

Symphonies of the bush: indigenous encounters in Australian symphonies¹

Rhoderick McNeill

Dr Rhoderick McNeill is Senior Lecturer in Music History and Music Theory at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba. His principal research interest lies in Australian symphonic music of the earlier 20th century, with particular study of Australian symphonies of the 1950s.

Between 1985 and 1995 he helped establish the Faculty of Performing Arts at Nommensen University in Medan, Indonesia. Dr McNeill's two volume Indonesian-language textbook on Music History was published in Jakarta in 1998 and has been reprinted twice.

Landscape was a powerful stimulus to many composers working within extended tonal, nationalist idioms in the early 20th century. Sibelius demonstrated this trend in connection with Finland, its landscape, literature, history and myths. Similar cases can be made for British composers like Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bax and Moeran, and for American composers Copland and Harris. All these composers wrote symphonies and tone poems, and were important figures in the revival of these forms during the 1920s and 30s. Their music formed much of the core of 'modern' repertoire heard in Australian orchestral concerts prior to 1950.

It seemed logical for some Australian composers -by no means all - to seek a home-grown style which would parallel national styles already forged in Finland, Britain and the United States. They believed that depicting the 'timeless' Australian landscape in their music would introduce this new national style; their feelings on this issue are clearly outlined in the prefaces to their scores or in their writings or by giving their works evocative Australian titles. As early as 1923, Melbourne-based composer Fritz Hart composed the symphonic suite *The Bush*. Its five movements, some 45 minutes in duration, bespeak a fine romantic and impressionistic score invoking far more of Hart's British background, particularly his friends Vaughan Williams and Holst, than the Australian landscape itself. Henry Tate's *Dawn - an Australian rhapsody for full orchestra* (1926), Roy Agnew's *Breaking of the Drought* for soprano and orchestra (1928), Lindley Evans' *An Australian Symphony* (1933) and Hooper Brewster-Jones' *Australia Felix* (performed 1941) were other examples of early Australian-themed orchestral works.

However, unlike similar situations in Finland, Britain and the United States, there was little in Australian musical culture, whether in the church, folk music, popular urban music or the concert hall, which marked a distinct national flavour. In contrast, Aboriginal culture presented a unique Australian voice; it was also undeniably connected to the topography and spirit of the bush. Melbourne composer Henry Tate was one of the first to advocate the incorporation of Aboriginal music into concert music. In his book *Australian Musical Possibilities* (1923-4), he wrote:

The music is surprisingly interesting. Wild and barbaric as much of it sounds, it is rich in rhythms and themes, that, once annotated and fixed, will supply a copious reservoir of melodic gems and rhythmical fragments of the type that composers all over the world are continually seeking.¹

Visiting pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch, a champion of the piano music of Roy Agnew, aroused considerable controversy in 1937 when he claimed "the only way Australian music can ever be really Australian is by adopting Aboriginal ideas and themes". This view was both rejected and

¹ McNeill, Rhoderick J (2005) *Symphonies of the Bush: Indigenous encounters in Australian symphonies*. In: Plush, Vincent and Schippers, Huib and Wolfe, Jocelyn, (eds.) *Encounters: Meetings in Australian Music: Essays, Images, Interviews*. Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Brisbane, Australia. This document is the Author's accepted Manuscript.

applauded, notably by Alfred Hill, in subsequent correspondence in the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.² Following on this line, the Sydney music critic Lindsay Browne wrote in 1947:

Probably Mr Moiseiwitsch was right in suggesting recourse to Aboriginal rhythms and themes: as a matter of fact, an intelligent use of Aboriginal rhythms and themes in composition evolved from the present prevailing European, extremely derivative styles might help to reconcile in Australian music the 'geographical' Australia and the 'ethnological' Australia...Aboriginal themes and methods must be absorbed until they have become part of the personal experience of composers...Any Australian composer who plans to seize upon the musical lore of the Aborigines to strike out on a new path in composition had better take pains to assimilate the native music.³

It was bitterly ironic that the owners of this perceived 'distinctive Australian identity' lacked most of the basic human rights of white Australia right up to the early 1970s and were generally absent from the daily lives of the white urban Australians who composed the entire concert-going public. Yet, without permission or consultation, a number of composers from the 1930s onwards, most notably Clive Douglas, John Antill, Alfred and Mirrie Hill and James Penberthy, incorporated Aboriginal music and dance, or imitations of these genres, into symphonic music as one of the main ingredients of an intentional Australian national style. In the main, composers encountered Aboriginal music second-hand through the recordings and writings of anthropologists like Spencer, Mountford, Gillen and Strehlow. Clive Douglas claimed that during his period as conductor of the ABC Tasmanian Orchestra from 1936-41 he "did much research into Aboriginal folklore in an attempt to find a means whereby an Australian expression could be injected into my music"⁴. Although Antill, Alfred Hill and Penberthy made positive public statements about the high artistic value of Indigenous culture, Douglas was more guarded; he believed it needed symphonic development⁵. All of them, nonetheless, seemed to take for granted their right to use and 'own' it as part of their own compositions. These were common views of their time, providing us with an insight into a postcolonial dilemma typical of its era.

Early examples of Aboriginal elements in orchestral concert music were Douglas's tone poems *Carwoola* and *Corroboree* both of 1939, originally orchestral interludes in his opera (based on his own libretto) *Kaditja*, and John Antill's symphonic ballet *Corroboree* (1937-1946). Antill's *Corroboree* was the most successful and important Australian work of its time. Its success overshadowed the work of his contemporaries, and even Antill's other major works. Whereas Antill did not use Aboriginal musical materials in *Corroboree*, Douglas did quote and develop Aboriginal melodies in his tone-poems. However, had he not drawn attention to their use⁶ they may have gone undetected in their Western disguise amidst either impressionist harmonies or driving motor rhythms.

An interesting sidelight to these works was Lindley Evans's film music for the 'corroboree sequence' in Charles Chauvel's film *Uncivilised* (1936).⁷ The images featured Aborigines from Palm Island. Regular drum pulses, long pedal points of bare fifths and sections with conventional tonal melodies and harmonies, accompany the dance. The small orchestra is supplemented by harmonies from a wordless male chorus. At the height of the sequence, Mara, the 'white chief' of the tribe, bursts into full-throated baritone song, cast in regular periods and based on the main motif of the section. Evans later reworked this corroboree scene for full orchestra. In this guise it was performed at a Sunday afternoon concert by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Goossens, sometime after 1946.⁸ The overt white supremacist tone of the film in which this sequence is set and Evans's somewhat lame music makes the *Corroborees* of both Douglas and Antill's appear respectful and artistic in comparison.

After the Second World War, there was an extraordinary proliferation of symphonies from Australian composers, with over 40 symphonic scores surviving from the 1950s alone. This trend stemmed from the establishment of state orchestras throughout Australia during the late 1940s, and the stimulus of the 1951 Commonwealth Jubilee Symphony Competition which attracted 36 Australian entrants⁹. Australian composers of extant symphonies from the 1950s include John

Antill, Edgar Bainton, Clive Douglas, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Alfred Hill, Mirrie Hill, James Penberthy, Margaret Sutherland and Malcolm Williamson, amongst others. Although many of these composers were not consciously 'nationalist', some included Aboriginal titles, themes, or mere mention of Aborigines in their symphonies. The principal figures so involved were two composers already mentioned, Antill and Douglas, with the addition of Alfred Hill, Mirrie Hill and James Penberthy.

John Antill never repeated the success of *Corroboree* in later works. He claimed, in connection with his ballet or string suite *The Unknown Land*, that his most 'contemporary' idiom, amongst the eclectic cluster of styles found in his total output, was found within his works connected in some way with the Aborigines.¹⁰ According to the program of Antill's three-movement *Symphony on a City* (1959), the first movement is intended to be a musical depiction of the history of Newcastle with a section that depicts the first inhabitants of the Hunter Valley region with a dissonant harmonic idiom and constantly shifting metres.¹¹ There is no quotation of Indigenous melodies or simulated Aboriginal musical instruments. On a much smaller scale, the violin and piano work *Nullabor Dreamtime* (1956) shows Antill reflecting again on Aboriginal themes.

Antill's principal teacher was the much older Alfred Hill (1870-1960). Although Hill called for the study and use of Aboriginal materials within an Australian national style¹², only a few works within his large oeuvre actually do this. Of his thirteen symphonies, only one movement, the scherzo of *Symphony in B minor 'Australia'*¹³ of 1951 uses Aboriginal melodies. Three Indigenous tunes appear in this movement, which in turn is an adaptation of film music written during the late 1940s. The second of these themes was also treated by his wife Mirrie Hill in her film score, *Aborigines of the Sea Coast* (1948)¹⁴. One of the themes from this work appears in greater length in Mirrie Hill's largest work, *Symphony in A, 'Arnhem Land'* (1954)¹⁵. The cover of the autograph full score is decorated with Aboriginal-style motifs. On the inside cover, Hill pasted a magazine article¹⁶ concerning the Sydney artist Byram Mansell's practice of adapting Aboriginal motifs from Arnhem Land for his own art works. The appearance of this article in the score is highly significant in that Mansell's work parallels what Hill herself is doing. She quotes and arranges Aboriginal melodies in the second, third and fourth movements of this work, naming them in the score. Despite the fact that her appropriation is more consistent than his throughout her symphony, Mirrie Hill largely has been spared the criticism aimed at Clive Douglas.

Douglas's symphonies are largely neglected today. He was the most public amongst his contemporaries in setting out a nationalistic agenda in his music. Although he claimed his music was essentially abstract and absolute¹⁷, he persisted in using Aboriginal words as titles for many of his major works and also occasionally used Aboriginal melodies. He also devised nationalistic programs in which he portrayed Australian landscape in concert programs and in his scores. Unfortunately, Douglas overstated his case and the program outlines themselves received far more attention than the composer intended. In his symphonies the actual employment of Aboriginal melodic materials is quite limited; there is none in *Symphony No. 1 'Jubilee'* of 1951, one short section in the first movement of the symphonic suite *Wongadilla* of 1954 and two sections in *Symphony No. 2 'Namatjira'* of 1952-56.

Namatjira represents a watershed in Douglas's output with its consistently dissonant idiom that largely eschews traditional triadic tonality, unlike his earlier works. The work is cast in eight continuous sections, each representing a specific landscape or event. Douglas wrote in the score:

Since there is no musical idiom which can be regarded as essentially Australian in style, nor any folk song source, an attempt has here been made to write music of national significance by creating a tonal thesis wedded to the land itself... The real Australia is that vast and little known interior; the environs of the Aboriginal painter, Namatjira... A land of vast distances and a grim, remorseless and forbidding desolation of sandy desert or gibber plain, contains incredible mountain formations and geological wonders unique in the world. It is a dramatic land conforming to no ordered pattern, a law unto itself.

What is beyond the limitations of words to describe might be conveyed in the abstract quality of music – a music which, like the land, must be defiant of precedent.¹⁸

Aboriginal melodic material occurs in two sections; towards the end of the second section *Arunta* there is a theme labelled 'Aboriginal stock rider's chant', and one of the main themes in the final section *Larutja*. In addition, there are musical depictions of Aboriginal ceremonies; in section five, *Corroboree at Ooldea* and in the final section. Douglas's program note about *Larutja* is very revealing:

Primeval ritual of the Tors. In a dramatic setting of fiery cinnabar mountain ranges, stone-age man enacts the savage rites of his race.¹⁹

Both sections feature driving rhythms, ostinatos and colourful scoring for percussion. The slower sections of the work feature shimmering, static, and lonely musical landscapes in a strikingly individual style. It is a shame if evocative and colourfully scored music like this is to be permanently discredited on the basis of Douglas's unfortunate views on appropriation, or on the overstated case that his music was 'defiant of precedent'.

James Penberthy (1917-1999) is best known for his extensive series of ballets on Aboriginal themes, especially during the late 1940s and 1950s, and his opera *Dalgerie* (1958). Unlike his contemporaries, Penberthy seems to have been aware of issues of alienation between white and Indigenous Australians. Nevertheless, there are examples of his appropriation of Aboriginal music in his ballet scores, and also in his largely neglected, but extensive series of symphonies²⁰. Four of his nine numbered symphonies were composed between 1950 and 1960. Generally speaking, these are relatively short works of about 20 minutes' duration. *Symphony No.2* (1953) is a counterpart of Douglas's *Namatjira*, but on a much smaller scale. Penberthy writes in the score:

These four short movements were influenced by the Western Australian scene. There has been no positive attempt to capture sights or imitate sounds, even in the Allegro [third movement] where the percussion rhythms at the most may suggest the spirit of an Aboriginal Corroboree. Nevertheless, as the music was composed almost in the heart of the Western Australian bush and without its influence would never have been set down, a description of the place may perhaps serve as some kind of program.

Penberthy's largest orchestral work of the 1950s was his ballet-symphony *Boomerang* (1951). Although the piano score abounds with ballet directions – and for many years Penberthy conducted opera and ballet in Western Australia - the full score bears the title *Symphony 'Boomerang'* on its cover, and the order of the four main sections in the continuous music suggests symphonic discourse. The work was based on an idea from the Spanish dancer and choreographer David Lichine which linked the account of creation in the Book of Genesis to the Dreamtime creation myths of the Aborigines, but it was never staged. In his unpublished autobiography²¹, Penberthy describes the story of the ballet:

The story was about an Aboriginal Adam who threw a boomerang which returned, smote him midships and brought our Aboriginal Eve. He has to teach her to crawl in the dust, walk and eat of the fruit. The choreography has them touch accidentally with due results – Sex was invented and a most erotic pas de deux was the immediate result. Gradually their offspring discover the same enjoyable touching game until the whole stage was alive with an offsprung Corps de ballet – they fought and loved and built until great buildings of steel emerged poking their figures phallic into the sky. Then began the dance of destruction. So all dancers are finished.

The interweaving of Creation and Dreamtime was taken up by Penberthy again in his *Symphony No.6 'Earth Mother'* (1962), which was derived, Hindemith-like, from his earlier three-act opera of the same title (1957-58). According to John Meyer²², the first movement of the symphony is based on 'a popular Aboriginal song from the north-west of Western Australia'.

Like much Australian concert music of this period, these symphonic works remain neglected, unpublished, unperformed – silent. Their sometimes problematical appropriation of Aboriginal materials is perhaps yet another reason for their neglect. Nevertheless, they stand as important sound-documents of the period, clearly illustrating white Australian attitudes to Aboriginal culture. The composers could not see the contradiction between their use of Aboriginal culture as an iconic symbol of their Australian nationalism and the issues of Aboriginal human rights that we perceive today. For them, Aboriginal culture added ‘authentic’ Australian flavour to their ‘Bush Symphonies’.

¹ ‘Aboriginal Influences’ in *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, ed. J. Whiteoak & A. Scott-Maxwell, Sydney, Currency Press, 2003.

² Orlovich, M. *The Music of Clive Douglas*, Thesis B Mus Hons, University of Sydney, 1993, pp.134-5.

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 22 December 1945, p.2b-d, cited in Orlovich 1993, p.140.

⁴ Douglas, C. “Composer/Conductor Clive Douglas looks back”, *APRA Journal*, January 1976, p.54.

⁵ Douglas, C. ‘Folk-song and the brown man – A means to an Australian expression in symphonic music’, *Canon*, July 1956, p.82

⁶ In several of his articles but most notably in Douglas, C. ‘Folk-song and the brown man’, *Canon*, July 1956.

⁷ *Uncivilised*, Canberra - National Film and Sound Archive, 1993.

⁸ Evans, L. *Hello, Mr Melody Man*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1983, p.150

⁹ Papers relating to the Commonwealth Jubilee Symphony Competition 1950-1952, SP 497/1, National Archives of Australia, Sydney.

¹⁰ Dean, B. & Carell, V. *Gentle Genius: A life of John Antill*, Sydney, Akron Press, 1987, p.145.

¹¹ The program for the work is found in the preface to the score, copies of which are located in the Antill Collection, National Library of Australia and in the Symphony Australia library in Sydney.

¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 18 April, 1950, p.2d-h, cited in Orlovich, 1993, p.142.

¹³ The manuscript of this work, along with all Hill’s symphonies, is located in the Alfred Hill listing within the Symphony Australia Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

¹⁴ *Anthology of Australian Music on Disc*, CSM 36, Canberra School of Music, ANU, Canberra.

¹⁵ The autograph of this work is held in the Symphony Australia Collection, National Library of Australia.

¹⁶ PIX, January 28th 1950, Sydney, p.22.

¹⁷ Douglas, C. ‘The Composer’s Lodestone’, *Canon*, March/April 1958, p.295 & Douglas, C.

‘Composer/Conductor Clive Douglas looks back’, *APRA Journal*, January 1976, p.55.

¹⁸ Facsimile of autograph score, Australian Music Centre Library.

¹⁹ Douglas’s program notes were written for ABC concert performances of this work, Clive Douglas file in the Australian Music Centre Library, Sydney.

²⁰ The manuscripts of the symphonies are held with the James Penberthy Papers in the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

²¹ Held with the Penberthy papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

²² Meyer, J. ‘James Penberthy’ in *Australian Composition of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Callaway, F. and Tunley, D. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1978.