

## **Autobiography – Insight or Illusion?**

### **I prepared this earlier**

The conclusion that emanated from my previous investigation in this area is that my composition is autobiographical research and the understanding of that autobiography is realising that it is a pursuit of my spiritual self. I noted that:

*“I have alluded to some of my personal thoughts and deeply held feelings and even ventured into the intangible areas of the soul and spirituality. The creative factor is quite often glorified beyond what it is. I find it just is!”(1997:193)*

I sought to understand why I compose and often considered it from the quantifiable (as did my supervisor) but I found that it cannot be measured. What I discovered was spirit. It was the ineffable that some would describe as creativity and others as the numinous but I think it is God!

It “just is!”

It sounds like a petulant four year old stamping their foot but it is really a petulant fifty one year old scraping his whiskery chin.

You see, I never wanted to find that it was spirituality. I was an aggressive agnostic, the last thing I wanted or needed to find was that I was engaged in some pathetic spiritual pursuit.

Heaven forbid!

Pardon – heck no!

The pursuit I was on was one of finding truth and meaning. Not soul and spirit. The ontological datum was the *Symphony for Wind Orchestra* and all that made me ‘aware’ in that compositional activity. I had decided I would investigate:

*“The origins of the symphony....when was it written and what generated its creation? The processes of selection, combination or rejection of musical ideas are significant in understanding one’s compositional process. What artistic or architectural influences were there? Why choose one melodic fragment over another, or embrace polyphony at one point and not at another? Seeking to contextualise my work is a paramount objective.”(1997:162)*

But I didn’t want to find God!

### **The evidence and the explanation?**

So what did I find that will inform this present exploration of creativity and context?

Soul and spirituality!

Possibly not as blatantly stated as that but from this perspective I find that, given the ever so personal unpacking of my work and the influences on it, the only conclusion one can come to is that my stalking of truth and meaning continued after my earlier research and the evidence of that can be found in the works, their titles and subject matter. I was continuing what I set out to do when I said:

*Interestingly I find that trying to understand the processes I go through when composing leads beyond the realms of the band and even music. It is really an investigation of me or possibly me attempting to project my ideas to others. That follows comfortably to the notion of my spirituality emergent in everything I compose. I have no doubt that essentially I am a spiritual entity.*

*At one stage in my life I seriously considered a life as a Salvation Army officer, a minister of religion. My investigation of my spirituality and its impact on my life continues. My evangelism is now focused on music making yet I feel it is just a refocussing of my spiritual drive and inquisitiveness. So, to understand my musicianship I feel I need to understand more than the obviously academic and quantitative in evidence in my work" (1997:169)*

### **An evolutionary line of spirituality?**

What has followed since the symphony that may substantiate my contention that the spiritual grows and now leads? The list of my commissioned works since then is as follows:

#### **2005**

Strip the Willow  
Migaloo

#### **2004**

Simple Song

#### **2003**

Cinque Quattro – Alla Marcia

#### **2002**

A Joyful Noise  
Cyclone

#### **2001**

Bright Sunlit Morning

**2000**

Three Moon  
Immortal, Invisible  
April 25<sup>th</sup> 1915

**1999**

Millen Kulgen (Many Paths)  
As One  
And Enoch walked with God....  
Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!!  
Pioneers

**1998**

Masada  
Beyond the Frontier

To reflect on my journey I will take on the manner I assume when presenting my work to my ensembles, the third person. I have alluded to this in other places and here my struggle is to present these quite personal ideas without proselytising. So, wearing another hat, I continue.

### **A biographical encounter with autobiography**

Though titles may be indicative of content or intent, an examination of the notes for the published and unpublished scores of those works, as considered previously re the symphony, gives a more defined insight into the composers' perspective and inclination at the time. (Further consideration of program notes and the implications from them can be found [here](#))

Consider his comments on "*And Enoch walked with God....*"

*This work is reflective of the simple faith and trust in God that my dear friend Tan Beng Wee has. For years I have been impressed by his honesty, depth of love for people and his commitment to his family, students and his Lord.*

*I asked him what he wanted in this life, what he would view as personal success. His reply was as simple and uncomplicated as he lives his life. "I want to be like Enoch and walk with God". Beng Wee wants to be a good man, a man who is deemed good enough to walk with God. He is a humble man, a righteous man and a devoted family man. I am sure that one day he will walk with God. I hope to be able to walk and talk with him then.*

*Mention of Enoch can be found in Genesis 5:24.(2002:2)*

(And Enoch Walked with God – [sound recording](#))

Is the composer expressing his spiritual side here or just reflecting on his friend? Is he “interested” in more than just the spiritual here or is it just a nice story?

Consider his comments on *Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!!* Reflect on whether this is the same man as above, in the same spiritual condition, or is this very much a part of his journey to spiritual understanding.

*Can you feel that sensation as you mentally juggle the demands of emotion, profession and family and each concern barks at you for attention and demands its need be satisfied and you can sense the priority in them all but you know and feel your lack of time and your diminishing grace and patience to deal with them all!*

*Can you feel that sensation in your heart and mind when you are lead to something that might be on the edge of what you feel comfortable with but you want to go there and you know that going there will jeopardize your everyday situation but you still want to go there!!*

*Can you feel that sensation that wells up in you as you desperately search for the right answer in a situation that has no turning back, no sense of ambiguity can prevail and no hope of satisfying all the competing emotional interests seems possible.*

*Your mind spins, ducks and dives, leaps and plunges and seems to Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!!(2001:1)*

(Whirr, Whirr, Whirr!!! – [sound recording](#))

The publication dates are disparate but the actual composition projects were very closely located.

Now examine the notes for *Masada*. Here is a narrative work (more fully explored [here](#)) that seeks to engage the listener in the story being told and possibly that story has a spiritual dimension to it. Or does it? Look at the last two paragraphs of the program notes.

*“As a composer, I am drawn to the fervour and the passion of the zealots. They were committed to their ideals and they wanted to restore Jewish rule to Israel. Yet, I cannot help but think that Flavius Silva was just doing his job. He was attempting to subdue a revolt in a small, isolated part of a large empire, an empire to which we can trace back many of our civilisation’s social and cultural structures.*

*The work ends in a fervent Hebrew style dance in conflict with the powerful legion motifs. The listener can decide if the power or the passion conquer or are conquered. Whether I, as a composer have decided, is an interesting question.” (1998)*

Here is the playing with meaning and the sniffing around at God that he has been doing for a long time, even in his vicious rejection of a deity. He presents the idea that the zealots are only following their god but the question must be asked; why has he chosen another narrative work about God?

(Masada – [sound recording](#))

Review the commissioning and publication of *Immortal, Invisible!* Here the work is based on a hymn, not an unusual situation for a composer. He notes in correspondence with the commissioner and editor of the publication:

*The piece is based on the hymn tune St Denio and relates to the hymn that commences; "Immortal, Invisible, God only wise". It's a great tune and we had a good old sing of it in church a few weeks back and the ideas I had from 6 months ago came bounding back. It's very rhapsodic in the truest sense and never states the whole theme. I guess it's like the way I feel (surprise...) when you see the sun rise over the water or you sense the majesty of the stars or you are moved by the quintessential beauty of nature. Just as the tune starts to "say" itself I am drawn away again.....(29 August 2000)*

The question may be is this autobiography again or coincidence? Is this some connection with the ineffable or the numinous?

In the program notes on the score he states:

*Sitting uncomfortably in church one Sunday morning the composer was drawn to the text of the hymn based on the melody, St Denio. Unable to fathom the amazing assertion in the first two lines he began to contemplate the depth of meaning and significance of them.*

*Immortal, Invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,*

*Beyond that he could not move. What it meant, the immensity of it and the wonder. Over and over those first two lines and then the melody of St Denio began to tease him. Not once or twice, it seemed always! It visits as an allegro and then returns as a question and then presents itself as a statement. It speaks with one voice and then with many. It asks tentatively then it calls out its affirmation.*

*So, rhapsodically presented, are the thoughts and musings of the composer in musical form. Consider them if you will or dispense with them but the truth remains that one can quite strongly argue for the absolute wonder there is in the concept of the immortality and wisdom of God.(2001:4)*

(Immortal, Invisible! – [sound recording](#))

His journey continues, apace it seems!

The wondering is being replaced by more certainty and the musing more reflective and contemplative. The whirring continues but abates more often than previously and the subtle questioning doubt; pervasive, intrusive and nagging, is being addressed by something.

Hultgren muses in the exegesis that accompanies his symphony and states he must, "...continually revisit and discover writings that inform me in respect of my compositional process and not just works which might discuss its content and skill base." (1997:169). The consideration here is the inadequacy in music theory understanding and teaching to explain what composition really is. Further he suggests that he is investigating discourses that "...investigate the emotional and intangible in the creation and recreation of music." (1997:169)

His pursuit here, his quest for truth and meaning ("*There is little doubt in my mind that I am seeking truth and meaning in my life.*" (1997:175)), proceeds and he gives us Meyer and the inadequacy of a multitude of music located sources to explain or assist in his quest. "*On the whole*" Meyer, in Hultgren, contends, "*music theorists have concerned themselves with the grammar and syntax of music rather than its meaning or the affective experiences to which it gives rise*" (1997:175-176)

So what of his search and his findings? Is there evidence that the autobiographical output that is his composition is really what is reflected in his artistic outpouring? Is life beginning to imitate art here or this some desperate groping after meaning, hung loosely around overtone theory? (Blacking???)

*The spiritual returns here also when, for example, one considers the multiplicity of interpretation and explanation of Christian teaching. My search for a spiritual haven in years gone by had me emotionally buffeted and cast about when caught in the infinite variety of truth presented to me.*" (1997:177)

He then says, "*That may well be one reason for the investigation of the spiritual in my writing.*" (1997:177). Such a position leads us to question whether the spiritual or his connections to it have become immanent in his works and to what extent they now might pervade his every artistic act and instinct.

### **The composer speaks in this day and from this socio cultural perspective**

The assault on our comfortable western lives is perpetrated on September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. How did the composer respond? How did this man respond? The program notes best depict both the context of the response and the intent of the piece I produced to react to and reflect on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

*How does one write something about an event so truly awful that musical depictions would seem trite and banal? The events of*

September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 are etched in everyone's memory. Even my youngest children talk of the animated and fearful discussions that took place in the schoolyard amongst the 10 and 12 year olds.

I would not wish to represent the events of that day in musical terms. My effort has been to present my reactions to that dreadful day. How one comes to terms with such an occurrence is very personal indeed. I turned to my faith and to my God. I found solace, as did my wife, in the wonder and comfort of the Psalms particularly. **Bright Sunlit Morning** features the words of many Psalms and also other sections from the Old Testament. Included are the words of Joseph to the brothers who had sold him into slavery and whom he did not seek to judge (Genesis 50:19–20) and the most wonderful words of blessing God gave to Moses for the children of Israel (Numbers 6:24-26).

Faced with such calamitous events I cannot but say that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble" (Ps 46:1) and I am assured that "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear" (Ps 27.1). Through this tragic time and the frenzied panic that grips us God calls and says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

What then of the future? What of the actions that follow from these deeds that well may blight the coming years? How do we get over the depression and misery and ache of such tragedy? I turn again to God. "I waited patiently for the Lord and He turned to me and heard my cry. He brought me out of the pit of despair.... and set my feet on a rock" (Ps 40:1-2).

I do not seek to preach or foist my views on anyone in writing these notes. They are the best way I can express myself through language. I only seek to reflect on the impact of these times on me; a man, a husband and father and a very small part of this world. My music may speak differently to you. Whatever the situation my desire is to share the comfort one can find in faith and the peace one may then share with others.

(Bright Sunlit Morning – [sound recording](#))

Can I find another way to describe my arrival at truth and meaning? Is this the end of consideration and searching or striving? Can I find a more appropriate manner to display the socio cultural context I now find myself speaking from?

I am a devout Christian man, living in an unspiritual world, a world that is more comfortable with goblins and fairies than with an omnipotent God, a vicarious atonement and an active Holy Spirit. I am a man who values his "social location and contextualisation" and my "position within and not apart from (my) social networks" (Stanley, in Hultgren 1997:195).

I am also well aware that to present such matters in this type of environment leaves me open to questions of subjectivity and academic rigorousness. So be it. I am that person described above and my work is a product of that spiritual, social and artistic milieu.

Earlier in this study I said:

*“I am concerned to ensure that my endeavours will make more transparent the vibrant union there should be between composer and performer and listener. Being a composer I am uniquely located to comment here, as my practice is my laboratory and my creative endeavour my field of investigation.*

*Conductor, Mallory Thompson (2002: x) states, “Whenever I perform the music of Karel Husa, for example, I imagine that he is standing beside me”. My desire, through this research, is to place myself “beside” those who are playing my music and to provide them with an awareness of my “presence” and how to ensure the “presence” of other composers “beside” them too.” (2004:6)*

That remains my desire, my passion and my continuing hunt for truth and meaning!