

Exploring The Australian Context

A Reflection

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The plethora of cultural roots extant in Australia, together with a general profound dissatisfaction or disinterest with traditional concepts of "nation" and "nationality" ensures that Australia is unlikely to ever develop as strong a national identity as older nation states have.

Economic rationalism as a defining creed for social interaction is rife in the "new" world. It is irrationally rational in not taking into account the importance of human values - values which are exposed, explored and defined in and by the arts and give richness and meaning to all our activities. To think of the arts industry as simply a provider of (cultural) services is to truly miss the point. Until the central role that artists play in constructing their communities identities is generally recognised and supported as the essential activities that they are, Australians will continue to be culturally pubescent.

Because Australians don't have very deep common social roots, we tend to be blown about in the flatulent breezes of other social/political/economic "new world order" experiments, whilst at the same time not grasping the significance of experiment and innovation in maintaining cultural resilience. Many Australian artists feel that they can't live here, and many of us who do find living here extremely difficult "culturally" - even arid. The jingoisms that so dominate public definitions of ourselves as Australians in the present social and political climate are shallow nostalgic resonances of a fundamentally irrelevant past.

This criticism is necessary - it functions to identify the milieu in which I as a creative artist, as a social animal, find myself. On a recent visit to cities in western NSW I was struck by the pathetic way overt exploitation of the relatively recent colonial past is being glorified by European Australians in trying to establish a sense of continuity, of purpose, of reason for being there; and at the same time, the way that local aboriginal peoples and their cultures are consistently ignored. Much as we might like to think about and incorporate aboriginal concepts and ideas - and even sounds - into our art music, until we are prepared to grow and learn from these peoples' contributions to contemporary living in a radically

different way than we have to date, we will continue to be the disadvantaged.

European composers have a well of folk music to draw upon - even if today they do not do so overtly. I am very aware that I don't have *any* folksongs which are readily definable as my own. This "missing fundamental" means that I do not have as direct an emotional vocabulary for communicating with my listeners as my European colleagues have.

I live in Australia and I write music. I don't know if it can be identified as Australian in some other way - it does not really concern me. I am attracted to Australian landscape in a way that I am not attracted to landscape anywhere else in the world. This attraction, through its sounds, its forms and colours, is extremely strong. It is not overtly emotional, it is almost abstract. I do not know how this has come about but because of it I understand something of the sense that aboriginals have of being *of* the land. An implication of this is a commitment to protecting it as a source of spiritual energy and this (ritual) commitment ensures a continuing contemporary relevance.

Although it is generally agreed that spiritually we are in very difficult times, it is not enough for me to analyse situations and create works which probe in ever more minute detail the misery of our modern deconstructed condition. So many people express the despair of living a life devoid of meaningful and uplifting experiences. I search for these experiences and try to highlight and explore them in my music. Then perhaps, just perhaps, some sympathetic resonance may uplift those who hear it. "Music (has to be) edifying, (so) from time to time it sets the soul in operation" (Cage, *Silence*, p62).