

SINGING HOME:  
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN COMPOSERS  
RESONATE TO BELONGING

*Andrea Breen*

---

In my research on Australian women composers who use improvisatory gestures and representations of place in their compositions, I do not hear motifs of journey to a centre of renewal so much as a sense of the self in process, what Deleuze and Guattari call 'becoming', openness to meaning and resistance to closure. I hear too, a strong sense of connection to the rhythms of the place of inspiration, wherever that may be. And so the recurring signifiers that come from the composers' creative impulse, which I like to think is imbued with a sense of the sacred, are non-closure and inter-relatedness.

Clearly, there is a risk of falling into essentialism by naming signifiers common to works by women. However, significant markers of the feminine in the compositions of women composers have emerged. The canon of Western music has been constructed on masculinist desire, following Rameau's theory of development, climax and closure. Exceptions to this construct have been relegated to feminine form. (For example, second movements, *ostinatos*, repeating cyclical gestures, and weak cadences have been feminized). To genderise musical form at all is a dubious pastime yet as listeners to Western art-music we have been conditioned to expect the model just described while the music of women composers, largely unheard, often represents rhythms and impulses that are not shaped to closure.

Risking essentialism, I want now to engage with the concepts of non-closure and inter-relatedness in the work of some women composers. I have chosen four established Australian composers: Miriam Hyde, Ros Bandt, Anne Boyd and Moya Henderson. The compositions of these four in particular, ring with a resonance to place, derived from what sociologist Pierre Bordieu calls their *habitus*; that is, an embodied sense of belonging in place over time. Improvisation is also central to the act of composing for these composers, though it may not always be articulated by them in improvisatory terms. I'd like to suggest that allowing the moment to speak in and through the music strengthens the voicing of the experience of emplacement, or belonging: that is, the sense of the self centred in place which sparked the composing impulse is in some way revealed through improvisatory expression.

*Miriam Hyde*

Miriam Hyde describes her music as bridging 'the major-minor composers and the new music'. Through improvisatory impulse which then, to use Delueze and Guattari's language, continues to become refrain in the act of notation and performance, Hyde responds to belonging and sense of place consciously and intuitively through signifying water. She has found her most meaningful moments of emplacement through lived experience of water-in-place, and so a sense of the sacred bubbles through her works, especially when played by Hyde herself. It is the improvisatory inflection in the moment of playing which recreates out of a resonance to emplacement and to the unfolding creative process. Of improvisation, Hyde says:

Much of my own composing has been an act of improvisation.... I have even broadcast a quite lengthy work of which not a note was written down,

but just memorised, as it developed, at the piano (firstly in my mind of course).

Hyde's memory for detail, her performances of her own works and her composing impulse are embodied in her music-making events to such an extent that all these selves become joined through experiencing and re-experiencing the centred self in place. Her intention to compose in response to outside space and to experiences of emplacement in nature that become refrain, is sacralised, in the act of improvising which she may later notate from memory.

Hyde's piece *Brownhill Creek in Spring*, for example, responds to a painting, but the sounds, like the visual images, resonate to time spent at that place. Formal and conservative in structure, closure here is subverted, by inviting the player to improvise in a short cadenza, by using cadential disruption, and by deploying inconclusive musical terms on the score, like, at the end, *perdendosi* (which means losing itself, or gradually dying away). *Brownhill*, like so many of Hyde's works, represents enduring relationship with place rather than a journey to or through a place, and freedom to play with formal constraints like closure. Hyde's music demonstrates a sense of the self in process and awareness of interconnectedness.

### *Ros Bandt*

Ros Bandt responds to a sense of place in direct and exploratory ways with an eclectic set of works. Her eclecticism reflects a passion for diversity in creativity and responses to a range of experiences of place. Many pieces are improvised, although she shies away from this term as reductive. Bandt's pieces show a thirst for, and openness to, new knowledge and a determination to apply this knowledge in diverse ways. Her flexible and playful application of media, using for example recorder consorts,

digital technologies and found and invented objects, is improvisatory in derivation. The act of placing these objects in open space for co-active play with the environment and users of that space, suggests a freedom that breaks the bounds of generic description. An interrelated sound-world is constructed that is never fixed nor complete, often relying on random elements for definition. Her acoustic artefacts are also often representations of an endorsement of the reconciliation process at many levels of understanding and meaning. This diversity and openness reflects a commitment to letting the land speak for itself in ways which signify a deep attunement to the diversity of place-sounds and respect for first nation custodians.

Water figures prominently in Bandt's body of work as it does for Hyde, but the wider questions of emplacement, site, and indigenous loss of language of place have become increasingly significant to her intention to compose. It is these issues that I believe resonate with the feminine intention, expressed, often overtly, through openness at many levels, eclecticism and collaboration.

Bandt's piece *Mungo* is an intertextual work that melds experiential narrative with an historiographic underpinning generated by the place itself. It is comprised of wind sounds through an Aeolian harp which Bandt constructed on the site of Lake Mungo while exploring it with local Aboriginal custodians. Added to these sounds in the studio are layers of bird song, shell sounds, didjeridu and the blurred voice of Aboriginal elder Alice Kelly telling her story of that place. Meaning is diffused and rendered in process, a sense of timelessness in conveyed and interrelated rhythms of death and rebirth alluded to.

*Anne Boyd*

In Anne Boyd's body of work she self-consciously evokes a spirituality grounded in childhood lived experience of vast and arid lands of Western Queensland. She claims that all her pieces refer to Asian musics through instrumentation and gesture, creating a spaciousness that signifies her own interior world and the landscape of silence. While she rarely deploys improvisation *per se*, the subtle shifting colours of her works and the directions often imparted to performers, resonate with implicit improvisatory force. Even the act of writing itself, as caligraphic and monastic, is considered by Boyd to be a treasured unfolding of the creative impulse, a sacred act.

I would like to suggest that reverberating through all Boyd's works are markers of non-closure and interrelatedness, expressed through a sense of surprise and 'unbeginning', and through relationship between elements, and to place and cosmic space. She is deeply concerned with the fate of the planet, expressed in her recent work *Dreams for the Earth* for example, an intertextual collaboration between school children and the wider community. There are improvisatory aspects to this piece, as the audience is asked to participate throughout the performance to express hope and celebration.

Boyd's string quartet, *Play on the Water*, is based on Paul Klee's statement that he wished 'to be as though newborn, knowing nothing about Europe, nothing, knowing no pictures (or music or poems), entirely without impulses, almost in an original state'. The piece contains elements from birdsong and children's ring games and Boyd suggests that there are resonances to the desert regions of Australia, as well as to reflections on the surface of a calm pool of water. Structurally it is designed as a spiral around the central movement, with directions for the players in the first and fourth movements to play the composed fragments

'in any order, at any dynamic level and for any duration'. While not overtly improvisation, it is clear that the performance relies on interaction and intuitive response in the moment of playing, and on playfulness. The result is a sense of unbeginning, continuum, or to use the language of Ecophilosophy, deep time, and to a process of becoming and belonging.

*Moya Henderson*

In all Moya Henderson's musical compositions there is a feeling of confrontation, of political intent and of the strive for authenticity. Henderson interweaves concerns for loss of place and social justice by layering oblique and overt references so that the listener is not only confronted but also asked to make her own meanings. Henderson spent ten years as a *Sacre Coeur* nun and it is her experience of the ghetto of Irish-Catholicism, which, though rebelled against, has spurred her to express feminist and social concerns. She has particularly identified with the lived experience of Aborigines and in her recent piece, *The Stolen Children*, narrative is made more powerful by the strident music that accompanies it.

Henderson expresses her deeper, emerging self through multi-modal works which often meld improvisatory gestures with formalist sections. In all her pieces there is a figuring of interrelatedness and non-closure that, while expressive of the diversity of women's composition in Australia, stems from her own lived experience of relation with and to the world and special place, her sense of the sacred and its resonance to the composing intention, and the fight for rightful place.

*Sacred Site* was written to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Sydney Opera House. It is a layered work full of references to time and place. The organ, playing fragments of Prokofiev as representative of the

canon of Western music, is interpolated by didgeridu, clap sticks and emu eggs hitting the piano strings (suggesting pre colonial time and place), and tram sounds (representing the pre-opera house site).

Henderson's music voices an existential theology of equality and responsibility towards land as homeland, place of belonging, and to grief and loss, both in social and ecological terms. *Currawong* is a recording of birds raiding rubbish bins in a national park. It is a free improvisation with little help from the composer that is potent in its juxtaposition of clanging rubbish bin lids, flapping and swarking. Henderson's music is playful, often declamatory, and tuned to her own impulses in response to sense of belonging, displacement and oppression.

For these four Australian women composers, the model of development, climax and closure that pervades so much Western music is subverted. Improvisation has enabled them to stay close to the sacrality of the composing intention, and through representations of non-closure and interrelatedness they have allowed the process of becoming self and deep relationship with place to be revealed.