'Australianness' in Australian Music

a personal view by Don Kay

Australia is a complex of regions which are very diverse from the point of view of, for example, landscape, climate, culture and life-style.

One can consider 'Australianness' in music to include a capacity for it to communicate a response to a composite of these elements, or perhaps, to be representative of only some, or, indeed, to reflect an association with, for example, a particular region in a fairly exclusive way.

We tend to think of certain European composers as being just that and others as being more identified with a particular part of Europe. Those composers generally agreed to have established a universal and continuing appeal seem to, in one sense, transcend national boundaries. Nevertheless, in another sense, we generally have no difficulty in associating such composers with particular regional cultures. Bach, Debussy, Verdi and Tchaikovsky appeal universally for both types of identification and they are a more or less random choice of very worthy representatives of their particular European cultures.

Australian music which stems from composers with European forbears has had, of course, a much shorter history. It has tended to simultaneously reflect both the European (and more lately American, largely via Europe) influence and its geographical remoteness from those continents. The Australian population is still dominated by people of European origin but slowly and surely that population is becoming more comfortable with an acceptance of the geographical reality and the implications of the social and political ramifications that brings.

Composers of my generation are being replaced by younger composers influenced by us as we have been influenced by an older generation. Those of my generation would no doubt have shared the question of 'Australianness' many times. Perhaps it is less of a concern for increasing numbers, indicating more confidence and less self-consciousness about such matters.

For my part, living and working most of my life in Tasmania, I have found an increasing motivation from consideration of the landscape, history and ecology of this island. I acknowledge the strong Anglo-Saxon/European based nature of my music education in both the way I was taught and the repertoire to which I was exposed. I also acknowledge, in composition practice, the use of, for example, instruments and ensemble types stemming from long established European practice. I believe, nevertheless, long personal association with my place of birth (Tasmania) has transformed the nature of my music. By that I mean, in spite of obvious cultural origins, the actual quality of the music – its patterning, colouring, pacing, form and aesthetic is informed by responses to Tasmanian experience. If that claim can be shown to have some validity, even in part, it seems logical to conclude that certain Tasmanian qualities are reflected in the music.

Although adhering to the traditional, Western tuning system, complying with the chromatic scale, the syntax of the musical language has been able to adjust with sufficient flexibility to communicate responses to the various special Tasmanian stimuli.

The language of music, being formed from a complex of elements which includes pitch, duration, dynamic and timbre, operates within a defined framework governed by those

elements made comprehensible through the ear. Sound sources comprise a sophisticated array of instruments (mostly of an acoustic type) which have developed from expressive needs driving appropriate technologies to satisfy those needs. The ear has always been the defining factor. In Australia we have access to virtually the same sophisticated array of sound sources for making music as the best anywhere else can offer. It is possible for composers in Australia, as elsewhere, therefore, to charm, anger, arouse, depress, make joyful and so on through their music. Human responses have been proven to be very receptive to changing ways of expressing new as well as recurring ideas, albeit with varying rates of acceptance.

In composing, I have consciously and sub-consciously always been aware of certain musical patterns having the capacity to arouse certain responses in the listener. That is simply because I, too, am a listener with, I suspect, fairly normal response mechanisms. I, therefore, use myself to test responses, knowing that I am one of us, and not so unique as to be an unreliable response assessor. But I also strongly desire to take my listener(s) with me into the delights of fresh personal discoveries.

For me, these delights are often generated by patterning and shaping sounds that aim to reflect the stimulus through literal, metaphorical and abstract styles of musical thinking. For example, I might attempt, with a flute and violin, to imitate, in a precise way, a certain native birdcall. Later in the piece, I might respond emotionally to the thought of that bird sound, using very different patterning, but patterning that seems compatible and able to fit an overall scheme that carries conviction. I always assume that if I'm convinced, my listeners, provided with appropriate listening and an open attitude, will come to share in that conviction. If I therefore imbue my music with dark, threatening colours, make sparse and isolated, soft, transparent and dissonant, as a juxtaposition to a bright, vibrant and densely textured passage, I could well be responding to forest images which could be similarly described. I would only do that if moved by the stimulus and would strive to do it truly and in such a way as to enable a sharing of the experience in a musical form. In that honest pursuit I strive not to be constrained by the conventions of traditional musical language, only by the practical limits of the instruments being used. But, in so doing, I am also conscious of my own inherited musical values; my own fallibilities and cautions; my own desires for acceptance in being true to my particular stimuli.

I cannot easily believe that after such consideration and striving, transformation does not happen; that if the stimulant is significant and special enough, it does not affect the outcome in a certain individual way to connect it with the subject of motivation. I contend, therefore, that in the effort to respond sensitively to the stimulus, the language has adjusted to take on characteristics identifiable with characteristics associated with the stimulus.

Music is, of course, very concerned with the expression of emotional states. One cannot legislate to determine how it must be listened to or what emotions are to be experienced and what connections are to be made. As a composer, though, I am often quite conscious of my own intentions; of my stages of literal, as opposed to metaphorical or abstract thinking styles, often within the same piece and in quick unpredictable rotations. In that sense, I feel I know what I am doing without feeling I have to be totally accountable. Such a demand, external or internal, would create a stultifying effect and inhibit a necessary intuitive flow in the act of composition. Many of the 'knowings' are retrospective, or become realised after the event, if at all, in a conscious way. Like all the arts, music, at its best, transcends any attempt to fully explain it. However, the composer, as both craftsperson and visionary, is continually striving towards an increasing capacity to say worthwhile things well. This involves, therefore, a desire to know how things work and connect.

I believe I am drawn to respond in music to stimuli like the natural world in order to comprehend the mysteries; to capture something of the drama, the timelessness and the associated moods of elations, brooding, melancholy and so on. I've become aware of these qualities as analogous to aspects of my own state of mind, thus providing a way of explaining or understanding; of enabling a way forward; of making better sense of things; of communicating my valuing of this place within the broader context of the world.

I am also increasingly conscious of searching for a lost culture associated with Tasmania. The remoteness and isolation of Tasmanian forests, mountains and waterways suggest, to my imagination, aspects of an ancient culture in a long forgotten past. One can only speculate; never substantiate. Such imaginings can create certain searching qualities with their inherent ephemeral effects. Such is the tragedy an sorrow of this island. However, I feel myself fortunate for having, at my disposal, such a resource of great natural beauty as a primary stimulant.

If Australia or 'Australianness' is made from the sum of its parts, those parts need to be acknowledged to enable understanding of the whole. Music that results from responses to regions very different from Tasmania are no more or less valid as part of the whole. From outside Australia the perception of this country could well take little account of a small region which greatly contrasts with, for example, the 'great out-back' or a cosmopolitan city like Sydney. That small region is, nevertheless, part of the total complex.

The music that emanates from these diverse regions is bound by certain common qualities, just as the music of Europe or South America. We are often able to identify the region of origin whilst also recognising the links between these broad and quite specific regions and cultures. I believe it is all a matter of degree and no region of the world can be excluded from such perceptions. So, as far as I can tell, it is impossible not to be identified with place and culture. It is another thing to be able to identify, in our case Australian characteristics which take account of regional differences and, at the same time, recognise recurring common qualities.

What I feel certain of is that these characteristics exist. I would add that a general outspokenness and boldness of conception mixed with a certain naivety, in varying degrees, are fairly recurring and common characteristics. These are perhaps the result of our isolation and 'rough' beginning (at the time of European settlement), followed by a fairly stable and ordered progression free of over-stress during the last 150 years or more. Increased sophistication and rapid communication facilities have not obliterated those qualities. Add to this the overwhelming presence of an ancient and spacious landscape with its particular ecological system and climate contrasts, the effects of which are exaggerated by the sparsity of the population, and it is not surprising a sense of local colour affects our music as it does the other art forms. The influence of the Tasmanian landscape, for those living there, is just as powerful (if not more so) as the mainland landscapes, for those who live there. Those influences seem to have imbued, one way or another, much Australian music and, I contend, have given that music special, shared, identifiable qualities which include a sense of spaciousness and isolation, often laced with a feeling of searching for the unattainable.

Although these above-mentioned characteristics and others, reflecting residues of various European (and, more recently, Asian and American) cultures, are by no means all embracing or always clearly evident, they recur in varying degree sufficiently often to appear to be integral to our culture.

I think it should be added that the presence of such identifying characteristics do not in themselves serve as a means of measuring the quality of the music. Such identifications, though, can assist understanding of aspects and motivations which inform the outcomes. Great music, like any art, transcends regional boundaries. The paradox is that great music is deemed to be so by virtue of its continuing universal appeal, whilst remaining clearly identifiable with its culture of origin. The strength and durability of Australian music will be judged by its capacity to broaden and deepen its appeal whilst inevitably being identified with this culture. Some of its strength could well be due to its capacity to inform about this place as an integral component of the broader world community.

Don Kay (11.11.1998)