ross Bolleter is a composer and improviser who works a great deal with dancers. His theater and improvisation works are strange and quite challenging (his work is also documented in Jenkins' book). Bolleter's improvisation recordings with Tos Mahoney (available thru EVOS) are well worth hearing. Lindsay Vickers is a young composer and performer (saxophones and clarinet) who is doing some extraordinary work through EVOS, teaching improvisation workshops to high-school kids, with surprising

results.

My biggest surprise upon arriving in Perth was stumbling upon the music of Alan Lamb, a neurophysiologist and medical researcher by profession who composes what he calls "wire music." Lamb's work involves stringing up extremely long cables, and amplifying these with phonograph cartridges. He then records and meticulously mixes the sounds into giant and unique sound canvasses. Lamb's music, has a lot in common with some of the work of Alvin Lucier (like the famous "Music on a Long Thin Wire"), Ellen Fullman, and Richard Lerman (in the way both use transducers to amplify quiet "natural" sounds and oscillations). However, the way that Lamb, a scientist by nature and profession, constructs his pieces, is radically different from anyone else I know. These natural phenomena (like the wind gently vibrating telephone cables, or cows bumping into his wires) are mixed into long, romantic, almost Mahlerian (Gustav, not David!) tone poems, which make a very personal and powerful statement. Lamb's music is pretty much unavailable at present, but hopefully that situation will change as soon as people learn more about it. Jenkins' book contains an excellent chapter on Lamb, with the composer describing the physics of his music quite eloquently.

SOME RESOURCES IN AUSTRALIA FOR EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC:

THE AUSTRALIAN NETWORK FOR ART AND TECHNOLOGY (ANET), Francesca da Rimini, Executive Officer, PO Box 21, North Adelaide, South Australia, 5006

ARTLINK, 363 Esplanade, Henley Beach, South Australia, 5022

EVOS Music, Tos Mahoney, Artistic Director, Lynn Mitchell, Administrative Director, PO Box 136, Cottesloe 6011, Western Australia. EVOS also puts out an interesting newsletter, records, tapes, and other publications.

Experimental Art Foundation (EAF), PO Box 21, North Adelaide, South Australia, 5006

MEANJIN is an Australian art journal, primarily devoted to literary matters. However, MEANJIN #2, 1988, is a special issue devoted to music, and contains articles by Alistair Riddell (on Nancarrow), Warren Burt (an interview with Boulez), and an excellent update of his book about Australian composers by John Jenkins called "New Wine, New Bottles."

MEANJIN, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3052

MOVE RECORDS, Box 266, Carlton South 3053, Victoria, Australia, has a number of recordings of contemporary Australian music, including several by Roz Bandt.

NMA Publications, PO Box 185, Brunswick, Victoria 3056, publishes NMA Magazine, Chris Mann's "The Rationales", many tapes (including works by Warren Burt, Alistair Riddell, Richard Vella, and Rik Rue), and John Jenkins' book 22 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS (1988, ISBN #07316 2263 4). Most of the composers mentioned here have entries in Jenkins book, and the book also contains complete discographies and bibliographies on each composer. In addition many important composers I didn't discuss here are well-documented. In the United States, many NMA materials are distributed by Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective), Box 9911, Oakland, CA 94613

For information regarding the SIMMS Conference (Proceedings, abstracts, etc.) contact the Dept. of Music, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia