Phyllis Campbell and the Sounds of Colour

Fiona Fraser

Phyllis Campbell (1891-1974), an active member of the Theosophical Society during the 1920s and 1930s in Sydney, was an accomplished woman. She was a pianist, violinist, composer, poet, pioneering broadcaster, lecturer, and amateur musicologist. Campbell had strong theosophically based beliefs about the spiritual benefits of music that she expressed poignantly in an essay entitled 'Mystery in Music' (probably dating from the mid to late 1920s). Here, she claimed music was a "physical translation of far mightier harmony to which the true composer is ever striving."[1] She believed, "The Music of Pure Mystery is calm, impersonal other-worldly… It opens, it reveals, it lights up. It raises Man above physical beauty or ugliness."[2] For Campbell, music was a critically important issue for her time. She believed her era represented a "musical renaissance" or a "Golden Age"[3] with the musical super-power, Germany, no longer the "one and only Mecca of the art."[4] She took delight in the revival of folksong and plainsong in many countries, pointing to the particular importance of Russia and the introduction of new scales and modes, including Eastern scales that were finding their way into Western music. She claimed that contemporary composers were opening up "mighty territories of mystery… to the music-lover"[5] and that Australia could take a leading part in the dawning of this new "Golden Age" by assimilating the language of modern music, which would have associated spiritual benefits for the nation.

In this article I will explore the ways in which Campbell applied these ideas in her compositions and in her musical life. Her ideas had much in common with visual artists of her time who were united in their efforts to engage with both colour and sound. Her beliefs ultimately led Campbell to compose music that placed her outside the approaches sanctioned by the musical establishment. Her involvement in the Theosophical Society, however,

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Fiona Fraser is a PhD candidate in Music at the Australian National University.

[1] Phyllis Campbell, 'Mystery in Music', Campbell Archive, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS).

[2] Campbell, 'Mystery in Music'.

[3] Elliston Campbell and Phyllis Campbell, *Modern Music - What it is and What it is not*, Lecture at Adyar Hall, 19/11/26, Campbell Archive, UTS.

[4] Campbell and Campbell, *Modern Music*.

[5] Campbell and Campbell, *Modern Music*.

enabled her to explore her ideas leading to an extraordinarily productive period in the late 1920s and early 1930s when she composed her most original works. Campbell's music and her writings, as well as those of her husband Elliston, are held in the Campbell Archive at the University of Technology (UTS) in Sydney. This research material forms the basis for this article.

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) and Theosophical Music

Traditionally, most histories of early twentieth century music celebrate the move to atonality as the most significant development of the era, with the primary focus being the 'twelve-tone' system developed by Arnold Schoenberg and the so-called Second Viennese School.[6] This is despite the fact that most of the music written in the twentieth century remained resolutely tonal in origins.[7] Schoenberg abandoned tonality around 1908, but his systematic 'twelve-tone' approach to composing atonal music did not emerge until his first pieces using this style were published in 1923.[8] These developments were strongly resisted by a group of Paris-centred composers led by Igor Stravinsky who, like Claude Debussy, opposed German hegemony in music. Composers of the so-called 'Neo-Classical movement'[9] such as Maurice Ravel, Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud instead "turned toward pre-Romantic forms"[10] for inspiration. Since that time, Schoenberg and Stravinsky have represented 'cultural monuments' with subsequent generations of composers generally holding allegiance to one or other of these schools of thought.[11] To understand Campbell's music, it is necessary to trace a third, often ignored, even derided,

[6] See for example Robert P. Morgan, 'Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-Tonal Age', in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, eds Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 46-47; Andrew Ford, *Illegal Harmonies: Music in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1997).

[7] Charles Wilson, 'Twentieth Century, The', in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Alison Latham (Oxford Music Online), at http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e6997. Accessed 17/9/10. "It is salutary, therefore, to be reminded that, in spite of the collective turn towards atonality on the part of leading modernists, the greater proportion of the century's music remained tonal in some recognizable sense."

[8] Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: W. Norton, 1991), pp. 187-188.

[9] Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. 117.

[10] Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*, p. 83.

[11] Alan Lessem, 'Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Neo-Classicism: The Issues Reexamined', *The Musical Quarterly* vol. 68, no. 4 (1982), p. 527.

and sometimes hidden, strand of early twentieth century music stemming from the mystical and eccentric Russian composer, Alexander Scriabin who was heavily influenced by theosophical ideas.[12]

Until recently, spirituality in general, and theosophy in particular, has rarely rated a mention in musicological literature. Yet in the art and literary worlds the importance of esoteric religious ideas for influential players, including Wassily Kandinsky and W. B. Yeats, is now readily acknowledged and has been the subject of scholarly attention for some time.[13] Most music histories, if they consider Scriabin at all, usually assign him a marginal role, often because of his extreme religious views. Such ideas were not popular in the Soviet era and Western scholars struggled to understand his religious preoccupations. Consequently, Scriabin's music has traditionally been studied in isolation from his beliefs.[14] This trend continued in the early work of Scriabin scholar, James Baker, who focused on a mathematical approach (along the lines advocated by Allen Forte)[15] arguing that this is the best way to know Scriabin today because his "grandiose self-image as high priest of an art" is "increasingly difficult to comprehend" in the modern era.[16] In his recent rewriting of twentieth century musical history, Richard Taruskin devotes significantly more attention to Scriabin and takes his religious ideas seriously, arguing that Scriabin consciously modified his style to express his spiritual concerns.[17] In his search for the transcendent, Scriabin made "an abrupt break with traditional tonal structures and procedures around 1910."[18] His final

[12] For a recent discussion of Scriabin's engagement with Theosophy see Antony Copley, 'Music in the Himalayas: Alexander Scriabin and the Spiritual', *Studies in History* vol. 26, no. 2 (2010), pp. 218-219.

[13] See for example Vivian Endicott Barnett, et. al., *Kandinsky* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), p. 23; Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 207, Maurice Tauchman ed. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 11; and Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

[14] Susanna Garcia, 'Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas', *19th-Century Music*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2000), p. 273.

[15] Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

[16] James M. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 270.

[17] Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 203.

[18] Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, p. vii.

completed symphony, *Prometheus*, *Le Poeme de feu*, dating from that year, is a large-scale atonal orchestral work. He was well ahead of his contemporaries in Vienna who, at that stage, were still only undertaking experiments on a much smaller scale.[19] More recent studies have shown that it is possible to deepen understanding of Scriabin's music by identifying the symbolic ways in which Scriabin represented his spiritual ideas in his music, which, on investigation, can be identified quite easily.[20]

This study will focus on three key beliefs – the spiritual significance of vibrations and overtones, the importance of correspondences, and finally, the notion of 'thought forms' – that were popular among Theosophists in the early twentieth century, and which significantly influenced Scriabin's music. I will argue that these ideas were subsequently taken up by some of Scriabin's followers, including Campbell. Scriabin, like many Theosophists, was very interested in overtones. Indeed, Scriabin has been credited with founding a new system of harmony based on "higher overtones."[21] His famous 'mystic chord' is usually contrasted to triadic harmony by being described as "superimposed fourths."[22] However, in my view, the correlation between this six-note chord and the overtone series is very striking. It corresponds to the first six notes of the overtone sequence, leaving out octaves and fifths. The relationship between the 'mystic chord' and the overtone series was also noted by at least one contemporary commentator, the Australian ex-patriot, George Clutsam who spent much of his career in England.[23]

According to leading Theosophical Society theorist Charles Webster Leadbeater, overtones were significant because they generate specific colours that "can be seen by an eye even slightly clairvoyant."[24] Scriabin clearly identified as being such a clairvoyant, claiming to be able to clearly see such

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[19] Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, p. 216.
[20] Garcia, 'Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas', pp. 276-287.
[21] Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), p. 29.
[22] François de Médicis, 'Scriabin's Mature Style and the Coordination of Form, Grouping and Pitch Structures', *STM_Online* (2009) at http://musikforskning.se/stmonline/vol_12/medicis/index.php?menu=3. Accessed 30/3/2011.
[23] G.H. Clutsam, 'The Harmonies of Scriabine', *The Muiscal Times* vol. 54, no. 1 (1913), pp. 156-158.
[24] C.W. Leadbeater, *Theosophy: Hidden Side of Things* (Anand Gholap Theosophical Institute) at http://www.anandgholap.net/Hidden_Side_Of_Things-CWL.htm. Accessed 30/3/2011.

colours when certain tones were played.[25] It is therefore not surprising that Scriabin's music also demonstrates an interest in 'correspondences'. Theosophists believed that 'correspondences' or links between colour, musical tones, and other natural phenomena could be deciphered, providing insight into divine manifestations on earth.[26] Scriabin's preoccupation with this notion is most graphically demonstrated in *Prometheus*, which was specifically envisaged as a multi-media event with the score calling for a colour keyboard to project colours onto a screen as certain pitches were played.[27] His unfinished symphony, *Mysterium*, was to be the ultimate such multimedia event.

In 1901 Leadbeater, together with the eventual President of the Theosophical Society Annie Besant, published a very influential treatise called *Thought Forms*, which claimed, among other things, that when tones and colours are aggregated they create specific 'forms'. This text is thought to have been very influential among Russian artists striving for a fusion of the arts,[28] and played a crucial role in Kandinsky's artistic development.[29] Besant and Leadbeater detailed their beliefs complete with illustrations of the forms they "saw" in the music of Mendelssohn, Gounod and Wagner, arguing that if the music is good "the effect of those vibrations cannot but be uplifting to every man."[30] In the following image, the "form" they "saw" when listening to music by Mendelssohn shows individual notes and melodic contours which are depicted by individual lines.

[25] For a discussion of Scriabin's claims to be a synesthete see B.M. Galeyev and I.L. Vanechkina, 'Was Scriabin a Synesthete?', *Leonardo* vol. 34, no. 4 (2001), pp. 357-361.
[26] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.
[27] For a discussion of this work see James M. Baker, '*Prometheus* and the Quest for Color-Music: The World Premiere of Scriabin's *Poem of Fire* with Lights, New York, March 20, 1915', in *Music and Modern Art*, ed. James Leggio (New York: Routledge, 2002). This is a more recent work by Baker who has obviously changed from his earlier position regarding the importance of Scriabin's spiritual beliefs.
[28] Baker, '*Prometheus* and the Quest for Color-Music', pp. 70-71.
[29] Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 54.
[30] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, p. 86.

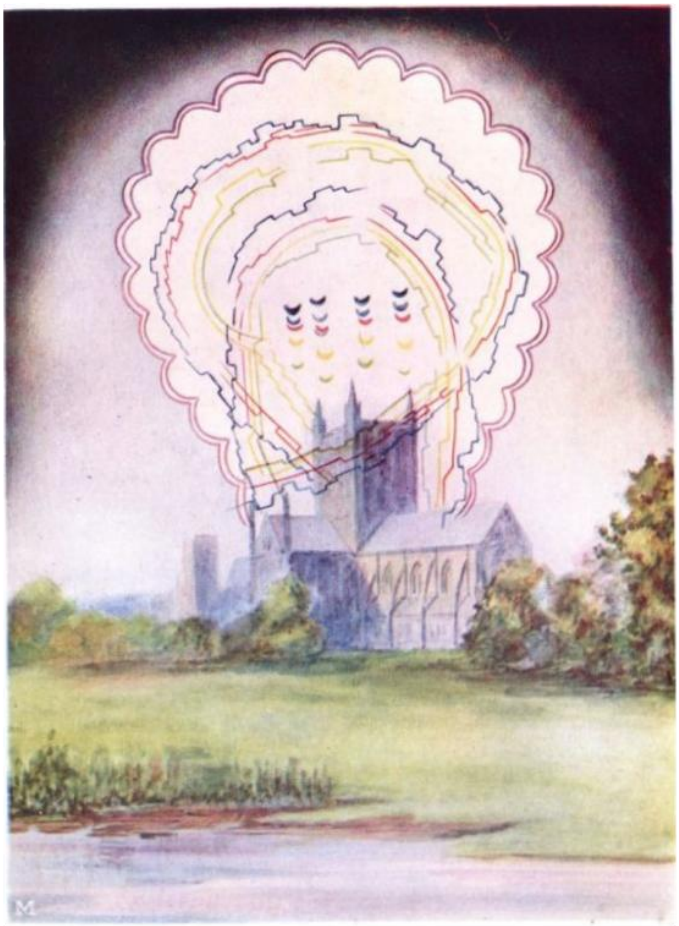

Figure 1: *Plate M. Music of Mendelssohn* from Annie Besant, and C.W. Leadbeater. *Thought Forms*. London: The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., Public Domain eBook released by Project Gutenberg in 2005, p. 87.

However, in the "greater and richer form" produced by the music of Richard Wagner, such lines are less apparent with the dominant feature being the masses of colour created by what Besant and Leadbeater described as Wagner's "sound edifices."[31]

[31] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, p. 91.

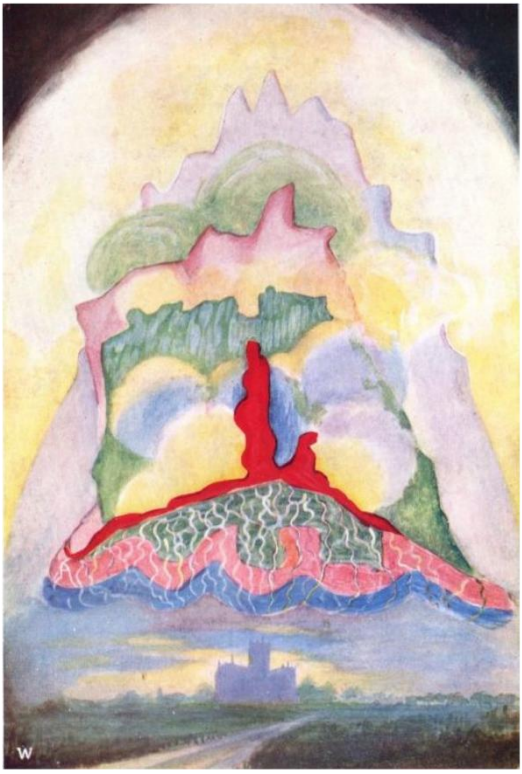

Figure 2: *Plate W. Music of Wagner* from Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater. *Thought Forms*. London: The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., Public Domain eBook released by Project Gutenberg in 2005.

Elsewhere, Leadbeater describes the "music of the spheres" or "that which the Chinese authors have called the KUNG" – "an inexpressible compound or synthesis of all forms" – where "the sounds of nature blend themselves into one mighty tone."[32] Scriabin's music, which is built around complex non-

[32] Leadbeater, *Theosophy: Hidden Side of Things*. It is unclear what Leadbeater is referring to by the term 'KUNG'. He possibly misunderstood the meaning of this term which is described in Oxford Music Online as a term used to denote the "lowest of the five Chinese degrees" (similar to 'do' in Western terminology) of a Pentatonic scale, or the middle degree in the Korean five note scale. See Ian D. Bent, et al. 'Notation', Oxford Music Online, at

triadic chords, is obviously designed to cultivate such an otherworldly effect. It is no coincidence that Scriabin described his famous 'mystic chord' (or Promethean chord) as the "chord of the pleroma."[33] In Scriabin's music, this and other similarly constructed chords are repeated or extended indefinitely without resolution creating what Taruskin describes as a "harmonic stasis" or "satiation without resolution."[34] The resulting sound mass smothers individual voices, which become less distinct or even disappear altogether. Taruskin describes composers who use such aggregate harmonies as "maximalist,"[35] claiming that the purpose, in Scriabin's case at least, was to extinguish the "petty I" to make way for "transforming transcendence."[36] For Scriabin, it was not enough to compose music encoded with symbolic meaning – his music was meant to be the embodiment of the spiritual world here on earth.

Towards the end of his life, Scriabin's ideas became increasingly grandiose. These included unworkable plans to perform his never-completed *Mysterium* at the foot of the Himalayas to herald nothing less than the "annihilation of the universe."[37] Consequently, he failed to synthesise his ideas into a coherent form that could be followed by his many admirers. Schoenberg, on the other hand, deliberately codified a new musical language as the basis for a so-called Second Viennese School (the title is a deliberate reference to the Germanic musical tradition) with its associated "twelve-tone technique."[38] Not

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http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/music/20114pg1. Accessed 1/4/11.

[33] Anatole Leikin, 'From Paganism to Orthodoxy to Theosophy: Reflections of Other Worlds in the Piano Music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin', in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2002), p. 41. I would assume that Scriabin is using the gnostic term 'pleroma' here, which according to the Oxford Dictionary is the spiritual universe or abode of God. It was a term used by Madame Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

[34] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, pp. 205-206.

[35] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 197.

[36] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, pp. 205-208.

[37] Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*, p. 63.

[38] See for example Joseph Auner, 'Proclaiming the Mainstream: Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, eds Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 228-259, who argues that Schoenberg was very successful at positioning himself within the mainstream by tracing his lineage from Bach and Mozart, through Beethoven, Wagner, and Brahms.

surprisingly, with clearly articulated rules and procedures,[39] yet framed within an "essentially unchanging context of general formal and aesthetic assumptions,"[40] Schoenberg's legacy has traditionally attracted more academic interest. What is often ignored is Schoenberg's "strong interest in spiritual transcendence and the possibilities of representing it in art"[41] during his formative years. Schoenberg corresponded extensively with the artist and author of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* Wassily Kandinsky, debating these very issues.[42] He even contributed an article, a musical score, and paintings (as he was also an amateur artist) to Kandinsky's *Blau Reiter Almanac.*[43] It was, according to Taruskin, his spiritual quest for a "utopian musical universe" that caused Schoenberg to pursue a "pan tonal system" that surmounted the "major/minor dichotomy."[44] In Taruskin's presentation, Schoenberg and Scriabin actually have similar motivations. While Scriabin's ambitions may have become totally impractical by the end of his life, Taruskin observed that he was nevertheless much imitated in Russia until Shostakovich denounced him as "our bitterest musical enemy."[45] However, according to Taruskin, Scriabin's maximalist tendencies subsequently resurfaced in the work of French composer Olivier Messiaen[46] and American composers such as Henry

[39] Auner, 'Proclaiming the Mainstream: Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern', p. 245. Auner claims that Schoenberg, Berg and Weber had remained ambivalent about the idea of twelve-tone composition as a set of rules, but, nevertheless, presented it in a way that others could adopt.
[40] Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, p. 200.
[41] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 338.
[42] Jelena Hahl-Koch (ed.), *Arnold Schoenberg Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures and Documents* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).
[43] Wassily Kandinsky, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Klaus Lankheit (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) p. 90. Schoenberg quotes Schopenhauer's insight into music: "The composer reveals the innermost essence of the world and pronounces the most profound wisdom in a language that his reason cannot understand." The relationship between Schoenberg's music and his art was explored by Schoenberg scholar Jennifer Shaw in a recent presentation entitled 'Colour, Space and Time: The Impact of the Visual Arts on Arnold Schoenberg's Music', an unpublished paper presented at an Australian National University Postgraduate Seminar on 2/5/11.
[44] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 339.
[45] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 227.
[46] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 229.

Cowell, Dane Rudhyar, and Carl Ruggles.[47] I would suggest they also resurfaced in the work of Australian composer, Phyllis Campbell.

The Legacy of Scriabin

Prominent American musicologist Carol Oja has explored the link between Theosophy and modernism in the music of Rudhyar, Cowell and Ruggles as well as Ruth Crawford Seeger. In this "nearly forgotten chapter of American music"[48] she claims that such composers looked to Russian mysticism as represented by Scriabin, clearly identifying this course as an alternate to "the Latin reactionaries and their apostle, Stravinsky and the 'rule-ordained' music of Schoenberg's group."[49] While the resulting music differs from Scriabin's in many ways, the techniques they deployed are clearly based on similar principles. Rudhyar developed a theory of dissonance based on the concept of "tone" or "cumulative resonances" that was produced by "introducing piles of seconds, as well as other intervals considered 'dissonant' within traditional practice."[50] The effect he admired most was Cowell's use of cluster chords. Rudhyar likened his approach to Scriabin's technique of piling up "chords upon chords."[51] According to Oja, Rudhyar's ideas provide "striking perspectives" on the early modernist movement in America, as they influenced the next generation of composers, including John Cage, Peter Garland, Lou Harrison and James Tenney.[52]

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, recent work by van der Linden and Mansell has prompted a reassessment of the contribution of the neglected English composers John Foulds and Cyril Scott who were also inspired by, and actively engaged with Theosophical ideas.[53] Van der Linden describes Scott and Foulds as admirers of Scriabin; both were conversant with and interested in synesthesia and theosophical ideas about the relationship between musical

[47] Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, p. 295.
[48] Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.
[49] Rudhyar, quoted in Oja, *Making Music Modern*, p. 102.
[50] Oja, *Making Music Modern*, p. 104.
[51] Rudhyar, quoted in Oja, *Making Music Modern*.
[52] Carol J. Oja, 'Dane Rudhyar's Vision of American Dissonance', *American Music*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1999), p. 131.
[53] See Bob van der Linden, 'Music, Theosophical Spirituality, and Empire: The British Modernist Composers Cyril Scott and John Foulds', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 3 (2008); James G. Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2009).

tones and colours.[54] In examining the work of John Foulds, Mansell argues that he and other composers including Scott, Holst, and Warlock understood music as "an objective physical phenomenon with an active occult agency in social, psychological, and spiritual life." Mansell claims that such composers freely adopted modernist techniques as "an extension of Theosophy's quest to experiment in this occult science."[55] He argues that historians have largely forgotten this strand of musical modernity despite it having a wide intellectual currency and significantly influencing cultural life in early twentieth-century Britain, particularly through the medium of music.[56]

The Australian Musical Context and the Contribution of Phyllis Campbell

Campbell's writings about the spiritual benefits of music, quoted at the beginning of this article, demonstrate that Theosophical beliefs were also influential in Australia. Like her European and American counterparts, she looked to Germany, but rather saw Russia as pre-eminent. In particular, Campbell used similar principles in her music as those employed by other composers inspired by the music of Scriabin. It represents a largely forgotten engagement with modernist thought by early twentieth century Australian composers. However, this flies against the traditional orthodoxy of Australian musicology.

Since Roger Covell wrote the first history of Australian music in 1967 with only a few dissenting voices,[57] the notion that little of interest happened musically in Australia before the 1960s has been all-pervasive.[58] In her recent study of the work of twentieth century Australian composer Roy Agnew, Kate Bowan suggests that such attitudes reflect "a general tendency in Australian musical history towards ahistoricism, whereby music is interpreted or judged on current aesthetic standards rather than the ones prevailing when the work

[54] Linden, 'Music, Theosophical Spirituality, and Empire'.
[55] Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance', p. 435.
[56] Mansell, 'Musical Modernity and Contested Commemoration at the Festival of Remembrance', pp. 433-454.
[57] Joel Crotty, 'Interpreting Australian Music History: A Question of Time, Place and Attitudes', *Sounds Australian*, vol. 41 (1994), pp. 6-7.
[58] See for example Roger Covell, *Australia's Music Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), p. 187; Gordon Kerry, *New Classical Music: Composing Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), p. 4; David Symons and John Whiteoak, 'Classical Music 1788-1930', in *Currency Companion to Music & Dance in Australia*, eds John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell (Sydney: Currency House, 2003), pp. 165-167.

was written."[59] This trend is less apparent in the other arts where, in recent years, there has been growing interest in and appreciation of the work of early twentieth century visual artists and writers including Kenneth Slessor, Christopher Brennan, Flora S. Eldershaw, and Marjorie Barnard; and visual artists such as Roy de Maistre, Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin, and Grace Cossington-Smith.[60]

However, evidence is mounting that the traditional view of Australian music needs to be challenged. In his groundbreaking book on Australian piano music, Larry Sitsky found that a "modernist stream" has always existed in Australian music, producing a solid tradition of high quality art music. He claims that it is not "an invention of the last thirty or forty years of the twentieth century but had roots from much earlier on."[61] Bowan's work provides a "fascinating glimpse" into the musical scene of 1920s Sydney "revealing a rich and fertile cultural field" that had not "entirely succumbed to the stupor of English pastoralism."[62] She identified a strong Scriabin influence on Agnew's music.[63] Bowan also noted that Campbell was a contemporary of Agnew's and was actively engaged in promoting modern musical ideas, particularly the music of Scriabin.[64]

Although Campbell was strongly influenced by Scriabin, she freely adapted his principles in developing her own compositional style. Like her American and English peers and other composers influenced by Theosophy, Campbell explored the capacity of the piano to produce resonant overtones by using aggregate chords. Such chords predominate throughout her *Nature Studies.* Altogether, around one-fifth (twenty-five) of her 128 piano works

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[59] Kate Bowan, 'Wild Men and Mystics: Rethinking Roy Agnew's Early Sydney Works', *Musicology Australia*, vol. 30 (2008), p. 2.

[60] See for example, Mary Eagle, 'A History of Australian Art 1830-1930: Told Through the Lives of the Objects' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 2005); Jenny McFarlane, 'A Visionary Space: Theosophy and an Alternative Modernism in Australia 1890-1934' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 2006); Michael Ackland, 'Poetry from the 1890s to 1970', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Bruce James, *Grace Cossington Smith* (Roseville: Craftsman House, 1990).

[61] Larry Sitsky, *Australian Piano Music of the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), p. 5.

[62] Bowan, 'Wild Men and Mystics', p. 58.

[63] Kate Bowan, 'Musical Mavericks' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 2007), p. 27.

[64] Bowan, 'Wild Men and Mystics', p. 25.

listed by her husband, Elliston, are identified as *Nature Studies*.[65] Written between 1925 and 1928, these pieces are highly impressionistic, using many dense, chromatic harmonies and aggregate chords. She also uses a variety of modes including the whole-tone scale, the mystic chord and pentatonic scales. However, Campbell did not extend to the 'ultra-modern' extremes of Cowell who often included fists full, literally, of piano bass notes to create the maximum number of overtones. Rather, Campbell used aggregate chords to create an impression, to set the mood, or as her husband described it, to "express the life of the subject of the title."[66] The enharmonic spelling she used was not consistent with any key, (for instance, using sharps against flats as in figure 3 below) suggesting that she was not thinking tonally and probably sat at the keyboard to find the "right" sound. Indeed, Elliston records that Campbell would "sit at the piano and improvise as ideas floated into her mind."[67] The resulting effect is reminiscent of Debussy, although unlike Debussy, she takes the logic of the notions of maximalism to a logical conclusion. If individual voices are to become submerged as a result of using aggregate harmonies, it follows that there is little purpose in writing melodic material. Rather, she builds her piano works on the gradual transformation of sound brought about by small, but often surprising harmonic shifts of a repeated ostinato pattern. This is demonstrated in the following example from *A Tree,* one of her Nature Studies:

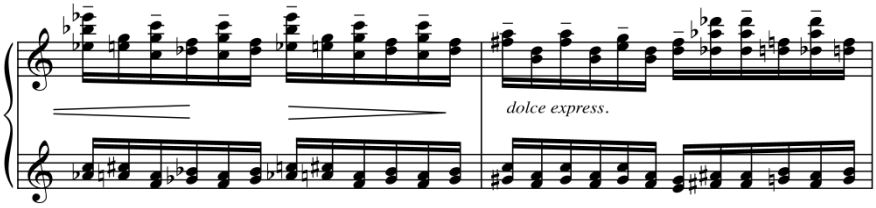

Figure 3: Phyllis Campbell, *A Tree*, bars 27, 28.

Moonrise Over Sydney Heads, written in 1925, is particularly interesting as it demonstrates a connection between Campbell and other artists concerned with

[65] Campbell Archive, UTS, Sydney. Campbell's Nature Studies were separately identified by her husband in his list of Campbell's works by using the Notation (NA) next to the piece.
[66] Elliston Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*, Typewritten Notes, ND, Campbell Archive, UTS.
[67] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.

similar subject matter. As in *A Tree*, Campbell sets up an ostinato pattern, which changes gradually with the addition of new harmonic colour.

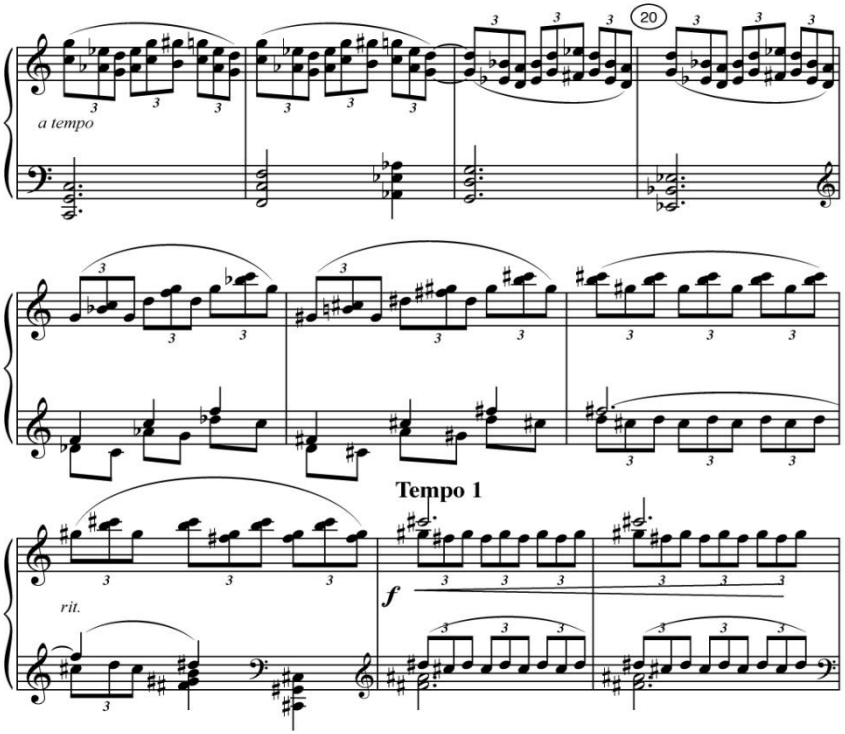

Figure 4: Phyllis Campbell, *Moonrise Over Sydney Heads*, bars 17-26.

Sydney Harbour was, according to Jenny McFarlane, a particular focus for Sydney Theosophists who considered it redolent with "angels and water fairies."[68] McFarlane undertook a recent study on visual artists associated with the Theosophical Society. One such artist, Jane Price, did many paintings of Sydney Harbour, particularly at night. According to McFarlane, Price's painting *Sydney Harbour by Night* (1910) "relies on the reflective surface of the water to water to make visible Price's vision of the transcendental in Sydney Harbour."[69] It is very likely that Campbell knew of such paintings. Using a cassette recorder, Elliston Campbell recorded his wife playing this and other nature studies sometime shortly before she died. He subsequently wrote

[68] McFarlane, 'A Visionary Space', p. 67.
[69] McFarlane, 'A Visionary Space', p. 67.

program notes about the pieces based on his "countless discussions"[70] with her about them. He attached photos of two watercolours by Esme Farmer, one entitled *Sunrise Over Sydney Heads* and the other *Moonrise Over Sydney Heads*, to these notes. His description of his wife's composition is very similar to the way McFarlane described Price's painting:

> As in her other Nature Studies, Phyllis Campbell was not so much concerned with impressions on her own consciousness as trying, rather, by a succession of special chords to enter into and become aware of the consciousness of the living scene before her… Thus, by the magic of music, can the life, the power of a scene in Nature be revealed as capable of affecting human beings by producing in the consciousness of each a sense of peace and, in the more sensitive, an ecstasy at the sheer beauty of it.[71]

It is also certain that Campbell knew of efforts by various artists to explore the links between colour and music. In 1919, a highly controversial art exhibition was held in Sydney called 'Colour in Art', which included paintings by Roy de Maistre who was a "young musician-turned painter" and who chose colours "to harmonise like the notes in music."[72] Famously, de Maistre painted the first known abstract painting in Australia in 1919, which again demonstrates a connection with music in the title; *Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor*.

Campbell too was preoccupied with the relationship between colour and music. She believed that "Victorian drabness" had given way to a "riot of bright hues, transforming home and city… Colour has become indispensable… Much unlovely superfluity has been dispensed with, and the result is nearer the Beautiful."[73] In music she argued that there was "a growing freedom... of harmonic colour." She believed that such "modernity" in music was "opening the doors of Nature, the Faery Kingdom, to man's perception."[74] The reliance on harmonic colour at the expense of melody was very unusual for this time. Indeed, Elliston reports that Campbell played *Dreaming Rock*, which is based on Scriabin's mystical chord, to the visiting Russian pianist Paul Vinogradoff who gave a recital of Scriabin's piano music at Adyar Hall on 12 April 1927. Vinogradoff commented "but madam, you cannot write a piece of music

[70] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.
[71] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.
[72] Niels Hutchison, *Colour Music in Australia* at http://home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic/welcome.htm. Accessed 2/4/2011.
[73] Phyllis Campbell, *Modern Music: Lecture Notes* (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).
[74] Campbell, *Modern Music*.

without a tune in it."[75] Indeed, as with Scriabin, if the aim is to produce a mass of sound, radiating colours, and vibrations; melody ultimately becomes a secondary issue.

Like Scriabin Campbell was also preoccupied with the spiritual significance of musical vibrations, particularly those of the overtone series. She claimed that "contemporary descriptive" music was not intended as "musical photography." Rather,

> [i]t seeks to translate Nature's very consciousness in terms of sound… Gradually the overtones, the harmony within apparent discords will become audible… In proportion to the achievement of this conscious unity with the world of Nature through music, it will be discovered that the New Message is a door leading to infinite possibilities of ever-wider knowledge.[76]

Also like Scriabin, the effect of the repeated aggregate chords creates a sense of harmonic stasis through extended passages of slowly shifting harmonies where the tension rarely fully resolves. Campbell champions this approach in one of her many articles promoting the beneficial qualities of modern music;

> [o]ur ears are new to unaccustomed combinations of sound. We think we know what the resolution of some discord will be, and lo' instead of the expected "all's well in the world" concord, we get more discords, and still more – Then we become Superior, and murmur 'Cacophony". But the light of another day reveals a wondrous underlying method, and the so-called 'cacophony" takes its place in our little scheme of things.[77]

After developing her harmonic language in the *Nature Studies*, Campbell also applied these techniques to compose larger, quite ambitious works including several sonatas and 'Phantasies', a musical drama, *Wesak*, and a setting of Krishnamurti's spiritual treatise *The Path.* Campbell's approach, while clearly based on Theosophical principles, was a highly original application of these ideas. Her work demonstrated that, as in the United States, there was an engagement with modernist compositional techniques that were transmitted via Theosophical beliefs. Despite this similarity, these principles were freely adapted to her own situation.

For Campbell, her task was to discover the spiritual qualities within the natural environment. As indicated at the beginning of this article, in doing this she was anticipating that Australia would have a leading role to play in music's

[75] Elliston Campbell, *Stray Remarks* (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).
[76] Phyllis Campbell, 'The Renaissance in Music', *Advance! Australia* (July 1926), p. 31.
[77] Phyllis Campbell, *Jazz* (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).

evolution. Although many of her peers were similarly preoccupied with defining an Australian identity through music, few could get past relatively trite efforts at gentrified bush ballads and crude appropriations of bird calls and/or aboriginal songs which were usually altered to fit within traditional Western tonal constraints.[78] Using her unique harmonic language, Campbell pre-empted Australian composers who found Western tonal music inadequate for the purpose of expressing their own experience within the Australian environment. Whereas the music of many of her peers sounds very dated today, Campbell created music that still sounds fresh and interesting and which should appeal to modern audiences.

Unfortunately, Campbell had little support for her endeavours in her own lifetime, even though she lived during a period when Australian musical institutions were being established and art music concerts, including orchestral music and chamber music, were becoming increasingly popular. Music was actually a highly contested area in 1920s Sydney. Popular music was perceived as a threat, which spurred on the establishment of the New South Wales State Conservatorium in 1915 and the Australian Music Examination Board (AMEB) in 1918. In addition, the Australian Performing Rights Association was established in 1926 and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1932 (with its precursor, the Australian Broadcasting Company established in 1929). Further, during this period, the phonograph came into widespread use and radio was introduced causing profound and fundamental changes to the way in which music was performed. There was widespread discussion about the role of music in newspapers and magazines, particularly the music magazines and Theosophical publications that proliferated during this period.[79] What was good music? What was not? How should music be performed? What music should be broadcast on the radio? What should the role of music be in Australian society?

For Sydney in the 1920s these were important issues to resolve for two reasons: to demonstrate its worth as a city within the international community,

[78] Many of Campbell's peers, including Louis Lavater, Alfred and Mirrie Hill, and Iris de Cairo-Rego, composed music on Australian themes, but they are universally written using traditional Western harmonic language. An important exception is Henry Tate who, in 1917, proposed alternate scales that Australian composers might use. He altered these scales so that they were close to the actual tones used by Australian birds.

[79] A range of musical magazines were established during the early 1900s including *Australian Musical News* (1911-1940), *The Conservatorium Magazine/Musical Australia* (1916-1925), *Music in Australia* (1928-31), and *Triad/New Triad* (1915-1928).

and to relieve anxieties about population growth and social unrest. A new nation needed to be able to show its worth in a cultural sense to earn respect from other nations. In her history of the Sydney Conservatorium, Diane Collins records that the Beethoven festival held in Sydney in 1927 to mark the Centenary of Beethoven's death was a deliberate attempt to legitimise Sydney's claim "to count itself among the significant cities of the world."[80] The 1920s were also a time of dynamic popular growth and industrial unrest with resulting social tensions.[81] Concerns about the stability of social order led to anxiety about the burgeoning growth of popular culture. According to Jill Matthews' work on popular culture in Sydney, concerns ranged from those who worried about "commercialisation" and/or "Americanisation" to those who saw it as "decadent," "degenerate" of even as "manifestations of bolshevism, consumerism, capitalism, urbanisation or mechanization."[82]

Campbell, like many of her peers, believed that such threats could be countered by promoting the spiritual values of art music. She and other members of the Theosophical Society were active participants in this contested space. The Theosophical Society promoted its musical ideals through concerts held at Adyar Hall (later the Savoy Theatre), education activities, and the establishment of its own radio station, 2GB, in 1926. Henri Verbrugghen, the first Director of the New South Wales State Conservatorium was also influenced by Theosophy and was active in trying to realise Theosophical ideals by bringing music to the public and promoting musical education activities designed to bring about uplift and "counter the degrading materialism of modern life."[83] Verbrugghen left Sydney in 1922 amidst tensions and debate about the funding of the orchestra he established.

Campbell had an ambivalent relationship with the Conservatorium. Although she herself did not record her experiences, Elliston indicated that she

[80] Diane Collins, *Sounds from the Stables: The Story of Sydney's Conservatorium* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 55.
[81] See for example Beverley Kingston, *A History of New South Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia: 1901-1942 The Succeeding Age*, vol. 4 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[82] Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005), p. 192.
[83] Diane Collins, 'Henri Verbrugghen's Auditory Utopianism', *History Australia* vol. 6, no. 2 (2009), pp. 36,13.

played in Verbrugghen's orchestra[84] and wrote with some pride about Campbell's composition lessons with Alfred Hill who taught harmony and composition at the Conservatorium, but as far as I can tell, was not significantly involved with the Theosophical Society. Elliston claimed that at the end of the tuition Hill said to Campbell "I have taught you all I know and now regard you as my equal."[85] However, Hill, who trained in Leipzig at the end of the nineteenth century, had a quintessentially romantic style[86] and was not at all given to modernist experimentation. Diane Collins, in her history of the Sydney Conservatorium, claimed that Hill taught sensitively but was not always comprehending of the aesthetic experiments of his students, attaching no priority to the production of new music.[87] It is unlikely, therefore, that Hill provided much support for Campbell. Certainly performances of her work, as recorded by her husband in his notes, were few and far between. The *Sydney Morning Herald* only records performances of a violin duet by Campbell in 1923[88] and a piano solo, *Orchards in Spring* in 1931 by Sydney pianist, Edna Burke at the Conservatorium.[89]

Her husband later explained this lack of recognition in terms of "a drought in music in Sydney" and a consequence of the "limitations due to ill-health," which left her unable to try out her compositions beyond the piano and voice.[90] He also claimed that Campbell was not aiming at "performance on the concert platform to entertain audiences used to sheer virtuosity."[91] Her nature studies were intended as a "psychological experience" rather than for the "entertainment of an audience."[92] Nevertheless, Campbell, understandably, still sought recognition. She entered (unsuccessfully) seven pieces in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) 1934-35 Competition for Australian Composers and made numerous attempts to have her work published. The only pieces that she was able to publish in her lifetime were a small volume of four

[84] Elliston Campbell, *Introductory Comments on Program Notes on Piano Solos Written and Played by Phyllis Campbell*, Taped in Sony Cassette, C-90F. (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney), p. 1.
[85] Elliston Campbell, *Phyllis Campbell – Brief Sketch of the portion of her life she devoted to music*, Typewritten Manuscript (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).
[86] Covell, *Australia's Music Themes of a New Society*, p. 25.
[87] Collins, *Sounds from the Stables: The Story of Sydney's Conservatorium*, p. 95.
[88] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1923.
[89] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1931.
[90] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.
[91] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.
[92] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.

short piano pieces for children.[93] In rejecting her compositions, most publishers expressed concern about the "modern" or even "ultra-modern"[94] nature of the music, claiming "we find the modern type of music very difficult to sell," although the music is described as "clever" and "atmospheric."[95]

Despite such setbacks, as Bowan has suggested, Campbell was "tireless in her advocacy for music, in particular modern music and especially that of Scriabin and the English composer, Cyril Scott."[96] Campbell organised regular concerts at Adyar Hall, gave lectures aimed at educating her audience about music and wrote numerous articles for Theosophical publications.[97] She also was involved as both a performer and lecturer on 2GB, which was established with the explicit objective of "elevating cultural standards in music."[98] Campbell was, however, more successful at having her music performed at Adyar Hall where she was probably more likely to have found a sympathetic audience for some of her more daring compositions. For instance, a song and a series of piano pieces "in an advanced style with much play upon the whole-tone scale" by Campbell were included in a concert of Australian music organised by The Music Lovers' Concerts Committee alongside those of Alfred Hill and the flutist, Wilfred Arlom.[99] In 1926, the *Herald* recorded a performance at Adyar Hall of "an interesting piano piece" by Campbell "all in the modern style with wildly clashing discords."[100]

Campbell, like the visual artists studied by McFarlane, was therefore able to "enter the public sphere in a sheltered space"[101] as a lecturer, social activist, performer and composer. The Theosophical Society provided even

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[93] Phyllis Campbell, *A Piper's Tune – Four Modern Easy Piano Pieces for Pianoforte* (Sydney: W.H. Paling and Co, ND), no. 258. Two volumes of Campbell's *Nature Studies* were published for the first time in 2008 by Keys Press. Information can be obtained at http://www.keyspress.com.au/australian-heritage-series. Accessed 24/04/11.

[94] Allan and Co., *Letter to Phyllis Campbell*, 15 June (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).

[95] W.H. Paling and Co., *Letter to Phyllis Campbell*, 9 January 1936 (Campbell Archive, University of Technology Sydney).

[96] Bowan, 'Wild Men and Mystics', p. 25.

[97] Campbell wrote a regular feature for *Advance! Australia* on music, particularly the lives of great composers and 'nationalism' in music from 1926-1928.

[98] Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1979-1939* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1986), p. 327.

[99] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 1925.

[100] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 1926.

[101] McFarlane, 'A Visionary Space', p. 36.

more than this for Campbell. She gained her authority and the confidence to write and perform some of her more challenging works from the Society. As Bourdieu has theorised, artists rely on consecration from an appropriate power to lend validity to their work.[102] Her work was largely ignored by the consecrated musical authority of her time, the New South Wales State Conservatorium. On the other hand, according to McFarlane, the Theosophical Society accorded artists a "privileged sensibility" assuming they had "increased access to spiritual truth and astral vision."[103] This would explain Campbell's prodigious output during her most prolific period from 1925 to 1932 when most of her extant music was composed. Apart from the 128 piano works mentioned above, this included 119 art songs, 36 works for violin and piano, 3 works for viola and piano, 18 chamber works, 5 orchestral sketches, 1 harpsichord suite, and liturgical works. Without the Theosophical Society, it is unlikely that Campbell would have been able to pursue her work with such vigour and enthusiasm. Apart from the public gatherings, many small special interest groups were convened under the auspices of the Theosophical Society and, although neither she or her husband mentions such groups as a source of support, it is highly likely that Campbell was able to perform and discuss her works at such informal gatherings as well as the public events at Adyar Hall and on 2GB.

Sadly, when the Theosophical Society imploded in the early 1930s following the Krishnamurti debacle and the deaths of Besant and Leadbeater, Campbell along with numerous others left the Society, losing their support and the authority for her work.[104] As a consequence, she lost her voice with her compositional flow almost petering out after 1932. She joined the Catholic Church and wrote a small number of liturgical works, taking lessons from a visiting organist from Spain, Father Joseph Muset-Ferrer from 1939-1942.[105] These works are more traditional in style and do not make use of the techniques she developed in her *Nature Studies*. In 1942, according to her husband, "seeing no future for her music compositions"[106] Campbell gave up composing and turned instead to poetry. He quotes her poem 'Flowering' in which she expressed her frustrations:

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[102] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 75.
[103] McFarlane, 'A Visionary Space', p. 37.
[104] Roe, *Beyond Belief*, p. 371.
[105] Campbell, *Phyllis Campbell – Brief Sketch*, p. 1.
[106] Elliston Campbell, *A Summary of the Life of Phyllis Violet Campbell*, Campbell Archive, UTS, p. 7.

> No more I sail uncharted seas of sound.
> Mid storm and swell my ship has gone aground.
> I turn where tranquil havens beckon me
> To magic pleasances of poetry.[107]

Although she rejoined the Theosophical Society again in later life she did not resume composing.

Campbell's quest to compose music vibrating with colourful harmonies that express the "life within"[108] sets her apart from most other Australian composers of her time. Campbell was part of an alternate third strand of musical modernism that has been overshadowed by the dominant Second Viennese School and neoclassicism. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it is a movement that had adherents in Europe, the United States and Australia. Composers like Scriabin and his followers had spiritual aspirations, which were influenced by Theosophical ideas that underpinned their approach to composition. These ideas were also highly influential among visual artists. Campbell shared such Theosophical ideas but applied these concepts in her own unique way. Believing in the spiritual nature of all, she looked to her own environment for inspiration. In Campbell's case, this meant that she needed to invent a musical language appropriate to her environment, pre-empting a move by later Australian composers to seek inspiration outside the Western harmonic tradition to express their engagement with the Australian landscape.

Scriabin's followers applied Theosophical ideas in different ways depending on their local circumstances and their individual spiritual concerns. This may be one of the reasons that the strand of musical composition by those influenced by Scriabin has largely been ignored to date. However, these composers shared beliefs that found expression in their music. Specifically, they were concerned with one or more of the following: the effect of overtones and musical vibrations; the links between colour and sound or multi-media effects; and aggregate chords that produce "edifices of sound." Many of these composers found little support for their work from the musical establishment. Their only recognition often came from involvement with and links to the Theosophical Society. As we have seen with Campbell, the Theosophical Society provided an alternative source of authority for her endeavours. However, as the Theosophical Society lost popularity, such composers faded from view and, in Campbell's case at least, stopped writing altogether.

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[107] Elliston Campbell, *Letter to Australian Music Centre*, 31 January 1983, Campbell Archive, UTS, p. 1.
[108] Campbell, *Program Notes on Piano Solos*.

Conclusion

In recent times there has been, globally, a re-emergence of spiritual preoccupations in the music of composers such as Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidulina, Henryk Górecki, James MacMillan and Steve Reich. In Australia, many composers, particularly Larry Sitsky, Nigel Butterly, Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards and Anne Boyd also acknowledge the influence of spiritual concerns. Although, like Scriabin, musical maximalists run the risk of exceeding practical performance constraints or of writing themselves into a dead end, composers continue to produce "sound edifices" that could barely have been imagined by either Besant or Leadbeater. One work that immediately springs to mind is Steve Reich's *Drumming.* Although, ironically, Reich is usually described as a 'minimalist' composer rather than 'maximalist', the visceral vibrations and resonant overtones produced by various combinations of drums and mallet instruments in a live performance of this extraordinary work is surely a clear contemporary manifestation of Scriabin's endeavours. It is therefore timely to revisit Scriabin and his many followers and to recognise the far-reaching significance that the Theosophical movement has had for the development of Western music in the modern era.