

Visionary Encounters

Helen Lancaster & Josh Catt

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Conceived and curated by composer and musicologist Vincent Plush, the *Encounters* symposium held at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University finally brought life to what has been long in gestation, his visionary concept of a “week-long exploration of 200 years of interaction in Australian music between Indigenous and European cultures”. Extending beyond the concept to the practical, Plush’s vision raises the benchmark for effective cultural connections and challenges the boundaries of conservatorium research. Introducing the event, Director of the Research Centre, Huib Schippers announced the intention “to build an enduring platform for interaction – literal, physical, conceptual, artistic – that enables the two cultures to meet freely, exchange ideas and create,” - a noble cause of the type which, in the hands of a university, might run the risk of high ideals overtaking valuable practice. Not so with Vincent Plush as curator. This extraordinary week comprising a diversity of ingenious encounters was a co-production of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University and Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, and was held in Brisbane from 12-17 April. Clever programming had it followed by a 2-day “Celebration, Appropriation, Reconciliation” symposium hosted by the Queensland Chapter of the Musicological Society of Australia, encouraging reflection on the week’s activities and attempting to further the cultural encounters in various practical ways, from yarning circles to community performance.

As is his custom, Plush attracted key people to the project, among them composer Peter Sculthorpe, didgeridoo virtuoso William Barton, and Debra Bennet McLean, Chair of the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency and Community Cultural Development Officer – Indigenous Communities at the Queensland Community Arts Network. Just as the participation of Sculthorpe and Barton shaped the artistic program, Bennet McLean made a significant contribution to the potential futures market unleashed by the events. Her “Right of Reply” in the *Encounters* publication aspires to the clearing of space “for in-depth dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people”. Her presence at the weekend symposium ensured progress toward that end: as an academic-style discourse began to unravel any potential brought about by artistry, Bennet McLean intervened to establish a traditional yarning circle, surely the most promising of triggers for future encounters.

The performances and symposium were only part of the package. The resulting publications provide a valuable enduring resource for schools and audiences. “Encounters: Meetings in Australian Music. Essays, Images, Interviews” presents articles by a range of writers. In addition to Debra Bennet McLean’s “Right of Reply: An Indigenous perspective on Encounters as a source of dialogue”, a striking essay by Liz McKinley openly addressed the attitudinal shifts required of mainstream academics in order for them to effectively work with indigenous communities in respectful and meaningful ways. In other articles Gordon Kalton Williams, Judith Pickering, and Rhoderick McNeill discuss Indigenous and Western musics in varying combinations, Christine Mercer writes about composer Henry Tate, Vincent Plush of Peter Sculthorpe, and Janet Healey on Moya Henderson’s opera *Lindy*. Humphrey McQueen describes the making of the film *Jedda*, Katelyn Barney writes about Indigenous

Australian performers in contemporary music contexts and Stephen Knopoff describes two successful collaborations from the Adelaide Festival. There are conversations with William Barton and Peter Sculthorpe, and a Timeline detailing the evolution of John Antill's *Corroboree*. It is accompanied by a concert guide with extensive program notes on the 13 various concerts: the free lunchtime series "New Horizons", the Schools Concert, and the evening events. The guide details performances of 25 Australian composers, most of them living; the irreverent "Music Hall Entertainment" *The Jindyworobak Review* written by Plush and featuring the music of another 8 composers; no less than 4 world premieres, including the composition debut of William Barton, and biographies of artists and keynote speakers from the symposium.

As an artistic series it was all-encompassing, covering a wide range of repertoire across two centuries and cultures. Each event was its own masterpiece, making attendance compulsive, and all attracted good audiences. With many of the composers present or represented by family, *Encounters* provided an opportunity for interaction to a degree rarely available. The tone was set in the first of the free lunchtime concerts, when the audience responded as one to Robert Davidson's *Ruth Portrait* from *Taken* (2002). A remarkable work using footage of Ruth Hegarty as she describes being separated from her mother at the age of 4, the piece cleverly transposes speech rhythms and pitch patterns into instrumental form and together they tell the story; the very poignant "nobody cried" and "I waved her goodbye" communicating a strong message to an absolutely silent audience. At the other end of the spectrum, Plush's cheeky piece of music theatre, *The Jindyworobak Review* used all that was politically incorrect to demonstrate the response to cultural difference over more than a century. Sculthorpe's lecture "Towards the Sacred in my Music" revealed his love of the sacred in all things: "I'm just a pantheist", he admits. Despite his best efforts at a formal summary of his connections with spirituality, Sculthorpe was engagingly informal in describing his search for the sacred in nature, speaking as an elder might with his mob, perfectly oblivious of western time constraints. The final community events at the Judith Wright Centre completed the circle by bringing people of both Australian cultures, professional and amateur, together to play, sing and dance. As an educational series, it was outstanding. Although disappointing that the Schools Concert attracted a relatively small audience given the potential for exposure to such programming Antill's *Corroboree* and Sculthorpe's *Requiem*, with Sculthorpe present, talking with Barton and Plush about the work and taking questions from the audience. Despite the slow response by schools, the publications provide enduring resources as a teacher's kit and as a foundation for future academic research.

The schools may not have seen the value of *Encounters*, but individuals did, and it is testimony to this event that it turned young devotees into addicted disciples. It caused my 17-year-old nephew Josh to forsake both surf and new girlfriend (there's a degree of uncertainty about the order) for a week of his (NSW) school holidays. Josh's example typifies all that *Encounters* set out to do. A relatively recent convert to music, Josh has taught himself to play guitar and didgeridoo, the latter after seeking permission from local aboriginal elders. He has a deep respect for indigenous culture, and the additional motivation of Xavier Rudd's multi-instrumental performances on both instruments inspired Josh to try it for himself. He describes the challenge of teaching himself didgeridoo in these words:

The didge is unlike many other instruments, because there are so many cultural connotations involved with it. With the didge, you don't just learn to play it technically. You should also learn the traditional cultural and spiritual aspects of the instrument, as a sign of respect to the culture from which it comes. ... I play didge

because I love the sound, and the way in which you are using your lungs to play rhythms. You really "feel" the music with a didge. I also love it because it is a challenge (I've only just begun to be able to circular breathe, and that's on a good day). Finally, I love the didge because it is something very different, and something that keeps me in touch with the country I call home.

A teacher at Grafton High suggested that Josh might start a didge club, and he now teaches other students to play, going home from school every Thursday "with the sound of a quickly-improving didgeridoo choir in my ears". Such was the background which convinced me Josh was a candidate for *Encounters*, although I wasn't so certain that a 17-year-old would want to do it every day, all day. However, from the moment he attended the first orchestral rehearsal the day before *Encounters* began, Josh was hooked, present at everything on offer and more, making friends with William Barton in the process.

Young people like Josh epitomise one achievable future for Australian music; one which is guaranteed to have a compounding effect in the community. It's therefore appropriate that Josh should describe the impact of this special event in his own words:

[My Encounter with Encounters](#)

Josh Catt

Encounters was a special experience, opening up my eyes to a hugely rich musical history, and a wonderfully intricate relationship so very much older than myself.

The free lunchtime concerts, called New Horizons, provided diverse examples of the coupling of western and Indigenous Australian music. It was interesting to observe the different ways in which the two musical backgrounds meshed, and how, over time, the relationship between them has changed. The oldest piece offered by the New Horizons concert was Henry Tate's "Nocturne: The Voice of the Never Never", and the most recent piece was composed just this year by Aboriginal composer and didgeridoo maestro William Barton. Witnessing representations from nearly a century of music in the space of a week provided a wonderful scope for viewing the ever developing relationships between the two different backgrounds of music. As the week progressed, an interesting trend became apparent: the older pieces often seemed to be trying to assimilate Aboriginal melodies into the music, translating them into a very western sound. The Arthur Loam piece *Maranoa: Fantasy on an Aboriginal Theme* which was played on Wednesday is a good example of this. This piece features the melody from the Maranoa lullaby (which was featured often, and in many forms throughout the week) as a token to begin and end the piece.

The more recent works are very different. Rather than trying to absorb and recreate indigenous music in a western context, these pieces display a special accord between indigenous and western music. Pieces like Peter Sculthorpe's *String Quartet No. 14 "Quamby"* (1998), and Ross Edwards' *Tyalgum Mantras* featured beautiful interaction between the sounds of the west and the sounds of native Australia. Cellos imitated didgeridoo tonguing techniques, and double basses played long, drone-like notes, making pieces such as these more a homage to and embracing of the uniqueness of Indigenous Australian music, rather than an attempt to feature aspects of it within a western framework. The difference between the two varying approaches towards combining music from both cultures was easily noticeable. I took heart from the way in which, as the pieces progressed chronologically, a change in attitude took place, and that sense of unity rather than assimilation became evident within the

music. I see it as a reflection of changing attitudes towards our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, not just within the music arena, but a move forward in general, and it gives me hope that true harmony between our cultures will be attained, just as it has within these wonderful pieces of music.

Another event which prompted reflection on the Encounters maxim “Meetings in Australian Music” was *The Jindyworobak Review* by Vincent Plush, presented on Thursday night. This light-hearted night of entertainment was hosted by Mrs Daisy Bates herself. (Actually, I think it might have been actor Jennifer Flowers. The organisers of *Encounters* did an exceptional job, but acquiring Daisy Bates’ posthumous participation to host the event seems a little much, even for them). Daisy Bates was a renowned anthropologist who dedicated much of her life to the plight of Aboriginal people. *The Jindyworobak Review* was a historical showcase of meetings in Australian music, and provided an even broader scope for seeing where we were, and where we are now, as far as attitudes towards indigenous Australians go. During the introduction, *Encounters* curator Vincent Plush said that political correctness had been thrown out the window, and indeed it had. For someone who has been brought up learning to respect other cultures, *The Jindyworobak Review* was an eye-opening experience that showed, through music, the different attitudes held towards our indigenous compatriots since European and Indigenous Australian cultures first met. Embarrassing is probably the best word to describe some of the things we shared at this event but it was all the name of fun, and it served the positive purpose of showing just how far we have come, which was an inspiring thing. For its sheer ridiculousness, the song “Oh how I wish that I could be a little aborigine” for vocal innocents and pianoforte by Georgette Peterson was definitely one of the stand-out pieces. It certainly heightened the worth of “Row, row, row your boat” as far as nursery rhymes go.

On Friday afternoon, I was blessed with the opportunity to spend some time with William Barton, one of Australia’s top didgeridoo virtuosos. I have only been playing the didge for a couple of months, teaching myself as I went along. Spending that afternoon with William was such an honour, and it not only advanced my didge playing by leaps and bounds, but also made me truly thankful for the chance to learn and play one of the oldest instruments in the world, one that belongs to an amazing culture that is very much a part of the country I love and call home.

On Friday night, the Conservatorium’s Symphony Orchestra treated us to the fantastic showcase “A Century of Encounters in Australian Music”. This event featured four pieces that perfectly summed up the spirit of *Encounters*, and that emphasised the beautifully diverse relationship between the different backgrounds of Australian music. Vincent Plush’s piece, *Freycinet Fanfare II* was based on parts of scores transcribed by two French anthropologists after they first heard traditional Indigenous Australian music. Featuring two didgeridoos, Delmae Barton’s vocals and the Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra, Plush’s piece was an exciting and contemplative opening to an amazing night of music. *Freycinet Fanfare II* truly reflected the “Meetings in Australian Music” adage, as it featured many concepts and melodies that were obviously from an Aboriginal background. Henry Tate’s *Bush Miniatures* is inherently Australian, featuring some beautiful melodic phrases in which instruments mimic the calls of some well known Australian birds, such as the magpie. Tate’s piece also features many concepts from traditional indigenous music.

A highlight was John Antill's *Corroboree Site No. 2*. At the schools concert on Thursday afternoon, we had learned the story behind this seemingly legendary piece of music. *Corroboree* has many forms, but is most famous as a ballet. Its lengthy background involves much controversy: the first performance of the ballet featured only white-skinned dancers in blackface costume, and the instrumentation involves the use of some sacred Aboriginal instruments, such as the bullroarer. Testament to the harmonious and respectful nature of the *Encounters* concept, the Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra did not use these instruments, but instead recreated similar sounds digitally. The music in Antill's composition is extravagant and dramatic, prompting the use of the word 'epic' when describing it.

The featured work was Peter Sculthorpe's *Requiem* for choir and symphony orchestra, featuring William Barton on didgeridoo. This piece is truly incredible. As a country kid, I have few opportunities to see symphony orchestras in any form, so to hear a piece of music that instils such euphoria and exudes magnificence in the way that this work does was a truly special experience. Both choir and orchestra were amazing, but it was the way in which the didgeridoo not only complemented, but was also very much a part of the overall sound that was the most inspiring aspect of this *Requiem*. The didgeridoo is from an entirely different world to that of the symphonic instruments, but they worked together beautifully. It was not European and Indigenous Australian music - this piece was Australian music in the true sense of the word. It was an extraordinary meeting of different musical backgrounds to form an entirely new cultural music: the harmonious sound of a combined heritage, white and black - a truly amazing experience, one that I still feel a deep sense of gratitude for having experienced.

That gratitude extends to all the *Encounters* events over the week. The multitude of musical pieces I experienced during that time not only opened my ears to the different ways the music of two very different cultural backgrounds might meet with such amazing results, but also the way the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures is constantly changing and developing, both musically and non-musically, for the better.

Josh's experiences seemed to resonate among almost 200 young musicians at the Queensland Conservatorium who actively participated in *Encounters*. For many, the symposium provided an opportunity to explore Australian music at depth, considering not only artistic merit but also appropriation and reconciliation, often for the first time in their lives. If such response is any measure of the significance of this event, *Encounters* achieved what Schippers hoped it would: an integrated approach to innovative and relevant research and a way forward "in the long search for a common language in the music of Australia" – a visionary demonstration of what might be achieved by a university research centre in a contemporary budget-savvy music institution. But would the budget stretch so far without the huge commitment of people like Plush and his team?

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Josh Catt is in Year 12 at Grafton High School, NSW. He began playing guitar at age 14, and didgeridoo late in 2004, achieving outstanding results over a brief period by performing Xavier Rudd's *Timber and Wood* at a school event early in 2005.

Helen Lancaster is a very proud aunt who has established a few music institutions. Her

current research into music institutions around the world lends credibility to her comments.