

THREADS AND EMERGING PATTERNS: SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN NEW ZEALAND MUSIC

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Since 1984 there has been a deliberate and rapid internationalisation of New Zealand's business and financial position. This change in political attitude has also wrought major social and cultural changes. In music, the divergent philosophical pulls of ideas such as internationalism, post-colonialism, postmodernism, commercialisation and 'world music' have generated a changed atmosphere for composers, performers and audiences. The demise of the musical avant-garde has allowed a successful renegotiation of communication between professional musicians and listeners.

Contradictions abound in the current scene, with less state funding than ever being available for promoting music, yet also a clear increase of public interest in new music at the same time. It is no coincidence that the rise of private sponsorship in music, especially Classical Western music in New Zealand, has occurred as composers begin to write for audiences again, rather than purely for self-fulfillment or experimentation.

A key question now is whether the integrity of new music has been subverted by commerce and the need to engage with audiences. Indeed, what should new music aim to do in the first place today? For composers, such re-thinking has provided a liberating removal of stylistic prescription but also the withdrawal of any common aesthetic and philosophical purpose. In popular music, the Americanisation of ethnic traditions continues. In all fields of music, the steamrolling effect of mass media globalisation has produced a backlash resulting in 'new tribal' groupings, as the major ethnic groups in contemporary multicultural New Zealand work to establish up to date and recognisable stylistic musical identities for themselves.

To assert that the arts in New Zealand currently exhibit stylistic pluralism is by now merely to reiterate a cliched truism. The next step in assessing the condition of the arts in this country, and a challenging one, involves attempting to define and analyse the different strands which make up the present plurality of approaches and from there investigate how each strand seems to be interweaving with others - or not interweaving, as the case may be. In looking at the evidence of trends in recent music in New Zealand, a number of distinctive approaches can be discerned.

In this essay, selected significant trends are teased out and illustrated with reference to the work of representative composers and musicians.

In New Zealand as elsewhere, many of the current dilemmas and sources of creative tension in music can be traced back to just two central issues: time and politics, or, put in more topical language, tradition and commerce. In New Zealand today, the Commercial very obviously is Political.

The issue of time includes all those familiar nagging Postmodern questions about history, tradition, style, fashion, originality, authenticity and so on. In recent years the political implications of national history have risen much closer to the surface of daily life in New Zealand. This has had a significant impact on new music.

In the broader context of international Western culture, the death of Modernism and the rise of regional modifications of Postmodernism as modes of working and thinking for artists, all have been extensively debated and documented. The process of rejecting musical Modernism and treating musical Postmodern dogma with some scepticism and individuality is proceeding relatively quickly in New Zealand as the century closes.

A crucial tenet of Postwar musical Modernism was the supposed necessity for a complete break with the past. In the famous words of Pierre Boulez, composers needed to 'start from scratch'. There was to be a deliberate and unsentimental severing of links with the mainstream Western art music tradition. Modernism was obsessed with novelty and supposed originality. Nostalgia became a cardinal sin. In music, more than in any other art form, this attitude had dire consequences, especially in the alienation of concert audiences. During the 1940s - 70s many composers, and above all university music departments, joined the avant-garde aesthetic and put into practice Boulez's demand for a completely new start. What that meant in practice was the institutional endorsement of Modernist ideology.¹ The result was composers attempting to create totally new and unique works every time they wrote a piece of music. The ideal was for every piece written to be completely novel and different from any other existing piece, both in form and content. Not only that, each new piece needed to be demonstrably unique, with a supporting apparatus of intellectual argument.

In retrospect, this was clearly a nonsensical proposition. It was the equivalent of expecting novelists to invent a new language for each new book they wrote. In turn that would demand readers (listeners in the case of music) learn a new grammar in order to understand every new work

that came along. Non-specialist audiences of classical music refused to be coerced and began a decades long de facto boycott of so-called 'serious' new music. At the same time, especially in the 1960s, the phenomenon of global pop captured a huge audience. As classical music wrote itself out of the mainstream of debate and civilised cultural life in the West, pop music moved to fill that gap, propelled by commercial gain and utilising new recording and broadcast technology, especially television then video. This split, and shift in public appreciation from the classical to the popular, was epitomised by the phenomenal rise of the Beatles as a musical force in the mid 1960s.

Having captured the music market, commercial forces have since minimised the art and maximised the repetitive craft aspects in pop music production. Today Postmodern intellectual theory and global capitalism are locked in a loving embrace of mutual stimulation. Indeed, it has been suggested that an accurate short explanation of Postmodernism is 'capitalism won'!

Given that composers continue to believe that music can be serious and complex, and still has a vital role in cultural life, the question, for many of us, is how to draw elements of the Western art music tradition back into the mainstream of civilised debate, to rejoin contemporary theatre, visual art, writing, film, wine and food as central elements in a culturally rich life.

One way is to take the tools of music commercialism and adapt them to one's own purposes. In New Zealand a young composer has accomplished this 'reverse engineering' with striking success during the last few years. In a very short space of time Gareth Farr has established himself as undoubtedly the most widely recognised composer in the New Zealand public consciousness. Farr was born in 1968, and began his music studies at the University of Auckland before transferring to Victoria University of Wellington. As a student he specialised both in composition and percussion performance, and played professionally as an orchestral percussionist before moving on to graduate studies in composition at the Eastman School of Music in the United States. He returned to New Zealand about three years ago, and his rise to musical fame has been meteoric since. At the 1998 Wellington International Festival of the Arts he had two new commissions premiered and around the same time two CDs of his music were released commercially. In fact, virtually his entire compositional output suddenly could be heard over just a few intense months.

In characteristic works like the 1997 orchestral piece 'Queen of Demons' commissioned by the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Farr's music is heard to be extrovert and colourful. It has a strong rhythmic drive and is

audibly related to the popular orchestral music styles of some recent movies - there are echoes of Batman soundtracks, for instance. The music is approachable because it is stylistically familiar in many ways, but Farr has gone much further than this. He has carefully cultivated not one, but two public personas. He exists as Gareth Farr, the talented and noisy young composer, but is even more famous as Lilith, a glamorous drag queen. The fame and notoriety he has achieved with his drag act have been an unbeatable publicity vehicle for promoting his more sombre musical activities. Lilith appears on television shows and commercials, and features in publicity photos with major celebrities including the Prime Minister and the current mayor of Wellington. In 1998, Lilith toured New Zealand with Ginette McDonald, a well-known television personality, fronting a series of AIDS benefit concerts.²

With a dexterity and effrontery quite without precedent in New Zealand, Farr has seized the tools of show business and commercial music, and turned them to his own ends. To date he has also composed music of sufficient substance to justify his fame. How he may develop artistically in future is an open question.

In public statements, Farr has made a point of dismissing and rebelling against his university training in music. He claims his music draws its energy from memories of Polynesian drumming, its melodic invention from Indonesian gamelan music (he has composed for gamelan orchestra) and its exuberance from the vulgar soundtracks that drag queens choose to lip-synch to. These influences are certainly detectable, but there is also a clear understanding and adaptation of Western classical music procedures involved in his work. This last aspect of his artistry will become more obvious in retrospect, one suspects, and is clearly perceptible in a work like 'Kembang Suling', a beautifully crafted chamber piece for marimba and flute. The title refers to the Balinese bamboo flute, and the three movement work as a whole is subtitled 'Three Postcards from Asia'.

To what strand of New Zealand's current musical pluralism does Farr belong? Much of his work could be labelled crudely as 'camp populism'. Lilith's recent syrupy pop song offered on a television arts programme as a replacement for the New Zealand national anthem is a perfect example of that. Significantly though, Farr sees no contradiction between the ironic, the pop and the more serious and sophisticated kinds of music he composes and performs. This is a genuinely new approach for New Zealand composers. In the past, they have tended to be pigeon-holed into one genre of music or another. The kind of flexibility which Farr shows is a new development. Virtually overnight he has re-established artistic contact with a remarkably wide and varied audience base.

An older figure who continues to pursue his own path and who is also heavily influenced by Asian music and culture, is Jack Body. Now in his mid 50s, Body nurtures a virtual obsession with Asia. Nearly all his recent pieces have a direct Asian connection. His grandest work to date is the opera 'Alley', treating the life and death of the famous New Zealander Rewi Alley, who lived through the Cultural Revolution and beyond in China and is a national hero there. The opera was premiered in Wellington in 1998 to a very positive reception. It is scored for opera singers, and both a Western classical pit orchestra as well as a band of Chinese folk musicians. Body recruited these musicians himself in the remote heartland of China and wrote parts especially for them. Surprisingly, the major differences in tuning, performance styles and languages between Eastern and Western musics were, in the main, able to be overcome in performance.³

The appropriation of exotic musical material, especially from Asia, is a strand of musical development in New Zealand which has become increasingly fashionable over the last decade, not least due to Jack Body's proselytizing - he teaches in the Music Department of Victoria University of Wellington. As he quite deliberately worked through and then broke out of the restrictions of the postwar avant-garde style, Body used folk music from exotic countries as a road forward. He has lived in Asia, especially Indonesia, for several years and travels in Asia very frequently. To build a bridge from Asian music to his own Western Classical background, Body made a large number of transcriptions. Most of these were exercises done to increase his personal understanding of the Asian music, but some he worked up into stand-alone works for concert performance.

As an antidote to so much imported exotica one reasonably would expect a grassroots rebellion. In music, there has been just such a reaction. But delightfully enough, the fad for reviving New Zealand folksongs and the creation of instant icons out of commercial signage - the so-called 'kiwiana' or 'buzzy bee' phenomenon - has sparked its own antidote. The ironical undercutting of instant and synthetic folk elements in music have been mercilessly satirised recently.

The CD album by Greg Malcolm 'Trust only this Face', for instance, opens with a number called 'Traditional New Zealand Folk Song'. It includes copious amounts of added extraneous noise to create a feeling of mock authenticity, including even the ironical sound of a scratchy LP record, though this is a compact disc production! Other supposedly traditional noises to appear include sheep, police sirens, and distortion from cheap instruments. The final irony occurs with the inclusion of a tune supposedly lamenting the loss of the folk tradition in New Zealand,

'Look what they've done to my song'. This is itself an oft recycled pop song imported from the United States in the 1970s.

But while Farr engages with pop music and showbiz, and Jack Body and others appropriate non-Western music, a number of composers continue to develop individual styles and voices by refining and extending an indigenised form of Western classical music. The Western tradition in the broad cultural sense is, after all, not geographically limited. It reached a high point of development in Europe during the Renaissance, but it first flowered long before that in ancient Greece - or before that in North Africa. Today it is a global cultural phenomenon. Just as New Zealanders speak English with a fairly distinctive regional accent, so New Zealand composers working with mainstream musical instruments and techniques continue to evolve a regional voice using an international musical language.

Interestingly, it seems to be composers in their 40s and younger who are turning back strongly to reassess the mainstream Classical musical past, especially the 19th and early 20th centuries, and to mine that past for previously undiscovered creative possibilities. It is another significant part of smashing up the remnants of Postwar avant-garde ideology. A representative composer from this group is Aucklander Eve de Castro-Robinson. She is now in her mid 40s, and has composed for a widely varied range of forces. While appreciating some of the new sounds and approaches realised by Modernists of the 1950s-70s, de Castro-Robinson characteristically declines to be ideologically overwhelmed by them. Instead she will use carefully selected avant-garde techniques which are felt to be appropriate and valid for her style. She is able to synthesise these with ideas from other sources, including the broader canvas of music history, as well as popular culture and the sounds of nature. She has been successful in generating an individual musical voice, and one which can deliver a high musical voltage. Her 'Tumbling Strains' for violin and cello is a strong example of her recent work, and supports the assessment by critic John Kinsella that de Castro-Robinson possesses a 'refreshing unpredictability and resistance to type-casting.'⁴

Finally, a long-awaited emerging strand in the musical fabric of New Zealand is the reawakening of interest in Maori music. There are actually two divergent approaches distinguishable here. On the one hand, the Postwar urbanisation of Maori and the subsequent adoption of American pop as the preferred listening of most young Maori has prompted a number of Maori musicians to take that pop medium and give it a local character. Groups like Upper Hutt Posse adapted rap and re-oriented the lyrics to address racial and political issues affecting Maori in New Zealand.⁵ In a more sophisticated way, other musicians have used American, especially Black American, music as a launching pad for

beginning to revitalize and modernise traditions of older Maori music which had died out. A leading exponent of this approach, fusing current pop styles with Maori language and reintroducing some traditional Maori instruments, is Moana Maniapoto-Jackson. Her group is called Moana and the Moahunters, the moa being an extinct New Zealand bird. The implication is that Moana - a lawyer by training and an outspoken social critic - is hunting down parts of a cultural tradition which have become extinct. Most of her songs have uplifting lyrics, concerning the need to reunite families, to live peaceably, to struggle for social justice. Her popular CD album 'Tahi' ('tahi' means the number 'one' or 'first') incorporates traditional Maori instruments and as well as Western ones interspersed with a capella singing. Reinvigorating the Maori language using music is an important goal for Maniapoto-Jackson. 'Tahi' is a New Zealand example of global pop captured and politicized.

The other strand in the revitalising of Maori music has been quite different. It is less overtly political and more scholarly. It also makes no attempt to be commercial or to incorporate global elements. Instead, a small group of people, actually a group of friends comprising both Maori and white New Zealanders, have been hunting out lost instruments and performance traditions of the Maori. The two key people in this attempt to unearth the roots of traditional Maori music are Hirini Melbourne, a senior lecturer in the Maori Studies Department at the University of Waikato, and Richard Nunns, a Nelson musician and school teacher. Some ancient instruments have been discovered in museums or family collections, but in nearly all cases the techniques for playing them have been forgotten. There is also another whole group of instruments which old people remember having been played but of which no examples can be found today. From piecing together early written reports by Europeans with Maori oral tradition, Melbourne and Nunns are trying to recover and recreate both the old instruments and their performance practices. The results of their work are fascinating. Because music did not exist as a separate art form in traditional Maori cultures, but instead was bound into social function and ritual, much of the musical tradition is inseparable from rites of passage and the Maori language, especially as used in incantations.⁶

To conclude, while commercial pressures and a rightwing political tendency have changed the cultural landscape in New Zealand since 1984 towards a perspective of global Capitalism, the reaction of composers has been to do the opposite and to seek out tribal roots of one sort or another: traditional Maori music, the Western Classical tradition or the folk music of exotic cultures. All these strands are finding a new, changed, place in contemporary New Zealand music. Some of these strands are overtly individual, others are forming a new mesh of relationships with each other and with international music trends.

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Endnotes

1. The institutionalisation of Modernist musical dogma was epitomised by the creation of IRCAM in Paris, a centre for acoustical and musical research founded and long directed by Pierre Boulez. IRCAM has recently become the subject of a provocative anthropological study in a book by Georgina Born, 1998, *Rationalising culture: IRCAM and the institutionalisation of the musical avant-garde* (University of California Press, Los Angeles).
2. 'I'm a publicity whore' Farr admitted to Jason Kaminski in a recently published interview. 'Uncut; a conversation with Gareth Farr', *Music in New Zealand*, 33 Spring 1998, p.19.
3. Critic William Dart wrote of the Alley premiere: 'The chief delight... is the enchanting blend of East and West in the score.' *Music in New Zealand*, 33 Spring 1998, p.12.
4. Cited in the liner notes for CD album 'A Chaos of Delight' (Atoll, 1998).
5. See, for example, Kerry Buchanan's article 'The Hutt Posse; music with a message' in *Music in New Zealand*, 2 Summer 1998-99, pp.34-5.
6. A concise account of this crucial aspect of Maori music is given by Te Puoho Katene (1991) in his prefatory chapter 'The World of Maori Music' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Music* by John M. Thomson (Oxford University Press, Auckland).