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The Dark Corner:
a study of the dynamic dialectic between women composers and the Australian orchestral milieu

Volume Three

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Appendix 1: Eight Interviews with Australian Women Composers.

Interview 1. Helen Gifford interviewed on the 4th January, 1998 at her home, 27 Smart St, Hawthorn, Melbourne.

[Context: we discuss Helen Gifford's interest in the orchestral genre and her orchestral works. She begins by reading the program notes from her orchestral works Chimaera and Imperium.]

Gifford: Chimaera, 1968. Chimaera, my first orchestral work, was written not long after a visit to India. The harpsichord and substantial percussion part reflect the concerns with textural effects that was prevalent in the 1960's. The music is about the theatrical posturing and whimsicality of the fabulous winged and dragon tailed monster of ancient law - the fire breathing Chimaera - as well as with wildly improbable fancy and mystery which surrounds the legend.

Imperium 1969. The word ‘imperium’ stands for supreme power and authority - imperial sovereignty. The idea behind the writing of this piece was the encounter of two opposing cultures and traditions, and more especially, between the Imperial British and the East. I wanted to illustrate the complex sentiment underlying the imperial invasion - the ferocity of its power seeking for possessions, the nobility of its high minded idealism, that single mindedness and extraordinary conviction in the rightness of their undertaking that characterised the 19th century British. I also wanted to imply the subtle transformation that was effected upon the colonisers as they became increasingly committed to their strange new life and exotic surroundings, until in time they came to form the strongest ties and allegiance to the Orient. Something of the mixed nature of these motifs is shown in a few words spoken by John Lawrence, one of India’s greatest viceroys, and which I think clearly demonstrates the simplicity and optimism of the Victorian British.

'We are here by our own moral superiority, by the force of circumstances and the will of Providence. These alone constitute our charter of government, and in doing the best for the people we are bound by our conscience and not theirs'.
Our conscience. That's that!

Martin: Helen, what was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Gifford: It was something I'd been looking forward to for some time, but I felt that I had to write quite a few - quite a body of small chamber works - different textures, different instruments, before I attempted it. But then, by the late 60's when I did begin, it almost burst out, especially the new awareness of musical textures, the surface of music and so on. The emphasis had switched to this - right through the sixties it was happening by then and so I ended up using seven percussion players in one work and five in another. And the harpsichord's yet another texture and so there's a piano in Imperium and a harpsichord in Chimaera, and it's all just a way of including as much texture into the orchestral sound. In Imperium I completely divided the strings a la Ligeti’s Atmospheres, but it was something I'd been dying to do. Then I had them tremolando. It was a wonderful, sensuous thing to do.

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired or encouraged you?

Gifford: Ligeti’s Atmospheres was a work I loved. Now a lot of people said that that’s an orchestra trying to sound like electronic music and he wasn’t the first composer to do that either, and that’s true enough, but, the more static quality of the music. Not that I think it really sounds like Ligeti. But no other role models. I was always fascinated by the orchestral music of - specifically one work of Lutoslawski - and that was the three poems, Trois Poeme Henri Micheau, which was I think '63. That was a fabulous work with its double choir and that was definitely a work - and again my work sounds not the slightest bit like that, nothing like that. But somehow they inspired me - they got me going and I couldn’t wait to write something similar. A few Australian composers were fascinated by the Polish avant-garde. By the mid 60’s we were hearing these works on record.

Martin: Phantasma, scored for string orchestra, is that your first -

Gifford: Oh that’s a much more traditional work, and that’s much earlier, ‘63. So it was my first essay into orchestral writing and it’s a bit of an exercise that. Yes.
Martin: Do you remember who performed the premier?

Gifford: It was done in Sydney in the Great Hall of Sydney University, conducted by Peart, at about the time it was done in Melbourne - I'd have to check that - by the Astra Music Society's string orchestra. It's a string piece, conducted by George Logie-Smith. I'll have to have a look. In '65 was the - and so which version went on the ABC record? I can't recall now.

Martin: And this work wasn't a commission?

Gifford: No, none of the orchestral pieces were commissions. You were lucky and you needed to live in Sydney to get orchestral commissions, I think. They weren't bandied around at that stage before the Australian Council of the Arts - oh, that came in '68 didn't it? Anyhow they weren't commissioned, they were just written because I wanted to write them and I was lucky the ABC was happy to perform both of them.

Martin: Has *Phantasma* been recorded?

Gifford: Yes, it's on one of those yellow LP's the ABC put out. I might even have it. I'll have to have a look.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider to have been influential to *Phantasma*?

Gifford: No because it's - no I can't think [laughs]. I really can't think.

Martin: So there's nobody - there's nothing outstanding that -

Gifford: No. I wouldn't think the Second Viennese School, but at that time I was very interested in atonal music - in the early '60's.

Martin: Do you remember what was behind the inspiration in the musical elements?

Gifford: In *Phantasma*? No. It's a rather dark work isn't it?

Martin: It is.
Gifford: It could be the early Schoenberg works which I absolutely love. I love *Pierrot Lunaire*, *The Hanging Gardens* - all those early works. I really love them. I was never one for Webern particularly, and Berg to me sounded as if his whole heart and soul wasn't in it as an atonal composer - but Schoenberg was. He had one foot in the 19th century and it just came naturally as an extension of the 19th century. I love his works, *Erwartung* I adore and I was really a bit miffed when I read in the score - well, when I heard first the passage in *Wozzeck* with the Swamp Music - so called - and I checked the score and it's the same writing as in the part of *Erwartung*.

Martin: Is that right?

Gifford: I have an enormous library of scores, twentieth century scores. A specific library. I mean I don't have - I may have one work of Penderecki. It's my taste. I have so much of Schoenberg and when I like a composer you'll see the piano versions and the orchestral versions.

Martin: And this is how you've learnt orchestration?

Gifford: Yes, you don't learn that in a course at the conservatorium. For instance there's a passage in *Les Preludes* by Liszt that I'd love to have the excuse to write that sort of string writing in a work but I haven't quite worked out how I could fit it in to work of this century! [laughs] For instance *Turandot* sitting over there on the box over there [goes over to box] is the full score. I've got a lot of full scores of operas. I've got *Elektra*, piano reduction and full score - it's about the only Strauss score I have. But I love *Elektra*. And then again, he reneged didn't he! That was written at the same period and belonged in that whole style, but he saw in this way madness lies because the public will not follow you down this path and so we sailed back to *Rosenkavalier*.

Martin: The Pro Musica Society String Orchestra performed *Phantasma* in 1965. Do you remember how that performance came about?

Gifford: Ah, this is the Peart one! Pro Musica. I was - that name's been troubling me in my researches in Sydney and I thought, well its obviously something Peart must have set up and I can't find a mention of it in any reference book, except a couple of
works were performed by the Pro Musica Society at the same time as the ICM in Sydney - apparently ICM was going back in the ‘30’s - dormant largely till post World War II. Silverman was the president for a while and then I think when Peart took over there was a music department set up in Sydney, in what ‘48? But then when did Peart switch from being a medievalist to a new music man? Sometime in the ‘50’s.

Martin: And so the performance of this work came about through the -

Gifford: Pro Musica. Well, I just got rung up by Peart saying he’s going to put the work on. I presumably met members of the society.

Martin: Did you send it (the score) to him or -

Gifford: No. He travelled to Melbourne a bit. I remember he had set up the ICM Melbourne branch and he wanted to set one up in Western Australia and I think he thought Tunley would run that and Sitsky ran the Queensland branch in the mid ‘60’s. In Australia if something’s worth doing in music you go to every state and maybe there was someone down in Tassie, but I’m not sure, and whoever would set up the Adelaide branch? So, he personally arranged that performance. I never ever sent things around or travelled to publishers, but when I finished the orchestral works there was only one way of getting them done. You sent the score to the ABC. And then Patrick Thomas wrote a letter and said, ‘we’re going to record it at Norwood studios in Adelaide at this date’. And it was 118 takes and I was there. That was exciting. That was Chimaera. And a few composers had that sort of thing happen. You sent a score to the Sydney Head Office, the Federal Music Department, the State ABC’s had the money to do nothing, all the money came from Sydney if anything was to be done. For Imperium, I sent that to the ABC and they said it’s going on in a workshop conducted by Keith Humble. So I rang up Keith - he said, ‘is it?’ - he didn’t know! [laughs] And he knew the workshop was coming and he was going to conduct pieces but he didn’t know that piece was going on, so that tells you where the power lay. Who was it then up there? I just sent it to the Federal Music Department. But the most exciting thing that ever happened to me was when I finished the score of Regarding Faustus, no plans for performance anywhere, and I travelled with this score up to Sydney’s Federal Music Department. The tenor who I’d written it for, Robert Gard, I remember he drove me in. I had an awful cold and I
was wearing his cardigan because I thought Sydney was going to be hot and then it wasn’t. Anthony Hughes was the big power then, not for much longer at that time, and I’d never met the man and I was shaking I was so nervous and I’d made an appointment to see him. I’d never been up before and they were probably quite curious to see me after all these years and see what I looked like because I’d never been up into that inner sanctum. So, he sat there and he looked at it and said, ‘of course this is the sort of thing we should be doing’, which is the sort of remark he would make. And he looked at it for quite a long time and then he walked into the next room and showed it to - who was that chap, Michael - someone - and report had it he was always having a nervous breakdown because there was a room of about a hundred takes of Australian scores that had never been processed, put on record, or nothing done with - no performances, he hadn’t sorted them all out and the man was having a breakdown - this is true - Michael - was it Coburn? [Corben] Some name. Can’t remember. Well-known composers were always ringing him up shrieking at him [laughs] and he couldn’t take it anymore. So, he was consulted secretly round the corner because I was a potential shrieker and hysteric and I was so weak and wobbly though, if only he’d realised. This was in ‘83 and Anthony just walked back in and said, ‘alright, we’ll do it. We’ll record the whole piece in twelve sessions in Melbourne,’ and that was a lot of money in ‘83. So they did it - six sessions in October ‘84, six sessions in April ‘85. The first six were the backing and Robert came down in ‘85. They put head phones on him and he had to sing to the pre-recorded backing! And he did it. I mean he was a fantastic performer. It was a big ask, but he was terrific. And that cassette was very important for me and that cassette Harwood heard and he programmed it in the ‘88 festival - the Adelaide Festival - just from hearing that cassette. So a recorded cassette is a very valuable thing, or records of any sort.

Martin: I’m going to ask you now about what motivated you to write *Chimaera*.

Gifford: Well the notes I’ve said, the trip to India, which was wonderful because I’d been dreaming to go to India for ages. India was a place of my dreams as it were and it fulfilled them. It was just as remarkable. We travelled - I was with a Community Aid Abroad study group - there were three groups of six that went in different directions - four nights on a train - it was a very, very cheap trip in that sense. Second class, [laughs] lots of soot coming in the window, pretty awful, got terrible bronchitis, lost my voice, nearly died of exhaustion and we always put up in the
villages - very rarely in the capital cities. We did a whole tour all around India, right round Bombay, Delhi, clockwise all around to Calcutta, Madras, so I was just full of these images, and yet it comes out as European music. Influences are strange things because *Chimaera* is a European style work. I was incapable of transliterating it into - you know - I suppose too, I had a lot of influences coming from atonal and Polish avant-garde, a lot of influences coming in.

Martin: Of course the whole thing you were talking about before, about the textures that you were so interested in -

Gifford: Yes, and so you’re tied into European designed style instruments, unless I was writing for sitar, sarrod - Indian instruments - I’m writing for instruments in tempered pitch, for goodness sake! Yes.

Martin: I believe we spoke about the premiere of *Chimaera*.

Gifford: That was Pat Thomas and it was a recording, it was never -

Martin: It never got a public performance.

Gifford: It was never performed publicly until the Queensland one, was it last year in March? That was the first public performance.

Martin: Many years later!

Gifford: Yes. And the royalties were stunning! I think I got $68.

Martin: [laughs] That much?

Gifford: I mean my whole royalties from APRA this year - oh six months, was $12.

Martin: You could really treat yourself on that, couldn’t you!

Gifford: It’s amazing! Gee! [More laughter] Royalties come and go. I mean I had one year where it got to over $200. You know it’s a very variable thing, but $68 for one work. Oh well, in music you know $250 for 5,000 words.
Martin: We've spoken about the recording of Chimaera and we've spoken about the influences on this work haven't we?

Gifford: Yes, just briefly the Polish avant-garde and Lutoslawski and Schoenberg's atonal works.

Martin: Your next work for full orchestra was Imperium and I think we touched briefly on what motivated you to write this - it was the clash of cultures.

Gifford: Yes, and the mix of idealism and opportunism and everything. But what I was trying to depict in music - I certainly couldn't show that in the music - that's just what fascinated me, the slow transition from European to Eastern and the resistance to it. So its a pull against and yet a sucking in. Yes. I'd like to try that again some time too.

Martin: It's a very interesting work, Imperium.

Gifford. Oh, thank you. It probably tells people nothing at all about the subject behind it but - [laughs].

Martin: Was Imperium given a public performance?

Gifford: Yes. It was never recorded in a studio recording the way Chimaera was. It was, and the Adelaide orchestra did a very good job of Chimaera - this was just Keith Humble conducting the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra right through unedited. And that's what the ABC were then doing, a series of workshops - workshop was the magic word in the late sixties - and it meant a modicum of rehearsals, maybe two. It was better than recording Faustus where it was once through for balance, then put one down.

Martin: Unbelievable!

Gifford: Yes, unbelievable. Some people didn't even get their parts until the night before. Seriously, that's why you had to hire top performers. Now the main ABC orchestra players were very good readers, stunning sight-readers and they weren't
interested in learning parts - they had so much work to do, they usually worked very hard. So, you know, they were pretty cynical people. You know the third horn would pick up his part and you’d hear him say, ‘nothing much for me here’. You know they were really good professionals - they would do a pretty good job.

Martin: In the seventies and eighties you didn’t write any orchestral works. Why was this?

Gifford: I was flat out in the seventies doing music for the Melbourne Theatre Company. Umm - I did start Faustus - I was looking at the librettos for my music theatre piece. I got a special project for seven thousand and something from the Australia Council to do Faustus, but I was chopping up the Mahler original which was a bit awesome, except that the play ran for an hour and twenty minutes and it was almost a one person play. I mean, a lot of the funny bits were brought in after Mahler died to make it more acceptable to the audiences in the nineteenth century. But it really is a bit of a monodrama, Faustus and his problems, and so I just lifted out all of the mechanical bits, the funny bits which weren’t very funny to people, and we were left with almost an hour play which was what I wanted you see. So, where was I? Yes. I was writing the music for about three productions a year for the Melbourne Theatre Company, and in addition, choosing the music for several others. Now, by the end of the seventies they owned three theatres and I was flat out with three productions simultaneously in the Athenaeum, the Russell St, Theatre and they even had St Martins for a while, and then they had Athenæum II. Now, I brought in a few other composers at my own initiative; Phil Houghton did the Winter’s Tale, I think, and Martin Freedle was brought in by his wife Jan Freedle who was one of the actresses of the company, and so I was pretty flat out because I was working as a technical librarian. You got about, at the start of the seventies, about $500 for doing the music. For one production. I mean money was bad because - it was only in ‘68 I think that actors were paid for rehearsal. Actors were paid shockingly then. When I wanted to use musicians live, John Sumner, who ran the company said ‘we can’t do this because the musicians award is so good I can’t have them being paid about double what my leading actors and actresses are paid for coming up with a cast each night.’ He said, ‘we can’t have that’. I’ve never seen this used as an argument against having live musicians but it’s a very good one. You know, you could imagine. They were paid frightful amounts the theatre people, all of them right through. Sumner himself wasn’t paid much. This was just the way theatre was - it didn’t pay. Yet he
kept that company in the black all the way through. So you had to have it all pre-recorded before the production and so you worked to a pretty tight deadline to finish it about a month before it opened. And then you weren’t allowed into the technical rehearsal because you’d want the levels higher wouldn’t you? [Laughs]

Martin: In 1996 after a gap of 27 years you’ve written another orchestral work, *Point of Ignition*. What was it that made you begin writing for orchestra again?

Gifford: Oh, the first of my dear friends Jessica Albridge - she’s a wonderful person - I didn’t really meet her- although I knew close friends of hers for years right through the ‘70’s because she lives up at Montrose and there’s something of a recluse up there, I never met her. It’s quite a business meeting Jessica, and she’s written this fantastic body of verse. Have you ever seen the verse for *Point of Ignition*?

Martin: Yes, I’ve got the score for *Point of Ignition* and the verses are printed on the front.

Gifford: They’re amazing aren’t they? She’s about 78 and she’d written that over a twelve year period way, way back and she’d done nothing with it except send it to the little magazines. They were always published in the little magazines and they thought very well of her. But she’s done nothing to promote herself or get herself in books. She just stopped writing - she had a family and that was that, and so even though I think she must have had her doubts about whether it needed to be set to music - if I were a poet I certainly would think that - but I just wanted to. She’s also written poems I did not set, more personal, more intimate, women’s introspective poetry that’s marvellous stuff. She was more happy to allow me onto her ‘set pieces’ as she called them, *Point of Ignition* and all that, which are fairly astonishing poems.

Martin: I love the title.

Gifford: I had to think, well I’m not going to be setting this to be sung, so three of them are spoken. Now they are specifically written for someone who would do this awfully well, Kate Sadler, and I would really fight if someone else offered themselves because you know the ABC have a way of telling you, ‘oh we have our soloists’[laughs]. Now Kate is a mezzo and I love her voice and I’ve heard her sing Elgar’s *Sea Pictures* and it’s a glorious sound. She runs a music department at
MacRob High, she's got a sixteen voice choir. She's English born and trained and she got a really beautiful training for her voice. So, she's a thoroughly trained singer in the traditional sense and she's in her early forties now and mezzo's sound lovely in their early forties. I know she'd sound beautiful. If the ABC say she hasn't auditioned with us yet, I'll say, 'Alright then, we don't have a performance if it's not Kate'. That's that! In addition you know her husband, or actually they were partners for ten years, very close, Brian Stacey got killed the night before *Sunset Boulevard* opened in Melbourne and he was the music director. So, now more than ever I want her to sing that, and she of course knows Jessica and Jessica thought she would do it beautifully because she's heard her speak and knows she's a professional musician.

Martin: So, her speaking voice is beautiful?

Gifford: It's beautiful - perfect. Now since I’ve written the piece, it turns out that the ABC have decided she’s got a beautiful speaking voice. She introduces the concerts - their subscription concerts and so I said, ‘in the event Kate I’ve written for your specialty’. So isn’t it strange? She’s also moved. She auditioned for the Melbourne chorale, she’s an auxiliary conductor for the Melbourne chorale, she conducts this choir of voices you see regularly. She's a very busy girl - she has a CD out, she works with a group that sings in hotels at times. She is flat out.

Martin: So you had her voice in mind from the very beginning.

Gifford: Oh yes. It's written specifically for her. I think you’ve got to do this in a way. If you do anything a bit out of the ordinary vocally, you’ve got to have someone in mind who can do it. I did this with Robert and he did everything I knew he could, because I knew his voice well and I knew its versatility. I mean I'd heard him fooling around you know and I know Kate - she's done *Facade*, Kate. She gave me a cassette of her doing *Facade* and she's quite brilliant. So you know, maybe ultimately it's the singing part that the ABC - I mean sure, they've got magnificent mezzos on their register and wouldn't I like to hear Elizabeth Campbell sing the three verses that are sung. Elizabeth is very versatile too, but Kate's my friend - it's been written for Kate, and now that this awful thing's happened over a year ago.

Martin: I was going to ask you about a performance of this work.
Gifford: Well, I’ve done nothing - only the usual thing, but I didn’t have the usual response. I sent the score to the ABC Concert Department or whatever they call it now - it’s Nathan Waks I think - and I think they’ve even got a panel of score readers. Sue Tronser who I’ve come to know quite well over the years, told me - well she’s gone herself now she’s no longer at the ABC, but she said, - Symphony Australia as it’s called - ‘there is no guarantee for performance of any orchestral work except those commissioned by the ABC’. So they have direct control over what Australian works they want. They’ll commission a work and they’ll play it. But that could sit up there forever and a day and never be played now. In the past a conductor could pick it up and they’d give him an orchestra. It doesn’t work anymore.

Martin: So it’s the panel that makes the decisions?

Gifford: I think so. Umm, they do have a panel and God knows they don’t perform me often, so if it’s on the scale of it’s my turn, it certainly must be. They’ve got a regular group of composers they do play.

Martin: So you haven’t been in touch with them about this piece for a year?

Gifford: I haven’t to Sydney since 1988. That was for a conference and I never go into the ABC since Faustus. That was a one off. I had to get that done because I owed it to Robert. It doesn’t suit me to leave these two great, fat, indulged creatures -

Martin: That’s the cats -

Gifford: - who came into my life a couple of years ago. [Gifford talks for awhile about her cats] Sorry!

Martin: [laughs] Was there any influence behind the musical elements of this work?

Gifford: Point of Ignition? Oh, now I couldn’t tell you that. I was so sunk into the verse. I was trying, yes, to tune into something in the words - that’s all you can do when you set - trying to do something for the words and all the time thinking, ‘oh, I wonder if Jess will like this,’ you know.

Martin: You were writing and thinking about the words.
Gifford: The words entirely motivated me. I couldn’t tell you what style it’s in until I heard it again. I remember there was one, ‘Gothic Guns’, and I thought here’s my chance to do the defining Australian music and it ended up being just one chord from start to finish, one sustained chord. In fact, book-ended by A flats in the top and bottom and that’s just strings, and then there’s a glissandi on the chimes with successive triangle beaters, with the lorikeet in the gums suddenly appearing. You know this was just like Faustus. I tapped into things I’ve done for the Melbourne Theatre Company. I’ve been surrounded by years of the stuff and you have to force yourself to think of novelties in theatre music. I’ve got a Tibetan trumpet in one of them that I use, Pericles, and theatre forces you go into variety and novelty. I remember doing the forte piano for - we didn’t have them in 1978, I did Amadeus - or was it later, and I had to make the terrible old out of tune upright in the MTC sound like a forte piano. The out of tune was great because there was your mean tempered tuning, not well tempered at all, just like 17th century perhaps, and so I cut up a lot of plastic fly swats and put them on between the hammers and on the strings and it was just the buzz you wanted for the forte piano [laughs] until the ASM who was playing, of course someone on a salary comes very cheap as a pianist - was meant to be Mozart for God’s sake - refused to play on it because of that buzzing sound. So I had to cut it down a bit, but it worked amazingly. It forces you to deal in new sounds all the time writing for theatre, you’ve got to come up with something really novel.

Martin: And that’s influenced your orchestral writing as well.

Gifford: Oh, it’s influenced a lot of what I’ve done. I went into textures in a big way. I used zithers, I used Eastern instruments, middle eastern drums - Arabian drums - which I’ve got in the next room. I’ve got a chimney full of steel plates from Faustus, 15 steel plates that I got from junk-yards that were cut up by the guillotine in different lengths. So you know I’ve gone into percussion in a very big way, Faustus was the definitive. And from now it’s just simplifying. I’ll never do percussion like that again, it was just a nightmare.

Martin: Both Imperium and Chimaera were released on LP record

Gifford: Oh that’s the non-commercial ABC - the yellow cover LP.
Martin: Ah. I was going to ask you if this generated a lot of interest, but of course it couldn't have if it was non-commercial.

Gifford: No, it's all the secret performances. Like the ABC - George Tibbetts coined that, he called the workshop performances, secret performances. They were closed to the public. No, they couldn't have been, but they were not on their subscription audience.

Martin: What was the point of them then?

Gifford: They were meant to help the composers know their own music. Not a great point. It isn't showing much faith in Australian music. What has happened since that shows more I'd like to know. The workshops are now a bit discredited. Larry is for one saying, 'I'm not ever going to workshops, they're useless to me.' It's as if you don't know your business yet.

Martin: So they're probably only good for emerging composers.

Gifford: They were a fob off. It dealt with you quietly on the side.

Martin. So it sort of threw you a-

Gifford: Yes, that's right! It dealt with you secretly in the Waverley Theatre in Melbourne, you weren't even allowed in the Town Hall. I did get an ABC commission in '72 or '3 for the Australian Brass Ensemble or Brass Choir. He was a fantastic trumpet player who ran it, and I liked the man very much, I can't think of his name now. I got that one performance and then the Australian Brass Choir was disbanded, and I haven't had another and that was about nine instruments. I remember asking him what his top note was and he said, 'oh there's not really a top' [laughs]. Yes.

Martin: You began your musical life as a pianist. Has this been of any help in your orchestral career?
Gifford: Yes, because this introduced me to - you know I love a lot of piano music like Rachmaninov. Oh yes. The piano repertoire is very dear to me, but Chopin’s my favourite composer, of all. I don’t think its had any input whatsoever. I think it has to be a thing apart, because the piano is very limited in so many ways. Ross was appalled initially when I came out against piano tone in that foreword. We had to cut that back a bit because he said, ‘you can’t come out against the piano when you’re trying to’ [laughs].

Martin: Have you any thoughts on the orchestral commissioning process in Australia?

Gifford: [laughs] Oh, well as someone who doesn’t live in Sydney, yes. I mean, access to the main seat of power in the Australia Council, the Music Centre and the ABC is up in Sydney. And not to go there is a bit self destructive, but it’s costly to go there and I really don’t have an income to go up and down to Sydney.

Martin: So you feel you’ve got to be on the spot?

Gifford: I have a full pension and if I get a commission they take it off my pension. You are allowed $2,600 and I got a commission for the choral work which was $7,400 and I was only allowed $2,600; they took the rest off my full pension.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally speaking, as the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Gifford: Not now. Although there are still people who say that if you really want to make an impact on the community you’ve got to write for orchestra and have it recorded and performed. And they’re probably right. I think orchestral music is just as strong now as ever, if not stronger. Big funding is going into it. That’s gone corporate, that’s proof that it has community support. I don’t think its going to fall down. If it means to receive that support its going to play traditional music mainly and not very much Australian that’s a pity. Yes, I think only if you get commissioned to write an orchestral work, maybe it’s not worth writing it otherwise, there is no guarantee of performance.
Martin: Yes, that’s true. Do things such as economic factors because of the huge costs involved in writing for orchestra, audience accessibility, do they ever affect your language that you use in your orchestral works?

Gifford: No. No economic factors. You live quietly in your own home and you don’t move out of it. They don’t impinge on you. I mean I don’t see how.

Martin: Have you ever tried to have any of your orchestral works published?

Gifford: No. I haven’t ever approached a publisher, but in the sixties Albert’s were interested in the token publishing of Australians that they thought would be marketable in school music. Well, in my case it wasn’t. All the pieces I wrote were too hard for the AMEB which was a terrible disappointment [laughs] and so there was no future and so I’m thrilled to have Ross publish my work. Redhouse Editions is to me the best of the lot. I mean anyone who wants to take a picture of my garden and put it in their piano book, I think that’s just marvellous. It looks three times larger than it is [laughs], so that has worked beautifully. I used to feel a bit envious of composers who had gone overseas and got foreign publishers, but then they told me themselves later that the works were just sitting in the show room, nothing done. Well, Ross works quite hard. He’s apparently sent off brochures everywhere and he has a really good distribution and he also has plans to put things on CD that he publishes and it’s worked very well with the Australian miniatures book that he did. The piano miniatures - I don’t know if you’ve seen them.

Martin: Yes. I have the CD.

Gifford: He wants Michael to do my book - I don’t know if Michael knows that yet.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful in terms of performances and reception?

Gifford: Oh, you couldn’t talk of success, there is no success. One has only been played privately in a workshop and that’s Imperium, and the other one I wasn’t at the performance although the darling ABC offered to pay my fare there and back, but I was unable to go that week as I was getting the Honorary Doctor of Letters, so it was a bit of a disappointment. But my friend Phil Houghton went and said it was very
well played. So that’s beaut. So that was its only public performance. *Chimaera* had been recorded in 118 takes and never played to an audience.

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works? Well, you’ve really told me that you haven’t.

Gifford: No, no. That takes a terrific amount of energy and I think it’s a bit pointless.

Martin: Has networking played a role in your orchestral career – well, not really either [laughs].

Gifford: What with! No, no, never. I wouldn’t know about it at all.

Martin: What is it about orchestral writing that keeps you writing in this genre?

Gifford: Oh, a terrific interest in new music and a fascination with various styles around. A highly critical attitude to what’s being written too, not just an open ended fascination.

Martin: Have you any future plans regarding an orchestral work?

Gifford: I’d like to do another, that’s true. I never look more than about two pieces ahead. The choral work has to be done before November next year, probably before June. I thought it was going to be a twenty minute work but John McCaughey says he’d like it to be an hour and he’s got nothing else after interval [laughs]. But the one after that’s going to be for a young viola player who is really marvellous - viola was my second study at the con - and a thirty year old tenor and that appeals. She wants to do it with a string orchestra and it wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t commissioned. They want me to do it. She works mostly in America but she’s Australian born. She wants a piece from me which is lovely. After that Richard Ruddells wants me to write for him an octet for the Melbourne Wind Power and I’ve said yes, although confidentially it’s not my favourite sound [laughs]. He said are you very familiar with the literature and all I’ve heard I thought, ‘oh!’ (more laughter). I like Richard a lot and I think he does wonderful work and if he actually thinks that I might write
something that he likes to play then that’s a terrific compliment. So I’ll probably do that thing.

Martin: So there is nothing orchestral looming immediately.

Gifford: Well that would be nice to follow after that. Yes, and it doesn’t matter if I get commissions or not because now I’m on the pension since last year, everything is all right.

[Context: we discuss Miriam Hyde’s interest in the orchestral genre and her orchestral works]

Martin: You are one of Australia’s most prolific orchestral composers. What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Hyde: I suppose it would be my study in the third year of the ‘Mus Bac’ course at the Conservatorium in Adelaide - the Elder Conservatorium. It was one of the subjects that we had for our final year, and although I think it didn’t go at all that deeply into it for the reason that there was no conservatorium orchestra at that time and no hope of hearing played any of the bits of orchestration that we did. So it was more of an academic exercise, but certainly gave me an introduction into the technique of thinking orchestrally and writing for it I suppose during that time. I very ambitiously wrote what I called the first movement of a symphony and someone - Mallinson? - I forget his christian name for the moment - Mallinson anyway - conducted a local orchestra in Melbourne at that time, and very kindly and generously I thought, volunteered to play it through if we could get the parts written for it. Consequently it meant it had to be done, if and when I got to Melbourne, which I did - and I know my mother was a great help in writing the parts out for me. I’ve probably still got a manuscript of that somewhere, but anyway that was my first effort at writing an orchestral piece. I think it was very influenced by Schubert possibly, more than any other composer.

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired or encouraged you?

Hyde: Orchestrally, I don’t know whether my early orchestral works can be said to reflect the style of any other particular composer. Certainly, when I say the Elder Conservatorium had no student orchestra, there were orchestral concerts once in a while, in Adelaide, conducted by a Mr. Foote - I can’t remember his christian name either, you see it’s too many years ago for me to remember some of these details - and my mother used to take me to the orchestral concerts, and I suppose listening to them and just perhaps even then having the curiosity to try to follow what various
instruments were doing and the character of them must have been of some help in my early writing for orchestra.

Martin: In London, under the direction of R. O. Morris you wrote your *Piano Concerto No.1 in Eb minor*. How did the premiere performance come about?

Hyde: Oh, that was through an organisation known as the Patrons’ Fund. I think it was established long ago by - oh, my history’s not very reliable, but I’ve got King George the Third in mind - it could have been I suppose as early as that. At the time [early 1930’s] I was a student over there. Lord Palmer seemed to take a great interest in the works that were produced and he made a point of meeting the composers when they had their works done. I only saw him on rare occasions but I established quite a sort of friendly feeling for him and I remember even during the war years sending him - a couple of times - something like a food parcel, you know, when things were terribly scarce in London - yes - I’ve probably got a couple of letters somewhere from him. I’ve got an enormous lot of letters I’ve collected over the years and I suppose they will go to the National Library, in fact I think I’ll make a point of that in my will or somewhere.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Hyde: Well, I wrote it originally in Adelaide before I went to London and regarded it just as a piece for two pianos. So that’s as far as I ever thought of it. Naturally, I showed it to R. O. Morris when I began studying with him and he said straight away ‘oh well, why not make it a concerto? Do the orchestration and add two more movements’. So that’s what I did. That’s how it began.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Hyde: Oh yes, by that time it would have been Rachmaninov. I think it’s very obvious in both my concertos, and of course, Rachmaninov didn’t at any time come to Australia but when I started hearing records of Rachmaninov works, particularly the *C Minor Concerto*, it made a tremendous influence on me. And I know from then on, for a period of some years, I was very strongly influenced by him and I also had the remarkable good fortune to hear him in person in four concerts during my studies.
in London. I was at the first London performance, probably a world premiere I think it was, of the *Rhapsody on a Paganini Theme* - a most electrifying concert I've ever attended anywhere. I could hardly keep in my seat it got so exciting. And yet his demeanour on the stage was anything but electric. He would walk on quite slowly with his long, solemn-looking face and just go to the piano and improvise a bit at first, and then the playing became so dynamic. At the end of the work where it just goes, [sings], a little sort of nonchalant phrase, he tossed off as if to say, 'oh this is just a small work really you know,' in a sort of humble way [laughs]. Oh, I could hardly sit there through that number eighteen variation, you know the one in Db major which is a juicy key I always think. Yes, that's the way R. O. Morris described it, as a ‘juicy key,’ because I remember he suggested in the early stages that I would write a string trio and for the slow movement he said, ‘oh I think you ought to put it in a juicy key, perhaps Db major.’ But there is something special about Db major. Also, I think when, as in that number eighteen variation, the point comes towards the end where suddenly it falls on the Cb, the minor 7th, there is something terribly moving about that minor 7th in the key of Db major that doesn't evoke for me nearly such a strong emotional experience in any other major key. It's a funny thing about it. Last night for instance in the Db major *Nocturne* of Chopin that I played, the third time the theme comes around it gravitates to a Cb and it's something so moving. And Chopin’s done it in his *Berceuse* and Debussy in *Clair de Lune* and I think you get it also, yes, in the number three Liszt *Consolation in Db major* near the end where the Cb comes. It's a wonderful thing emotionally. Yes.

Martin: In 1933 you wrote *Dreamland*. Was this work performed?

Hyde: I think it was actually recorded somewhere - in Sydney? - no - I think it was performed by the Empire Orchestra of the BBC. Several of my smaller orchestral things were performed by that orchestra, conducted by Eric Fogg I remember, and I think *Dreamland* was - I had an orchestral accompaniment to it, and he also would have done my *Lyric* for small orchestra and one other work that I wrote on my homeward way, by sea of course in those days, *Prelude and Dance*, a small work for orchestra. I know he gave a performance of that.

Martin: So you sent the scores back to England?
Hyde: Yes.

Martin: Did you know him personally?

Hyde: No, I only met him as a conductor. I didn’t actually play any piano solo work with him, but I met him just briefly.

Martin: So, how did you go about getting him to perform your works?

Hyde: I probably think one of my tutors, either R. O. Morris or perhaps by then Gordon Jacob, might have suggested I submit them to the BBC. I can only guess that would be it - I didn’t take any sort of initiative in it myself. I expect it was more likely to be Gordon Jacob because with him I completed the writing of the Lyric, so he probably made the suggestion that my work should be broadcast from the BBC. The Lyric I started writing, I think it was in 1932 when I had attended a performance of As You Like It, in Regent’s Park. Do you know that little piece of mine [Lyric]?
And going home even in the tube that night I thought of the beginning of it, and indeed I knew it would have a conspicuous harp part. But somehow or other it didn’t get much further and it was only in my last year in 1935 with Gordon Jacob that I brought it to fruition. That, I think, is unusual. I don’t know how you find it, but if I start something and get so interrupted that I can’t continue it, I find it extremely unlikely and difficult to come back to it later and continue it. You seem to have lost the original atmosphere for it.

Martin: Yes, that’s true. In 1933 you also wrote Symphonic Overture in F minor.

Hyde: I think it’s F# minor, dear.

Martin: Oh, thanks [makes note]. This work was conducted by Sir Bernard Heinze in the late 1930’s. Is that correct?

Hyde: I can’t remember just which year that would have been. Certainly after I came to Sydney anyway because the Sydney Symphony Orchestra did it - when I came to Sydney to live late in 1936, so it could have been around about late ‘36 or ‘37. As far as I know it was the only performance there has ever been of it.
Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Hyde: I think I was simply motivated because R. O. Morris at that time suggested that it would be good thing to write for a larger orchestra than I had ever done. You see with the concertos each had a full orchestra, perhaps a little more so with the number two, but in the *Symphonic Overture* I certainly widened the range of instruments. I think I had a bass clarinet and double bassoon and tuba - perhaps with additional percussion - just some of the things that you don’t write in the sort of standard full orchestra.

Martin: Would you consider that Rachmaninov was influential to this piece as well?

Hyde: Oh, to a small extent. I’ve almost forgotten the context of it, or the content of it. No, I can recall very little of that to my mind. I haven’t even looked at the score for many years. It’s probably in the ABC Federal Library with my others.

Martin: Between the years 1933-34 you also wrote *Heroic Elegy*.

Hyde: Oh, yes.

Martin: It received its first performance in 1940 by the Sydney Conservatorium Orchestra, conducted by Edgar Bainton, on 30th October 1940. How did this performance come about?

Hyde: I think it could be - and this is only speculation - that soon after I came to Sydney to live I did some playing somewhere where Dr. Bainton was present and probably I played the slow movement of my *No. 1 Concerto* and – Helen, his younger daughter was somewhere about my age - and he suggested that we should do some two piano work together. And I suppose it was through that, that he got to know I had written this orchestral work. I think he wanted a few modifications made here and there in it, very little, as I’m sure you’ll find, once you start altering something, even if it’s only a few notes, you’ve got to chase it through all the parts and alter them too. So, it’s never a very pleasant prospect to alter it. And speaking of altering things, Joseph Post, who did the first recording of the *No. 2 Concerto* with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, was very much in favour of my extending the slow movement and bringing in again the main theme of it and I didn’t want that. I felt the
movement was long enough and complete enough in itself and I thought 'oh, goodness! If I bring in all these extra bars who’s going to bother to alter the parts for me'. So it’s not a nice prospect, but these days I suppose that sort of thing can be helped along with technology, but of course in my era that wouldn’t have been the case at all. All the copying of the parts for my early works including my two concertos had to be done by hand. Not by my hand, but I suppose you’ve got a note about that, about how they were done and the cost defrayed for me. Yes. Otherwise I would have spent weeks of my scholarship sitting writing parts. I couldn’t have been practising and getting on with my piano study, which was nominally my first study there.

Martin: Were there any composers that you consider have been influential to Heroic Elegy?

Hyde: Oh, well. Elgar, I think has got a bit in that. Yes, probably some influence by Elgar. Might even be Richard Strauss here and there. I don’t think there’s so much Rachmaninov in that as in some of the other orchestral works I wrote about that time. You’ll probably have a note on why I wrote that elegy, do you?

Martin: Yes, I do. In 1935 you wrote Piano Concerto. What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Hyde: I wrote it - started it - I bet you’ve got this also from my book - I was attending a performance of a Brahms concerto and during it I thought of the opening of this concerto [laughs]. It’s not a great compliment to poor Brahms, I’m afraid, that I was so sidetracked from his concerto. So that’s how that began. I think I’ve always had an interest in the brass section of the orchestra. I know a couple of conductors who have commented that I write effectively for brass. It could even be my early sounds of my father playing the comet which he more or less learnt by himself - getting an instrument and a tutor and setting to work to try to play it - which he did at home at times. I can even smell the instrument, you know, the brassiness of it [laughs].

Martin: In 1935 you wrote Adelaide Overture in anticipation of the Centennial celebrations. What inspired you to do that?
Hyde: Oh, I think it was a suggestion from some very good friends of mine, a Major Simnett and his wife Gwen. Some of my first friends in London they were, lovely people, and my friendship with them came about in an unexpected way too. When I was at Riverside School one of my favourite subjects was Physiology. We had a very charming teacher, Dorothy Mead, and when I was going off to London, some of my friends evolved a delightful idea of getting various people to write a letter for me all of which were put in a velvet bag and the idea was that during my long trip overseas which took then about 5 weeks, I would open one letter a day from someone at home and among them was a letter from this teacher Dorothy Mead, more or less introducing me to the Simnetts. And they lived in St. John’s Wood I think, as did my wonderful friend Christine Buckland, and when they knew I was going home to Adelaide they suggested that I ought to write an overture. So I got to work and that’s what I did.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Hyde: I think by that time John Ireland was an influence, yes. Several people - critics even - I think Fred Blanks is one who has mentioned an influence of John Ireland in some of my work.

Martin: I noticed in my research that you had some problems with the first performance of that work as it had been omitted from an advance program. What happened and how did you go about rectifying the situation?

Hyde: Well, I think that perhaps I was a little more aggressive then than I’ve been since. I was so disappointed. It was the ABC or some department of it that had agreed to perform it and then when I saw the advance program it wasn’t listed. So I think I wrote, probably to Charles Moses who might have been - oh, I don’t know if he was head of the ABC, he would have been at least an executive of it, and somehow, it may be with the names Moses and Miriam that he felt rather kindly towards me [laughs].

Martin: Yes, it’s very biblical [laughs]. How did London compare to Adelaide regarding the opportunity of obtaining an orchestral performance?
Hyde: Oh, it was absolutely magical [London] and it was an absolute surprise to me that it would happen so quickly to me in my studies over there because the thought of having - well, I hadn’t written much for orchestra of course before I left Adelaide - but the thought of having my work performed by an orchestra was something that I didn’t think would ever happen, and submissions would be made each year, no doubt, for this Patrons’ Fund which gave concerts, usually in the concert hall of the Royal College - I don’t know if they were held elsewhere. As you would know, they enlisted the performance of some of the major London orchestras, so they were very professionally done, from manuscript. I suppose almost everybody who had works performed under that privilege would have submitted only manuscript work.

Martin: So you found it easier to get performances in London?

Hyde: Well, yes, it was really, yes.

Martin: In 1939 you wrote Fantasy Romantic for piano and orchestra. It was given its premiere performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra with conductor Sir Bernard Heinze and you were the soloist. How did this performance come about?

Hyde: I think it was a program of entirely Australian works if I remember correctly. That would be 1939, yes, that was - I can’t remember whether the war had started when I wrote that or not. Probably I wrote it before War was declared which would have been in September of that year, but I think it was an all-Australian program. I’ve got the program notes somewhere in my books. Yes, it was the Simnetts, by the way, my same friends who suggested when my first concerto was performed to have a scrap-book for press reports and I kept them diligently in books for a while. Then they were too numerous over the years to put them in books. They would have taken up so much bulk in our cupboards and I just put them in plastic bags or something year by year. That desk behind there is pretty well full of the stuff [laughs].

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Hyde: Oh, that’s a very Rachmaninov sort of work indeed, yes.
Martin: In 1943 you wrote *Village Fair*, a ballet for orchestra. It was recorded by the ABC (Sydney Symphony Orchestra) in the 70's, but it was only in 1995, some 52 years after it was written, that it received a public performance. How did this performance come about?

Hyde: Well because several years ago the Strathfield Orchestra had a new conductor in Dr. Solomon Bard - you’re familiar with his name I’m sure - and he was new to Australia, he had been in Hong Kong I think, as a conductor, and I suppose originally from England. This was new territory to him and I greatly respect him for the fact that he set about trying to bring forward some Australian works and almost in every program he does there is some Australian content. So he must have gone to the ABC’s Federal Music Department and looked through scores and that’s how he came across my *Village Fair*. He thought it would be playable by the orchestra, which is an amateur one, although they have of course some very proficient players, but a wide spectrum - some of them quite amateurish - so that’s when he did it. But I was very amused at the end of that performance when a lady came along to where I was sitting and she said something like, ‘oh, I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your work. And who did the orchestration for you?’ [laughs]. Shows you what the general public think about Australian composers, women composers. Perhaps she thought I just sort of hummed the tune and somebody else would put it all into orchestration. I wish I had that story in my book, but Currency Press has solicited from me an additional chapter because it’s about ten years out of date really since the writing was finished. It was published in 1991 but the actual writing didn’t get much further than ‘88, and I think it was in that year that Currency accepted it, and then of course we had the tiresome process of editing it and hanging about waiting for it to be published and so on. It wasn’t published until three years after then, so it really has got out of date, because quite a lot has happened in the meantime. Of course, you don’t know how long you’re going to live, so you’ve got to draw the line and finish the book somewhere [laughs]. A second edition is envisaged.

Martin: In 1945 you wrote *The Symbolic Gate*, a tone poem based on Dante’s *Purgatorio*. This piece was rehearsed once by an ABC orchestra -

Hyde: By Kubelik.

Martin: - but it was never given a performance. Why was that?
Hyde: No, it wasn’t. Nor was my *Orchestral Theme and Variations*. I think the fact that those two works were never performed was one thing that made me decide that I might just be wasting time sitting about trying to write more orchestral works, because as time went on I felt that it was unlikely that I could write better for orchestra than I was writing in those two works. So, it was pretty disheartening when you get a rehearsal and they don’t tell if they like it or they don’t, or whether it will ever be performed, and that discouraged me and I thought ‘well, I may as well be writing more piano works or chamber music or something with a chance of being published and performed’. And I think it’s like a language, if you don’t keep on at it, the instinct and the technique get away from you. So I haven’t written for orchestra since. I remember when I wrote the *Theme and Variations* - what year was that? - it was about the 1950’s - you see that television started coming into Australia - on my cover of my *Theme and Variations* I put a big T and a big V for the theme and variations, sort of suggesting that television had come to this country [laughs].

Martin: In 1957 you wrote *Happy Occasion Overture* for the Australian Youth Orchestra. Was this work a commission? If not, how did the first performance come about?

Hyde: Oh, I don’t think I ever got a fee for it. No. I’m sure I didn’t, but it was suggested by Lindley Evans that I write something for that first performance and you probably know it was a very hasty affair, almost within a weekend. Of course, it was only a short work, it only takes about four minutes I think, something like that. So I found it easy to write for that, and that was a fairly large orchestra because it was important that all sections at least had something for them to play. I think there’s even a scampering bit on the xylophone in it and a bit of other percussion, yes.

Martin: This work has been recorded twice, by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and by the Western Australian Symphony Orchestra. How did these recordings come about?

Hyde: I think the WA one was conducted by, oh, you’ve probably got it down on paper there.

Martin: [laughs] I haven’t actually got the conductor written down.
Hyde: Oh, now in - wait a minute, he’s a composer in his own right. I just can’t recall his name at present. I think it was Richard Mills, who recorded it on ‘AM’ [ABC Radio] in the 1999 Australia Day Honours.

Martin: Were these performances as well as recordings?

Hyde: Oh, I can’t remember really. Whether it was just a recording in a studio or whether it was an actual performance I’m not sure about that. No, that I don’t know. *Happy Occasion Overture* has received a number of performances, most prestigiously on 10/11/95 at the opening of CHOGM by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in the presence of the Queen - and by Sir William Southgate.

Martin: In 1959 you wrote *Kelso Overture*.

Hyde: Mm. Because we were going to Kelso Street.

Martin: Yes, that’s how I always remember the street name [laughs]. Was this work given a public performance?

Hyde: Well, I can only say that I think it probably was, because at that time the conductor (Pekarek) up in Queensland recorded it - the Queensland Symphony Orchestra recorded it. I rather think he did also perform it but I couldn’t be sure about that.

Martin: You have obviously had great success in composing music for children. Do you think this has had an impact on how you are perceived as a composer of larger orchestral works?

Hyde: I can’t see that there would be much connection in that regard, because I haven’t written anything for orchestra designed to entertain or to be within comprehension of very young people.

Martin: I just wondered if people tended to see you as a composer of children’s works and does that then -
Hyde: Oh, I see your point. For many, many years I probably was thought of as just a writer of little pieces for AMEB books because they got published. And I've got stacks of things that have never been published. So definitely I would have been known for years as a miniaturist as a composer. But I think in more recent years with some CD’s about - for instance, the ABC only two years ago brought out a CD with the two concertos and the Village Fair on that same disc. I probably have become known as someone who can write on a big scale. The ‘big picture’ as they call it now for everything, as well as just the little AMEB third grade stuff. Yes.

Martin: As your children have grown up the public’s idea of you as a composer for large works seems to have taken off.

Hyde: I think it has grown a bit, I hope so anyway. Probably, I think through having children of my own, and I expect you would agree, I might have been all the better able to write things that appeal to children. I’ve had lots of very nice letters from teachers to tell me how much they and their students enjoy my music. Probably the fairly elementary stage of piano things that I’ve written strike a rather happy medium between the very conventional sort of classical idiom and something tending a little bit more towards the modern, though not excessively so. I had such a letter only a couple of days ago from a piano teacher in Melbourne by the name of Thomas Samut. I’ll just get the letter, I don’t want his name spelt wrongly. Oh, I’ve never had such a letter about my pieces [goes to fetch the letter]. Now it’s strange how things almost always happen in pairs for me. I’ll get two dates for professional engagements very close together and that sort of thing, and only a few days ago, Warren Thomson brought here a most phenomenal young student among several others from the Ukraine. Perhaps you already know of him? His name is Alexander Gavriluk. He’s come out with his teacher. I don’t know how long they intend to spend in Sydney, the teacher and several pupils, but this fourteen year old is quite phenomenal and so much so that Walsingham Classics have invited the boy to make a CD of my works. So of course I felt very complimented about that. Warren brought him out here a few days ago to play a couple of things for me and to look at the list of my piano works which he’d got through the list held by the AMC, so they could be photocopied and work out roughly a program of about 70 minutes for a CD. But this boy had already played my Study in Blue, White and Gold and I was stunned by it. When he’d finished I said to Warren, ‘this makes me feel about sixth grade B.’ [laughs] Not just
the agility of it but the maturity for the age. And then he did Liszt’s Tarantella which I don’t know. It’s not played much. Do you know it?

Martin: No.

Hyde: Quite long and really virtuosic. There’s nothing the boy can’t do with his hands and fingers.

Martin: And he’s just fourteen?

Hyde: Yes, fourteen. I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a talent at fourteen. So Warren said that he’d learnt and memorised my Study in Blue, White and Gold in twenty four hours. [laughs] Anyway we’re getting off the orchestral track now aren’t we [laughs]. But you know it’s strange that within two days two people should want to record my piano things. I’m very grateful for it and I think what a good thing I’ve lived as long as I have, to receive some of these very heart-warming tributes. Glad I recovered from those two bouts in hospital I had recently.

Martin: I think you have to reap the rewards of being a composer when you’re older.

Hyde: Yes, you have to wait a long time for recognition.

Martin: Margaret Sutherland waited for a long time didn’t she?

Hyde: Oh, yes. Well of course she was really a generation before me and you’re a generation later still. But in Margaret’s time and I suppose for Mirrie Hill also, the prospects of performance and publication of orchestral works were very slender.

Martin: You began your musical life as a pianist. Has this had any effect on the scoring of your orchestral works?

Hyde: Oh, I think it has. And of course I think if I hadn’t been a reasonably good pianist and worked hard at the piano as my first study at the College, probably my concertos might never have been performed. I had to be a good enough pianist to do them with those orchestras. And I think from quite an early age with what little orchestral experience I had of going to concerts in Adelaide, I would be inclined to
think a bit orchestrally even about piano music. To this day if I’m teaching or
coaching other peoples’ pupils, they might be doing a Haydn sonata and I’ll say ‘oh,
this is a lovely little dialogue. Can you suggest any orchestral instrument that could
do the part down there and the part up there’. Hoping they’ll say bassoon and flute.
But when I suggest anything down in the bass, they usually say, ‘oh, a double bass or
cello’. Their minds always go to the strings rather than the woodwind, unless they
happen to play a woodwind instrument, but in passages that are played higher they
think of it as a flute because they hear or see a flute play. Sometimes I feel I’m rather
presumptuous the way I will orchestrate piano works by Haydn or even Beethoven.
I’m always thinking orchestrally and I think I did, as I’ve said, to some extent even
before I started writing for orchestra. And even now when I’m sitting at a concert I
love just focusing on one instrument, thinking what it can do; what are its
capabilities; in which register it sounds effective and that sort of thing.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being
the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Hyde: Well, I would think that perhaps the even bigger concept would be writing an
opera. Are you proposing to write an opera sometime?

Martin: [laughs] And follow in Larry’s footsteps?

Hyde: I’m sure I wouldn’t. I haven’t got any feeling whatever for writing an opera. I
wouldn’t know how to put the first bar down. But I think that’s an even bigger scale
because you need the orchestral background for it and you’ve got to be able to think
vocally and of stage situations. It’s very complex. I’m not a great lover of attending
opera. To me it’s too complex. I find I’m either listening to the orchestra - what
they’re doing in the pit - or thinking how stupid it is that someone who’s had a sword
in his chest is lying down still singing [laughs]. I prefer ballet. I think it’s a less
complex art.

Martin: What factors, if any, influence the musical language you choose to write
orchestral works in? I am thinking of such things as economic factors, audience
accessibility, etc.
Hyde: Well, I suppose that the only answer that immediately comes to my mind is that certainly for the BBC Empire orchestra I knew it would have to be limited to a small orchestra. I don’t think there was any brass in that, or at the most there might have been a couple of horns perhaps, or one trumpet or something. It was mostly strings and woodwind. No, I don’t think I’ve ever given that much consideration really. Perhaps, you see, if you have a commission to write for a certain orchestra then you have the limitations laid down for you, don’t you. But there are certain other works that I have written by request. What comes to my mind immediately is my trio for flute, clarinet and piano. It was proposed to me by Constance Pether, a flautist in Adelaide, that I write a trio for a broadcasting engagement that the trio was going to accept. So I wrote specifically for that, but I don’t think I’ve done so in an orchestral way.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?

Hyde: I think possibly the number two concerto. I think it’s had more performances and more broadcasts and recordings. You see there have been two recordings of that. There was the early one in 1957, by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Joseph Post, so that was capable of being broadcast from time to time, and since the ABC issued the CD with the two of them there’s been a few more broadcasts. But the number two concerto has the advantage of being a little less long and in the first movement a little less repetitive rhythmically than is the case with the Number One Concerto. I think it’s a slightly better work on the whole. Well, it ought to be better orchestrated. After all, if you write a second concerto very close to the first, I hope you’ve gained something in experience to put into the next effort.

Martin: Would it be your favourite orchestral work?

Hyde: Do you mean of my own orchestral works?

Martin: Yes.

Hyde: Oh, I think it is. Particularly the slow movement. I’ve got a very intimate feeling for the slow movement. There is a particular moment in it - when that was broadcast, it would have been the first time in Australia I think, with Bernard Heinze
from Melbourne. It was a relay so it was heard in Sydney and Marcus was listening at that time to it and he made a comment that I’ve never forgotten and greatly treasure. He referred to the moment in that movement and in the whole work which is my favourite moment and that is, in the slow movement, the lift of the high octave in the strings from Bb to Bb. To me that is the most telling and emotional moment of everything I’ve ever written. But I thought the fact that it had the same effect for him made me think, ‘oh, yes, we’re obviously destined for each other ‘[laughs] It’s quite striking and a very special moment. It reminds me of a thought expressed by Browning: “A man’s reach must exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Hyde: I don’t think I’ve ever set about promoting anything much. No, my daughter’s always at me to do more to promote my own things. I think if nobody else will promote me, I can’t be bothered myself. I’m not much good at that, are you?

Martin: No, I hate it [laughs].

Hyde: Oh you see, Mary Mageau at that conference gave us such good advice about how to promote our works, but I thought ‘oh, I don’t think I could do that’. She’s also had the advantage of good contacts in two different countries hasn’t she? That’s an enormous help to have the kudos of having things performed in America. It makes the Australians think, ‘oh they must be good they’ve done it in America’, and if she sends over something to America they say, ‘Sydney’s Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s done this,’ and they think, ‘oh yes this must be worthwhile’. She’s got that big advantage. But still some of these married women composers probably have a husband who does a lot of promotion. I can’t say that Marcus did and I say this with great respect. I didn’t feel that he should, at any time - I wasn’t looking to him for that sort of thing at all - but he didn’t, looking back on it, but oh, occasionally he might have made a copy of something before the time of photocopying if I wanted an extra copy. He would help in that way, but he helped so much domestically I wouldn’t have expected him to be a sort of entrepreneur for my writing. I would have thought I was imposing on him really.

Martin: They have their lives too.
Hyde: Of course they have, yes.

Martin: Do you think you’ll ever write another orchestral piece?

Hyde: I think it’s very unlikely. I’d love to do it, and occasionally you know, I get a little glimmer of something in mind that could be the beginning of an orchestral thing but, no. I think of those two unperformed works of mine, which even now if they were performed at some time I might have a fresh heart in trying to write for orchestra, but it’s so long since I have done so that I very much doubt it.

Martin: So it seems it was very traumatic to have those two works rehearsed and not performed.

Hyde: Yes, because honestly, I feel sure that there is as much merit in them as other works that do get performed.

Martin: And it’s such a big undertaking.

Hyde: Oh, yes it is. It’s so time and effort consuming.

Additional question which Miriam Hyde answered by mail on 14th April 1999.

Martin: Have you any thoughts on the commissioning process in Australia?

Hyde: This is something that is obviously simply not practicable for women (compared with men) [Hyde’s emphasis] - particularly if married with children. For many years TIME is to be broken and unpredictable to be committed to writing any work on a major scale, - and to meet a deadline for its completion. A married woman with a grant or commission cannot leave the home to go off seeking new inspiration in some other country, - and to pursue that one goal, - composing.

Martin: Have you ever tried to have any of your orchestral works published?

Hyde: No. I still have many concert standard piano pieces unpublished - or in some cases they have been out of print for a long time - unless in the AMEB syllabus they
remain almost unknown.

[Context: we discuss Anne Boyd’s interest in the orchestral genre and her orchestral works]

Martin: What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Boyd: Well, because I was an orchestral player. And that's how it started, because I was a flute player. I grew up as a musician in the orchestra, so to speak. I grew up rather late - I didn't start playing the flute until I was about 13 or 14, but that straight away put me into playing for orchestras. I think I'd only had two or three lessons when they put me in an orchestra, in a NSW public school symphony orchestra and the first thing we played was the Moldau, and do you know how the Moldau begins? With the second flute! And after three lessons there was no way I could play it [laughs]. Oh, it was so embarrassing. It nearly ruined my life as a professional flautist. It went from bad to worse I think, but anyway [laughs].

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired or encouraged you?

Boyd: I loved orchestral music and I always wanted to write for the orchestra, but as a student the chances were pretty limited in terms of performance. The ABC had a policy of asking young male composers to write music for them, but they didn't ask young female composers because we were thought not to be worth the investment that it takes in putting on rehearsals. We weren't good enough and we weren't going to go on in music. They'd give young blokes a chance. I mean, I'm speaking about the early sixties to mid and even to late sixties - you know, you'd think they'd know better by then. The feminist revolution was well under way but it certainly hadn't hit the ABC in any strong quota at that stage. John Hopkins was the person who was most influential by the end of the late sixties at the ABC, and of course he has wonderful daughters one of them is fantastic composer, Sarah. So I think John may have revised his - of course these things were never overtly stated, there were always good reasons given. So my first chance to write an orchestral work was when I went to the University of York and Bernard Rands was directing the orchestra, and he invited me - I think in the second year I was there, and he invited me to write a piece
for the orchestra, or I might have even asked, because I desperately wanted to do something. It was very interesting. I really hadn’t found my voice until I wrote the *Voice of the Phoenix* and that was where my musical language really began. And the *Voice of the Phoenix* was my voice. And all my music starts, in a sense in its stylistic development, from that piece.

Martin: So this piece was like a pivotal piece.

Boyd: Oh, it was. It was a seminal piece, and it still is. Even with my latest piece that I’ve been haranguing you about that I’ve just finished, you can find lots of things - I could find lots of things that still go back and relate to - *Night of Exploitation* for example with the string glissandi, the use of certain sonorities, even some of the orchestration relates to patterns. There’s not lots of it left, but there are still bits of the *Voice of the Phoenix* around.

Martin: I know that this work [*Voice of the Phoenix*] was inspired by traditional Japanese gagaku music, particularly *Etenraku*, but were there any specific composers at that time that have been influential to this work?

Boyd: Oh sure. I was just a young thing and I had been highly influenced by everything that I liked. Peter Sculthorpe was sort of my father/teacher if you like and sometimes I wished more than that [laughs] - he was quite a potent force. *Sun Music* was there - was in the piece - as was Penderecki. I don’t think Peter quite meant to have Penderecki in *Sun Music* but after all, the *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* does do lots of the same sorts of things as his *Sun Musics* do. I’m not sure how the dating works - but I do remember him quite strenuously denying it - but Penderecki was certainly an influence. That piece, the *Threnody*, had a profound influence on me. I thought it was one of the best pieces of its kind I’d ever heard for the medium. The other piece of that era which really influenced me strongly was Ligeti’s *Atmospheres* and that was how I wanted to write for the orchestra. It was this wonderful colouristic sense. And then as I matured in music I realised that Debussy was of course doing exactly the same sort of thing much earlier on with the medium. Debussy has always been a profound influence in my work, again up to and including this piece I’ve just talked to you about - the use of tritones, and whole tone scales and that sort of thing and pentatonicism and the love of the orient - as a dream - as a place of dreams, not a reality. It’s a place of dreams. I’ve never been to Japan.
and yet I’ve announced it as the most potent influence in my work, but I’ve never been there. It’s the Japan of my dreams that’s the potent influence, and that’s been important. I’m almost frightened to go there because of the imaginary world being shattered, although I think I could go there now as I’ve sort of grown - as in a sense I’ve grown away - or rather, I’ve expanded, and there are other competing influences - or competing feelings now. It’s not just Japan I look to when I write. But for a while it was a sacred place to me as an artist. So therefore it was Takemitsu - thinking of Japan - Takemitsu was another - and the other very, very important source of influence in my music was Morton Feldman. Again for his softness and his sense of colour in sound and I thought his writing again translated beautifully into the orchestral medium. It’s a colouristic medium, after all.

Martin: When you were studying at York University Orchestra in 1971, was this performance part of the infrastructure for composition students at the university or did you have to actively seek the performance?

Boyd: You had to actively seek the performance. There were quite a lot of composers in the department already, even when I went there and that was very early days in York’s life. But it had been Wilf Mellers’ incredible philosophy to build up this group of composers around the department. He appointed - all his staff were composers. He said, ‘composers can teach musicology. Of course they can. They can teach it better than musicologists because they understand how music works,’ and of course we do! I think we do jolly well teach it more imaginatively than musicologists, because we do see the inside. We have been into these spiritual places, these other worlds as artists because we’ve allowed our imagination freedom. So yes, there were a lot of composers and of course there was competition for the orchestra and it took me quite a lot of persuasion, I imagine, to get Bernard to conduct this work for me.

Martin: Have there been other performances of Voice of the Phoenix since that premiere in York?

Boyd: Yes. I sent it to the ABC. I was very happy with it, very excited by it. I mean, who wouldn’t be? I was a young composer and it was where I finally found my own language in that piece. It was thrilling. I found the medium that in a sense I was most comfortable with. I sent it to the ABC almost as soon as I had heard the York
performances and they rejected it and I was furious - as is my wont when I feel that a decision has been made which is a wrong decision, and I’m willing to say sometimes if my work is crappy, but I knew in this case that this piece was just as good as much of the rubbish they were playing by my colleagues and peers who shall remain nameless in the context of the remark I’ve just made [laughs]. It was unfair, that it wasn’t given a performance. That was my first inkling of an anti-woman composers stance. I’d never really been conscious of it before, although God knows I should have been, but I wasn’t. I was too busy writing to be too engaged with a feminist awakening and that sort of thing when I was a youngster, although I used to rub shoulders literally - sing, next to Germaine Greer in choir. And I loved her libertarianism. That sort of influenced me [laughs], but the whole feminist thing I didn’t understand. I was just too busy writing music to think about it much. And when Peter Sculthorpe said to me, ‘oh, but Anne, you must know that women can’t write music. I mean there are no great women composers - show me the great women composers.’ I sort of swallowed that hook, line and sinker and I thought, well I’m determined that I’m going to prove him wrong.

Martin: So that reinforced your determination.

Boyd: Oh, absolutely. And Ross Edwards who was my closest friend I remember at the time saying, ‘but Anne you’ve got to understand’ - he was practically masturbating in front of me, - ‘that women’ - no, seriously, this is not a lie - ‘just can’t do it!’ [laughs]. And I thought, ‘oh, you silly fart’. But I was really upset. I revered Ross’s opinion, and I revered Peter’s opinion even more, so it was a very strong disinhibiting factor. And I’ve read since people like Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn writing about - and Clara being so apologetic about this marvellous music that she wrote. It was almost as though she shouldn’t - she was wrong - she was living in sin, to write music. It was just terrible, terrible. And then Mahler pushing the thoughts out of Alma’s head that she could ever be a composer; there could only be one composer in that family. That I can understand, I’m not sure though if I could ever marry another composer, I can’t marry anyone [laughs]. I couldn’t marry another composer, no.

Martin: In 1988 you were invited to write an orchestral work for The Bay Area Women’s Philharmonic.
Boyd: Oh that was a wonderful invitation.

Martin: How did that invitation come about?

Boyd: Out of the blue! It was heaven sent. The gods have been very kind to me in my creative lifetime. I was sitting in Hong Kong at the time, having had my beautiful daughter Helen, who was then about four or five years old, when the invitation came. So for the years after Helen’s birth I wrote very, very little music. Oh, a couple of pieces I wrote, Kakan and I wrote a wind quintet called, Wind Across Bamboo, which isn’t a terribly strong work, but the wind quintet played it and loved it and Kakan is quite a good little piece, it’s an exploration of the octatonic scale - again preparation for this Dreams piece - and on an Aboriginal theme too which I wrote in Hong Kong, which was perhaps a bit of homesickness. But I was sitting there not having done much for awhile and beginning to worry about it and beginning to feel I want to get back to writing music, and I thought ‘I’m sick of my breasts being sucked dry by this little child who should have been weaned when she was six months old [laughs] and not at two and a half.’ So I wanted to get back to my music and this invitation to write this piece for the San Fransico Bay Area came out of the blue and it was absolutely extraordinary. I think the link came because there was this wonderful woman, Jane Le Page, who wrote a number of books on women musicians of this century. And she came through Hong Kong and she interviewed me while she was in Hong Kong and we were talking mostly about my early work, and we had a wonderful conversation. I think she was quite excited about the things we talked about, because my music however, I think, can be perceived as very original and very cutting edge in certain ways, particularly pieces I’ve written for Roger Woodward like, Angklung and then its heir, As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams. I mean, As I crossed a Bride of Dreams is probably the most performed choral piece by an Australian composer. It was a gift from God. It was a piece I take very little credit for. It was given to me, as was Angklung. That was another one of those things that seemed to come from the heavens, the heavens opened and out popped this work! The Bridge of Dreams is the other resonance and there are three dreams in As I Crossed a Bridge as well, so all this is preparation - your work is just a preparation for others. I think Roger said it beautifully on the phone the other night when he said, ‘I think the Western tradition is just one long song to which everyone contributes’. I think he must be right you know, with the tradition per se.
Martin: So this invitation just came out of the blue?

Boyd: Yes, I think they were looking for composers and they wanted to do a Pacific theme concert and Jane had been with me not long previously - perhaps they consulted her, I don’t know - I’m not sure. Perhaps that’s how they heard of me - I don’t know - as someone they might be interested to ask because I was Australian and living in Hong Kong and had these really strong Asian sympathies and wrote music that was inspired by Asian culture, more in the early days, much, much more than by the west, as the west had blown itself out in many cases almost to extinguishment in music by Penderecki and Ligeti and Sculthorpe.

Martin: Who was the conductor of the premiere of *Black Sun*?

Boyd: Joanna Paletta. She was fantastic! She is one of the leading conductors. I think that’s right. Do you want me to check the program for that? [goes to cupboard and looks up program notes] I’m pretty sure I’ve got the name right. This is the original program. Helen was six when this was performed and she spent most of the night rolling down through the aisles. There, Joanna Paletta and then Nan Washburn was the artistic director and associate conductor. That was such an exciting experience because here were these very strong women all banded together in this orchestra playing music quite exclusively by other women.

Martin: Where did the premiere take place?

Boyd: In San Francisco.

Martin: And what was the date and the year?

Boyd: I shouldn’t have put the program notes away. Well, I should be able to work that out because the student massacre was in 1989, it must have been 1990 or the beginning of 1990, because I wrote it after the massacre of the students in Tinmen Square. I originally was going to write - I’d even started forming in my mind another piece - a work on the Daya Bay Nuclear power station. And maybe I’d have written *Powerhouse* for Graham Koehne if I’d stuck to that idea [laughs]. I’d never write a Graham Koehne piece - come on [laughs]. So what do we want, the date? If we talk
Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Boyd: Oh, yes, many times but not on a commercial recording. Now this is interesting. It is probably one of the most performed orchestral pieces by an Australian composer. It’s been done by all the symphony orchestras now - I think every one of them in Australia has played it - the ABC symphony orchestras. It’s been played by all the youth orchestras including a number of school orchestras even, because it is very user friendly and because of its theme when the anniversary of the massacre comes around once a year on June 3rd and 4th. And it’s been a matter of spiritual solace to me that the students who died in this massacre are remembered through this piece. So it has this very special purpose. I am very, very happy when they can be commemorated because they can’t be in their own country. It’s not allowed - it’s not permitted. So this is one of the few living memorials that they have. And I thought - again, I love these pieces - they’ve become very spiritual for me and you go to another place when you write. And I was with the spirits of the those young students in this one section in the work, for the violins and the piccolo and harp and glockenspiel and it’s literally the spirits leaving the earth and I could hear the voices, I could hear the voices of the young people who were so recently massacred as I was writing that part of the piece particularly. So yes, there is a lot of symbolism which is all to do with the dragon under the earth and that sort of thing, and releasing the force of the dragon as a good thing which comes in that piece too - its quite a revolutionary work. It’s probably why it will never be played in China - although never is a long time - one day, eventually, it may be played in China, perhaps as a small footnote in history.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Boyd: It just came out. The initial impetus of the piece was a newspaper picture, or two actually. First of all there was Wu’erkaixi, the young student leader who fled to Hong Kong. [Goes to the cupboard to get pictures]. This is all inscribed here and you can read this in the front of the score itself. This is the original, already aging - thank goodness I recently got an archivist to sort this stuff for me. See this wonderful
statement he wrote. [Anne proceeds to read]. And that was Wu'erkaixi, on the run, front page, South China Morning Post. That's where the title 'Black Sun' comes from. There's another picture - a mother with her arm upraised covering her face. [Boyd searches for the picture]. Now I want to find it because it shows you the shape of the tune. It's a mother with her arm upraised covering her face. Here it is! This picture here. The woman has clearly lost her only child, probably a son, in the massacre and the gesture just says it all, doesn't it? She's being supported by these wonderful young people in her grief, and that's where the grief motif came from, that gesture of the arm - see the arm and the hand? You see in Western tradition the falling semi-tone has always to do with grief and yearning. It then falls a tritone - which is the devil's interval and then three semi-tones after that [sings]. And that's the motif that comes from this picture.

Martin: Did you find it [Black Sun] difficult to write?

Boyd: Yes and no. Again it all came out very quickly once I got on the right track. As with most music that I'm meant to write, the piece just - it's as though I don't have much say in the process, it's channelled through me in some way. It was difficult in that the music is extremely painful and even now I find it hard to listen to. It just makes me feel so awful. So in that sense it was difficult to write. Technically it wasn't at all difficult to write. And then there was a third thing that was important and that was through my daughter's school. She was at the Chinese International School in Hong Kong and those tiny little children from ages ranging from about three and a half to eight sang The Ancestor of the Dragon [proceeds to sing the tune]. That became the other main theme in the piece, and that represented symbolically the dragon under the earth and that was the only material I used, the three semitones plus tritone motif, plus the dragon under the earth. So technically the material came very close, and then there was a kind of narrative program in the piece which was to do with the actual death of the students. First the cry of grief and then ... [can't make out the words] the translation of the embodiment of the agony of this woman through music, as though remembering the death, then the translation of the spirits into the after life. After that's happened, in a sense a revolutionary section, where goodness revolts against evil and at the end of the piece asserts itself. So it's a way of trying to say that the death of these young people is not for nothing - it's not for nothing - it's not in vain.
Martin. Your next work for full orchestra was *Grathawai*, written in 1993.

Boyd: Like my other works this has been played by orchestras but it's not on a CD anywhere. Does it matter? I don't know. The people who hear it get the message, and that's what's important. But it's certainly an inequity. I suppose if one is concerned about these things it is an inequity. Why should this be so?

Martin: *Grathawai* was commissioned by the ABC wasn't it?

Boyd: Yes. I gave this work - when I came back to Australia I put *Black Sun* in the hands of the ABC and they liked it very much. And, gosh, even Mary Valentine - I, momentarily, was on her visiting card, or something, and she got the Sydney Symphony Orchestra to play it straight away. That was very encouraging, and on the basis of that the ABC commissioned me to do *Grathawai*, but I think they decided that *Grathawai* wasn't up to the same standard and it was suppressed. It wasn't allowed out of Adelaide. So that's never had another Australian performance as a complete work. Curiously the Dawn Music [the third movement] has. The Dawn Music has been played a lot because its been taken out and used as part of an educational kit, and the last movement was used, both for the Melbourne and the Sydney Symphony resource kits.

Martin: It's difficult to get a copy of the score.

Boyd: I may have a spare copy [goes to cupboard to have a look]. *Grathawai* is a very important piece to me and it was terrifically well received by the audience in Adelaide. They loved it. If they had been given their way it wouldn't have been suppressed, I don't think. In fact, I can remember one of the members of the audience coming up and saying, 'Oh, gosh, this is better than Sculthorpe.' Here it is. It was given a good performance and I've got some tapes and things. [Looks through the score] This is in threes. Nearly all my music is in threes. This is beau- I mean this opening - it comes from my children's opera - I don't think they liked that very much either - it's a translation from my children's opera called, *The Beginning of the Day*, which is a creation myth from Aboriginal culture, and it's on the theme of depression being changed by energy into ecstasy - translated by energy into ecstasy. So those are the three sections. So you start of with a sort of *lamentoso* section, a bit like Gorecki - it's set in a mode - a sort of Japanese depressed or anguish mode. It's
like the animals at the beginning of the children’s opera not being able to have any
light. There is all darkness on the earth: there is no possibility of the sun. It’s all
darkness so every one is very miserable, so they decide to push the sky with sticks
and as they push the sky with sticks it shoots up and opens, and then the beauty of
sunlight is revealed for the first time. So this is all very depressing and it’s building
up, building up [leafs through the score], and then when it reaches it’s climax - it’s
just a long song really. Ah, now this is the Dawn Movement. Now we’ve got this
transition - I need to revise this, this is not a good transition. That does need revising
- and then it moves into this transition and this is all on the dominant 7th chord
which goes round a full cycle of keys in a chorus - refrain - chorus - refrain -
structure - a very jolly movement, a bit like Ross Edward’s, I suppose, and I don’t
think the ABC liked that either because they may have thought I was imitating Ross’
style. It’s only because Ross took it from the African tradition. Does that mean they
shouldn’t play his music because he took it from an African recording? I’ve heard
the original recording in his house in Pearl Beach. He started off - he wrote the first
piece - and he acknowledges this quite openly, and there is no reason why he
shouldn’t - he wrote his first piece on the basis of that Malagasy, I think it was,
chant, and it’s all dominant sevenths and that then became a characteristic of his
style. But I use the dominant seventh as a sort of symbolism which represents
masculinity, but it also represents energy and activity and that’s how this is
structured. And even the fact that it just goes around in a chorus - refrain - chorus -
refrain - structure makes it quite African in a sense, and it’s fun. It’s great fun to
listen to. Not difficult to play, you just have to practise your dominant seventh
arpeggios, and the orchestra played it very nicely and the audience loved it, real foot
tapping stuff: real dance music. It’s never had another performance. Somebody
somewhere, some little reviewer probably, has written something derogatory about
it, and so the ABC have decided ‘oh well, it’s not worth doing’. Australians are so
unsure of themselves. It only takes one negative remark to suppress a new work.

Martin: Both Black Sun and Grathawai have been taken up by the Sydney
Symphony Orchestra and used in teaching and resource kits for their education
program. How did the inclusion of these works come about?

Boyd: Oh, well, this is the Dawn sequence - the third movement. We’ve gone
through the energy and the ecstasy and first light comes, and this also represents
certain aspects of Grathawai, the property just outside Goulburn where I stayed with
some very close friends. We’ve been friends for a very long time. It’s the name of a property. It’s an Aboriginal word meaning flowing water and there’s a creek that goes through the property and that, presumably, is where the name comes from. And I knew I wanted to write an orchestral work about my feelings on this property and the connection with Aboriginals. This here is a gagaku chord [points to score] and that’s the Voice of the Phoenix, and this here is all pentatonic. This in a sense is a starting place as well for the most recent work Dreams of the Earth. [Boyd here is talking of the first section of movement three of Grathawai.] The ABC had always liked this - they liked the third movement. No, they liked only the beginning of it. When I used the melody that the children sing in the opera, they didn’t like all that, so they got me to segment just the beginning of this movement and they’ve used that on their disc, which has gone into a kid’s - little children’s - disc of lullabies which has become a best seller. Oh, it’s one of many pieces - a sort lullaby - a dreaming of children sleeping - a dreaming disc. It goes up to that fanfare there and it stops. So they don’t like it when the tune starts - they don’t like this. Well, how dare they! But, anyway. It’s a very Mahler like tune, very Mahler like, as I look at it.

Martin: You began your musical life as a flautist. Has being a professional performer impacted on your orchestral career in any way? I’m thinking here of how Miriam Hyde performed the solo part in many performances of her piano concertos.

Boyd: Oh, very much so. I suspect I hear the orchestra from the woodwind section down, to start with, and also being a non-harmonic instrument it’s affected my approach to musical language very strongly, and only recently, only in the latest work have I come to grips fully with the complexity of harmony and harmonic architecture. I’ve never really worried about harmonic architecture before, I’ve just allowed my music to be timbre, sound colour essentially, or the embodiment of a melody - a textural thing. So I never worried about harmony. Pitch has always been there because I often use cantus firmus principles and that sort of thing, but I’ve never really worried about the resultant harmony. So the flute influences again - influences that aspect of my music which then throws the concentration more onto colour. I think that this section [points to score] is actually very nicely orchestrated. You know it almost could be from Mahler’s Fourth Symphony - that texture is so Mahlerian [sings a bit]. I love the Fourth Symphony of Mahler. It was the first Mahler Symphony I really got into. I’m not a huge - I’m a Mahler fan, but I don’t
really know his music nearly as well as I should, and I hope I will by the end of this semester as we're doing a seminar on his symphonies.

Martin: Have you any thoughts on the orchestral commissioning process in Australia?

Boyd: I think it's reasonably fair actually. It's not the commissioning process that's the problem, it's what happens to the material after it's commissioned that's the problem. Now every organisation has a right to exercise quality control. I have no problem with that whatsoever, but I do have a problem when I feel that the judgements are wrong and in a sense you can never say your own work's good - it's not your job to do that. But then if you don't believe it, then who else is going to?

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Boyd: No, not any more. I think that most composers are so disappointed by the lack of opportunities for music to be performed in the orchestral medium that they have turned their attention elsewhere.

Martin: What factors (if any) influence the musical language you choose to write orchestral works in? I'm thinking of the cost involved in performing an orchestral work and if that factor impacts on the style of musical language chosen. For example do you think there is more pressure to have appeal and accessibility in a large scale work, and if so, is orchestral music somewhat less experimental than say a work for a chamber group?

Boyd: Yes. It has to be good, in that sense. It needs to be successful, the work does need to be successful in its own terms. Appeal is a dangerous word. I think what you have to worry about is truth, musical truth. And it's the same with any human discipline really. If a piece is truthful it will almost certainly have its own appeal - it will have its own presence. And if it's successfully written for the medium, it will probably have that appeal as well. But it doesn't mean you've got to write commercial kinds of music, which I feel people like Graham Koehne do. I think they compromise themselves by so doing, because music must be inspired, which means in a sense it must come from God, or whatever you call that other force - that force
of the ‘other’. There must be the feeling of the ‘other’ in music. I think that’s what we use it for as a human race. Music to me has just two basic functions. One is to do with the corporeality, the feeling of the body and dance - to do with the opposite of transcendence - in which you become one with the earth and nature, with energy through dance and I think that’s one function of music and I think kids have that a lot in popular music which is why the rhythm and the beat are so important to them. And the other is to do with transcendence, the opposite of the human condition - the opposite - transcendence, or communication with God, or ‘The Other’ if you like, and we’re much more able to do this through music than through any other medium because music is by nature immaterial, just vibrations in the air, so we can transubstantiate ourselves through this.

Martin: You have had Voice of the Phoenix published by Faber and Black Sun published by University of York Press. How did you get a publisher for these orchestral works?

Boyd: Faber were my publishers until they dumped me. We didn’t have a divorce either really - it was very painful - they just suddenly decided that I was not a good investment so they just threw me out of the house. That was very upsetting because I was a professor and head of a music department and I’ll never recover from that I don’t think. It’s a very important relationship between a publisher and a composer. It is like a marriage, and certainly non commercial. And then after Grathawai - it was after Grathawai that they decided - somebody somewhere said, ‘Boyd’s no good - she’s a dud investment’. So I was thrown out. I was only part of a huge clearance sale in the UK. I didn’t know that out here in Australia, it’s so isolated, but when I went to England the year before last, I discovered that a lot of my buddies who were great composers, that I really respect, had also been cleared out of their publishing houses for the same reason. It was a movement that was going on when publishing houses were desperately hurting financially and they had a big clearing operation. They dumped all their older composers, which has never happened before to my knowledge, because once you make a commitment to a composer it is for life, because if you believe in your composer you’ll go on supporting them until they die whether they produce good music or not, because of the nature of the relationship. It’s almost a sacred relationship. But that went out the window in England and I suspect in Europe as well, at the beginning, or increasingly through the last decade. So, the University of York was established just as a small in-house university press -
as a place to pick up some of these composers that had been dumped by the publishers. I mean David Lumsdaine was dumped by Universal Edition for example, and David is a fine, fine composer, so University of York took him up. I think that applies to most of the senior composers with the York University Presshouse. They are composers who have been similarly treated by their publishers, like myself. But it is very small and largely ineffective operation. It’s more just a name than a - and I’m so far away from them and I’m so slack in sending them things. I don’t send them things because I have other priorities, and the new work always has to be a priority and always takes precedence over the caretaking, housekeeping concerns of older works. It’s a shame, but one only has a limited amount of time. And so I think offshore publishers for that reason don’t always work terribly well. But it’s still very nice to have them, even as a name. It’s nice, but they’ll publish anything I send to them, so there’s no big deal with the - I’d forgotten that Grathawai was publisherless, so they’d probably be delighted to have Grathawai in their catalogue. In fact I’m not sure that it’s not there - are you sure it’s not there?

Martin: I’ll check. I talked to the AMC and they didn’t have a copy.

Boyd: I must get one in the Australia Music Centre, that’s dreadful that they don’t have one, even if I give them an unrevised - I’ve probably suppressed that score myself knowing I needed to do revisions on it and haven’t released it - same with the Flute Concerto which I need to substantially rewrite. I’m not satisfied with that piece. It’s a bit of a dud in some ways and it’s a very important piece because it commemorates Victor McMahon - who was my own flute teacher - his death, and therefore I’ve got to get that piece right eventually - it’s got to be respectable from my point of view, as it’s a memorial to a person who was profoundly important to me and gave me a great deal. Eventually I’ll get around to it.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?

Boyd: Black Sun, there’s no question about it. If I have a criticism of Grathawai it is too many things - in a sense there is too many areas in it. I mean it’s got three movements, but the movements are in a sense almost too disparate, there’s no organic connection. It shouldn’t necessarily be a problem, but I can see that at a critical level it might be. Black Sun is motivic writing essentially, two ideas. It’s so
western, so masculine. It’s paradigmatic. You split things into polarities; you have black and white, sweet and sour and these two things have to be in opposition to be affective. So yes.

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Boyd: I haven’t had the time much. No. I’m afraid I don’t promote my music at all. I suppose I hope others do that to some extent for me, or the works themselves.

Martin: What are your future plans regarding orchestral works?

Boyd: Every time I write for the medium, I want to write more. It’s a medium, I absolutely love.

Preliminary interview: Nettheim’s favourite work is writing/arranging for school orchestras. She likes the challenge of working for a specific problem (cellos weak, brass non existent etc). She works through word of mouth and networking the system. She has written a set of dances, *Dance Suite* and *Pacific Legends* and oboe concerto. None of these pieces have brass as they were for the non-professional Beecroft Orchestra.

**Dawn Nettheim interviewed on the 20th October, 1998 by telephone.**

[Context: we discuss Dawn Nettheim’s interest in the orchestral genre and her orchestral works].

Martin: What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Nettheim: The very first thing I was asked to do was back in 1979 at Mount Erin High School at Wagga Wagga where I was a school teacher. I didn’t teach music there, I taught History and English. I used to play the rehearsal piano for their music halls and operettas and things like that, and there was another lady there who started up a training orchestra and there was no music that she could get that was easy enough for them to play when they were just learning. She asked me if I would make some little arrangements for them to play, so I did a Bastille Day arrangement and an Anzac Day celebration arrangement for them and they were successful and the kids loved them. I really sort of thought ‘oh, this is for me,’ [laughs] it was - and shortly after that another person in Wagga - he was an Englishman but he had lived in Arnhem Land for many years and had mastered the didgeridoo and he was very keen to enter the Peter Stuyvesant Concerto Competition. Of course there was nothing written for didgeridoo. So he came and asked me would I write a concerto for the didgeridoo? Just so that he could enter that [laughs] and being a sort of crazy person I said ‘yes!’ So I did that and that was a lot of fun too. After that I thought ‘now I’ll really have to study music seriously,’ so that’s when I came to Sydney. I came to Sydney in 1985 and started a Bachelor of Music composition major course at Sydney University, so I could learn to do it properly.
Martin: So you must have had a background in music when you were young?

Nettheim: Just piano. I learnt piano until I was about 12 or 13 and I got to a fairly high standard, a high enough standard to be able to play for accompanying people and playing for musicals and concerts and things like that. I always found that was a lot of fun but I'd never studied that really seriously. So there were various things that happened in my life at the time which meant I had to make a fresh start anyhow. This was a golden opportunity for me to make another start and another career.

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired, or encouraged you in the orchestral genre?

Nettheim: No. No. It was just that I was fascinated by it. I think as a child I loved colouring in better than anything else and orchestrating music seemed to me a sort of aural colouring in. I always loved the sound of an orchestra and since I only played piano there was no way I could do anything like that. So one of the very first things I did when I came to Sydney was to take up an orchestral instrument so I could play in orchestras and bands and get the feel of it.

Martin: So what instrument did you take up?

Nettheim: I took up the bassoon. I had to pick an instrument which was fairly easy to learn and which was comparatively rare [laughs]. It was no good doing flute or something, there are millions of flutes trying to get into orchestras all over the place. At that time, in the '80's, there were very few bassoons around and I was suddenly besieged by invitations to play with quartets and ensembles around over the place. I joined the amateur music society as well and had a wonderful social life and a wonderful musical education as a result of it.

Martin: So what was your first orchestral work then?

Nettheim: The first - well, of course I wrote a lot of things while I was studying for a Bachelor of Music - student works - I wrote them for my friends and each term we'd have a composers' concert where these pieces would be played and we learned by our mistakes. Naturally I wrote many, many pieces in those five years I was studying. In my final year I did a diploma of musical composition as well. I wrote a
complete ballet for a South Australian interschool company. They wanted a ballet. Unfortunately it was never performed because they didn’t get any funding, so nothing happened about that, but that was especially designed for the school orchestra. They’d had school level instrumental parts in it.

Martin: What was that work called?

Nettheim: Well I never got around to calling it anything. It was based on the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* by Chaucer, so it didn’t have a name, unfortunately. Anyhow the following year in 1992, Barbara Stackpool, a castanet and percussion player with the Early Music Ensemble, was complaining that there were no cameo parts, or feature parts, for castanets and I got the idea of taking some of the dance items out of this ballet and arranging them in a suite featuring her. So that was 1992. That was performed by the Beecroft Orchestra. It was called *Dance Suite*. Barbara was delighted with that because she could star and at least something was salvaged from the ballet, otherwise all that work was wasted.

Martin: Were you invited to write *Dance Suite*, or did it come up because of Barbara?

Nettheim: No, it was because of Barbara really and also at that stage the Beecroft Orchestra was not terribly advanced. They were still finding their feet, so it was a nice easy thing for them to play. Anyhow, they liked it. There was another orchestra called the Kevinwood Orchestra at Eastwood and they heard it and liked it and wanted to do it too, so it got a couple of airings. The other things that I was asked to do after that, an acquaintance of mine who taught music at Ravenswood School asked for some choir songs, so I wrote a thing called *Three Animal Songs* for them. That was about the same time, and another acquaintance of mine who taught the Junior Strings Training Orchestra at Kambala School also asked for some junior violin ensemble works which I wrote for them. At the beginning of this year I revised them and they were published.

Martin: So who was the publisher for these?

Nettheim: That was the Keys Press and at the same time the Keys Press also published *Six Piano Solos for Aussie Kids* — oh, that was the year before, sorry, 1996.
That wasn’t asked for by any person in particular, they were just written over the years for my own piano students. I just put them all together in a volume. Now the following year 1993 this was the Beecroft Orchestra again. The principal oboe player there was leaving the orchestra and going to Townsville and he said that he would like to do something. So I whipped up a thing called *Pacific Legends* which was an oboe concerto written especially for him, within his capabilities. You know, he didn’t like playing very fast or very high [laughs], so it was sort of tailored to his requirements. So that was also performed by the Beecroft Orchestra. Then I got a request from Adrian Hooper from the Sydney Mandolins who was trying to build up the repertoire of mandolin music and I sent him a three movement suite called *Surfing Sydney*. I don’t know whether it’s ever been performed or not.

Martin: What was that scored for?

Nettheim: It was scored for three mandolins and guitar. Sorry, two mandolins and mandola, a sort of bass mandolin and guitar. Then in 1996 my acquaintances at the Kevinwood Orchestra also had a handbell ringing team who used to tour the world with their handbells. They had a conference in Adelaide. I think it was a world conference and handbell teams came from over the world and they were very embarrassed that they had no Australian music, so they asked me to write something so I did a *Fantasia on Australian Folk Melodies for Handbells* that year. That was challenging because I had to go and join the team and learn how to do it first [laughs] because there are certain things that you cannot do. There are certain ways of scoring it to make it readable for them and so forth, so that was very interesting, for me, anyhow.

Martin: So how many orchestral works have you written?

Nettheim: In 1997 the *Hebraic Overture* for the Strathfield Orchestra was written. That was set to a melody by Rabbi Samuel Tov-lev. He plays at Strathfield and I think he wanted them to play something there.

Martin: What was it called again?

Nettheim: *Hebraic Overture.*
Nettheim: It was written for Rabbi Samuel Tov-lev and the Strathfield Orchestra. He had this little chant melody which he made up himself and he said he would love to have that done in an orchestra. So it had to be expanded and developed.

Martin: So were you happy with the performance?

Nettheim: Well, it’s being performed in a couple of weeks actually. We did a run through last year just to check it. It’s being performed on the 28th of November [see below]. There’s pieces for concert bands. There’s a 1996 piece called the Bushwackers Ball which was for Hornsby Concert Band. That was again a fantasia on Australian melodies. Then this year another piece, On The Snowy Mountains Highway, written for concert band which was written for the Windsor RAAF band - a competition actually. It didn’t win, but it’s also been requested by Lane Cove Concert Band, so they’ll probably do it next year in September. And in 1997 One Starry Night which is a Christmas celebration for choir, organ and brass quintet. That was also written for a Canadian competition, which it didn’t win, but it’s being performed this Christmas by the Beecroft Presbyterian Church choir and orchestra. So they’re all the main things. I only have time to do one a year because I work full time as a music copyist and arranger and music teacher, so I only have time really over the Christmas holiday period to do serious work. There are a few things in the pipe line.

Martin: So, Dawn, you’ve played the piano for some years. Do you find that this has had an effect on the scoring for your orchestral works? For example I’m thinking of Miriam Hyde who does her orchestral works in a piano reduction then she orchestrates them afterwards.

Nettheim: Yes, I must admit to doing the same. I do a sort of piano sketch and then from that I put scribbles all over it. You know, flutes here or whatever and quite often it’s on four staves not just on two staves. But yes, certainly that helps a lot.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being the pinnacle of compositional writing?
Nettheim: I think it is currently. Certainly the way of teaching in tertiary institutions regards it like that and that probably influences all the graduate students there.

Martin: What factors (if any) influence the musical language you choose to write orchestral works in? I am thinking of such things as audience accessibility.

Nettheim: Definitely. I’ve seen so many audiences alienated and bored; plain turned off and bamboozled by what I consider rubbish or insulting rubbish in some cases. I mean people trying to be clever. Don’t get me started [laughs].

Martin: But for you at any rate, that [audience accessibility] would be an important consideration?

Nettheim: Yes.

Martin: Have you ever tried to have any of your orchestral works published?

Nettheim: No, not seriously.

Martin: Do you have your parts at the AMC hire library?

Nettheim: No I haven’t. No. I think one of the band pieces may be there but I’m not sure. No, I haven’t done anything about that at all.

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Nettheim: No. Again this is a combination of lack of time and laziness. I was talking to Ann Carr-Boyd. She spends two thirds of her time promoting and one third writing I think, something like that, and I just haven’t got the energy or the time for that at the moment. Probably when I retire I’ll have a lot more time for that sort of thing then, but I’m working a twelve hour day just now. It’s too hard.

Martin: How about networking? That seems to have been of use in you in getting other orchestral works performed.
Nettheim: Yes, it’s just word of mouth and people you know. Sometimes people ring up. I used to be the secretary of the Australian Composers’ Fellowship and often I was in a position to help people who were stuck or wanted something in a hurry. And being the secretary of the Ryde Eisteddfod too, I was in contact with a lot of teachers who taught in schools, school orchestras, bands and so forth. So yes. I think networking is very, very important. I’ve certainly got a lot of extra work. People wanting arrangements for weddings or something like that. A lot of my work is just arranging things. People want a specific piece but they haven’t got the instruments for it. They want it scaled down or scaled up. I find that sort of thing very, very satisfying because if you’ve got a school orchestra that want to play a particular piece you might have really hopeless clarinets and brilliant cellos or something and you can arrange it so that they shine and they feel good about themselves. They play well and you can disguise the poor players.

Martin: So you tailor the orchestral piece to meet the needs of the students?

Nettheim: Yes. And I find that the most satisfying work of all.

Martin: You must do a lot of arranging for school orchestras.

Nettheim: Not a lot. Yet it’s a regular sort of thing, certainly.

Martin: What is it about orchestral writing that keeps you composing in this genre?

Nettheim: Well I’m not really am I? [Laughs] I’m branching out all over the place.

Martin: What are your future plans regarding orchestral works?

Nettheim: Certainly I’ll be doing a lot of orchestral arranging in the future. My teacher was Eric Gross. He was a wonderful teacher and so sensible and down to earth and practical. He told me that you never pass up an opportunity: it doesn’t matter what people ask you for. If they ask you for music to be played on beer bottles and squeeze box or something, have a go. He followed that advice himself. The strangest thing he ever wrote was Music for Winton, music for a dressage horse [laughs]. It was a very nice piece of music, but you know he had to go out and watch this horse go through its paces in the dressage competition and tailor the music to its
particular gait and everything like that. It was very successful. So you have to be on your toes and ready to do it, like a proper craftsman, for whatever you're asked I think.

Martin: So your motto would to be flexible.

Nettheim: Yes. Extremely flexible. Give the customer what he wants and make it as enjoyable as possible, both for the player and for the audience, otherwise there is no point in doing it. If it alienates the players and alienates the audience it's just a waste of time I think.

Martin: So which of your orchestral works do you think has been the most successful in terms of performance.

Nettheim: Oh, dear. That's hard, isn't it? I don't know. This is only the orchestral ones, not the bands or -

Martin: No. Just the orchestral ones.

Nettheim: That first dance suite for Barbara Stackpool was, I think. There was a lot of good feedback from that.

Martin: How many times was that performed?

Nettheim: That was performed by the Beecroft and by the Kevinwood Orchestra and another reduced arrangement of it was performed once in the Old Darlington School by a chamber group. It was performed once in a public concert too, in a scaled down version. It didn't have any heavy brass or double winds or anything in it. It was mainly strings and percussion and piano, just one flute and one clarinet.

Martin: And the version of the dance suite that was played by the Beecroft orchestra was that for full orchestra?

Nettheim: No that was for chamber orchestra. In those days we didn't have the brasses, but the Eastwood [sic - Kevinwood] one was for full orchestra. They had the whole lot.
Martin: You just added the brass parts?

Nettheim: Yes, I just added them in.

Martin: Being flexible [laughs].

Nettheim: Yes.

Martin: Do you mind telling me how old you are?

Nettheim: I'm 55 this December. I started learning music seriously in 1985.

[We then talk about composers who begin their careers later in life.]

Dawn Nettheim interviewed on the 14th April, 1999 by telephone.

Nettheim made this addition to the transcript. In the next question she is speaking of the performance of Hebraic Overture.

Nettheim: It was a success and it's being performed again by the Beecroft Orchestra on the 28th March, 1999.

Martin: You began your musical life as a pianist. Has this impacted on your orchestral career or effected your orchestral writing in any way?

Nettheim: I think my being a pianist made it easy to think vertically as well as horizontally. Those composers who perform on 'single line' instruments such as violin or clarinet must find it hard to cope with the harmony component or their music, or at least they must have had to learn keyboard harmony along the way - otherwise it would be so time-consuming for them.

Apart from that it didn't have much of an impact. I certainly do keyboard sketches before starting on a new work, but when thinking of timbres and orchestral effects I rely on my ears and experiences of both playing in an orchestra and listening to orchestras.
Dawn Nettheim interviewed on the 17th September, 1999 by telephone

Martin: Was this work *Hebraic Overture* a commission?

Yes. I had been doing arrangements for the conductor of the Strathfield Orchestra and Rabbi Samuel Tov-lev loved to conduct the orchestra. He had written some tunes to be used for his services and wanted to see if I could make them into a suite. I didn’t have the time to write a large work, so I chose two contrasting melodies and worked them into an overture. The piece is designed to have a Jewish flavour and this comes across clearly in the work. I did all I could to enhance the Jewish flavour harmonically, melodically and rhythmically.

Martin: Was the work written for anything specifically?

Nettheim: The work was written to fit in with the Strathfield Orchestras concert series of four concerts a year and is written to high school level.

Martin: How many performances has the work had?

Nettheim: *Hebraic Overture* has been performed twice. Once by the Strathfield Orchestra at its premiere and then the work was taken up by the Beecroft orchestra and given another performance. The work has now been taken to Israel by Rabbi Samuel Tov-lev.
Interview 5. Ruth Lee Martin answers the same questions put to the other women composers in the case studies.

What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Martin: I approached the idea of writing an orchestral work with both excitement and a touch of fear. As a composer I felt that writing for orchestra would be exciting because of the huge possibilities available in colour and texture, although at the same time I found the large palette also somewhat intimidating. Writing for orchestra requires large gestures and I was concerned about this and that I would not be able to sustain interest over a long period of time. I was also concerned at the possibility of putting an enormous amount of effort into one work when the genre is fraught with performance uncertainties. However I felt that the insights provided by a 'hands on' approach to my thesis would be invaluable as I would be able to gain insights into the orchestral field as an insider that would otherwise be denied me.

Did you have any role models that inspired, or encouraged you?

Martin: Yes. As part of my thesis has involved listening to a great deal of orchestral music mostly by Australian women, this has been of great significance to my own work. Also, in interviewing some of these women I found out that they too had had doubts about their orchestral writing and this encouraged me to overcome my own doubts. I have a variety of influences which I think come out in the orchestral work - from American Minimalism to folk idioms. The main influence was an exploration of Scottish Gaelic music which I have been singing for years. In fact, I grew up listening to my father's choice of music which consisted of Kenneth McKellar's renditions of Scottish folk songs. Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade was another of his favourites. Larry Sitsky has also been an influential role model and he certainly encouraged me to become involved in orchestral writing.

Gair Na Mara is my first orchestral work. Since I have finished writing this work I have an urge to write another - I would really like to write a choral symphony. I think writing for orchestra is addictive - there is just so much choice of sound with many subtle or not so subtle variations available. When I wrote Gair Na Mara I was lucky to be studying with Larry Sitsky, who has written a great many orchestral works and
in seminar every week he would play one of his works and we would then sit around and discuss the compositional style, the influences and so forth. One of the first things he said to me before I started on my own work was to treat the orchestra as one instrument - not to think of it as separate instruments - just to think of it as one instrument with a large range of colour. And that's what I did. I didn't really think 'oh, this instrument would be good here and that one there.' I thought of the instruments as interchangeable groups of colour. I played with the colour. There is one instrument that does stand out for me though, and that is the oboe. I always think of the bagpipe chanter when I hear an oboe and I find myself wanting to give it little bagpipe ornaments all the time. In fact there is a section of the work which uses bagpipe ornaments in the wind.

Has this work been recorded?

Martin: *Gair Na Mara* was workshopped by the Canberra Youth Orchestra in December and this ‘run-through’ was recorded. This workshop gave me some valuable insights into the piece. I feel it worked well although there were a couple of minor technicalities to sort out. One was a slight balance problem at the end of the work where the harmonics are - I felt the cello stood out in the texture too much and so I added a mute to that part and the other problem was that I had asked the brass to put mutes on and had not remembered to direct them to be taken off. The workshop came about because for a while at the School of Music it looked as though students in composition would not have a chance to get their orchestral works performed. When I first asked about the possibility I was told that students needed to learn the standard repertoire first before they could even begin to look at contemporary things. A new Director was appointed just after that who is open to the idea of contemporary performances. Because the Canberra Youth Orchestra is connected to the School Of Music, the conductor Dominic Harvey felt a workshop would give students a chance to hear their works and the members of the Youth orchestra would have an opportunity to play contemporary works and get to talk to the composers about their works. So again this workshop was a result of initiative on the part of students combined with a sympathetic viewpoint in the orchestral management. I had also been to see the Director of the School of Music three times to discuss the possibility of a performance for this work as it is part of my PhD thesis. The first time I was told that if the work was of sufficient standard it would definitely be considered. I then had to leave a copy of the score for the Director (who is also a conductor) to look at.
The work was also shown to the conductor of the School of Music Orchestra, Richard MacIntyre. I was then told a few weeks later that *Gair Na Mara* would be performed on 26th July in a concert with the premiere of an orchestral work by Larry Sitsky. So the performance was something for which I had to take the initiative. When I began writing the work I had in mind the orchestral forces of a fairly standard symphony orchestra so that the orchestra involved wouldn’t have to worry about any extra expenses. I thought this would increase my chances of the work being performed.

Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Martin: Caroline Szeto’s *Energy* is a piece I have always enjoyed and this influence can be seen to some extent in my own orchestral work. I was also influenced by Scottish composer, James Macmillan, the American composer Alan Hovhaness who uses folk idioms in his orchestral works and of course, Larry Sitsky’s orchestral writing, especially his *I Ching*.

What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Martin: The musical inspiration for this work lies in my passion for Celtic things and the connection in the ancient Celtic mythology with strong female role models and the practice of worship of female deities. For this work I used a Hebridean folk song, ‘A Mermaid’s Croon’ as a basis for the whole piece. At first I thought it would be interesting to weave many folktunes together, but I found that I could get enough material from the first four bars of the tune. So *Gair Na Mara* is fairly tightly constructed on a motivic level. On a structural level Larry Sitsky encouraged me to allow the piece room to grow organically. Usually my pieces are fairly tightly structured as well. It’s a bit like a leap of faith when you allow the material to go where it wants, but I feel that in this case it worked quite well and if you analyse the piece you will find that it grew into an arch shape - slightly lop-sided - and the sections balance out against each other, I think, quite well. This really surprised me when I’d finished and looked back on it.

When was this work premiered?
Gair Na Mara received its premiere on the 30th July, 1999. It was performed alongside works by Australian composers Sitsky, Meale, Vine and Kerry - all very well established male composers! The premiere was performed by the Canberra School of Music Orchestra in quite a long programme. The experience of receiving an orchestral premiere was quite unlike anything I have ever experienced. It was incredibly stressful. As I work part time at the Canberra school of Music I found that in the week of rehearsals, wherever I went, I was asked a question about the score. On another level it was very touching that the students took the performance so seriously and wanted to make sure they were following my intentions to the letter.

You began your musical life as a folk singer. Has being a folk singer had any effect on the scoring of your orchestral works?

Martin: Well, it has had an enormous impact on the inspiration behind the piece and on the piece itself. As mentioned, I used the first four bars of The Mermaid's Croon which is a folk song as the compositional building block for the work. Also in parts of the work I think I tend to use the material in a way that is very much derived from a focus on melody. When I write I'm not concerned greatly with the vertical, but rather with the horizontal - with the idea of line - and generally melodic line. The way I write is really heterophonic and this could well be derived from my folk background. I'm actually trying to change my focus to some extent and when I'm listening to music now, I try and shift my focus from the melodic line and listen to other things.

Have you any thoughts on the orchestral commissioning process in Australia?

No personal experience as I have never been commissioned for an orchestral work. My studies would tend to indicate that it is still easier to obtain an orchestral commission if you are male.

Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Martin: I think that maybe amongst the general music public it is viewed as being a 'pinnacle'. I think with composers themselves perhaps this idea is slowly passing. For myself, I feel that my orchestral work was a pinnacle. It certainly stretched me
greatly as a composer and to be able to say you have written an orchestral work does feel good - you feel that you will be taken seriously as a composer - you're not just a dabbler. Probably for an emerging composer the most useful thing about writing an orchestral work is the fact that people see you as a composer differently. I think you are taken more seriously. Some might say that opera is the pinnacle. I do believe that any orchestral writing requires a great degree of orchestral skill and a knowledge of all the instruments and how they combine. The thing is that with an orchestral work you have to approach it from a different level. You have to think in large gestures and long sustained sections, and that requires a different kind of skill.

What factors (if any) influence the musical language you choose to write orchestral works in. (I am thinking of such things as economic factors, audience accessibility etc).

Martin: I didn’t really consider the potential audience when I wrote this work. Primarily I write to please my own aesthetic standards, taking into account idiomatic instrumental concerns. I also wrote this work to stretch my capabilities as a composer and although I feel I have found my compositional voice with other smaller works, I felt with this work that I had taken my voice and moved it somewhere else which is great. I think it is important to be continually doing that as a composer. I think that when composers are comfortable with their style it can be dangerous, because then you stop growing and start churning pieces out instead. I believe that to some extent everything you write should have some element of taking yourself to a different place - of feeling that your craft has improved in some way - even with the little pieces. Occasionally I like to toss something off - just for the fun of it, but I don’t think this should be a matter of course - it’s like the icing on the cake.

Have you ever tried to have any of your orchestral works published?

Martin: No. I think in Australia it is almost impossible to get an orchestral score published. There just isn’t the market for it. However, now that I am a represented composer with the Australian Music Centre, I will be able to keep a copy of the score in their music hire library.

Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?
Martin: I can't really talk in terms of success at this moment. It will be interesting to wait and see what unfolds.

Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Martin: Not yet as I haven't had the time. I aim to do so however, just to see what happens. I can document the whole process and maybe get some interesting things out of the experience. It would also be very exciting to get an orchestral performances or two. I think the most difficult thing will be finding the time.

Has networking played a role in your orchestral career?

Martin: I haven't really got an orchestral career - yet. I don't know if I'm entirely happy with the whole idea of networking. I mean I don't think I could be friends with someone simply for what they could do for me - it wouldn't feel right. On the other hand I think networking to some degree is essential if you want to get performances and get known as a composer. If you shut yourself up in a room and write compositions all day long I don't know if anybody would care really, unless you found someone who believed in your work so much they were prepared to promote it themselves, and I don't think that would happen too often.

What is it about orchestral writing that keeps you composing in this genre?

Martin: As so many other composers have pointed out it is the vast palette that you have to play with that makes it such an enticing genre. Of course this is balanced by the limitation of performance possibilities and the enormous effort required.

What are your future plans regarding orchestral works?

Martin: I would like to write another orchestral work, but this would be far off in the future unless of course I am fortunate enough to receive an orchestral commission some day. If I had a choice I would like to write a work for choir and orchestra. I have this recurring thought about a choral symphony which nags at me from time to time. I would love to do it - again on a Celtic theme. I think choir and orchestra works beautifully as a sound - maybe more than anything else. I've always loved the
voice and that combined with the orchestral colours makes for a very exciting performance.

[Context: we discuss Caroline Szeto's interest in the orchestral genre and her orchestral works].

Martin: You have written five orchestral works to date. What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Szeto: I guess it's really the opportunities that come up. When I was told there was this orchestral school, I wanted to be involved. So it was just the fact that the opportunity came up and I wanted to grab the opportunity. That was just the very first one. But when I'd done the first one and had discussions with my teacher about the works, an aside was that orchestral works were regarded as the pinnacle of composition. I heard many others say the same. So that idea stuck in my mind. That point had not occurred to me before. I'd never thought that this medium was supposed to be, you know, the pinnacle. I thought that little piano works could be just as important, because at that time I'd just been studying piano works and I felt that there are so many significant and important piano works. It makes no difference what medium it is, it's still important. The importance others place on this genre is very noticeable. There's much more publicity attached to this genre. And that's true, because it doesn't matter what you do, you don't get the launching pad like you do with an orchestral work. Everyone thinks of it that way. So, I guess I felt that when I was given my first real opportunity I had to prove myself. It was like a springboard. It had to be my springboard. If I didn't grab this opportunity I wouldn't be able to establish myself further.

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired, or encouraged you?

Szeto: I'd probably say Mozart, because he's always been the composer I've admired longer than others, and I still do. As a child and before I started composition I was really fond of this great master, and now that I've started studying composition I consider him to be the greatest master. But when I compose I don't model myself on him, it's just that I find his music so delightful and so forth that I consider him as a
master. As far as role models, I really don’t have one - I don’t think so, because if I did I’d be able to answer you immediately. So I don’t.

Martin: Your first orchestral work, *On a Crest*, was written as part of the requirements for the (then), Young Composers’ Orchestral School.

Szeto: It wasn’t exactly. At that time the conductor was Dobbs Franks. I went as an observer that time, not a participant. He said that all the observers could have a work written and played through. So I grabbed at that opportunity just to do it for that occasion. So that was my first.

Martin: Did you find the experience of being an observer at that school helpful?

Szeto: Very relaxing, because I wasn’t put in the spotlight like the participants and I felt I could really relax and enjoy myself. It was almost like a holiday for me. It was good because you spent a whole week just observing how the orchestra rehearsed and you really knew the balance of the different sections of the orchestra. Although that shouldn’t be so important because then you go to other orchestras and the balance is all different again because the number of strings and so forth changes. So you think ‘that’s how I should write,’ and then you have to adjust again for another orchestra. So it was very important from that point of view. But the silly thing is that they sat us behind the horns, or next to the horns, to observe [laughs]. We were all up on stage which is the worst place to be. You’ve got to be in the body of the audience to be able to hear the whole orchestra properly. But nevertheless I learnt a lot.

Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Szeto: No. I wouldn’t want it to be anyway. I think I should withdraw it from the AMC. It’s my very first and it’s got things in it that I wouldn’t do today. It’s almost like a large ensemble work. A lot of composers who haven’t done orchestral works tend to treat the orchestra like the previous works they’ve written for many instruments. I’m not saying it shouldn’t be really - that’s really wrong, but that’s not how I work. With ensemble works it’s individual instruments, with their individuality, but with orchestral works you’ve got to think of them as a family playing together all the time. That work is more like an ensemble work really. I wouldn’t really want it to be performed.
Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of On a Crest?

Szeto: Oh, it’s so long ago. I can’t remember - I don’t want to remember [laughs]. Let me think. No, I really don’t know. Oh, there was one part I remember it contained a Chinese folksong called Beautiful Fresh Flower which I had previously arranged for ensemble from a piano arrangement by Percy Grainger. In the orchestral work I have the viola playing the pentatonic tune while the other instruments obscure it with atonal harmony. I probably wouldn’t do such a thing now, but it did give me a coherent structure for that section of the work, and it made me think more of the importance of structure which wasn’t something I’d applied with much rigour then. Although I did have a graph mapped out with contours (hence the title) for the duration of the work, I didn’t apply it strictly. I merely used it as a guideline. At that stage I hadn’t thought too much. I just thought that everything had to, you know, just come out - was inspirational - came from heaven and arrived spontaneously.

Martin: Your next work for orchestra was Sheng. Who performed the premiere of this work?

Szeto: No. It wasn’t performed. At that time I think there was a competition going on and I had to satisfy the requirements of instrumentation for that competition, so I had a go at it. It was a minimal work; quasi minimal, I like to call it. It’s got little threads of motives that keep recurring and different instruments play and so forth. It’s probably not such a bad work, but I wasn’t as thoughtful then of orchestration and how individual instruments should play. I’ve got continuous clarinet parts that go on for minutes and minutes and I didn’t alternate between the two. I just thought that they’ll decide [laughs]. So it’s not a good work from that aspect, but I think musically, sound wise, it may sound quite delightful, but a lot of performers wouldn’t want to perform it as it’s probably awkward.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Szeto: Sheng is the name of the Chinese mouth organ equivalent to the Japanese sho. Have you heard of it? You’ve got the pipes and a mouth piece at the bottom of it. It’s a lovely looking thing. Have you seen Anne Boyd’s photo - well, its usually the one
showing her holding a sho. A similar Chinese instrument is called a sheng and I got all the chords from it for the composition. At that stage Peter Sculthorpe was still encouraging me very strongly towards Asian influences and trying to find my own identity in it, and that was one of my very first Asian ideas perhaps. I got the harmony for the work from the instrument itself, because I have one at home and I just blew in it and got the notes and chords out of it [laughs]. It's very Chinese sounding.

Martin: After *Sheng* you wrote *Energy* in 1990. This work was composed as part of the National Orchestral School. *Energy* has had quite a few performances by a variety of established orchestras both in Australia and abroad. It was also taken up recently by the Vienna Modern Masters label (1997) and given a performance and a recording. How did *Energy* come to be involved with the Vienna Modern Masters series?

Szeto: I think a friend sent me an ad that they were requesting four orchestral works. Previously they'd wanted large works, but this time they just wanted works under ten minutes, or thereabouts, and I decided to send *Energy* and the *ABC Fanfare* to Vienna. They were all anonymous entries by the way, I should say, which is very gratifying when that happens, when you get selected from anonymous entries, especially in a foreign country. I'm totally unknown to them. So that's how it happened! I sent it off and I thought nothing would happen, but it did happen [laughs]. I should say that it's not an excellent performance. I should have spent the money going there to supervise. I should say they gave me that choice, but it wouldn't probably have made a lot of difference. But now that I've got the recording at home I should have gone, because there are things like the side drums that have got the snares on when they should be off, and the great crescendo at the end with the fortissimo, where the momentum is supposed to be maintained, I think it's written 'fff', but in the recording it suddenly whimpers to 'p' before it comes back, and it's almost as if it dies at the climax. So if I was there I know I could have prevented that. I'm not sure why that problem occurred. The dynamics are in the score. Little things like that bother me.

Martin: Yes, the ending is very dramatic. I know the score quite well.
Szeto: For some reason - it's got the shock chords that lead up to the great fortissimo and then I've got this loud bass line holding it just before the last loud chord and the chord on the CD that holds it, is almost 'pp'. They couldn't really do much more with engineering it either. They did blame it on the instruments of Eastern Europe. I think that they recorded it in Moravia in the Czech Republic just to cut down on expenses and they tell me that the old Soviet or countries that were formerly communist have really bad percussion instruments. They don't have good quality instruments and I think that's because the tom toms were just so weak even where they're supposed to be - what do you call that part - not cadenza, but - well that bit that's supposed to feature prominently. It just didn't come out at all.

Martin: Percussion is very important to that work isn't it?

Szeto: Yes. It could have helped if they'd tightened the skins a bit more, but the problem's all on CD, so it's all too late [laughs].

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of Energy?

Szeto: I knew it had to be something quite energetic. I'm not sure whether that's how I like things anyway and it had to be quite, I guess the word is 'accessible' to the audience. I think that you've just lost the point if you're just writing for yourself. If you composed for yourself you just wouldn't need to notate. You'd just do it for yourself. There's no point writing for performers alone, but if you write for performers, if they like it, that would mean that the audience will as well, because in some way they are also the interpreters. So I knew that it had to be something that they enjoyed. If they did, then the audience would as well. So I felt it had to be something delightful.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Szeto: Not at all. You know, I've been told Stravinsky. I've read a review that mentions Stravinsky and it's not meant to be a compliment, but I take it as a compliment [laughs]. He is such a great master and I really love his music, but when people say that you're like someone else it's never meant to be a compliment, it's meant to be a put down. Worst of all when they say it's like a composer I dislike, but
people who know I study with Sculthorpe say 'oh, it sounds like Sculthorpe,' but I don’t think it does. I’m not sure which parts they are referring to that sound like Sculthorpe or Stravinsky. People say that because they assume that teachers influence their students, but the influence doesn’t necessarily replicate in students’ music. I think they are just making these things up from their own ideas and expectations and not from the actual music itself really. I think the very first review I got at the premiere performance of Energy made no reference to other composers at all, he just gave it such a fantastic review. It was even nominated for an AMC award for best work of the year. So that’s great. Amongst all those big works of the year, someone thought my work was best. I didn’t get the award [laughs].

Martin: In 1992 you received a commission (your first orchestral commission I believe) from the ABC to write a short orchestral fanfare. ABC Fanfare was the result. How did the commission come about?

Szeto: Well, I got a call from Cathy Brown-Watts. At that time she was in charge of special projects at the ABC and she rang me and said, ‘could you send in a cassette recording and maybe a score because we’re thinking of commissioning some fanfares.’

Martin: Who conducted the premiere performance?

Szeto: Elgar Howarth, an English conductor I think, and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra did it.

Martin: Where did the first performance take place?

Szeto: At the Opera House. It wasn’t the best performance of the work at all. I’m not sure why. Could be the instruments again, especially because percussion features so prominently in that work. If you don’t get the right instrument - I mean there are bongos and bongos - the skins of the instruments etc. The timbre of an instrument makes such a big, big difference and the sound depends on the room itself. So the recording from the concert wasn’t very good at all. Everything I thought I’d written wasn’t quite right, and I thought ‘oh, I’ve got all the balances wrong and maybe I should restudy orchestration!’ [Laughs] Then soon after, it went to Melbourne and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra did it and Isaiah Jackson conducted it, and it
was fantastic. It was exactly how I heard it in my head. It was amazing. There was one bit in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra performance, I thought it just totally dropped down and I thought it was me being meticulous and overly critical of myself, but Ronald Peelman mentioned it to me as well and he said ‘oh, I heard the recording on the radio and there’s a bit that sort of goes down a bit,’ and I thought ‘wow he’s noticed it as well.’ So he must be right, and I’ve found out since that it was actually the performance itself.

Martin: So the performance can have a huge effect on balance.

Szeto: Oh, yes! It does. I was so shocked at the bit that went down and it wasn’t down at all in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra performance. It was really up there as I wanted it to be. So it depends on many factors.

Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Szeto: Yes, the ABC have four different recordings on tape and the Vienna Modern Masters label has also got this one on the same CD as Energy.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to ABC Fanfare?

Szeto: Probably myself [laughs], because at that time Energy had been such a great springboard for me, it was soon programmed by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in their Twentieth Century Concert Series and so because of that it got broadcast and goes nationwide, so a lot of people got to hear and know about it. Also the feedback I got was very good and I thought I had to continue with that sound, and also, the influence of the ABC Fanfare was dictated by the commissioning constraints. It had to be fanfare. I was told it was to be the first item in different concerts that year, and so it had to sound heraldic and had to be something like that, so - it had to be - well, what a fanfare ought to be, an announcement. It only had to be two and a half minutes. No longer. A lot of people came up to me and said ‘it’s too short,’ as if it were in my control. They’ve probably never heard an orchestral work so short before and so I have to explain that as well, because most people think - a lot of people did write longer fanfares. But if I’m told in black and white in a contract that it has to be two and a half minutes, then I don’t write longer by the metronome markings. If they
want to stretch it out a bit, that’s the conductor’s prerogative, but I was surprised that a lot of people wrote longer fanfares - other people that were commissioned. So it was a very short work.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Szeto: By that time I had established for myself a chord, what I call a sort of quasi-pentatonic chord. It’s got only four notes of the five pentatonic notes and it has the two tones with the middle one missing, and I’d been using that quite a lot. I used that particular harmony for that work. So it sounds sort of Asian, but not quite, but that’s the idea of it. So I guess it was my own previous works influencing that one. I felt I had to maintain this previous sound, but in some way a little bit different.

Martin: Your next work for orchestra in 1994 was Energy II, again this work was written for the National Orchestral Composers’ School. It received its premiere performance by the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. Who was the conductor?

Szeto: Richard Mills.

Martin: Has Energy II been recorded?

Szeto: The ABC has two recordings on tape. They’ve got that recording plus the Queensland Symphony Orchestra performance which was actually broadcast this year, but I missed it, but no CD recordings. They broadcast it when they feel like it. It almost happened a year after the performance, but there is no CD recording. I haven’t really pushed that work. If people ask me for a work I normally point them to Energy rather than Energy II. Maybe the title is also confusing. I shouldn’t have called it Energy II really, because it gets confused with Energy. People think it’s the same work but that it’s been revised [laughs]. It’s no longer trendy - you know how it used to be to call works 1, 2, 3, 4 of the same title. That was a thing of the sixties perhaps. But I don’t want to change it now because that would be even worse [laughs].

Martin: Maybe it gives people an expectation of the work.
Szeto: That was my intention. When I wrote it, I thought, if you liked *Energy*, well this would be something you’d enjoy as well. So that was the idea of the title. But I guess it’s not as bold; I’m more aware of everything, but I’ve been told it’s much more well constructed. I still enjoy *Energy* much more than *Energy II*, despite the fact that the second work is probably more professional in much of the orchestration than the first work. It lacks that sort of vibrance that the first one has. I’ve been told that the first one was too noisy [laughs]. It depends on the taste of the listener. I mean if you like that second one, you do, but I still prefer the first work more than the second.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of *Energy II*?

Szeto: I’ve been stuck with this particular chord for a long, long time now, and I’m still at it, so I just see what sort of different composition I can get out of that quasi-pentatonic harmony. It’s a bit more like *ABC Fanfare* than it is like *Energy*.

Martin: You began your musical life as a pianist. Has being a professional performer impacted on your orchestral career in any way? I’m thinking here of how Miriam Hyde performed the solo part in many performances of her piano concerti.

Szeto: No, I’m not a professional performer at all. I did perform professionally when I was with the electronic ensemble but that’s not really the same category. No, I can’t compare. No, I haven’t been a professional performer.

Martin: Has being a pianist had any effect on the scoring of your orchestral works?

Szeto: Yes, definitely [laughs], because when you play on the piano, things have to fit the hands. So, when you’re hearing sounds, the sounds that you make on the piano fit the hands, and then when you get out to orchestrate it, it shouldn’t fit the hand, it’s got to fit the orchestra. So from that point of view being a pianist can affect orchestral scoring. I’m doing a concerto right now and I’m finding what I wanted to hear right there with only five notes within the handspan could be spread out to several octaves with other instruments, but I’m reluctant to do that, because I want to hear that hand thing. I would have said no to that question until doing this work right now and thinking I’ve got to have it within this handspan. I’m quite stubborn. I’ve actually stuck to the hand, although in my mind I keep thinking the flute can do this
just as well up there and probably more idiomatic where the hand can’t go. So yes, it does have an influence.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Szeto: I’m sure they do. I mean I don’t as much as perhaps others do. Maybe I shouldn’t speak for others. It’s not only composers, but composers are also influenced by the end user of the music and that’s the audience. Probably even the recording people as well, they think that orchestral works are the pinnacle, so I guess that composers could be influenced by that.

Martin: What factors (if any) influence the musical language you choose to write orchestral works in? I’m thinking of the cost involved in performing an orchestral work. For example do you think there is more pressure to have appeal and accessibility in a large scale work and if so is orchestral music somewhat less experimental than say a work for a chamber group?

Szeto: Often this is dictated by the commissioner anyway. I mean for Energy I was told I couldn’t have a tuba. If I wanted to write for a tuba then I had to pay for the tuba player myself. So that influences the size anyway, you know, whether you have one percussionist or two. So that’s the sort of influence that you are bound to confine yourself to. Even the size of the orchestra. They give you the number of first violins, second violins, two or three flutes and so forth, that’s given to you and I find that if I’m given such a large orchestra I’m not going to write for a smaller subsection of it. I don’t do that. I generally use every bit I can because it’s not often you’ll be given such luxury of having a large orchestra to write for.

Martin: Do you think that because orchestral works are so expensive to put on you have a duty to write something appealing or -

Szeto: I like to please people anyway. What’s the point in doing something that perhaps won’t? I think that’s really pleasing myself anyway. If I do something that people will be happy with, then I’m happy as well. And I’m awfully conscious with other people’s money. It is true that this is tax money funding this. Surely I have an obligation to them, although when you are writing notes on the page you don’t think
of that. I don’t think of it when I’m actually composing. At the stage I’m at, I know and I think commissioners know what I’m going to produce anyway and it’s more or less, I think, accessible and accepted by the general audience.

Martin: Have you had any of your orchestral works published?

Szeto: I have had offers, but I guess I’m a bit silly I didn’t take it up. The German publisher Furore who only publish women’s music wanted Energy II and the string quartet and some other works. It wasn’t the whole lot but they had quite a sizeable list which they wanted to publish. They wanted me to have the scores, parts and program notes and all that and again I didn’t have the time. I couldn’t be bothered getting all that organised, so I haven’t taken it up [laughs]. I guess it’s a bit silly. It is important to get a publisher, but I feel that they couldn’t do very much for me anyway. Most of the performances that I’ve had are Australian and they would have very little input anyway as far as the selection for concert programs was concerned in Australia. I doubt whether they would have such an influence in programming works outside, even in Germany where they are based. So from two points of view I thought ‘oh well, don’t worry about it unless it was going to make a significant difference in promoting my music.’ Also, because they were exclusively women I didn’t like that idea either. Then I’d be pigeonholed; ‘she’s only an example of a women composer, not a composer,’ which is not, I think, a good idea.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works do you think has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?

Szeto: I don’t really know much about reception unless performers come and tell me personally. Often there are so many performances that I don’t even know about. You know often one of my nieces will say they’re performing your work at so-and-so, and I say, ‘really.’ I don’t get a lot of reception unless I am about when people are rehearsing it and so forth.

Martin: What about in terms of reviews?

Szeto: I don’t get to see a lot of those either. Unless I know the performance is on, then I try and make a big effort to go. The strange thing was that I found out that Energy II was being performed for the public at the Opera House by a certain school
group orchestra and I thought, that's not too far to go, just across the bridge, and I rang up the box office to get tickets to go and it was booked out [laughs]. So I couldn't get to hear my work. They don't need to tell me when they perform a work, they just need to go to the AMC or ABC get the scores/parts, pay for it and that's it. There is no need to consult me, so sometimes I don't even know about these performances. They performed it for Princess Diana when she was here as well, last time in the Commonwealth Day Convention, and I only know that because one of the kids that performed in it knew someone else and someone else told me [laughs]. So really, I don't really know a lot. Maybe I think that I get a lot of good feed back and when anyone tells you things, it's got to be positive. Noone is going to come up to you and say I hated that. So it's probably a false impression anyway. The only feedback you would get would be positive.

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Szeto: No I don't do any promotion whatsoever. That's true. I'm very silly. I know that if I don't then noone else will anyway. I haven't really promoted - I don't do things - but what can I do really to promote it? I just don't know. If I knew there were certain things I needed to do to get things done then I would do it, probably. For most of my works people just go to the AMC and find it out that way. That's what I think they do anyway, and so often I don't even put things in the AMC [laughs]. It's not very good promotion is it?

Martin: Has networking played a role in your orchestral career?

Szeto: I don't think so. I don't have any network at all. I don't really know what you mean.

Martin: Well, for example, Mary Mageau sets out deliberately to make sure that her orchestral works are actively promoted. For example, she wrote a piano concerto for Wendy Lorenz, a friend who is also in a position where she can do a performance.

Szeto: Oh, I see what you mean. I could deliberately write for someone famous. No, I haven't done that, but that is a thought. I haven't done that, but that is something perhaps that I should do.
Martin: What is it about orchestral writing that keeps you composing in this genre?

Szeto: At this stage I’m not really picking to write this or that. People are approaching me to compose something and I say yes, or no, to it, that’s all. I haven’t really felt that I have to write any particular work for a long time. I think when I was a student I did a vocal, and I did a choral, and then an ensemble for this or that, and then you thought ‘oh I haven’t done a string quartet, I’d better do one of those,’ and now I’ve done an orchestral, so I’m not in the position of thinking I should try it. I just say yes or no to the commissioners when they want something ‘well how about this,’ and I say ‘OK.’

Martin: What are your future plans regarding orchestral works?

Szeto: I know that they’re very hard to come by really. So I can say definitely that I would never say no if I was asked to write more orchestral works, although I know that the effort involved is far, far longer than you would spend on other works. As I said to you elsewhere, it’s not the actual creativity that takes long. In your mind you can hear all that in a few seconds, it’s the actual mundane thing of the notation. It takes such a long time just to notate.

Martin: And the proofreading!

Szeto: Do you do proofreading! [Laughs] I can’t believe that the actual notating of the work is so time consuming and then all the editing that goes after that. Even with the computer you think this is a great wonder but just to get a quaver you’ve got to press this, this, and that, just to get the quaver in. So sometimes it’s a lot quicker by hand, but you don’t get the advantage of extracting parts and adding to it and editing after. So, it’s very, very time consuming and I don’t write straight onto the finished page. Even in the days before computer notation, I used to write it roughly and then rewrite it beautifully. So the whole creative process is not that long, it’s the physical presentational thing. It’s very quick in the mind, you can hear the full chord, but actually to write will take several minutes. At the moment I’m working on a mandolin concerto which is not so common, so that’s why I’m doing it because there aren’t enough mandolin works. Eric Gross has written quite a number I think and I’ve been
encouraged to do one.
Interview 7. Elena Kats-Chernin interviewed on the 22nd July, 1998 at her home, 93 Brook St, Coogee.

Martin: You have written quite a few orchestral works to date. What was it that first got you interested in writing for the orchestral genre?

Kats-Chernin: Well, probably every composer will tell you, the colour and lots of choices [laughs] and a big organism - it's an amazing body the orchestra - so it has fascination for any composer, or anyone studying music. You just see all these people playing and it makes this amazing sound. If you see it, and if you hear it, you think, well, how is it done? There is always a fascination and a mystery about how the sound comes about. It is so big and yet it can also be so small. My very first practical touch with an orchestra was when I was writing my diploma work. I was twenty and I was writing a piano concerto for myself to play. It wasn’t a full orchestra, but was a double string orchestra, plus three trombones and three percussionists and harp. I didn’t have woodwind or other brass, so it was kind of an unusual combination. Maybe I was scared a little bit of the big orchestra. I had some models and some other pieces by composers where trombones were featuring strongly, and a piece of Stockhausen’s - maybe Hymnen - which used profound [sic] trombones - maybe not three but eight. I was very lucky to get into the very first school for young composers which was then called the ‘Summer School For Young Composers’. It was actually limited to twenty-five [years of age]. Eight composers were chosen at the time. Now it’s much less, with no age limit. I wrote a piece called Bienie, which means the heartbeat, in Russian. That piece basically got me going really because I heard the orchestra play what I wrote, and I realised my mistakes too, and I knew that I had to do better the next time. It wasn’t a bad piece and I think with the piece Clocks today, I did something similar to what I tried to do, in Bienie [I] already had done - and that was almost twenty years ago. It was 1980, yes, that school was 1980. So that straight-forward beat was interesting for me then already, and I made a lot of mistakes in that piece I think, from a balance point of view. I had, at some point, strings doing the same thing after the brass had done it, thinking it would be the same sound, but it was obviously a total flop down - nothing! And of course the brass is so much stronger. If you have eight brass - and even fifty strings can’t get over them - the brass is still so much stronger. One brass is as strong as twenty violins. But this is something that you learn with time.
Martin: It's very important to have a work performed.

Kats-Chernin: Oh, you don't realise these things until you suddenly hear it. I used the kind of serialistic technique where I use the same pitches in a particular register but I didn't let myself get out of that, so the result was very dead music [laughs]. It was going [sings] and it was in the same register the whole time. It was incredibly boring, incredibly inflexible and not broad - narrow. Mind you, I still say that it is an OK piece and I wouldn't pull it out of my cupboard today.

Martin: Who performed the premiere?

Kats-Chernin: The Training Orchestra - it was called the 'Australian Training Orchestra'. I don't know if such a thing still exists today.

Martin: Was that in Tasmania?

Kats-Chernin: No, no. It was governed by the Australian Music Centre and it was in Lindfield. The ABC was involved in the project.

Martin: Do you remember who conducted that work - that premiere?

Kats-Chernin: I'm not sure, but I think it was somebody called Miller? - I'm not sure. Maybe David Miller, maybe, although David Miller is a pianist. There was some resemblance of the name - I just can't remember. There was a film made just prior to me going to Germany, what happened - you should really get that film - it's called Notes on a Landscape with Bill Forsyth - not Bill Forsyth - I can't remember his name, by Film Australia. It was a film where Don Banks is - there was a lot of people there, and from this school they pulled out two people, I was included and Graham Koehne, and we were filmed as we worked with the orchestra. We had to meet again. We had to actually come in and the piece was rehearsed again. I have never seen the film, but I actually speak on it. They were asking questions about how space affects you and I remember that I had to leave directly right after. It's a documentary about composers. I think ten composers are featured and it was produced in conjunction with the AMC, so it's just interesting because the conductor was in the film and maybe it's written down.
Martin: OK. I'll look that up. So it [Bienie] was recorded?

Kats-Chernin: It was recorded. I have a recording which is not very good, because it was in the days before DATS. We had cassettes and they weren't very good quality.

Martin: Was it ever issued publicly?

Kats-Chernin: Oh, it was broadcast on the radio once with interviews of the students and that was it. The pieces were either dropped or not - I think Graham's piece is still performed today - I think. Carl Vine was part of that story as well, but I was the only woman [laughs]. So, that was that experience.

Martin: Did you find the experience of being at the Young Composers' School helpful with your orchestral writing?

Kats-Chernin: I'm not sure, because it took me a long time before I wrote another orchestral piece. What happened though, was that from this particular experience I got another commission - from the Australian Youth Orchestra. They commissioned me to write an orchestral piece and it was just when I was about to go to Germany. It was just a conversation I had about a week before I left. They said, 'would you write a piece,' and it was my first big commission, because the *In Tension* commission had happened not much before so it was the second commission in my life really. What happened there - it's a long story - it was a 1980 commission, but I wrote it in 1983 when I was pregnant with my second son. I know that because I couldn't sit. I was like this [gestures] and trying to write. I remember that [laughs]. I wrote it in '83 and it was performed in '84, and in '85 it was put out on CD.

Martin: Was that *Introduction to a Dance*?

Kats-Chernin: No. This piece actually exists - noone has seen it! I actually have it here. You remind me of - I had totally forgotten I'd written it [laughs]. I think I wrote it as a joke - oh, not a joke, I just thought I'd write an orchestral piece. I sent it in for a competition. I even have a letter from the ABC saying, 'sorry we don't want it,' or something - that kind of thing. Oh, I remember that - I wrote a very beautiful score. I thought at least for the competition it has to look good. That was in '82 or '83 just prior to the other piece. No, the piece I actually wrote was *Stairs* and that
was the piece commissioned by the Training Orchestra [sic - Youth Orchestra], so that was in a way my fourth piece, you’re right. I forget *Introduction to a Dance*. How do you know about *Introduction to a Dance*?

Martin: Research [laughs].

Kats-Chernin: Even I don’t know about this. This is such a funny thing, because this piece totally dropped out of my head.

Martin: *Introduction to a Dance* is listed in the ‘New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers’.

Kats-Chernin: Isn’t that funny! That is so funny, because it’s not really in existence.

Martin: I can’t find it [the score] anywhere.

Kats-Chernin: Of course you can’t. I’ll have a look and see if I can find it, but I’m not sure where I put it.

Martin: It was written in 1983.

Kats-Chernin: Yes, it was written prior to *Stairs*.

Martin: And then I’ve got that in 1984 you wrote your next orchestral work *Stairs*.

Kats-Chernin: I finished it in 1984. He [Kats-Chernin’s son] was born on the 18th of January, and I finished it in January still.

Martin: So the commission for *Stairs* was really a product of being a participant in the Young Composers’ School.

Kats-Chernin: Yes. It took a long time for me to write. There was a lot of correspondence which they didn’t answer and it just dragged on. And I thought maybe they’re not interested.
Martin: In my research I also found mention of a violin concerto. Was this work scored for full orchestra?

Kats-Chernin: No that is a concertino which is on the *Clocks* CD and that is for violin and eleven instruments. It’s really a chamber piece, but it sounds big [laughs] because I’m not really using strings, I’m using brass, woodwind and a lot of percussion - one percussionist, but he’s doing a lot and just one double bass on top of everything, so it sounds like an orchestral piece really, but it’s not [laughs].

Martin: In 1990 you wrote the orchestral work *Transfer* as part of a series of works designed to be performed at the same time.

Kats-Chernin: Yes, that’s what I thought at the time. I was on this grand scale of thinking. I was also having a kind of composing block at the time - not a composing block - but I stopped writing as you may have read. I stopped writing from ‘85 until I wrote *Transfer* in ‘89, I think. I actually stopped composing concert music because first of all I couldn’t earn a living from it, and I had a total block. I didn’t want to write. I didn’t know what to write and I had a lot of theatre music to write. So that was paying very well, so I could survive on that with the kids. In ‘85 I was just pregnant with my third so I needed something to live on. So I remember that came out of the blue. I got a phone call from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in Germany. I don’t know how they tracked me down because that number wasn’t even listed. They kind of found me through my parents. It was Tony Fogg who called me and he said ‘it’s about time you wrote another orchestral piece.’ You know I haven’t heard this sentence since then. I wish someone would say it today [laughs]. At the time I must say I was pushed a little. I thought it was a great thing to do, but I didn’t have an idea - I kind of had an idea - I mean it came. I don’t think I was ready. Now I know. You don’t know it at the time, that you’re just not ready for a big piece. It’s a big piece an orchestral work. It’s not a small piece and you just can’t think on a small scale. You have to think groups and it’s not even instrumentally that you think, you have to think structurally a big piece and conceptually a big picture. You can’t just write a small melody and embellish it. It’s a different story. You have to think in big phrases and even if they’re not in the conventional sense phrases, they are points that you pick up on the way. You know that connects to this, and this connects to that, and there could be three or four layers or even five layers at the same time. It has to be interesting, otherwise it’s just a piece of fluff! So *Transfer* had, I must say, a very
interesting idea and I think I still want to rewrite it. I actually think I should revise it. If you’re interested in the story behind the piece, I started writing it in Majorca because my kids were really small and I just had the holidays from school and from kindergarten. It was really hard. My little son was four I think - was constantly around me and I just couldn’t get away. So I was in Majorca with a couple, they had two children, and they said they would look after them and I could use their room where they had a table and I could work for two hours every day. That was two weeks. And that’s how I could start the piece. I took all my utensils with me. And that’s the only way I could start. I wrote it in four weeks. In Majorca I didn’t write very much. I think I wrote up to the ninth page and then, because I was working in another city, I could do some work between rehearsals, basically any spare moment - that’s what I always do - any spare moment, I write, or do work that has to be done. So I came home and I remember I got this fax saying, ‘where is the piece? We have to perform it in a month.’ So I nearly died. It was the middle of the night and I’d just come back from Majorca to Hanover and I called Tony Fogg - he was in Melbourne - and he said they’re just going to perform Stairs. The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra was performing Stairs.

Martin: Stairs was used in a teaching kit wasn’t it? It says on the front of the kit that as your new work Transfer is not available they are using Stairs instead.

Kats-Chernin: Ah, yes. Well that is a different story all together. Nobody said anything about the kit making. So when they did say something that’s why they were so desperate that it was on time. And I said ‘OK, I’ll fax you.’ So I sent it [Transfer] from the theatre. It cost me a lot of money and I had to reduce it all to half or something. So I sent the whole thing through fax and after that everybody was joking about Transfer because it was transferred with a fax [laughs]. And it was totally useless. I wrote it in such a rush - the second half of the piece - that I actually put it in the bin right after I sent it. Yes. I actually said, ‘please disregard it all.’ I guess I just did it because I had to do something. I don’t even know if that exists still because I had a totally different idea on the way it went - the piece - and I’ve changed the whole thing again. But because of this time shortage I think the piece lacks - it’s a bad experience I must say. It should never happen like this, because what happens is the second part is mumbled, whereas the first half is really well thought through. What I was doing was with a D minor scale which went note by note and each had its own character and its own motivic structure around it. So it
went [sings]. Anyway, sometimes it went really long - with 'F' I really went for it, you know, octaves everywhere. And for me it was like an open book which you sort of open and close, open and close, until it went to the very top and that part is really very workable. I also really like the end. What I did in the middle because of the time shortage, I think, and I am being critical here, I did a lot of free time where you say, 'for two seconds this group is playing' - you know, free sections around a D minor scale. But because I wasn’t there, a lot of these things didn’t work because they were played too distinctively. Maybe it could have worked if I’d given them a little more specification of the sound, although, I think at times I did. Maybe the piece still has a chance if I just shorten that part. It’s very hard to know what I mean if you haven’t heard it. I’ve got it on DAT. I actually have it - a recording. It’s not a bad piece and it just needs a slight revision. Only one part of it really. It was just a little too simplistic to say ‘you do this in this time.’ I just don’t think - . I can do better today I know that. It was ‘90, so it was my first piece. After a long time I keep forgetting this piece. I don’t mention it very much because it was such a block for me. I feel I didn’t do my best. I don’t think that about Stairs, and even Piano Concerto has a raw charm. It’s rough on the edges and it’s derivative, you know Penderecki and Xenakis, there’s a lot of that kind of stuff, but it has something fresh, and Stairs is very much where I was at the time, so I can tell myself that this is me, but Transfer is me trying to get somewhere but not really quite getting it; trying to, but not really achieving it, so I’m not totally convinced.

Martin: Retonica written in 1993 was commissioned by the Australian Music Centre. How did this commission come about?

Kats-Chernin: That is still a mystery. There was some kind of exchange program with Sweden and the Australian part was done and I was always keeping in touch with the Swedish Symphony but they obviously had no interest whatsoever. They never returned my calls. This happened in the middle of the night. I got this phone call from the AMC saying they had chosen me out of many, many people. They must have gone through a production selection process. I kept in touch with the AMC. I was there just prior to that, about half a year before, just to visit. You know I was here quite often, but not for my performances [laughs], they were always played when I wasn’t there. The interesting thing is that Dick Letts left shortly after that, then John Davis took over and so I had a whole correspondence with him as well. So the piece was lying at home, at their place [the AMC]. The Swedish were just not
interested in performing it. They just never really got around to it and I wrote all 
these interesting things for two button accordions. This is very European. People 
play button accordion everywhere, on every street. It’s taught as an instrument in the 
conservatoire in every city, whereas here it is not an instrument for study. It’s not 
something you can do an exam on with Bach, but in Germany and Europe it’s a 
standard instrument and really seriously taken ... [can’t make out words]. I knew 
friends of mine who would have played it then. She’s a professor actually. She plays 
a lot of premieres and her husband also is an accordion player. So I had them in mind 
somehow. I thought, ‘wow, this is great! They can go there and play,’ and so I wrote 
these two parts and I also wrote harpsichord and piano in it, so I wrote a big 
keyboard section - we’ll come to that in a second. So, Retonica was actually the first 
piece I think has a future. Still, it’s never easy to write an orchestral piece, you don’t 
know what to do! There’s always this long story I can tell you [laughs]. The Violin 
Concerto was commissioned years and years before for Ensemble Modern in Italy 
and I started it about ten times. I just couldn’t get it off the ground. I don’t know 
why. It was just one of those things. I was distracted. I had kids; they were small; 
there was theatre work and it was just too much. I just couldn’t do it and they kept 
writing to me - not the Ensemble Modern, it was the Australia Council. One of the 
sketches that I did for that violin piece went into Retonica. That idea - and somehow 
it would just never go beyond a certain point with the violin concerto, but it went 
with Retonica - it just took off. And it was just so easy to write. Some pieces just 
write themselves. Retonica just wrote itself, Clocks wrote itself. People sometimes 
say that Retonica is like small Clocks; concise Clocks. It’s very similar. I don’t know 
if you’ve heard it. It’s very different to Transfer which is heavy machinery, you 
know. Retonica pushes off pretty quickly. I’m pleased. Retonica has had a life 
already with many performances. The premiere performance was Edo De Waart with 
the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. I remember the date because in the general 
rehearsal we had to stop in the middle of the piece because it was the 11th of the 11th 
and that’s a peace day. It’s one of those memorable day for war victims. So 
everything suddenly stops and one minute of silence. So then it got another 
performance by Ron Spigelman. He conducted it twice in the Opera House. There 
were two nights where it was in a ‘Meet The Music Series’, and again it only 
happened because somebody else dropped out. So it had another performance which 
was very nice. You never know how these things happen because they happen pretty 
quickly.
Martin: So you were at the premiere?

Kats-Chernin: I was at the premiere.

Martin: Were you happy with the performance?

Kats-Chernin: Yes, I was very happy. But do you know how it happened? The piece was already a year and a half old. It was literally lying in a cupboard, and in the Australian Music Centre cupboard, but somebody, and again it was Tony Fogg, he looked it up. I don't know what it is, but he said he looked it up and it was a quirky piece. And I said, 'no, no, no. I'm sure it's a horrible piece. Don't play it.' I must say I was so insecure when I came back and I just felt I have to start a new career from scratch because I wasn't really existing anymore as a composer of concert music. So I was so insecure and I said 'oh I'd rather they didn't play it.' My whole family thought I was a wreck because I was so worried because it was a horrible piece and it was going to be so awful and nobody contacted me after the first rehearsal to tell me how it was, or ask, 'what do I mean there?' I really get stressed with these things and thought it would be kind of awful because they basically just looked at it in the Music Centre and decided to do it. But I wasn't there when they decided to do it.

Martin: So this was a year and a half after it had been written?

Kats-Chernin: That's right. It was written in May of '93 and I arrived in Australia in '94 in January and it was performed on the 11th of the 11th in '94.

Martin: So when you heard it, was it a surprise that it worked so well?

Kats-Chernin: Yes, totally! I remember it was the second rehearsal. I have a cousin in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and he told me how the rehearsal went. He said 'oh it sounds good,' and if you're putting them all in a good mood, that's good. So I went in the next day and I heard this piece and they stopped in the middle and I just laughed [laughs]. I couldn't believe it. It sounded like film music, but not quite and it was so different than I imagined. So different! Such a wonderful experience: it was just really nice. Not that I got an amazing amount of rehearsal time - I didn't. I think there was one hour, then one hour with me, and then there was a general run on that Friday morning before the premiere. That was it. So it was two rehearsals plus that
time, but it is a piece that can be done that way. The only problem was with the accordions. I actually had to go to a special studio and we had to sample accordion sounds and it was played on keyboards because they didn’t put too much work into finding accordion players, which could have been found - maybe! So since then, it’s become the thing to do. Everyone uses keyboards. So the second time I got used to it. It’s safe because you never know if the accordion is going to be loud enough for the orchestra and the keyboard sound was pushed up. So in a way it actually works with that sound. And in Brisbane they also didn’t use a real harpsichord, they used a keyboard. So in Brisbane I had a wonderful time. It was very nice. It was an all women’s concert. I still have all the publicity about that. It was Mary Mageau and Helen Gifford and some American woman, I can’t remember her name - that was the very beginning piece. There was a little interview before the concert. They flew me down. I was at the rehearsal. It was a very nice orchestra. I was very pleased with the climate and I also loved the room. It was like a studio, you know, where they practise, and Lyn Williams is just wonderful. I don’t know if you know her but she conducts the children’s choir. Lyn Williams is very small, almost kind of boyish, and looks fragile but she is so strong. She was the harp player in my piano concerto when she was thirteen ... [can’t make out words]. She was a student, sixth year or seventh year high school student. She was just a young girl, but she was talented, very talented. She’s great. She was very good at the rehearsals and she said she hated the sound of the harpsichord that they had, so she made them get a keyboard with the harpsichord sound and that was better. So this was the second performance of Retonica before the Opera House performance.

Martin: So you didn’t worry anymore about getting a real button accordion sound?

Kats-Chernin: No. After that I said, ‘OK.’ It worked. The only thing I said, in the first performance they didn’t spread them out, left and right, and I thought it was a bit of a waste to have them all in one spot. It was a bit silly. No-one thought about it. So, I made the point that it would be better if they were separated so there was a bit of left and right. That’s how I wrote it. I thought one on one side, and one on the other. It’s not that they play the whole time but sometimes you need that special edge. It gives that special ingredient that you need in the sound. Retonica just wouldn’t be the same without that sound. But I was quite pleased actually, and I think that the accordions would need extra rehearsals because they are not such easy instruments. They’re not orchestral instruments either, so they may not be trained to
follow the conductor. You never know. So I've come to terms with the idea. Not that it's been played since. I mean it's been again two years. I was very lucky to have a piece played three times by three different conductors. I can't ask for more. I would love to see it overseas one day. I don't think I've ever had any orchestral piece played overseas.

Martin: Haven't you?

Kats-Chernin: No, no. Not that I know of.

Martin: Vienna Modern Masters do a lot of orchestral music. Caroline Szeto has just had her work *Energy* issued on CD by them.

Kats-Chernin: I never push this because so far it means so much work; preparing all the parts again, because I never get the parts back. So whenever there is a new set of parts for a new performance there are a lot of mistakes that I have to correct again, which annoys me. You give the parts out and you don't get them back, so the mistakes multiply. I think it's really bad. I would love to do the typesetting, then you have it once and that's it. You have it on the disc and then you can do it again. It's more permanent.

Martin: Well it is easier if you want to change a couple of bars, or cut bits out. It makes it flexible.

Kats-Chernin: I think from now on I will only ask copyists to typeset and no handwriting because it's just too much work for me afterwards. Now if I get published they really do prefer typesetting. I have to find somebody who has time and who is good and quick and can read my writing [laughs]. It's pretty clear but sometimes a bit rough.

Martin: Were there any composers who have been influential to *Retonica*?

Kats-Chernin: No, not at all. Isn't that funny? More likely *Transfer* had an influence and that was Kurtak. Kurtak has written a piece which starts as a C major scale going down - it's called *Quasa Fantasia* and it's a beautiful piece. With *Retonica* I was very much in my own world. I was consistently interested in one idea - one cell.
Even in my older pieces going back to '84, or even '83, I use one interval, or only seven grace notes or just five notes. These kind of things. Very sparse ideas. That's why it's called 'Reductions' and *Stairs* uses the whole tone scale; *Transfer* uses the minor scale. In *Retonica* I use a C minor chord, and I just said, 'OK, what can I use with it this time?' because I had already thought about it for violin in a slightly different manner. I just thought, how far can I push it - that kind of thought. For a while I can just get away with being in C minor, but you have to use other elements. I layered it with horns and a totally different melodic line and then I had bass doing something else. So after a while, it built itself like a fan; it fans itself out. You start with one middle section and it goes up and down and becomes a multi-faceted piece - hopefully. So I think in a way there is not much influence there really. I guess the idea of using harpsichord is like Schnittke, but I'm not really a fan of his music funnily enough. I'm a fan of his incidental music. I absolutely admire him there, but the concert music has too much emotion which is too much on the sleeve. Do you know what I mean? His music is very powerful and maybe I find myself unpleasantly touched by that power - maybe.

Martin: Yes, he has influenced some of my writing.

Kats-Chernin: Oh, I've just been sent, by the Kronos Quartet - they sent me a CD of their Schnittke, but I just gave it to my boyfriend and he's got it in his car [laughs]. Oh, what a pity. I could at least lend it to you. It's their newest release.

Martin: Have you been in touch with the Kronos Quartet? This has nothing to do with orchestral music but I love their playing.

Kats-Chernin: Well I have all their CD's. In Berlin I bought a pack of six CD's. You know they had a package. Every so often they send me a CD. I think I sent them my string orchestra piece. That's my newest piece. You wouldn't know it. The ACO played it in Canberra in May. It's called *Zoom and Zip*. That's my latest bigger kind of work.

Martin: Your latest orchestral work is *Lamento the Gestures*. What year was this piece written?
Kats-Chernin: Oh my God, you know about that one too! [laughs]. It exists in my cupboard. I wrote it for a competition. I wrote it in two weeks.

Martin: What is the date? I can't find it anywhere.

Kats-Chernin: I can tell you. I arrived in Sydney in January and I found out about this competition, a very lucrative competition, and I wrote it in June '94. And I must say this, out of that piece I got lots of ideas for other pieces, so it wasn't in vain. It was a good exercise to do something in two weeks.

Martin: Did it ever have a performance?

Kats-Chernin: No, and probably never will. How did you find out about this one?

Martin: I can't remember which source it came from. I've gone through a lot of stuff.

Kats-Chernin: I can't remember if I talked about this to anyone. I did deposit it in the Music Centre, but I only deposited it for someone to pick up. Nobody really has it. It's one of those pieces again like Introduction To a Dance. I mean, all these pieces exist in my head and somehow they bring me to write something else. Cadences uses that drum beat from Lamento the Gestures: that kind of [sings rhythm]. You know, that kind of beat came from there. It's not in vain, it's like a study. It was incredible training to get up in the morning and go to bed really late and since then I can write a piece in two weeks. No problem. The piano score for the Iphis I just wrote in two weeks. It's a good training to be fast and to work non-stop. It's hard and my back hurts.

Martin: So you just get up in the morning and work all day?

Kats-Chernin: That's all I do. I mean I also do cooking for the kids and ask them how they are. I do that and bring them to school.

Martin: Would you like this work to receive a performance?

Kats-Chernin: No, no. Not at all. I am quite happy where it is. I always think these things are in the cupboard for a reason. Not always and I'm sure not for everybody.
But for me, if I had really wanted it performed I would probably push it somehow, but I’m not a pusher. I’m not really a pushy kind of person. I’m really a little bit - well, I go with the flow. If somebody asks me - but I really don’t push a performance.

Martin: You began your musical life as a pianist. Has being a pianist had any effect on your orchestral works?

Kats-Chernin: Yes, unfortunately [laughs], because every orchestral piece has a piano in it. I haven’t been able to get rid of a piano and it’s been hugely hard for me to write for anything without a piano. I’ve just written a clarinet quintet. That was really hard without a piano. It’s not what I’m used to and I put such heavy accent on a piano that it overpowers everything else. I have to get away from it. Somebody even said, it was a critic, I think Chris Dench, he almost imagines me sitting at the piano writing as if it would be just for the piano and then editing everything in, and it’s true. I do cut material away from the piano later on quite often.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed by composers, generally, as being the pinnacle of compositional writing?

Kats-Chernin: I think that opera is. I think that opera is as well as symphonic works. An orchestral work of twelve minutes is not a pinnacle for a composer. No way! But a work of forty minutes, yes. But I’m not sure if this should be done. I find it a very indulgent thing and I’m not sure if I can sit through - I mean I shouldn’t say that, but there are very few orchestral works which you can handle that long. Even Tchaikovsky, which I know very well, starts boring me unless it is played in a very exciting manner. It has to be so well played. It’s very hard to perform a symphony really well, because it’s such a long time frame. That’s what I see as my top performance, if I ever write a symphony, a big one, or for that matter, a solo concerto. I always want to write a solo concerto and that’s my dream. You know Lamento the Gestures was a piano concerto and I wrote one when I was a student, but none of these pieces really exist for me today. So I really would love to write one for somebody that is actually going to be played and it will be the piece I want to write.
Martin: I think with concertos you still get a sense of the personal within the large scale. You are writing for somebody you know and can tailor your compositional style to suit their style.

Kats-Chernin: Yes. And it's also like one person is telling a story. It's like this one person, the soloist, is telling a story to the rest of the people and that's their reaction to that story. It doesn't have to mean a competition between who is better; who is winning. It can also be dialogue. How you answer that question and also how you work with the sound. A piano concerto would be it for me personally. If I write another orchestral work it would be preferable for me, a piano concerto. We'll see what comes along at all. I don't know.

Martin: Do you think it would be a forty minute work?

Kats-Chernin: Oh no, even for a piano concerto I think probably twenty five minutes would be stretching it. Because *Clocks* is twenty one and I think it's a good length. Twenty five is possible as well because I would like, even if it's a concerto, to have orchestral moments even for four minutes, you know. I wouldn't want to be very rigid about the form, three movements, cadenza and this or that. Maybe there would be a five minute cadenza. I don't know. I like to do extreme things in my pieces. But I'd love to write one and this is kind of a dream. But I don't have the time at the moment.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?

Kats-Chernin: *Retonica.* I must say that the performance on the 11th of November, people still talk about it. It was devoted to AIDS victims and it had the quilt hanging and Ross Edwards *Da Pacem Domine* was played at the concert and Corigliano's *First Symphony.* Everybody said it was a very touching concert and somehow they remembered it. I was lucky to be in this concert because it was so emotional and it had a theme. Even though I didn't write the piece for that theme, it still touched me and I thought it had a good purpose. Somehow people remembered that. It [*Retonica*] also went very well in the Opera House and in Brisbane as well. Brisbane wasn't a big audience; a small studio; three hundred people maybe. I would love to see it on a
disc at some point, but you know, I’m not a very ambitious person. I’ll just wait for it to happen.

Martin: Have you set out to actively promote your orchestral works?

Kats-Chernin: Never. I never actually promote anything. But there is so much I’m writing at every moment and the most important piece is the one I’m writing right now. And one cannot sway me anywhere, this way or that way. I have to be very focussed or I won’t get it done. Now it’s an opera again and it’s a big thing you know, you can make mistakes. I have to be very concentrated. And of course I get phone calls and I have to be actively involved on other levels as well and signing contracts and I’m doing a little music for an ABC documentary and I’m doing this, that and the other as well. So I have to juggle and I sort of like that. So it’s not as difficult as I make it sound. But it doesn’t leave me time to promote any work, because I always say enough has been played. But if I sign with a publisher they will do the work.
Interview 8. Mary Mageau interviewed on the 29th August, 1997 by telephone.

[Context: we discuss Mary Mageau’s orchestral work The Furies.]

Martin: Tell me about your latest orchestral work, The Furies.

Mageau: It is my best work so far and it was very well received. Every composer has an area of experimental writing and chamber music is my genre for that. Chamber music uses a small space and is interactive within that space, consequently smaller gestures are needed. Also performers in chamber groups are often more receptive to experimental music. With orchestral music the gesture has to be simple but there can be within the work more development occurring. With orchestral writing there are many players and a different audience, so I write more accessible music for that audience. While language and the basic architecture is clear there is much more complexity in the layering and use of the different colours and textures. In orchestral music I feel that more can be done on a micro level with texture.

With The Furies I felt a security and confidence in the writing of this work. It takes until the third orchestral work to really feel competent. You not only have to manage the craft, but the large scale. I work with a slow, chipping away; the process takes a long time especially to ensure the overall shape is balanced. It took many revisions to get parts of the writing right. The orchestral medium is a very difficult medium to be working in and requires much concentration and emotional energy. I didn't begin to write orchestral works until my children started school. You work alone and it takes months. The scoring is immense and there are numerous corrections to deal with. It is very detailed work. There were three rehearsals for The Furies and the conductor Lyn Williams was friendly and helpful. We clicked: composer, performer and conductor.

Orchestral rehearsals can be tense experiences. You may have minor corrections to make, or have made a small mistake and on the spot you have to be able to clearly state your intentions as a composer, or you can end up looking foolish in front of a large gathering of musicians. There is immense pressure placed on the composer particularly if the conductor or performers are not friendly. I must be a masochist to write an orchestral work. Once the performance is over the work is gone and then there is another year of writing ahead.
Martin: Why do you write for orchestra?

Mageau: I'm addicted to it. A performance takes only minutes, but when the orchestra comes through with your ideas it's absolutely wonderful! It's also a very spiritual experience that feeds the soul. There is a greater impact with the performance of an orchestral work than any other genre.

Martin: Do you think orchestral writing is viewed as being the pinnacle of composition?

Mageau: For me at any rate, it is the pinnacle of a composer's career, and I think it is still very true generally as well. The string quartet is my other preferred medium in this sense, but the orchestra is it!

Martin: Tell me about the Vienna Modern Masters label and how they have contributed to the recording of women's orchestral works.

Mageau: They are tremendous, with a policy to be gender free. They record international music and out of a total of 55 CD's, women have representation on 31 CD's. They have also used three women conductors and many women performers.

Martin: How do you promote an orchestral work?

Mageau: Before I start on writing an orchestral work I would ensure a commission, as orchestral writing eats up so much of your time. A guaranteed performance would be essential. The best way to get started is to make friends with a fine soloist. When I was with the Brisbane Baroque Trio I wrote us a Concerto Grosso. As two of the performers in this group were principals with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra this greatly helped getting a performance with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. We also approached smaller orchestras saying the Brisbane Baroque Trio would be happy to be soloists for this work. There was also a connection with the Darling Downs Trio as the cellist was also in the Brisbane Baroque Trio. Wendy Lorenz is a member of the Darling Downs Trio and she approached me and asked me to write her a concerto with the piano as solo. So I came in through soloists and they came in
through me. It's a situation that works both ways. Wendy had been promoted in the department and she marked this by commissioning a solo concerto.

I wrote *The Furies* as a strong women's statement and the three women involved, conductor, performer and composer worked together beautifully. After a time your name gets about; people get to know you.

I have received many commissions for orchestral works and one of my best sellers is *An Early Autumn's Dreaming*. I feel that there is still a bit of resistance to women composers in the orchestral genre although this tends to disappear as you get a lot of work out.

One of the big problems that is occurring today is the fact that we have spawned a top heavy music bureaucracy. Huge amounts of money are being creamed off by 'hangers' in arts administration. They are on large salaries while the composers get very little.

Martin: What about publication?

Mageau: You don't get an orchestral work published any more. What you do is to try and get an orchestral work into a hire library for promotion, or best of all, released on a CD.

*The Furies* has had two performances in Australia. The recording was done the day after the Queensland Symphony Orchestra concert at the ABC studios in Brisbane. It was nice that it was done locally as I got to sit in on the mastering and have a say about how I'd like things shaped. My *Triple Concerto* was recorded in central Europe and there was a language problem which added extra tension.

For the performance of *The Furies* Lyn Williams was the guest conductor for the composing women's concert. The Queensland Symphony Orchestra is marvellous and do quite a bit for local performers. I have had nine performances of orchestral works by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra over the years.

Mary Mageau interviewed on the 20th October, 1998 by telephone.
Martin: What was it that first got you interested in writing for orchestra?

Mageau: Well, when I began to compose and that would have been in the very late sixties. I always thought it would be a marvellous thing to be able to handle an orchestra, because of the wonderful scope of sound and colour, of this big resonating instrument. When I decided that I was going to do postgraduate study and get really serious about composition I chose the University of Michigan because the thesis requirement for the Masters degree was an orchestral piece. I felt, if I didn’t come at it through some means like this - you can’t just walk into an orchestra and say, ‘I’d like to write a piece for you.’ There have to be many steps that are climbed in that process.

Martin: Did you have any role models that inspired, or encouraged you?

Mageau: No, not at that stage. I just wanted to do it and so it was a personal wish fulfilment.

Martin: In 1968 you wrote Variegations, your first orchestral work.

Mageau: Yes, that was my thesis composition.

Martin: Right, because I was going to ask you how did the first performance of this work come about?

Mageau: It was the requirement for the compositional thesis. One had to write a full symphonic work and the University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra performed all the thesis compositions in a concert.

Martin: Who was the conductor?

Mageau: His name was Theo Alcantara. He was on the staff of the conducting department.

Martin: And did the premiere take place in 1968?

Mageau: Yes.
Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Mageau: The university made a tape of it. We were given a cassette tape at the completion of the concert.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Mageau: I don't think deliberately so. What I wanted to do was have the opportunity to get the feeling of it all. I might add that the piece was rather a failure. Your first orchestral piece is never, never right. I mean it is such a huge thing to cope with. You don't get it right the first time. You just get your feet wet. You jump in the water, you splash about, and you climb out and look at what you've done, and that's about the extent of it.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Mageau: I wanted to write something that was basically lyrical but used some contemporary gestures. I had little areas in the piece, little boxes where the notated rhythm would stop and move into to a freely improvisational aleatoric window. I was experimenting with using controlled rhythms and freely improvised rhythms. I tried to use a range of colour too.

Martin: In 1970 you wrote Montage. The premiere performance was by the Duluth Symphony Orchestra in Minnesota, conductor Joseph Hawthorne, in 1971. How did that performance come about?

Mageau: At the time I wrote Montage I was lecturing in Duluth Minnesota, a campus town with a ferment of musical activity and a good civic orchestra. I had no commission for the work but showed it to Joseph Hawthorne, DSO conductor, who liked it and premiered it on a subscription series concert. Later the Minnesota Orchestra also played it on a regional concert tour.

Martin: So it got a few performances.
Mageau: It would probably have had five.

Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Mageau: Yes, by the Duluth Symphony Orchestra, but again I had just a cassette tape of that.

Martin: Are there any composers that you consider have been influential to this work?

Mageau: No. I tend to try not to model anything on other composers' works. I work instead to find my own voice.

Martin: And what about the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Mageau: It probably was inspired in a sense by an art show that I had visited in Minneapolis and St Paul. I had gone to the Minnesota art gallery and there was a wonderful collection of montage work by Robert Rauschenberg. He had this wonderful technique of overlaying. There were a lot of visual things that were text based and then they were overlayed on top of other images. I thought, ‘wouldn’t it be interesting if a person could do that with orchestral colours’. So that’s what kicked the idea off.

Martin: In 1976 you wrote *Indian Summer* premiered by the Queensland Youth Orchestra and conducted by John Curro. How did the first performance of this work come about?

Mageau: I spoke to John Curro who is the conductor of the Australian Youth Orchestra. I’d attended one of their concerts and they were excellent, and I thought ‘I wonder if he would like to look at the *Montage* score’. He said ‘oh this is very good, but why don’t you write us something new. Something a little longer’. So that’s what I did. It was the year of the American bi-centennial, ‘76. So I wrote something that had an American flavour. I thought that might be interesting.

Martin: Has this work been recorded?
Mageau: Yes it has. Curro used it again several years later when he conducted the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. It was one of those direct broadcasts live to air that the ABC does.

Martin: And so the inspiration behind that was the American theme?

Mageau: Yes.

Martin: You later revised this score in 1986. Why was that?

Mageau: The original piece was in four movements. I felt that one of the movements didn’t work. The architecture wasn’t as strong and as obvious as I thought it should be. I removed that movement and I kept the three others - the first and final movements I didn’t touch - and I added just a little bit of material to the middle movement, so it became a three movement or thirteen minute suite.

Martin: In 1983 you wrote *Pacific Portfolio*. What was it that got you interested in writing for young or emerging orchestral players.

Mageau: Well we had a several good youth orchestras in Brisbane at that time. This work was for the College of St. Margarets which was mounting a festival of Australian music which they have continued right up to the present day. I received that commission to write a work for the school orchestra.

Martin: Has this work been recorded?

Mageau: I can’t remember. I think it might of been.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Mageau: I felt the students needed music that had a strong programmatic bias, so I chose four ports in and around the pacific basin: Acapulco, Hong Kong, Jakarta, and Sydney. I just tried to incorporate folk elements from those cultures in those little pieces.
Martin: In 1990 you wrote your *Triple Concerto*. This work was commissioned by the Darling Downs Trio. How did that commission come about?

Mageau: The Darling Downs Trio was the piano trio in residence at the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba, and again, I had written a piece for piano trio, a two movement work, which I showed to them. Gary Williams was their cellist at the time, and of course I had worked with him in the Brisbane Baroque Trio. After performing my piano trio the commission for a triple concerto arrived. The trio went ahead and applied for the grant, got the commission fee and I wrote it.

Martin: How did the American premiere at the Murray State University in Kentucky come about?

Mageau: The Darling Downs Trio did a lot of piano trio playing in Canada and the United States and Murray State University was one of the places that had an orchestra available to them.

Martin: It went to Europe as well as America?

Mageau: Yes. I entered the *Triple Concerto* in the Vienna Modern Masters First Recording Award. The award was an anonymous entry, with no composer’s name appearing in the score. There are many such awards and women always do well as the works are evaluated solely on merit. A distinguished jury of European composers adjudicated the award. While I did not receive the prize, my *Triple Concerto* was a runner-up which entitled me to visit Bratislavia, Slovakia to record with the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra for CD release on the VMM label. The concerto has enjoyed international radio exposure.

Martin: What was the inspiration behind the musical elements of this work?

Mageau: I drew a lot from the piano trio that I had written because I felt I had made a good, solid foundation in doing piano trio writing. By that stage I had composed my seventh orchestral work, so I really felt I had command.

Martin: Your *Variations on a Ground in Gumut* written in 1992 was premiered by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. How did that performance come about?
Mageau: Oh, that was interesting. Richard Mills was mounting a series of Queensland Symphony Orchestra concerts, Meet the Composer. There were two of them every year. They were informal concerts at the ABC Ferry Road Studios and Richard just asked me for a piece about twelve minutes long.

Martin: In 1993 you wrote *An Early Autumn's Dreaming*. This work was commissioned by the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra. How did that commission come about?

Mageau: The QPO requested a work of ten minutes in length for its 1993 season. They're an interesting orchestra you know, much smaller than a standard symphony. They have double winds and, interestingly enough, only two horns and two trumpets. It's very much a classical size ensemble. Because of the particular makeup of the orchestra I thought that the scoring would lend itself to something pastoral. I chose a nostalgic, autumnal work.

Martin: In 1994 you wrote *Celebration 100* another work for young or emerging performers. This work was also commissioned by St. Margaret's School in Brisbane. Was it because you'd already been successfully commissioned once and they thought of you?

Mageau: What happened was that they thought of us all because over the years there had always been a commission for some composer to write either a choral work or an ensemble work for a chamber group within the school, or maybe to write for the orchestra within the school. When we got to 1994, the year of their centenary, they wanted to have a special concert where a number of the composers that had been commissioned previously were asked once again to write a work.

Martin: *Symphony of War and Peace* was written in 1996. This work received its premiere by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. How did that performance come about?

Mageau: I had spent two years sitting on the ABC National Score Reading Panel. When my period of service was completed, the members of the new incoming panel recommended me for a commission. Being resident in Queensland it was suggested
that I might write something for the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's coming 50th anniversary celebrations.

Martin: What made you decide on war and peace as a theme for this?

Mageau: Two reasons. Given the duration of 12 minutes I had to do something that involved only two movements. I thought I would do something with war and peace as I had been very active in the peace movement. I wanted to bring forward those concepts.

Martin: Mary, was that work recorded?

Mageau: Yes, the Queensland Symphony Orchestra recorded it and it was broadcast. I had a wonderful soprano soloist, Joanna Cole, and we had a very fine conductor, Vladimir Verbitsky.

Martin: _Overtures with Fanfare_ was written in 1998. This work will receive its premiere by the Strathfield Symphony Orchestra in Sydney who commissioned this work. How did that commission come about?

Mageau: The Strathfield Symphony Orchestra is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year and my commission would open the anniversary concert. I decided to write an overture with fanfares that would set the mood of the celebrations.

Martin: I know that you are also a harpsichord performer

Mageau: I was [laughs]. I don't perform any more.

Martin: Has this affected your orchestral writing?

Mageau: No, not at all.

Martin: Did you find your performing helped your composing career? Did you ever perform one of your own concertos?
Mageau: Yes, but not as a soloist in a sense. I did write a concerto grosso for the Brisbane Baroque Trio, (flute, cello, harpsichord) that was given a first performance with the Queensland Philharmonic - Georg Tintner was the conductor. Later we made a recording of the Concerto Grosso with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra for CD. That was the only time I ever actively performed one of my own concertos.

Martin: In 1990 you were the driving force in founding the Australian Women Composers’ Network, a group of people with an interest in promoting Australian women’s music. The aim of this group was to seek gender equity within the ABC in terms of commissioning, performance, air-play and recordings. How did you perceive the situation for women composers of orchestral music in Australia at that time?

Mageau: Oh it was dismal. A black hole. There was so much talent. There were women who were writing so well, but you just couldn’t break in anywhere. The ABC weren’t performing any women’s music really and they certainly weren’t recording any of it.

Martin: Do you feel this group was successful in its aims?

Mageau: Yes, it definitely changed the consciousness. There has been a difference as a result of this action.

Martin: Do you feel that there is still a need for the Australian Women Composers’ Network

Mageau: No. I think it achieved what it set out to do. We tried through normal channels to contact the ABC to just make suggestions that they might do something about this women’s problem. We made a number of overtures and nothing happened. We were laughed at you know; we were a bunch of quacks and so forth. So we approached the press and we had some very interesting articles in the paper.

Martin: Yes, I’ve read quite a few of them

Mageau: However, nothing really changed until we all joined together and organised ourselves so that we could send a letter to our senators.
Martin: So you feel then, since the early 1990's until today that there’s been quite a significant change in the status of women’s orchestral music being performed.

Mageau: Yes, in women’s music full stop. You know there is much more women’s work broadcast on the ABC now. Some sort of a spearhead was needed to just break through that glass ceiling. Of course the orchestral panel was established and things opened up. ABC classics occasionally had a work by a woman on its label. A lot of younger women coming along are just walking in and being just a composer. This thing of being a woman composer, thank God we can bury it, we can bury it, because it's so silly. Gender has nothing to do with creativity.

Martin: Is there any difference in the treatment of women composers within the orchestral field here in Australia as opposed to that in America?

Mageau: Oh it's hard to say now because I haven't worked in America for many years. I’ve done more work in Europe. I can’t make a comparison.

Martin: Have you any thoughts on the orchestral commissioning process in Australia?

Mageau: Well I think that opportunities are occurring here at least up until now. The ABC offered a couple of orchestral commissions every year. Elena Kats-Chernin’s been commissioned; Helen Gifford, Anne Boyd, myself. I think Mary Finsterer might have been.

Martin: Which of your orchestral works has been the most successful, in terms of performances and reception?

Mageau: Probably the work that has received the widest performance exposure in international circles is the *Triple Concerto*. It has also earned me the most substantial royalties. Next *An Early Autumn’s Dreaming* has received most live performances here in Melbourne and Queensland and by being recorded for CD in Crakow with the Polish Radio and TV Symphony Orchestra. The SBS TV Youth Orchestra included it on its European tour and released an excerpt on its video: A European Experience. The concerto Grosso is played more often on radio here in Australia. Yet *The Furies*,
my best work, has yet to make its mark, despite two different live performances and CD release.

Martin: Would you consider orchestral writing to be a pinnacle of composition?

Mageau: Well not for everybody. It was for me, but that was a personal goal. It was something I wanted to achieve and I wanted to write a body of orchestral works, but other composers don't feel that way at all. You know a lot of the younger people say, 'oh Lord, who wants to write for a symphony orchestra today.' I do it because I love it. I think it's an absolute buzz when you walk into that first rehearsal and you meet orchestral people and you talk with them and you learn things and you develop these wonderful, warm friendships on many occasions. The whole thing is just a mammoth rush. Other people don't see it that way at all and to each his own [laughs].

Martin: What are your future plans regarding orchestral works?

Mageau: Oh I don't want to write any more [laughs]. After nineteen orchestral scores I feel I need a break.

Martin: I remember you said to me the other day that you felt tired.

Mageau: Yes, I get tired sitting for all that long time to score and putting all those thousands of spots on paper. I feel my eyes need a rest. You just want to get off your bottom and go out in the garden and dig up some earth - do something different. When you're writing, you're absolutely tied to that paper with those five lives on it [laughs].

Martin: Yes, it's a huge undertaking an orchestral work

Mageau: Yes it is. It takes a lot of emotional and psychic energy. There's a time to work to fulfil the dream and there's a time to let go and take a well deserved rest.

Brisbane composer Mary Mageau - Chair of Session and First Speaker

Good afternoon everyone, it’s lovely to be here again in Sydney. I’d like to welcome you to this forum discussion ‘The Big Picture’. Our forum has assembled a very distinguished group of women composers. They represent all age groups; each of these women is today, still professionally active. All have contributed music to ‘The Big Picture’, and all are happy to share ideas - some of their strategies for developing their creative work and many of their professional concerns.

Ten years ago during the 1988 Australian National Composers Conference which was held at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, we women at that time strongly articulated the difficulties that we felt that we were encountering in receiving recognition and support for our work. Now today, when we view the situation in our present context, I think it only indicates a slight improvement and we might have to think and talk about ways to overcome that this afternoon. Yes, I think we have to acknowledge that women’s music is more quickly commissioned, recorded, performed and broadcast today, but it seems that the area that’s targeted are instrumental solos, music for the voice, and music for small ensembles. I think that we can thank women performers for doing a great deal of this for us. However, I think we still have to admit that the doors are firmly bolted against women being commissioned for writing large scale works for very significant forces. Here I’m thinking about such professional organisations as the big ballet and opera companies, the symphony orchestras and so on. It seems to be very difficult for us to make our entry into that ‘Big Picture’.

Another thing too, is that some of these works do come to light, they do originate, they’re given a first performance, but then they seem to sink to the bottom like a stone, never to resurface again. It’s often been said that it’s that elusive second performance, and sometimes that third performance, that is the one that’s more important to a composer than the premiere.
We’re so fortunate to live in a world of technology which enables a musical work to celebrate an ongoing life in the compact disc, the video and the broadcast format. This achievement however involves a very long labour intensive process. Not only must the work be written, performance parts have to be extracted and checked prior to the rehearsals and the performance, while recording sessions follow with composers involved, hopefully, in the editing and remastering processes. Finally pre-production materials, biographical and program notes, photos must be supplied, all of which takes time to assemble. Then the finished CD has to be distributed, sometimes personally to radio stations where there is perhaps a connection with an announcer or presenter and so forth. However, all of that long labour is really important and comes to fruition when one has a major work on compact disc. Broadcasts reach thousands of people, while attendance at scattered concerts might only reach a few. A composer’s profile is built through name recognition and through the growth of an expanding catalogue of work. In that context a discography is a very essential tool that we all should have.

In ‘The Big Picture’, because our present economic climate is one that’s built on competition and scarcity rather than on cooperation and abundance, much of a composer’s energy is now required to market themselves. Our creative works have become linked to the dollar bill, with our music assuming the guise of a commodity, an item now, that can be bought and sold for a price. Music’s imaginative strength, it’s artistic vigour and the quality of it’s craft is too often evaluated in terms of box office returns. This new climate of economic rationalism has also spawned an ever evolving and expanding bureaucracy of arts advisers and administrators; a few of these actually receive six figure salaries. Now many of these people are skilful, and are well trained in administration, and yet they are non-artistic practitioners, which leads one to be concerned about their ability to make genuinely informed judgements on an individual artist’s creative worth. We know that many organisations have panels; they have peer groups and that’s a wonderful thing, but the input from practising artists is advisory and it never seems to be policy making. I think we watch in dismay as the bureaucratic numbers increase along with their salaries, their social functions and their travel expenses. Again and again, with each new federal budget, we get the same old refrain, ‘it is with deep regret that funding to the arts will have to be cut’. Yet, officialdom seems to thrive, while less and less money seems to find its way into artistic pockets. Is there something out of focus here? Isn’t it our intellectual property and creative work that should be served by them? Or have I got it all wrong?
To conclude my part of ‘The Big Picture’ presentation with a few personal comments: in 1986 I took a firm decision to devote the next ten years of my life to writing orchestral music. I always think in decades rather than in years. I felt that I should do this because large scale works were under-represented in my catalogue and because opportunities for orchestral performance existed in Queensland. Now I must say something very positive about the musical scene in Queensland. Since the middle 1980’s there has been an active policy to include performances of music by contemporary Australian composers and women have done very, very well indeed. We have a ‘Meet The Composer’ Series’, and it was a constant thing almost, to have at least one work by a woman included in a program. As of the last several years the Queensland Symphony Orchestra sponsors one full evening every year, in the ‘Meet the Composer’ Series’, to ‘Composing Women’. And in the last two years there have been nine works performed by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra in that series.

I also felt deeply that if I didn’t write my major works ten years ago it was likely I would never do so. Eleven years later and at sixty three years of age I have just completed my sixteenth orchestral score. Every work has been performed with the most recent one being premiered in November. Five of these are smaller works. Yes, they were commissioned for school orchestras which I love writing for, for I have a strong interest in educational music as well, but the others include fifteen to twenty minute works for full symphonic forces with, and without, soloists. Five of the big works are available today on compact disc as well, two within Australia, and three on the Vienna Modern Masters label. I evolved a two-pronged strategy that enabled me to realise this goal, and I thought I might just like to share it with you. First, in 86, I conceived my core musical identity as a symphonic composer. And whenever anybody asked me what are you working on, I always told them ‘ten years of orchestral music’. I am convinced that because I believed in myself in this way that I projected that particular energy - I attracted orchestral opportunities to myself. I believe very deeply that what we think of consciously we will manifest. Initially I wrote concerti, and I did this by cultivating and creating interest in good quality soloists who were themselves attached to musical organisations or universities. Therefore I made every piece a win, win situation. My music featured their skills and included their input in the compositional process.

It was that sort of close interaction that I tried to develop. In turn, of course, I could make use of their organisation or facility to mount a first performance. I created this working model with my very first concerto which involved harpsichordist, Audley
Green. We often used to joke about playing musical chairs. Audley is an Australian who lives in the United States and I’m an American who lives in Australia, and that was very useful because performance opportunities were able to occur on both continents. Audley’s commissioned concerto for harpsichord and strings was premiered with the Hartford Symphony in Connecticut which is her home town and with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra in Brisbane, my home town. Audley had made a very practical suggestion. She said, ‘Mary, I want a version of this concerto that I can take on tour. In the States I work with a very good string quintet so I want you to do me an alternate score’. No problem. Easily achieved because I scored the full orchestral parts without any divisi writing, and so we were just able to extract the principles parts and give them to Audley and there were her orchestral parts for the quintet. Audley played her chamber version at the Sebego Longlake Chamber Music Festival in Maine and the Australian counterpart here at the Orange Music Festival. Over the years many performances eventuated both in the orchestral and in the chamber format, but the best part of all, Audley and I have maintained a close, warm and friendly relationship.

I’m also convinced that having more than one string to your bow in terms of your residence or citizenship or even your travel aspirations can be very beneficial. I’ve maintained dual American/Australian citizenship which allowed me to visit my former place of residence in order to continue professional relationships with American colleagues who over the years have very generously continued to play my music. Then I’ve had successful commissions too that eventuated from those contacts. My Australian residence of twenty four years now, has benefited me through musical friends down here doing the same for my work. They’ve even taken my music to China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Indonesia. I would never have had that opportunity had I lived in the States. The Commonwealth connection too reaps many rewards with performances in England, in Ireland and in Western Europe. Finally I had an international composition win that took the Darling Downs Piano Trio, resident in Queensland, and myself to Central Europe where we did chamber music concerts and we recorded for the Vienna Modern Masters label.

I think it’s important, especially if you’re young and you’re starting out, to budget if you can, a certain amount of your income so that you will travel, because I think international travel very important. If you’re going to sit for your whole life in Sydney, or in Brisbane or in Melbourne you really will not have the exposure that your music should have. It took me six years of hard, steady work before my name became associated with large scale writing. Then commissions and performance
requests began to arrive regularly. At the end of the day I believe that how you see yourself, and how you work to fulfil this, is what you will become. Also, composition is a very lonely and isolating activity, and in the recreation process when we socialise; when we work with performers and conductors; I think here we must work very hard at developing good public relations. Be inclusive. Be charitable about your colleagues. Cooperate rather than compete, and work closely with performers to develop mutually beneficial outcomes for you both. I believe that successful public relations carries your career much further afield than all the marketing skills in the world. In speaking generally now to women composers, we all share a perception that opportunities are still not forthcoming and that an unspoken policy of discrimination remains in place. Is there any hard data that supports these misgivings?

Mageau then introduces musicologist Sally Macarthur as second speaker.
Sydney composer Miriam Hyde - Third Speaker

I am honoured to be among some of my eminent fellow composers, although fellow seems to be rather the inappropriate epithet in this case. I speak not only for women composers in general, but for those who have also brought up a family, albeit in my case a modest number of two, but after being without my husband for five and a half years of the war and then finding myself on the brink of thirty seven, perhaps two was enough.

At eighty four I can say that I’ve spanned the greater part of this century. Consequently I have witnessed great changes in the lot of composers, women in particular, in some ways for the better. It is fortunate that in youth we seem unaware of the limits of time, and even perhaps of our potential talent, and therefore plunge into ‘The Big Picture’ fearlessly.

From a very early age musical ideas just came compellingly in my mind, and I either composed at the piano, memorising a little piece bit by bit, or later, when I was able, writing it down in manuscript. It hadn’t occurred to me that, in little Adelaide anyway in the 1920’s and 30’s, there was anything unusual about a girl composing, nor did my family give me that impression. It was not until I had shaken off the demands of general education, schooling and the academic demands of a Mus Bac course and had won a scholarship to the Royal College in London that I found for the first time, and it has remained the only time in my life, that I was not only free, but indeed had an obligation to produce the musical goods. I was very mindful of the fact that I had won the scholarship among other competitors and had to justify the decision of the adjudicators. My scholarship was nominally for piano, and perhaps if I had not worked hard at that subject my two concertos would never have been performed or recorded. Some sixty years after they were written, they have, through an ABC CD, become available commercially; the 1975 version with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Geoffrey Simon.

Before leaving Adelaide, I had in fact written a movement for two pianos. No doubt I was already thinking of it orchestrally, but there was no student orchestra at the Elder Conservatorium in those days. Even a concerto for a final diploma performance was just a two piano event. What a difference I found so soon in London. R.O.Morris, my first composition professor, suggested orchestrating that one movement and adding two others, and within about eighteen months I was playing the concerto with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Leslie Heward.
Who did the part copying you may well ask, for "The Big Picture"? It would seem very wasteful of precious scholarship time to sit for hours a day copying parts with all the duplications for the string sections. And this is where I remind you younger composers that photocopying was not heard of in those dim, dark ages. This, and other accelerated advances in technology, is where our younger composers have scored, shall we say! They can produce parts quickly and be off again on the next Big Picture without a chunk being taken out of eternity. As for my concerto, I was fortunate that the Butterworth Trust, in memory of a Royal College scholar who lost his life in WWI, defrayed the cost of having those parts copied by a professional musician. The account was £13 14s 1d. It would have been far beyond my maintenance allowance, and even in relation to the cost of living in England at the time, it would seem to be a slow laborious way of earning a living. But further to writing a concerto it is really the composer's job also to produce two piano copies with the skill of reducing most effectively the orchestral part to one pair of hands. This is essential for rehearsal before being confronted by the whole orchestra. The total number of pages required therefore for a concerto is quite formidable. Within my three years of scholarship I wrote not only the two concertos, but two overtures; the *Heroic Elegy* and a *Lyric*. Of those, the work involving the largest orchestral force was the *Symphonic Overture*. You may well ask, was it ever performed? Yes, I had the pleasure of hearing it once, conducted by Sir Bernard Heize in the Sydney Town Hall in the late 1930's. And what about the Adelaide Overture, was it ever performed? Yes, Sir Malcolm Sargeant conducted it in the Adelaide Centennial Hall in 1936. I have not heard it since. In fact I heard it then only on radio, as by that time I had moved to Sydney.

Now surely, if two such eminent conductors saw fit to be associated with those works they are worth more than one performance. And now let me emphasise that I think the greatest handicap in our large scale works has been the lack of publication. Even if you are fortunate to have a few performances of a major work, the one score becomes untidy and mutilated. Each conductor adds something in the way of reminders. A big blue pencil mark at a change of signature; a drawing of a pair of glasses, meaning watch for this horn entry; or even after rehearsing in a hot studio, the drops of perspiration have spread the ink everywhere to a point of illegibility.

Composers of my generation have a particular problem in that our ancient scores are on manuscript no longer standard for photocopying. In fact, even if they are not used, but stowed away in a trunk somewhere, the paper itself deteriorates as time goes by.
Photocopying will provide new, clean white paper, but it will also perpetuate the disfigurements. The same may be said of the original orchestral parts. Why are our major scores not published even when they have had the blessing of quite famous conductors? One can hardly argue with our Australian music publishers who will say, ‘we’d be lucky to sell twelve copies’. Our population is still small, and of that only a small percentage is really interested in large scale, serious works. Oh yes, there is the Australia Council. On the rare occasions when I have considered making an application for a grant, I have been deterred by the enormous amount of bureaucracy; the forests that have been mown down to produce so many pages of fine print. I never have been any good at filling in forms. I can put my name and address and the date and then I get perplexed by what follows. Since those productive years of mine in London and during many years of family life, I have written six orchestral works. Kelso Overture, Happy Occasion Overture, Fantasy Romantic which is a one movement concerto, Symphonic Poem, a Theme and Variations and Village Fair. The latter was scored as a ballet, but never choreographed probably because of war time lack of funds.

In about sixty years I have played my Fantasy Romantic five or six times. The last occasion was last year about thirty years after it was produced during a Hobart Composers Seminar in 1963. The Symphonic Poem and Theme and Variations have never been publicly performed or broadcast. I venture to suggest that they are not of less merit than many works that quite frequently see the light. My Village Fair was, as I discovered only some time after the event, recorded by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra some years ago. Written in 1943, the first time I ever heard it performed was a couple of years ago by the Strathfield Orchestra. You will be amused when I tell you that as it concluded a lady came to my row in the audience and said, ‘Oh I just want to tell you how much I enjoyed your work. And who did the orchestration for you?’ Apparently women composers are only expected to hum the tune and somebody else does all the major part of the work.

I have seen no reason to continue writing orchestral works for I doubt if I could do better than in a few of those from the 1950’s that are lying dormant. Apart from labour intensive orchestral writing, surely sonatas and quartets are worthy of the label ‘The Big Picture’. My one string quartet of 1952, which shared with Richard Meale the Music Teachers Association Jubilee Prize, has as far as I can recall, never been publicly performed. Soon after writing it was played in my presence by a kind Sydney quartet. Rather to my embarrassment I was handed a ruler and invited to
conduct it. As I waved the ruler about I quickly realised that I had neither the aptitude nor the ambition to pursue that role.

In the sonata category I have four, for piano, viola, clarinet flute. Amazingly the flute sonata was published only a few years ago by Kelly Sebastian, an Adelaide firm which also brought my clarinet sonata to the point of an extremely well edited final proof only apparently to become insolvent. The Australian Music Centre at least has authority to provide copies of that proof. This sonata is superbly played on a Tall Poppies CD by Nigel Westlake and David Bollard who, however, were studying the work from my manuscript. For this reason probably it is not included in the two CDs of my chamber music recently launched by Walsingham Classics thanks to the generous gesture of pianist James Muir and his Sydney Chamber Players.

I think there’s a great thankfulness to have lived as long as a few of us have because quite unexpectedly it seems in our very late years some of these very touching tributes do come about. I think the most substantial of my sonatas is that for piano written during the stress of the war years. Again, in the absence of photocopying I made five copies of its 28 pages and at least it has had a few performers other than myself, notably David Lockett. I took special pains over the number five copy refining some details of notation, so that it would furnish some very legible photocopies through the AMC.

Now finally on a positive note, or what was to have been a positive note, because I was going to say that over many years a great deal of prejudice towards women composers has been broken down, until just a few days ago I received a newsletter with the quite horrifying statistics of how very few performances of works by women composers have been publicly made by our major orchestras and other organisations within the last ten years. So perhaps there’s still a long way to go before we women composers have adequate representation. I think the prejudice certainly has been very happily broken down in the music teachers’ profession. I’m quite sure that the average teacher no longer looks for the name of a man composer on the cover. When my first little pieces were published in 1936, the Forest Echoes, it was seriously suggested to me that I ought to adopt a male nom-de-plume. Fortunately I didn’t succumb to that. So through the music teachers and these little pictures in a lot of the AMEB books, we have received a lot of interest and encouragement, and at least some of those small works are quite frequently featured in the many eisteddfods that have grown up in so many places through Australia.
And now I think that’s all I have to say, and I thank the music teachers, and I thank you all for listening to me.

Sydney composer Caroline Szeto - Fourth Speaker

I’ll begin by saying that I think it’s ironic that we’re discussing ‘Big Picture’ music in the women’s music festival and not have women’s ‘Big Picture’ music included in the festival. Please don’t interpret this comment as a criticism in any way. I’ve stated it merely to highlight the inherent difficulty in organising this particular genre. I’m apprehensive about discussing strategies and ideas on improving women’s opportunities in this area because I don’t think I can shed light on solutions. If I did have solutions they’d already be executed.

Composers, by and large, spend most of their time at the creative process and leave the other necessary support processes to others. So firstly I point the finger at myself. I don’t believe that I promote myself or pursue opportunities vigorously, or as vigorously as other composers do, or as perhaps as I feel I ought too. Secondly, without wanting to blow my own trumpet, I’ve had orchestral works performed every year for the last eight years, that is since 1990. I don’t question myself on how well I’m doing, or what problems there are etc., although I’ve had to answer these sorts of questions several times in the last few years when I’ve been surveyed as a female composer of orchestral music. So absolute answers to these sorts of questions that we’re asking today are probably best obtained from the sorts of researchers in this field who have collected and collated a lot of information from female composers. So I’ll pass the buck here. I also pass the buck when the question is asked about under-representation in orchestral performances. I usually direct the researchers to other people. I say ‘don’t ask me, ask the people who program concerts on why they excluded or included women’s music’.

Anyway I think this is a hypothetical question because I don’t believe you will ever obtain a truthful, negative answer. What I mean is, you will not expect people who exclude women’s music in concert programs to be so blunt, or insulting by admitting
that they didn’t have a high enough regard for women’s music, or, on the other hand
being so patronising by saying they included women’s music merely because they
were women’s. If these were in fact negative truths there exists a very insidious
problem. Identifying the problem is very important, but that’s only the starting point.
Of course there is no need to address a truthful positive answer as there’s no problem
to deal with. ‘Big Picture’ music by its nature is a very difficult medium to organise,
as well as a very forbidding genre for most composers. Of the total number of
composers, regardless of gender, there is probably only a very small number of
composers involved in ‘Big Picture’ music. So given that fact, women would be even
more disproportionately under-represented in ‘Big Picture’ music because I think
that women only represent around 20% of the total number of composers. So what
I’m saying here is that under-representation of women’s ‘Big Picture’ music already
begins with under-representation in women’s scores, and in turn, the under-representa-
tion is further compounded by the fact that they are under-represented in
performances and recordings.

I say that ‘Big Picture’ music is forbidding because there are fewer opportunities in
this genre than there are in other genres. Secondly, more work is required to produce
‘Big Picture’ music than other genres, so without an invitation or an offer of a
performance for such a work a composer would probably not expend the effort to
produce such a work unless there was a lot of spare time to do so. In my own case I
started to write ‘Big Picture’ music even without an invitation or a promise of a
performance because, firstly I really wanted to do so, and secondly I was an
undergraduate student and such a work could contribute to my assessment in
composition studies. Therefore all my efforts were not totally wasted. My first real
opportunity came in the National Orchestral Composers School where I experienced
my first professional performance of my orchestral work. An aside here, yet pertinent
to today’s discussion session, is that the selection of the four composers for the
school was done from nom-de-plume entries and I was selected by judges to whom I
was, at that time, totally unknown even if my identity was disclosed. This fact gives
me great hope and satisfaction to know that I was selected on merit, and not on
gender or other extraneous reasons. Although I never regard myself as a female
composer I know that others do because many people come up to me after a
performance of my work and say to me they like the music very much, but that the
music didn’t sound female, or you couldn’t tell it was composed by a female
composer. This comment I’m sure is intended as a compliment. This also confirms
that some people do perceive gender in music, and if such preconceived ideas are
negative and I suspect that they are, then this sets back women's efforts of gaining recognition as composers equal in status to men.

Now back to the National Orchestral Composers School. This opportunity probably opened other doors for me. It was followed by a commission for an orchestral fanfare for the ABC's sixtieth anniversary, and later another orchestral work followed. So this demonstrates that not only did one opportunity lead itself to another, it also gave opportunities to people who selected work for concert programs to include a work of mine should they choose to do so. The latest opportunity was in June this year when two of my works were included in this second international festival of new music for orchestra in the Czech Republic. So if I had not composed orchestral works, then the opportunity for inclusion in that festival would not have been possible, and opportunities that followed such as CD recordings would also not be possible. I do believe there are opportunities for performance of my music that I don't avail myself of, and from the number of performances of my orchestral works, I don't think I can say that gender bias has worked against me. Maybe I'm wrong. I guess there is always the hypothetical question of, 'what if?' I'll just finish by saying the reward of experiencing fruition in performance of my own work of 'Big Picture' music is exhilarating and other rewards that flow from it are well worthwhile.

Taped and transcribed by Ruth Lee Martin with the kind permission of the composers.
Interview with Professor Nicolette Fraillon, Director of the Canberra School of Music and Conductor, at the Canberra School of Music on the 30th March, 2000.

Martin: What have been your experiences as a woman and a conductor, and have you found it more difficult being a woman?

Fraillon: Yes. Yes, to everything. Yes, in terms of work opportunities: yes, in terms of the way you are treated by certain people. Not really once you actually prove you know what you are doing, and, to varying degrees, it also depends on which country you are in, and the age group of the people you are working with. Student orchestras are not a problem in whatever country generally, in terms of being a woman, and being a conductor, and being an authoritative figure. Professional orchestras definitely. Working in Holland I was told amazing things by directors of a couple of orchestras: ‘We really like what you are doing but we can’t employ you because you are a woman,’ as though that was a perfectly valid excuse. At least they were up front about it, others were not quite as up front, but still did the same thing. People would come up afterwards - all sorts of people - the public, managers, others, and say ‘Well, that was really, really good for a woman,’ that kind of thing. I’ve had things said to me - certainly in Australia they are quite libellous, where you could actually take someone to court over their attitude to you and your work - just gender based - but in Holland the regulations aren’t quite as strong. It’s difficult also in the way professional orchestras tend to look at you, things that are really annoying, and if it’s done continuously then it’s an extra pressure: the way you look, the kind of clothes that you wear. They make comments that noone would ever dream of making about a male conductor, other than conducting styles or things like that, but not really personal comments about your appearance - everything from age, to skin, to hairdo, to the clothes that you wear. As I said, it’s quite irrelevant to what you’re trying to do in one way, and in another way it’s symbolic of the way you are looked at. You are not looked at, when you first get up on the podium, on the same basis as your male
colleagues. You can be judged - I remember I was doing a performance and I forgot my usual conducting clothes and only realised that a quarter of an hour beforehand, and I didn’t have time to go and pick them up, and the only thing I had was a vest. Now usually I’m quite careful and make sure that I don’t wear anything that’s too suggestive - not that it was. It was just a shirt that had the top button missing. I got representations from the orchestral body - it wasn’t their artistic committee, it was the reps - the next day suggesting that ‘how dare I wear something that was as suggestive.’ And it wasn’t. It wasn’t any more deeply cut than a t-shirt or something. But you know the kind of things they try and get at you with.

Being a conductor is very difficult anyway, because you’re open to everything and everybody, that’s part of the job. But there are, certainly among more elderly members of orchestras, and certainly in essentially far more chauvinistic cultures than ours which a lot of European cultures are, where there aren’t females in any kind of management positions: where female concert masters are few and far between. Then you are given a hard time, or can be. Certainly you’re judged in a different way purely for being a woman. They are not used to authority figures who are female. I have had arguments with people as to why we couldn’t do it - a female cannot be authoritative. Ridiculous things like ‘you won’t have the same physical stamina. How could you possibly conduct an opera, you won’t have the physical stamina to get through.’ I mean completely absurd things when you look at what female athletes are doing, and what childbirth is all about [laughs]. Men you go through that - there’d be no hope! But it is believed by people, and not only by males but by females as well. I’ve sat on panels where the leading positions in orchestras on audition panels are women, and where women have also come out and said ‘oh we don’t want a woman sitting up the front,’ because they couldn’t deal with that. I never used to - before I left Australia, I wasn’t a particular exponent of, neither was I opposed to the idea. I just hadn’t spent much time thinking about, proportional representation. But I certainly came to it overseas both working as a musician in Vienna first, and then as a conductor in later, because until people actually see more women in positions of power, and that doesn’t mean that they could be incompetent because obviously that has the completely reverse effect, but competent women who are in positions they often don’t believe that women can do it.

Because I was the only female conductor based in Holland - there were a couple of others coming and guesting with the major orchestras, but some of the major
orchestras were just getting around to inviting women, I also felt an enormous pressure not to fail because I was kind of the only representative of the sex, and the pressure of that, combined with the fact that as a female working in an essentially male dominated profession, I could never be tired: I could never make a mistake of any kind because if I did it wasn’t because I was tired, it was because I was a women. They’d say ‘oh she can’t deal with it,’ even if I’d been conducting twelve hours a day and doing everything in between. My position involved a lot of admin. things as well. None of that would be recognised, it was only because ‘oh she’s a woman, she can’t do it,’ and feeling that I had to succeed, not for myself, but because otherwise other people weren’t going to be given a chance. That was also an extra pressure. I’ve heard a lot about Simone Young who was working with the Vienna Phil and at the ‘Met’, and again orchestra managers who have said to me that ‘of course the only reason she’s got anywhere is because she just unbuttons her shirt.’ That kind of thing, which they are far less likely to say about male conductors. Everyone slags off about conductors male or female. They’ll tell jokes, but more often than not it’s just a discussion of their ability as a conductor, their quirks and their idiosyncrasies, not the fact that ‘oh he just unbuttoned his fly and slept with the orchestra manager.’ That hardly ever happens, and I find it still completely offensive.

Now when I was actually working with orchestras - again orchestras vary anyway, each has its own personality, and what works with one orchestra brilliantly, male or female conductor, a relationship won’t necessarily work with another, it either clicks or it doesn’t for whatever reasons -but there are always - if there were people who were just out to give me problems, for no reason, but just to create problems, it was usually the brass players which is still essentially a male dominated profession. In Holland there are a few female horn players, and one or two female trumpet players, but that’s about it, and the rest is just boys club. The females in that part of the profession also talk about their difficulties: the way they [males] talk, the jokes, the drinking - you know, its a whole culture that tends to go with brass players, and they, more often than not, have problems dealing with a female conductor. There are other odd people that would have their problems as well, but generally, if there was going to be problems it would be coming from the brass section who would then set up to ringlead other difficulties, and really for no other reason than for making your life horrible.
Martin: How do you view Australia compared to Europe regarding the acceptance of women conductors?

Fraillon: Not fantastic. I mean Simone is obviously doing an enormous amount because she has a level of professional experience that no-one can deny. Certainly none of our male colleagues - even Bonyne - gets anywhere near where she’s been, and what she’s conducted. In conducting ages she’s really young, she’s just setting out, and it horrified me, and probably her as well, that she wasn’t invited back to the country for many, many years when some of her male colleagues who had done far less were being invited back. That was also a real sign you know, about female conductors. She was up there doing the Vienna Phil. for years before Australia deigned to invite her back. I think it’s a kind of arrogance on the part of orchestral managers here as well, that they could ignore that level of expertise. Now that she’s here, and certainly going to be based here more or less full time, it becomes less of an issue.

My own personal experiences with orchestras is similar to Europe. It is still unusual enough for there to be the same kinds of discussions. There are, particularly among the more older generation of orchestral musicians who have been in orchestras for many years, similar kinds of attitudes ‘oh a female can’t do it.’ You’re not taken seriously. I look at our orchestral culture and I think how many female concert masters do we have now? I don’t think we have any now that Barbara Gilby’s left and has come here to teach. She’s the only one, and I know from some of our professional orchestras they just do not want a female concert master. Again, they think a female can’t do it, and that kind of mentality is going to react in the same way to female conductors. I also know from discussions with people that similar things that I was talking about - comments are made about Simone, have been made about me, in ways that are completely unfair and irrelevant to the actual music-making. I think her heading up the opera company and doing what she’s doing here is an enormous plus for Australia and will do an enormous amount to change that on the smaller scale. Just being seen to do it by female students will have a role model effect, and that is important and will probably set about changing things, but I don’t actually - we have a lot more females, generally, in this country certainly than in Europe. America is probably more like here, but not in major important positions. I think its changing, but much too slowly.
Appendix 4: Orchestral Definitions

20th c. orchestras, like their predecessors vary in size, usually for economic reasons. However generally a symphony orchestra consists of the following:

Piccolo
Flutes I and II
Oboes I and II English horn Clarinet (in D or Eb)
Clarinets I and II (Bb or A)
Bass clarinet
Bassoons I and II
Contrabassoon
Horns I, II, III, IV
Trumpets I, II and III
Trombones I, II and III
Tuba
Timpani
Percussion
Harp Piano
Strings
1st violins 16 -18 players - 8 or 9 stands
2nd violins 14 -16 players - 7 or 8 stands
Violas 10 - 12 players - 5 or 6 stands
Cellos 10 -12 players - 5 or 6 stands
Double basses 8 - 10 players - 4 or 5 stands (Adler, 1989, p.605)
Appendix 5: Data from Appendix in Facing the Music by Helen Bainton

First Australian Concert Performances by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from 1939 - 1966

List of Australian Composers -
Antill, John
Bainton
Banks, Don
Benjamin, Arthur
Douglas, Clive
Goosens, Eugene
Grainger, Percy
Hanson, Raymond
Hughes, Robert
Meale, Richard
Morgan, David
Sculthorpe, Peter
*Sutherland, Margaret
Williamson, Malcolm

14 Australian composers in total
1 Australian woman composer - 7.14%
13 Australian men composers - 92.85%
52 composers in total

Counting national and international composers
1 woman composer - 1.92%
51 men composers - 98.07%

253 compositions in total
1 work by a woman composer - .39%
252 works by men composers - 99.60%
28 Australian compositions in total
1 work by an Australian woman - 3.57%
27 works by Australian men composers - 96.42%
Appendix 6: Orchestral Resources Kits

28 Australian Composers have at least one Resources Kit. There are 5 Australian women composers who have works represented. They are:

Anne Boyd  
Mary Finsterer  
Peggy Glanville-Hicks  
Elena Kats-Chernin  
Transfer  
Lisa Lim  
Black Sun  
Cor  
Sinfonia da Pacifica  
Stairs  
Cathedral

Women’s representation as composers is 17.85%.  
Men’s representation as composers is 82.15%.

There are 48 different works by the above composers represented in the Resources Kits. 41 of these are works by Australian men composers and 7 by Australian women composers. In terms of percentages of actual works, men’s representation is 85.4%, while women’s representation is 14.58%.
Appendix 7: Teaching Kits for Primary and Secondary Schools

There are 5 Australian composers, to date, whose works are presented to school children in Teaching Kits.

The one woman who has a work represented in a teaching kit is composer: Anne Boyd with Grathawai: Movt. III