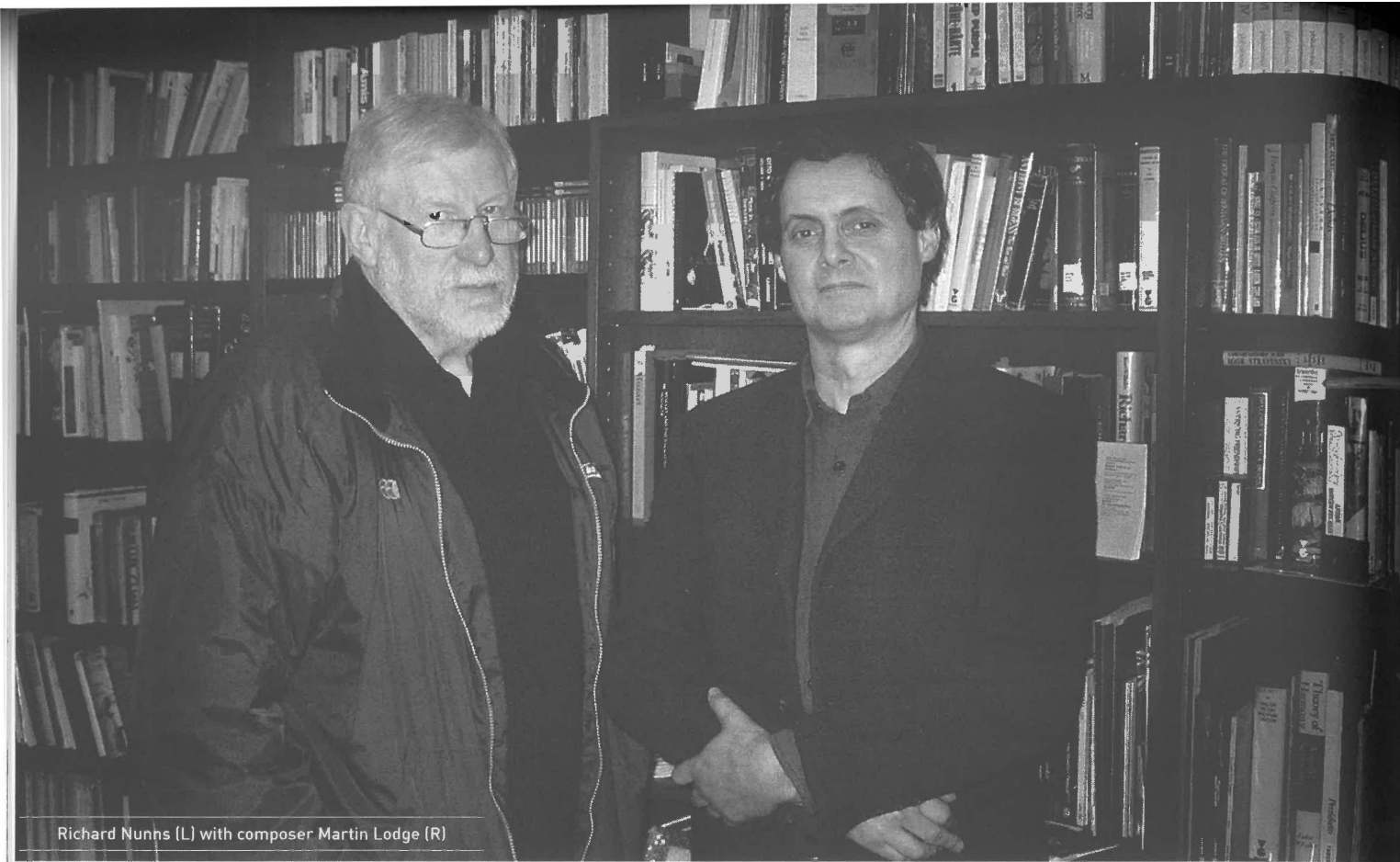




voices of the land

Richard Nunns in conversation with Martin Lodge



Richard Nunns (L) with composer Martin Lodge (R)

MARTIN LODGE: *Richard, you've become very well known for your work in the rediscovery of taonga puoro, traditional Maori instruments and their performance techniques, but perhaps today we could look at some other aspects of your music making. Your approach to music performance, for instance: nearly all your playing in recent times has been to a greater or lesser degree improvisatory. What do you understand improvisation to be? Is it more than self-expression on the spur of the moment?*

RICHARD NUNNS: If we can backtrack a little... I've spent a lifetime in a variety of musical formats, most of them at a very low level. If you were to name almost any musical genre, I've been there and done that not so well! So there's been orchestral playing, small ensemble playing, rhythm and blues bands, and of course the main field of abiding interest has been the whole area of jazz. In the past something I really wanted to be was a proficient jazz musician. In fact today my knowledge of the building blocks of music is still as barren as it ever was, but, having said that, I now have enough confidence to suggest there are things I can do in performance—like transmitting and communicating excitement.

One of the things about the confidence of middle age is becoming comfortable with your limitations and working with those. There are young players coming out of jazz schools here and overseas who can already do things I can't and know I never really will. That's put me into a situation where I am, misguidedly or otherwise, totally comfortable with the improvisational process. I even have enough confidence to take to the taonga puoro—which are my focus, my passion, my obsession—skills from the other parts of my musical life. These traditional instruments are so simple and so limited in their vocabulary, their pitch range, but so rich in their evocative and atmospheric capacity. What they have to say to other genres and forms interests me. Of

course there are real risks: one is possibly to trample on a culture, another risk is that they might have nothing to say to each other and you could have two barren utterances going on that don't meet in any way at all. And of course that last one is part of the challenge of improvisation, where one is always facing the abyss of disaster and chaos. That risk makes it exciting.

Still, the in areas of performance that I have entered into, stirring the pot a little, I'm personally finding it very satisfying, and audiences are finding it strange and mysterious, but also interesting, and surprisingly satisfactory.

It seems to me that improvisation can be misunderstood as a musical approach by people who don't practice it. What's your view on how improvisation relates to more prescribed structures of traditional classical Western music?

Well, I think you've put it in a nutshell. Improvisation is a word that is suggestive of 'anything goes', of 'make it up as you go along' and 'anything that happens to come out of your head'. It is misunderstood, and within improvisation there is a vast range of types and forms and modes. Derek Bailey has written an excellent book called *Improvisation* in which he enters into conversations with practitioners of improvisation from a whole variety of musical forms: classical improvisers, improvisers from ethnic musics, particularly Indian, and then also non-idiomatic improvisers like the whole European school and some in America who seem to have only the scantiest reference to "Jazz" improvising. And jazz improvisation, of course, is highly formulated, based around a thorough knowledge of certain structures and harmonies so it really is the art of substitutions and telling different stories within the framework of popular song.

On the other hand, non-idiomatic improvisation seems to begin with the premise that the musical collaborators

that you're working with are already virtuosi in their musical fields and on their instruments, so it is more an interpersonal communication through sound. But it isn't chordally based, it isn't based on musical orthodoxy. This is the area where I work because it ideally suits the instruments I work with. I really live in a musical world of bend and curve. I have four tones, four pitches, at my disposal, and it is the exploration these, the nuances, the subtleties, the emotional qualities of glissando, tremolo, vibrato—the weeping, the crying, all the emotional qualities of this mighty melisma—which is provided for within the traditional Maori context. I'm using English names for those techniques, but they all have a place and huge aesthetic value within Maori musical forms.

Do you think that this emotional quality is unique to Maori music?

No, of course it's not. Such qualities as I am able to evoke from the instruments I work with speak universally. Non-Maori audiences are equally moved, if they allow themselves to be, as are Maori. It's actually fairly rare that there are Maori in the audience where I work improvising with a string quartet, for instance, or orthodox jazz instrumentation, or with symphony orchestra. However, there have been occasions where it's almost exclusively a Maori audience, where I still improvise but around recognisable themes and motifs that are distinctly Maori.

Music has many different environments, and the musical areas that you have been moving into over recent years seem to have been environments that reflect back to you, or shape directly, what you're doing. Would that be fair comment?

Yes. Both the land itself—and the sea—and their many voices are of great interest to me. Maori long recognized the voices of the land, *te reo o te whenua*. Those places named after the sounds of the area, for instance, are vast in number. This was one thing Hirini [Melbourne] and Brian [Flintoff] and I discovered in our journeys. There are an extraordinary number of sites named because of the voice they had or were perceived to have had. So yes, a lot of the work I have been doing has been based around engaging with these voices of land, forest, water, sea, wind. And increasingly I find that the projects I'm lining up for the future are based around landscape.

One of the most proactive engagements with land occurs with a band I work with called Urban Taniwha. This is an improvising ensemble whose music is largely based around Maori themes, but we take as points of reference New Zealand artists or art works—Ralph Hotere is one example, in poetry the work of Allan Brunton or Cilla McQueen for example—or actual physical landscape. When travelling to perform at festivals and so on we call in to places with special voices, places like Whangatoka, the Elephant Rocks out the back of Duntroon. We hope to create recording situations and maybe performance situations in some places, such as the caves with rock art near Timaru. These places can provide thematic material and also influence our playing.

This idea of the voice of the land is close to with Murray Schafer's notion of soundscape. It involves thinking of music as being part of a total acoustic environment rather than as an entirely separate phenomenon. Where do you see this leading in terms of what you're doing—and in terms of the composers and performers you work with, and your audiences?

I can't actually see where it's leading, but I take enormous pleasure in engaging with the voices of the land and the environment in its entirety. Certainly Schafer has been influential in drawing my attention to such things. It began with the publication of his book on 'ear cleaning'. During my brief sojourn as a primary school teacher in Hamilton, I took responsibility for some music, using the limited equipment we had, and attempted to draw the young people's attention to the environment we lived in. They attempted to make rudimentary music from assembling those sounds. Schafer has continued to be a presence, but not consciously, as my work over the last fifteen years or so has taken its own course. I think most New Zealand composers—and international composers—have been very conscious of the sounds of landscape for a long time. Lilburn is an obvious case in point, as well as numerous composers thereafter.

I've always thought there's a certain irony there, because Lilburn's most well known reference to the need to reflect the New Zealand landscape in music comes in his 1946 lecture to the Cambridge summer music school. He tells how the train he was travelling north on stopped in the bush during the night, on the Raurimu Spiral I think, and he reflects that he was struck by how the music of Mozart then seemed very remote and that the sounds of the bush were what we needed to make music from. The irony would be though, that the most fully accomplished works that meet that aim are his electroacoustic works, like Soundscape with Lake and River, but there's only a minuscule audience for electroacoustic music outside the academy. Perhaps it was a Romantic wish on Douglas's part rather than real artistic necessity after all? But your approach is garnering significant audiences. It addresses the same issue but from a different angle.

It addresses the same issue. What we're finding is in the works that cross over to meet 'the classical genre'—works by Gillian Whitehead, Gareth Farr, Philip Brownlee, Helen Fisher, yourself, and others—what's being sought is artistic evocations of this country. The sounds that arise could only come from here. That seems to be a kernel of desire in most New Zealand composers. Going back to your comment on electroacoustic music, there's something very difficult about responding to loudspeakers.

There's no theatrical presence in that experience.

There's no drama. But there is a certain drama in the taonga puoro and the way they're played. There's still a curiosity concerning them, a lack of knowledge about them, one would have to say, though their voices are being heard increasingly on radio and TV and film now.

In fact they're tending to become symbolic sound bites.

They're becoming the sound bites of the decade, perhaps, but people don't know what they are! They just know the sounds and are comfortable with them. That's healthy. A new piece commissioned for the New Zealand String Quartet and myself from Gillian Whitehead is being programmed with pieces by Berg, Smetana, Mozart—and the work is being requested by programmers. That makes quite a revelatory experience for most audiences. Thus you change attitudes, you cultivate interest.

You're also changing the soundscape of the country.

I suppose one would have to admit humbly to helping change the soundscape of the country—and that's healthy too. The other thing that happens is that, as in jazz, a performer takes an instrument and makes from it a very personal voice. In jazz extreme and outrageous things are done with instruments as part of personalizing them, but I've been very careful so far not to do that with the taonga puoro. I am taking these voices largely within their traditional contexts and performance techniques forward into new situations. Not that there is the potential for very much in the way of extended techniques anyway. They do what they do and that's it.

My situation is that I have a set of musical experiences sitting next to another set of musical experiences, which, I think, means that what I do at the moment no-one else can do. With the greatest respect, even Hirini, with his great musicality, did not have the musical experiences that I have, and made conscious decisions not to engage in the ways I have. He would pass work over to me in situations where he felt either he couldn't or didn't wish to do it. The David Hamilton piece with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra is a case in point. Hirini was in fact offered that first but passed it quickly over to me when a score arrived. It wasn't something he wanted to do. I have a confidence now, that I can enter any musical situation and contribute something to it.

I guess what you're saying is that you're able to enter a dialogue in any musical situation rather than fitting into a totally predetermined musical role.

Yes, it's a dialogue. People know that I can deliver musically as long as I am not trapped by things which I can do but find difficult—score reading, counting and so on. Once I gave myself permission, to use that wretched cliché, not to read the dots anymore and not to engage in counting—which are the foundations of most classical musical practice—then I was free to bring intuitive musical skills in, and I trust to those. That doesn't suit everybody, so I work with particular people who feel they can cope with that approach, people such as Gillian [Whitehead] and yourself; and performers like Moana and the Evan Parkers of the world all know they are engaging with me on that basis. That frees me to be myself as a musician.

You've found your musical voice.

I have found a voice, after all these years, and it is the most liberating and extraordinary thing I could have imagined.

What's happening to me is like being reborn into a new way of being in the world. Every day is a surprise—a musical surprise, a surprise at the new work that keeps coming—work for film, for dancers, teaching and scholarly work around the globe. Collaborative performances and solo too, largely improvised, take me all over the world. But the improvisation is within a traditional form.

Yes, your work is very heavily collaborative, isn't it?

To me music is a collaborative activity. The greatest joy for me comes from having the opportunity to engage with master musicians, virtuosi in their own right. The engagement takes place with the understanding that your mastery of instruments is a given, so that what happens is on the level of shared feeling, of attending, of listening intently. Of course it's a way of making music that is not for everyone, but it so happens that there is a pool of people throughout the world who do want to engage in this way. For me this is an engagement at the most profound level. You spoke earlier about the nature of improvisation—to my mind improvisation does have its own language, there are sets of vocabularies. These can only be explored when instruments are totally mastered and musicianship fully honed. Then you begin to listen and—in the widest sense of the word—loving what you're doing, loving the situation, and attending closely to the people you're with. Having a sense of shape, of form and resolution in what may appear to be chaos—that grows with familiarity and experience. The problem with beginners in improvisation is that having been liberated and being set musically free, the terrible thing is the improvised moment becomes an eternity—people don't know when to stop. You have to listen constantly for the resolutions which will appear and have enough musicality to recognize them and finish. But to me, the excitement of improvising with fabulous musicians is completely wonderful, and has become a musical ticket to the world.

You're also a prodigious reader of books and a very literate person. What's the relationship, or interface, between the reading you do and the music making?

There's no interface; it's all seamless. It all adds up to a curiosity, a wanting to know. I suppose the improvisatory moment is a wanting to know. In fact Evan Parker once put it far better than I could. When I had the temerity to ask him once before a performance what we were going to do when we went out on stage, he smiled monkishly, beatifically, and said; 'It's the going there and the finding out that matters.' And it is indeed that kind of journey. So I suffer a desperate hunger if I'm not engaged in a good book.

How do you choose what to read?

I tend to be obsessive about areas of interest and read and read and read in those areas until a natural end. Sometimes one line of reading leads on to a related branch.

Do you read about music?

I read a large amount about music, but not always in the way you might expect. Analysis is not so gripping; I'm more interested in speculative thinking, descriptive writing.

You could think of that as being in the Pythagorean tradition.

Well yes, the relationship between spirituality and music is constant. I've been hugely excited by a little shaman's medicine bag given to me by my old friend John Dearnaley. I'm fascinated by it because, as well as containing all the shaman's spiritual tools, the bag has built into it the musicality that the shaman needs to begin his journeys. There are little bells to suggest the accoutrements of travelling by horse, for instance.

At the moment I'm reading a book on overtone singing. This is an area that I never thought I could make work, but things have begun happening so now I want to know more about it. This particular book includes biographies of two great Tuvan throat singers. This is the kind of thing that I can get obsessed by!

But you're also constantly reading mainstream English literature too.

Absolutely. I spent 36 years as an English teacher and reading is a central part of my daily life. Turning young people on to reading as a life art has been central to me. I still have no answer really, on how to do that beyond trying to find the right book to put into the hands of the young person at the right time.

I love the whole physical process of reading, the use of the eyes, the holding of each book and its distinctive smell... I could get kinky here! But I'm not a good library user. I like to buy books—there's a terrible acquisitive side to me in this regard. I love brand new books and antiquarian books equally.

What are you reading at present in that regard?

I've rediscovered the little hard covered Everyman editions of the 1920s and 30s. They're an ideal size for travel and don't fall apart in aeroplane air-conditioning. At present I'm ploughing through a feast of Anthony Trollope: my wife put me onto it.

You read a lot, but do you write a lot as well?

I write quite well, I think, but very slowly. It's tortuous. I've been enjoying keep a sonic journal or diary of sounds, recording acoustic experiences and thoughts each day. I'm finding it quite addictive. In fact I've let it go beyond being a journal so that it has become a sonic scrapbook too. I put cuttings and other things into the book. I'm also working very gradually at an account of the journey of discovery with taonga puoro and passing on the knowledge we've put together. Hirini and I were embarked on that as a bilingual exercise. It had the makings of something wonderful, but of course his death meant the project has to be revised. Since his illness and death I've been rather paralysed about how to proceed. It will happen, but just now I'm not sure how.

And what recorded music do you listen to?

I'm completely omnivorous. I listen to everything—which surprises some people who seem to expect me to be confined to my own musical area. But of choice, at this point in my life, I'll get hold of the latest György Kurtag CD or

the new Kancheli. I'm fascinated by the Greek film composer Eleni Karaindrou. But most frequently, and by choice, I'm listening to friends, and they play all sorts of music, from free improv to folk music to virtuosic piano recitals, to whatever. Friends can manifest themselves in that way, through recordings. It's like the few art works we have around our house which are by friends.

What's your attitude to going the recording studio yourself? You're then making artefacts out of the transitoriness of improvisation.

Improvisation is ephemeral by nature, but I have no problems with the archiving of it. Recordings capture moments which will never occur again. I am known in some recording circles a one-take wonder! I go in and work very fast. The legend about this, is that the album *Te Ku, Te Whe* was recorded by Hirini and me in one and a half working days. And that is true. We began at 11am one day and went through until about 4pm, came back the following day and worked from about half past nine until midday and it was done. The rough mastering was done that afternoon. How could we do that? It was because Hirini and I had been working together for about 15 years already so we knew very well what to do. More takes could have resulted in equally good but different versions—different but not better ones, so there was no need to keep retaking.

You once told me that some years ago a palm reader gave an uncannily accurate insight into your later life....

When I spent about a year with Hirini in the Maori Studies Department at Waikato University in 1990, the senior archivist in the Maori research centre across the corridor was a Dr Salim. Word got around that in addition to his more orthodox archivist's skills he was a keen and competent palm reader. So we all sloped off surreptitiously at various times to have our palms read. I went in with a fair amount of cynicism—and still have a fair amount of cynicism about such things—but in fact he was very accurate about matters to do with my life.

Two salient things came from it. One sounded like lines that could have been written by anyone writing a play about a palm reader: you will never have money, but you will never need it. The other one was more intriguing. He kept looking at my hand, turning it over and over, and then pronounced that I had the longest learning line that he'd ever seen on anyone's palm. I found that very gratifying. I do feel that I'm on a constant journey of curiosity and discovery, especially of musical and the creative worlds, and, while I feel that I'm always on the edges of what I understand, the sense of excitement has never diminished.

The conversation above took place on 23 July 2004 at the University of Waikato in Hamilton.