

## **Reflections on 2006 and my composition output**

An addendum to other doctoral writing this year

### **Context**

The year has been a very full one in every way. I have written a number of larger works and also some smaller ones. This journal is mainly to reflect on three pieces; All Loves Excelling, Joshua and Dance Diversions. The journal also reflects the impact of conversation with others on these matters, especially other composers such as Martin Ellerby, Brian Hogg and Andrew Boysen Jnr.

At present I am somewhere over the Atlantic on my way to visit Bruce and Dee Pearson and then on to the Midwest conference in Chicago. Julie and the younger kids are with me and we have had time in Singapore, Greece (on holiday) and Manchester with Martin and his wife Linda and also at the Royal Northern College of Music.

### **Process and impact**

It is also apparent that it is not just the over that has an impact here; the comments from others and the discussions with composer colleagues; but it's the wondering as I go through so many compositional acts and the variety of the context of them and the manner of acquitting them given the exigencies of professional and family life. As I have journeyed through the journals I have written about the process of composition and orchestration etc I am drawn to wonder if the process I describe is the only process or if it's a generic process, which I adapt to circumstance. The most effective manner of describing what I mean here is to give an example.

In talking with Stephen Emmerson about writing All Loves Excelling I told of how the sketch seemed even more an aide memoir than previously. I found that I was getting to places in the orchestration process where I would normally expect the sketch to have more information on the sketch than I found I had completed. There was no problem with having 'missed' anything; it was more that I had completed a more incomplete sketch for that work than I had for the others I had written about (My Sister's Tears etc). In one instance, I will need to scan and add the examples here) I found that I hadn't even finished the section that I was leaving but had completed the section I was entering!

Amazingly, as I have found before, I could tell reasonably quickly what I wanted but because even the sketch was more 'sketchy' than usual the realising of the implied ideas took a little longer than usual,

Following from that is that I was concerned about the consistent interruptions to the compositional and scoring process of the work and so I was somewhat worried for the outcome. Pleasingly, the interruptions had no major adverse

impact on the works completion and I am very happy with what has been written.

In some way I assume this gives credence to my assertion that when I write the sketch it is an aide memoir and that the action of taking those scribbled ideas and detailing them onto the score paper is part of one continuum.

### **Muddling along**

It seems at times that what I am doing as I write is to pull thoughts/concepts/motifs etc from the subconscious and to express almost a complete idea and onto the sketch pad. It also seems apparent that as I write I am not consciously expressing things; it's more like I am transferring the ideas and come to a realisation of what they are later.

An example I can give of that is from Joshua.

I know I was aware of writing something that was like the walls coming down and the tramping of the feet at the end of the middle section (I will have to scan these too!). I was fully aware of what I was trying to do there but the sense of energy, and motion that is evident in both the major six eight sections and is reflective of a call to arms and a battle and final victory is something which I became evident of when I went into rehearsal with the work.

As the ensemble (Chatswood High School – Sydney) worked on the piece there it was as if they were unsure and were attempting to defeat the technical difficulties of the piece via acquitting time in practice and hard work. My endeavour was to have them understand some of what was intended there in the 6/8 and what happened is what I find most often happens in a rehearsal situation – they began to play it more effectively and with greater sense of purpose. A musical answer for a technical problem, as I tell my conducting students!

Being placed in that position I had to make an attempt to find that musical answer for the technical problems. I can remember vividly telling them how the 6/8 was preparing for and going to war. It was foreboding, and the adrenalin rush of fear and passion and it was the celebration at the end. I used similar imagery when I worked on the piece and played it in concert with the Conservationism Wind Orchestra later in the year.

The image of the work – the composer's intent – became evident to me as I worked on the piece; my own piece!

### **Images of long ago**

The writing of the Dance Diversions was a most exciting event. I was asked to write it by Michael Morgan, Head of Ensembles at QCGU, for Jamie Kennedy, an Honours trombone student. (The [program notes](#) and so forth can tell the story more fully). What excited me most was the chance to write a challenging

work and not to worry about the quality of the players. Those I had were generally very good though the double reeds were and are still a 'work in progress'. Jamie is a fine player and the situation meant I had a guaranteed premiere etc BUT what was most important and therefore exciting was that 25 – 30 years ago I had begun a trombone concertino and, because there was no one to play it there was no reason to finish it.

I dragged out the old sketch and started to consider the material I had 'prepared earlier'. The idea for the dance related materials (the concert was already 'themed' as symphonic dances) sat very comfortably with the music I had written for it was a parody of a waltz and it became the first movement. (Find that sketch Ralph and drop it in here)

That provided some deep thinking too. It was very 'old' Hultgren music but it was not out of place with what the work evolved to be thought it was music which harked back, for me, to a different set of ideas and ideals. They are ideas which I may well investigate again soon.

That also connects solidly with my contention about autobiography. Here was a work which was telling a story in dance forms and which connected to my musical voices over two periods. It was also music which had resonances with two other works I had or would write in 2006, All Loves Excelling and Joshua.

### **Autobiography – a snapshot indeed!**

Those autobiographical finger prints are evident for me in the less obvious emotional and spiritual matters which have been a part of this year rather than the obviously musical aspects, such as the use of vigorous 6/8 allegro type sections in all three. It may need deeper investigation than I give it here but this year has been a very demanding one at work and one that has caused me a deal of angst outside of work and in my spiritual life (should there be parts of personal journals reflected on here?).

The vigour and the passion and the dissonance evident in Joshua and the final movement of /dance diversions are symptomatic of my life situation this year. I understand how some might say I am constructing something here to validate my hypothesis but I cannot help what others may think of this. I am in a position to look back and see the year in retrospect and to hear the angst, feel the pushing and emotion and to remember the emotions that ran through me in the creation of those two works in particular.

I know my spiritual journey has had an impact this year too. That makes me argue all the more strongly for what I assert here. I also place here the fact that All Loves Excelling has a similar vigorous 6/8 but the music is much more sparkling rather than foreboding. It was written at the end of the year as the journey in my spiritual life was working itself out fully (as fully as can be expected at this time I would assume). It speaks in a more uplifted manner and it seeks to engage more than drag the listener to take notice.

Again, these are unconscious components of the overall creation of the works. Once more I counsel against thinking that all the composer does is well prepared and planned. More often than not the story telling which is inside the creator is more about telling it than understating or planning its construction. No doubt there is subconscious planning and assembly but for me it remains an unknown before the work 'arrives' on the sketch pad.

My intent here is to finish what this and when time permits to actually look at the three works in more detail and lay out the matters I allude to here and prepare more for consideration. It may well be that much of what I assert in other places about my process will be validated but, that remains to be seen.

### **Comments on 21st December 2006**

A tangent:

It's day three of the conference and there has been some most satisfying responses to my work.

I have had many positive comments about My Sister's Tears and Jessie's Well. I am taken aback by two in particular.

I hark back a week and a conversation I had while in Manchester. Martin called the conductor of the Coldstream Guards to discuss something and then he and I talked. Major Graham Jones is a significant musician in the British Army. He has just been told he will be posted from the band to Kneller Hall, the British Army School of Music to become the Training Colonel. It is a significant promotion and positions him to become the Director of Music of the British Army but he is unhappy with the posting. He believes it will inhibit his chances to make music as he has done with then band.

That positions his comments somewhat. He has a broad and deep experience of established repertoire and also has premiered and made premiere recordings of much new music. He was effusive in his positive response to MST. He suggested that it was such a significant work on a major subject but one that was not self indulgent and did not wallow in the subject matter but was an uplifting commentary on a life with reflection on the sad event that precipitated the writing of the piece.

The other comment was yesterday by Gary Ceipluch, conductor of the Case Western University Wind Ensemble and the Cleveland Youth Wind Symphony. He said, "The piece changed my life and the life of my ensemble. Thank you".

It was a most heart felt comment. Gary is larger than life and he is always animated and energetic and is "in your face" quite comfortably. We sat and talked and I noticed his reflective disposition; an unusual positioning for him. We talked about a number of things and he remained quite and less than his usual self. As the conversation quietened he reached into his bag and brought out a copy of the program and a live recording of the performance he had

given. It was presented in Severance Hall, the home of the Cleveland Orchestra, and recorded by their engineers. I am yet to listen; this place is not conducive to such reflection.

Though I haven't heard the recording of the work I have been astounded by his reaction to it. He often plays my pieces and revisits them and always presents vibrant and vigorous performances. He comes to see me at the Midwest "larger than life" and swaggers as he tells me of his latest 'success' with one or other of my works.

This response was vividly different and it displayed another side of Gary. He was quite and reflective and he showed me what the work can do, for the conductor and the players. It had affected him and his musicians!

More on this will come I am sure as others have gone to listen to the work at the Studio Music booth and have come back to me to talk about it.

### **Back on task**

Same day and same place – Midwest Exhibition Halls.

I have just spoken with Paul Whear, an eminent American composer, and he has just listened to the Dance Diversions and has been effusive in his praise.

Let me contextualise that statement as well. Paul and I have shared music with each other over the years. I have premiered a number of his work for band in Australia but he is most well known here for his works for orchestra and for strings. Our discussions have always focused on each others works and our connection with them or not. We 'read' the comments that come back from each other and know when they are reserved in a reflectively critical sense. To have him so enthusiastic about the work is a measure of his connection with it.

"The first two movements are excellent and a growth on your composition – not that the third movement isn't good, it's just that the other two are so much of a growth from what you have written before" were his initial comments. He continued to discuss the structures and the orchestration.

"It's very Stravinsky like, though he wouldn't have been so melodic" – a reflection on the first movement. "Don't you think the second movement is sensual?" he asked when I commented on the third movement being most people's favourite given its sensual nature. "Yeah, the third movement is sensual but that second movement; wow! It's so sensual!"

All illuminating comments from a man who has heard the majority of the new band and orchestra music produced in the USA over the last 50 years!

**Comments on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2006**

What a day yesterday was! There was the award recipient luncheon and then the public acknowledgement at the Dallas Wind Symphony concert in the evening. There I was surrounded by 'the' names in the wind band world – Hunsberger, Reynolds, McBeth, Bourgeois, de Meij and others. Then there were 'the' names in the instrumental music education field – Pearson, O'Reilly and others. Why was I there? Yet I was and I was really quite overwhelmed!

Not as overwhelmed as I was from the comments about my work over the course of the day.

“There is something that has happened in Ralph’s life over the last two or three years” said Tom Rohr from Utah State University. “You can hear it in the music.””

“Rob (McWilliams) and I were talking last night and your music has become very introspective and so chamber music life.” His comments are informed comments because he has presented performances of my work across the USA and also in Australia.

“There is something different – something which has connections with what you composed before but it’s different.”

McWilliams is an expatriate Australian working at the University of Wisconsin at Osh Kosh and one who has presented many US premieres of my music. They have become close friends and that may lead to suggestions of subjectivity but it also locates them uniquely in respect of their understanding of my work over an extended period. They have analysed and performed my work from Bushdance (1986) and An Australian Rhapsody (1987) through to the USA premiere of Jessie’s Well (McWilliams) and multiple performances of it, at MENC conferences and the like, (Rohr).

Brian Hughes, a conductor from Iowa/Minnesota has also known my work for years having been at the world premiere of my Symphony for Wind Orchestra (1994) at the University of Northern Iowa. He listened to Jessie’s Well yesterday and was most effusive in his praise. I suggested to him to listen to My Sister’s Tears at the Studio Music booth. He returned with his eyes full!

“I am truly speechless Ralph. Words cannot explain what I feel.” Like Ceipluch on Tuesday, Brian will often arrive for a visit with me during the conference, though not as animatedly as Gary, and to have him honestly speechless was a surprise.

Jim Ripley, Secretary of WASBE has chosen Jessie’s Well as a work for a middle school honour band in Wisconsin. He was also animated in his praise for the work. One of the biggest music dealers here in the USA has ordered multiple copies of it. It is being validated as a work of value in more ways than just sales or performance.

The reaction to the three slow works has stunned me!

The reaction from conductors far and wide is really amazing and it's such that there is a real feeling in me that my contention that my music is a reflection of my spiritual change is being substantiated in the responses of those who are using the music. They are often people who have used my music often – used; what an interesting way to think of performance! -

I will consider this more after the conference.

### **In the air!**

Here I am at 35,000 feet above Colorado on the way to LA and then home – December 23<sup>rd</sup>!

I have had much to think of in this last week and it has made me quite inward looking. I wonder at the acceptance of my works. I wonder at the consistent positive response to My Sister's Tears and Jessie's Well. It amazes me that there is such a very positive and often very emotional reaction. especially to Jessie's Well because it doesn't necessarily have the some narrative intensity as MST and people don't always read the program note before listening.

That's an intriguing part of this whole 'reception' process as well; do they react to the music in a particular manner because they have read the program note or are they connected via the tonal material itself? That's the contention of Meyer, isn't it; that the tonal material carries all then information and we react in 'learned habit responses. I'm not sure of that either!

I best go back to the reason I began this musing, the response to my compositional work this last year.

### **Composing again!**

I have two commissions in the pipeline at present. I have been very active with one and not so active with the other.

I have another commission which has come from the activity of Gavin Staines in Sydney. This one is for a regional honour band and it is to be premiered in the Opera House later in the year. He asked for a concert opener, an overture style about level 4 – 4.5. I am working on the sketch of that at present. I wrote nearly all of the outline of it at Bruce and Dee's home on Tuesday. It's about two hours from finishing it – the sketch – and then I will begin scoring it next week, after Christmas.

I have tried to write a work that is 'concert opening' and also one that has my contrapuntal and melodic ideas but not my bombast. I will have to live with it a little before I know if I have been successful. I have also tried to write a work that isn't 6/8 like the last three! Time will tell and the scoring process will be interesting because it has little quite and reflective moments in it at all!

I will finish for now and come back to this later.