

Music, Poetry and the Natural Environment

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In a well-known passage in the *Geographical Memoirs of New South Wales* (1825) Barron Field claims that Australian nature abrogates the customary figurative significance of nature as represented in European art. The land, on this account, is inimical to poetry. Field extended his critique to include music in a poem which begins by describing Australia as a place 'where Nature is prosaic / Unpicturesque, unmusical' and concludes by dismissing it as a 'prose-dull Land'. Though he did not attempt an analysis of 'unmusical' it can be assumed that he conceived of music as operating like poetry, by evoking images of nature imitatively or conventionally.

In both passages Barron Field compares the arts of poetry and music with the idea of the picturesque and suggests that since Australia cannot be represented in terms of the picturesque it is an artistic void; a land 'where/Nature reflecting Art is not yet born'. Theories about the *mis*representation of Australia according to the picturesque or sublime are familiar, but Field seems to suggest that Australia is artistically *terra nullius*; a place where nature is aesthetic chaos, impossible to represent artistically at all.

Barron Field's response to Australia was neither representative nor consistent as Tim Bonyhady demonstrates with another extract from the book from which I took my first quotation. In this case the implication is that 'Nature reflecting Art' is 'born' as human figures at work begin to domesticate the land. However in Field's general speculations about art and nature the latter is always represented as *uninhabited*, even though there are references to Aborigines in his other writings. This not surprising; it can be assumed that implicit confidence in the universal validity of European assumptions about nature and art precluded any recognition of Aboriginal *culture*, such as song poetry and its relation to the land.

Though Field's encounter with Australia brought him to the limits of poetry it never seems to have occurred to him to adapt his artistic procedures. However, his analysis of the incompatibility between antipodean nature and European modes of art foreshadowed the central idea of the Jindyworobak movement, as well as Judith Wright's argument in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965) that the European poetic inheritance offered nothing with which to get a grip on the Australian environment and Les Murray's idea in *The Australian Year* (1983) that links between nature and the supernatural had to be 'recast in the Southern world of European settlement'.

Critical debate about this topic, from Barron Field to Brian Elliott's *Landscape of Australian Poetry* (1967) and Gary Catalano's *Intimate Australia* (1985) has been dominated by vision in a compelling fusion with semantics which transforms images into figures of thought, such as Field's 'emblems' and 'allegories'. The visual impact of Australian nature has also influenced composers. Percy Grainger (an amateur landscape painter as well as professional composer) admitted the inspiration of photographs; Michael Hannan reports that Peter Sculthorpe regards Australia as predominantly a visual country and some of his music suggests that he has tried to tap similar imaginative sources as his friend, the painter Russell Drysdale. However, even though there have been misguided (if not wholly unsuccessful) attempts to evoke images through music or interpret it as if that is how it was composed, the music of Grainger and Sculthorpe does not function that way.

Discursive references to sounds (or more often their absence) are fairly common in early Australian writings. Among them is the passage noticed by Brian Elliott which records a land

... where for lowing herds
And for the music of the bleating flocks
Alone is heard the kangaroo's sad note
Deepening in the distance.

This is by Robert Southey, who never came to hear the kangaroo's sad note for himself; it is worth notice only because it brings out the connection between music and humanised—in this case pastoral—landscapes implied in Field's 'unmusical'. The concordance between domesticated space and music composed of regular rhythms, segmented repeating forms, resolving harmonies and sequential, singable melodies becomes apparent the moment it is transposed to boundless desert, where its delicate webs of sound would blow away. Unbounded space lacks resonance, which may explain why Australia was so often described as a silent land.

Poets registered this before its was notated musically. Charles Harpur's 'Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest' records a silence composed of humming, droning, a murmur, a ripple and a breath and the poem is an early trace of the recurrent idea that Australian sounds are characterised by extended duration.

The slower emergence of purely musical responses to the land was probably accentuated by the fact that outstanding musical talent usually led to expatriation *via* a German conservatorium, as in the case of the Melbourne contemporaries Ernest Hutcheson, who became President of the Juilliard School of Music, and Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson (1870-1946), better known as the novelist Henry Handel Richardson. Recent research has verified that Richardson composed songs throughout her career and I am grateful to Dr Bruce Steele of Monash University for generously allowing me to see the manuscripts he is editing and to hear a tape recorded performance of some of the songs. They are accomplished compositions, notable for their sensitive attention to the verbal qualities of texts by German, English and Danish poets, but they are not, as I had speculated on the basis of her husband's report that Richardson's composition teacher 'poured scorn on her formlessness', evidence of a break with European compositional practices into the 'great new music' adumbrated by Baron von Kraus in *Ultima Thule*.

'Here is lying'—and the Baron waved his arm all round him—'a great new music hid. He who makes it, he will put into it the thousand feelings awoken in him by this emptiness and space, this desolation; with always the serene blue heaven above, and these pale, sad, so grotesque trees that weep and rave. He puts the golden wattle in it when it blooms and reeks, and this melancholy bush, oh, so old, so old, and this silence as of death that nothing stirs. No birdleins will sing in his Musik'.

Richardson places Baron von Kraus in a similar position to Barron Field. Both are face to face with what they take to be unhumanised Australian nature, but whereas Field found it incompatible with art, the Baron perceives it as the source of a 'great new music'. The terms in which the bush is characterised here may have become conventional, but we need to look beneath them to see that what the Baron is proposing is a break with the conventions of Romantic nature music. In the phrase 'No birdleins will sing in his Musik' he is not assuming that Australian birds are songless (Richardson made him a natural scientist so presumably he knew better) but rejecting

the idea of nature music as imitative. In this scene which can be imagined as occurring around the time of Grainger's childhood in the 1880s the Baron is foreshadowing the kind of music Grainger was actually developing. It is notable that the Baron dismisses any idea of acoustic imitation; the music he senses latent in the Australia bush arises not from images, but from the *feelings* inspired in the composer by unhumanised environments. This is precisely the point Grainger frequently made in setting his own work off from the music of Europe (excluding Scandinavia).

Looking back in a late essay, Grainger claimed that when he went to Frankfurt in 1895 at the age of thirteen he was composing in a conventionally academic mode, and the only manuscript I have seen from the Melbourne period—an unfinished piano piece inspired by *Beowulf*, illustrated with sketches of swords and boar-helmets—confirms this. He goes on to record how Cyril Scott introduced him, at the age of fourteen (in 1896), to modern music and brought him into the 'Frankfurt group' of predominately English composers who were the creative elite of the conservatorium in the 1890s. Grainger immediately rejected his German composition teacher and through interaction with the group, particularly with Scott, and the informal teaching of an eccentric German lithographer and amateur musician called Karl Klimsch, began to develop his own system of composition. He later claimed that his main work as a composer was accomplished between the ages of sixteen and twenty.

The notebooks which survive from this period include ideas and sketches for compositions mixed up with philological notes and lists, transcriptions of passages from *Beowulf*, including one where the rhythms are notated musically (anticipating by half a century Pope's famous *Rhythm of 'Beowulf'*), extracts from a wide range of Anglo-Saxon poems in modern English versions, his own translations of *Beowulf* and the Icelandic *Vatndalsaga* and allusions to his favourite modern authors Longfellow, Whitman and Kipling. In one of these notebooks he sketched some ideas for an 'Australian Bush Style' inspired by photographs of what he called 'raw' Australia and his memories of 'the country between Melbourne and Adelaide;] wee hillocks acting dramatically after the broader uneventfulness of the scrubbed desert'. He was probably unaware of Marcus Clarke's identification of the dominant note of the antipodean environment as 'weird melancholy' when he suggested that the 'Australian Bush Style' should 'embody the veiled weirdness of the unopened continent' but as an amateur philologist and keen reader of *Beowulf* he would have been aware of the etymology of 'weird'.

The 'Bush' which Grainger envisaged was primarily the *unhumanised* Australian environment; in a letter to a Danish friend he pointed out that '[t]he very scenery that stirs me, and that I love is lifeless & unproductive ... useless and unkind to man', and in a lecture he gave at Yale in 1921 he associated himself with composers influenced by 'the reaction of man's emotionality to wholly non-human nature'.

Grainger sketched fourteen bars of 'Bush Music' in 1900, and in 1922 he scored them for string octet for his friend, the English composer Balfour Gardiner. They are characterised by rhythmic irregularity and a sustained pedal note or drone over which independent voices create a swirl of dissonance. These are musical attributes which Grainger associated with the Australian bush and the other non-human environments which inspired him. They are developed in the *Hill Song No 1*, 1901-2, which Wilfred Mellers rightly claims is Grainger's 'most radical attempt to create music totally aboriginal, independent of *a priori* rules and regulations'. The piece unfolds in what Grainger called 'large form'; a single continually evolving form, without sections or repeats, through a polyphony of long irregular melodies using the modal or gapped

scales which he regarded as typical of the voice isolated in nature. For Grainger 'large form' was 'the face of the endless yet unrepeating Australian desert translated into tone'; it is a formal compositional innovation inspired by precisely the attributes of Australian nature which Field found disabling but it is not a mode of representing anything. It is the form of unbounded, unrepeating song; a direct expression of feeling. Grainger's *Hill Songs* have no specific Australian reference, though he would have claimed that they were Australian music by virtue of their form.

Even in these pieces Grainger was constrained by musical notation which prevented him from realising the music he had imagined since his childhood in Australia. In 1904, between the composition of the two *Hill Songs*, he designed a machine called a 'Beatless music typer' which included a device for notating gliding tones. This was the forerunner of the music machines with which Grainger hoped to create truly beatless music with gliding melodic contours in large forms. This 'Free Music' was Grainger's compelling ideal; he regarded it as the natural expression of independent individuals in fully participatory democracies and the desirable goal of musical progress because by dispensing with all musical conventions it would enable the composer to respond directly to the 'myriad suggestions of nature' (as he suggested in a short essay on Free Music). In the notes for a lecture he gave to the American Guild of Organists in New York, 29 December 1959, he wrote:

From an Australian Democratic standpoint it seems to me that the music of the future might justifiably aim at the following freedoms:

1. Melody freed from the tyranny of harmony.
2. Harmony freed from narrow conceptions of concordance.
3. Intervallic freedom unrestrained by the hampering confines of scale & key.
4. Rhythm freed from constant in-step-ness-with-Jim
5. Musical form freed from unsuitable 'architectural' conceptions. In other words
FREE MUSIC.

He tried to promote these freedoms by designing machines which would enable him to compose directly with sound. His last experiment of this kind was probably the world's first electronic composing instrument, which his long-suffering wife destroyed shortly after his death, perhaps in a fit of understandable exasperation. (All that survives of Australia's contribution to musical progress are a few seconds of free music composed in the 1930s.)

Many of the compositions of Peter Sculthorpe can be seen as confirming Grainger's faith in a distinctly Australian music. The work up to 1979 has been expertly analysed by Michael Hannan,¹ who describes how Sculthorpe's style emerged from a contrary process of simultaneously distancing himself from European compositional traditions and approaching the land as a source of inspiration. His extensive catalogue of works variously inspired by the land and the natural environment has developed around several important stylistic transitions. One was the composition, in 1965, of *Sun Music I* which almost—but not quite—abandons melody, harmony and rhythmic pulse. It is mainly composed of clusters of adjacent tones on strings and brass, prolonged and varied by staggered entries of sounds involving extended instrumental techniques to create musical textures which evolve gradually to give a sense of sound filling space, rather than moving in time.

According to Michael Hannan, Peter Sculthorpe believes that the modern Australian artist should strive for the intimacy of the Aboriginal relationship to the environment, an idea which is cognate with Les Murray's theory of convergence. This

led Sculthorpe to investigate Aboriginal music, something which Grainger never seems to have considered, despite the fact that he was one of the first to notate Aboriginal song (from a recording made by the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer) and had played rare recordings of Aboriginal music in his 1933-4 lectures at NYU.

An Aboriginal melody is adapted in Sculthorpe's *Song of Tailitnana* (1974), composed just a year before Les Murray adapted Aboriginal song in the *Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle*. Sculthorpe's music is a setting of an Aranda text from Strehlow's monumental *Songs of Central Australia*. However, like Murray (another admirer of Strehlow) Sculthorpe also drew on Aboriginal song from northern Australia, and set the Aranda text to a reworking of a Groote Eylandt melody.

He returns to this in *Earth Cry* (1986) a composition inspired by a sense of the Australian environment which runs very close to Murray's idea in 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia' that '[w]e have come to the sense, which the Aborigines had before us, that after all human frenzies and efforts there remains the great land'. The notes for the recording of *Earth Cry* quote Peter Sculthorpe as saying: 'Perhaps we now need to attune ourselves to this continent, to listen to the cry of the earth, as the Aborigines have done for many thousands of years.' This is consistent with what Murray once referred to as the 'old Jindyworobak idea of environmental values'. As Rex Ingamells repeatedly pointed out, this did not imply joining Aboriginal and European cultures, but (in Sculthorpe's apt term) 'attuning' cultural inheritances imported from elsewhere to Australian environments.

Earth Cry also has an inspirational link with Grainger's *Hill Songs* in that it is an attempt to give voice to the earth itself, just as Grainger 'wanted to convey ... the nature of the hills themselves, as if the hills themselves were telling of themselves through my music ...'. It is worth noticing, though, that between Grainger and Sculthorpe the *song* has become a *cry*.

Earth Cry is essentially composed by supporting the reworked Groote Eylandt melody with orchestral colour and repeating it in various forms in a manner reminiscent of Aboriginal music. The characteristic descending contour of the Aboriginal song towards an insistently repeated tonal centre suggests a kind of drone and is consistent with Sculthorpe's predilection for various modes of musical prolongation. Thus *Earth Cry* evokes the

... lifelong sound
on everything, that low fly-humming
melismatic untedious endless
note that a drone-pipe-plus-chants or
...
a ballad—some ballads—catch

Martin Leer cited these lines from 'The Returnees' by Les Murray to launch a deep discussion of the implications of a modulation in Murray's poetry from visual to auditory perceptions of the land. Yet Murray has always been an acoustically alert poet and 'The Returnees' harks back to an early meditation on sound and silence in 'Noonday Axeman' (in *The Ilex Tree*, 1965, Murray's first book). The two poems are also related through their allusive links to Harpur's dreamily meditative 'Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest'. The comparison, however, only strengthens Martin's theory, for in the earlier poem, the axeman is the primary source of the sound—composed as a melodic sequence—which drives the poem—'axefall, echo and silence'—whereas the sound in 'The Returnees' is outside the rowers, surrounding them. It recalls the 'hum'

and 'drone' of Harpur's poem but is more like Sculthorpe's *Sun Music I*. In that it is not a sequence of separate acoustic events (as in 'Noonday Axeman') but is a cluster of overlapping or 'converging' sounds in which only isolated traces can be identified (one of which, significantly, is the sound of land being humanised). The 'untedious endless note' transcends its diffuse sources, but it is also songlike ('melismatic') with attributes similar to the continually developing but unrepeating melody Grainger experimented with in his 'Bush Music' and *Hill Songs*. The close equivalent to this 'life-long sound on everything' is Aboriginal song accompanied by the didjeridu, as Murray points out in his comments on this passage which also identify 'that low fly-humming / melismatic untentious endless / note' as the 'wild sound' of Australia. This is registered in the acoustical texture of the verse through slow attenuated rhythms, enjambment, parenthetical suspensions and clusters of similar vowels punctuated by the consonants 's' and 't' in conjunction and division.

Murray summarises his reflections on this passage in 'The Returnees' with the observation 'If I had to find epithets for the partly synaesthetic signature-note of the Australian countryside, I would probably fumble with phrases like "beautiful monotony" or "belonging subtlety" or some such'. Similarly, Sculthorpe countered the criticism that some listeners found the music of his *Rites of Passage* monotonous with quip that the same people would even find the drive to Broken Hill monotonous and Grainger praised the Icelandic *Grettir's Saga*, which he regarded as the embodiment of his human and artistic ideals, as 'shapely yet "Formless", many-sided yet monotonous, rambling, multitudinous'.

Monotony, like silence, is relative. Both are approached as dramatic contrasts and climaxes are evened out, reduced or eliminated, so that previously inaudible sounds are heard and slight acoustical events become prominent. In this respect, monotony is an acoustical (or synaesthetic) equivalent of that recurrent ideal in Murray's poetry of a visually perceived world 'where nothing is diminished by perspective'. This is accomplished in Murray's poetry by his frequent use of a moving viewpoint, which is also the case of the rowers in 'The Returnees'. The land become imaginable by moving in it, an activity which raises acoustical perception.

I don't want to suggest that the acoustics loosely identified in this paper comprise an exclusive Australian sound, nor deny that the spread of European settlement created a milieu receptive to diverse musical influences. The point is (rather) that Australia—the *land*—challenged the acoustical imagination of European settlers and their descendants and that re-imagining it from within inspires and compels innovations in musical composition. In the work of the three artists I have mentioned (and others whom I've had to exclude) this has resulted in an array of acoustical effects which reformulate monotony positively as a mode of artistic subtlety concordant with the land which baffled Field's imagination. As Murray's poetic meditation put it, the 'endless untentious note' forms the basis 'here' of an 'unsnubbing art', set apart from that imported under the misapprehension that the land was artistically *terra nullius*.

Notes

1. Michael Hannan, *Peter Sculthorpe: His Music and Ideas, 1929-1979*, (St Lucia: UQP, 1982).

Works cited

- Strehlow. *Songs of Central Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971.

Editors' note:

We regret that Bruce Clunies-Ross's references were not available for inclusion before this publication went to press.