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REVIEW

Douglas Lilburn *A Search for Tradition and A Search for a Language*

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Reviewed by Martin Lodge

This re-publication of Douglas Lilburn's two major pieces of writing on music is entirely welcome. It is excellent to have both essays brought together in a single handsome volume. The editorial and production work by Scilla Askew on the new edition is outstanding, resulting in a beautifully designed and printed book. The colour illustrations have been selected from works by Rita Angus, Lilburn's close friend and sometime intimate. Each picture is well chosen, finely reproduced and appropriate.

John Mansfield Thomson edited the first publication of each essay separately in the 1980s and it is good to have his two introductions included here as well. These introductions are little gems of insightful, stylish writing in themselves, all the more important because of the long and sometimes turbulent friendship between Lilburn and Thomson that lies behind them.

Aged just 30, in his Cambridge Summer Music School talk of 1946 Lilburn (1915-2001) sets out his view of the issues facing a New Zealand composer in the mid twentieth century. He focusses largely on the question of context, especially the lack of a tradition of art music composition in this country at that point in time. Subsequently he went on to lead by example, staying in New Zealand throughout his professional career and creating an impressive body of work that others could build on. Essential as that task was, it actually proved to be one of the easier problems identified by Lilburn in his talk.

Twenty three years later he reflected on his earlier thinking, finding the issues more complex than they appeared to have been in 1946. The second essay, *A Search for a Language*, is the text of a public lecture delivered on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Otago in 1969. In it, he begins by saying 'I shall be speaking of language... as a medium for expressing human experience.' What follows is in the nature of an artistic confession, revealing his attitude to the key problems he has faced as a composer up to that point, and indicating how he has attempted to solve them. By the end of the lecture, Lilburn acknowledges that the talk has, in fact, turned out to be an 'interim report on experience' rather than an exercise in linguistic exploration. That change in aim is what makes the lecture continue to be so engaging.

In his introductory remarks, Thomson likens Lilburn's essays to 'a solitary sentinel rock with a finger pointing to the sky'. Unfortunately most commentators have been unwilling to move beyond the familiar and now very well trodden road leading up to that sentinel rock. Thomson rightly suggests that the metaphorical rock finger points not in any lateral direction across an increasingly familiar cultural landscape, but upwards, suggesting an openness of thinking as an ideal for the future. Lilburn's two essays certainly began the debate on aesthetic, technical and historical issues in New Zealand art music and remain monumental, but the time has passed when they should still be used to frame the discussion. Frustratingly, they still often are.

Seventy years on from the Cambridge talk, surely any discussion of identity should be more sophisticated in methodology and in context than Lilburn's pioneering account? But this hasn't happened. However it really is no longer good enough to keep rehearsing Lilburn's original question about what one's individual identity might be, or what a national musical identity might sound like. Today, these are obviously the wrong questions to ask and so are unlikely to generate useful answers. It would be much more useful to ask, for example, how identities (plural) relate within and between individuals, and how such multiplicities and intersections contribute to, or detract from, ideas of a recognisable national culture. Identities and traditions are all constructed and are constantly being reconfigured. Every identity and tradition is part of a network of dynamic processes rather than being a simple object. The time is well overdue for the parameters and conceptual frameworks of such discussions to be updated. It's time for commentators and musicologists to catch up with composers and cease falling back so comfortably and uncritically into the framework supplied by Lilburn's essays.

Of the specific problems Lilburn identifies, the matter of folk music seems to have proved one of the most elusive. He believed there was no usable folk music in New Zealand in the mid twentieth century, a view which one might well take issue with. But what of the situation today? Put simply, folk music is the music that people make at home on their own or in small groups. It utilises available resources, both cultural and technological. Usually that means borrowing existing models and materials and making sounds with the voice and any readily accessible instrument. The folk music of our time largely is the musical outcome of folks working on their mobile computing devices, whether laptop, tablet or smartphone. The traditional folk music processes of creating sound, appropriating it, adapting, mixing and frequently disrespecting ownership have merely changed media from live to digital. Promiscuous mash-up is a dominant pop culture aesthetic in music and video, perhaps because it is so easy to do with digital equipment. But borrowing, parody, satire and repurposing have always been part of folk traditions.

The computer with its easy to use music software, much of it available free, such as the ubiquitous Garageband, is a musical instrument available to all and which many young people use to create music themselves. This is the new folk music. It can be vulgar and uncomfortable. The question for composers is how to regard it. Ironically, mobile digital devices have now provided everyone with access to what Lilburn hailed as 'my own total heritage of sound' when he initiated electroacoustic music composition in New Zealand in the 1960s. Now folk music has appropriated the tools of university art music, the reverse of the process Lilburn had observed in previous music history.

From his own experience Lilburn describes a frequently encountered pattern of response to innovation when, in 1969, he reports having ‘watched the slow transition from contemptuous indifference [to New Zealand composers] to an understanding, and now recognition and even some enthusiasm backed by practical support’. Concerning today’s iPad folk music, perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of the second of Lilburn’s stages, that of recognition? The new digital folk music is a factor that art music composers currently need to think seriously about.

In a perceptive afterword to Lilburn’s essays, Jack Body writes: ‘I interpret his words as a call to New Zealand composers, indeed to all our creative artists, for creative honesty as a basis for achieving an authenticity of artistic expression’. That is indeed part of Lilburn’s legacy, but so is the complementary part of artistic honesty that involves seeking inner rhythms, finding fecundity in shadows and even repression, as Lilburn himself noted. Accepting the completeness of what we are lies behind his belief that to find a valid musical voice we each need to search for the truth of our own experience.

Biographical note

Martin Lodge is Associate Professor of composition at the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music in Hamilton, New Zealand. He studied electronic music under Douglas Lilburn.