



Loose Canons

Papers from the National Festival of Women's Music,
Canberra, 2001

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and
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been playing music, they have been composing it.

Margaret Sutherland, Peggy Glanville Hicks, Dulcie Holland, Mirrie Hill, Moneta Eagles and Miriam Hyde can be loosely grouped as the first generation of Australia women to have received recognition – no matter how little, or in many cases, belated – as “professional” composers. In addition to Larry Sitsky’s recital of piano works by a number of these women in a unified program, other ensembles and performers chose to acknowledge the importance of their works.

The next generation of Australian women could be characterised as having started to find their voice in the 1970s; Ann Ghandar, Anne Boyd, Ann Carr-Boyd, Betty Beath, Gillian Whitehead, Moya Henderson, Judith Clingan, Ros Bandt, Helen Gifford, Mary Mageau and Jennifer Fowler, while all still composing and very much still to be considered relevant and current, can also be linked with a time in Australian music where second wave feminism and the opening of links to Asia had a great impact. As was to be expected, many of the performers at the Festival chose to include works by these influential women, linked by historical context and yet producing a range of original and innovative voices.

The third generation of composers to be featured during the Festival reflect the widening diversity of Australian music in general; composers such as Elena Kats Chernin, Sarah de Jong, Liza Lim, Amanda Handel, Caroline Szeto, Vanessa Tomlinson, Ruth Lee Martin, Mary Finsterer, Amanda Stewart, Lisa Crane, Linda Kouvaras, Eve Duncan and Andrée Greenwell all have distinctly different styles and approaches to their music, with improvisation, electronica and sound sculpture resting easily beside more “traditional” textures and media.

If the choice of works performed at the National Festival of Women’s Music showed one thing, it was that there is a rich – if still a little hidden – history of composing women in this country. It also shows that progress, slow though it may be, is being made: it is still difficult to make a living as a composer of either gender in Australia, but as the example of Elena Kats-Chernin illustrates, it’s not impossible – a thought that would no doubt have been very pleasing to Margaret Sutherland and her contemporaries.

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* Bridget Elliot specialises in photographing classical musicians and is particularly interested in documenting and promoting Australian composers and performers of new music. This work-in-progress is to be published in the near future. It has been exhibited at the Sydney Opera House and other venues, and is on permanent display at the Australian Music Centre in Sydney.

Bridget contributes as a music photographer to local and international media as well as undertaking publicity work for musicians. Her portfolio includes over 130 of Australia's leading composers and performers, plus international musicians. She publishes a monthly photographic column, Behind the Scenes, in *Fine Music*.

Women's Voice and Cultural Identity

sound, communicating the spaciousness of our landscape, which of course represents loneliness and isolation as well as freedom and natural beauty. Like other earlier women composers, she also acknowledges the aboriginal relationship with the landscape in her music.

Her performances are recorded in the folk music collection in folk festival recordings, and her oral history interview discusses the particular difficulty of composing music that falls outside convenient terms of classification.

This last sound example is a recording of a living musician who carries on the tradition of Australian dance music that Sally Sloane was part of. Eileen McCoy was born in Ulverstone, Tasmania, and was raised on a farm, helping with the milking and tilling the potato crop before and after school. In the notes for the CD recording of her music, she describes how she managed to sneak out her father's fiddle one wet day: "When Dad came home he could tell what I was trying to play. He said, 'If you can play me a tune tonight when I come home I'll buy you one', and he did". Eileen has had a lifetime of playing dance music since that event.

The following track is from the album, *Eileen McCoy, Apple Island Fiddler*, produced by Rob Willis and Alan Musgrave. The first tune is identified by the musician who played it rather than by the composer: *Pop McCoys Jig/I Want to Go Home Again/ Captain Jig of the Horse*.

The recordings I have referred to represent the breadth of the holdings in the Oral History and Folklore Collections. There are rich rewards to be found by the researcher who wants to investigate the creation of music at its human source.

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Resonating Voices: Australian Women Composers and Musicians in the Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia [website version of this paper, which also contains soundfiles of the interviews and musical performances] (Canberra: National Library of Australia: <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/2001/ResonatingVoices.html>)

Symbolism and Bodily Metaphor in Anne Boyd's *Black Sun*

Ruth Lee Martin

Dr Ruth Lee Martin is a composer, musicologist and performer with interests in Scottish folk music, Australian contemporary music and gender studies. Ruth's compositional output consists of works for piano, small and large ensembles, choir and orchestra, as well as music for multimedia projects and folk songs. Stylistic fusion is a strong element in her work. Ruth is a lecturer at the School of Music, Australian National University.

Black Sun, an orchestral work written by Anne Boyd in Hong Kong in 1980, is interesting for the way in which Boyd's relationship to political and feminist socio-cultural forces is articulated within the work itself. The work was written as a memorial to the student dissidents who died in Tiannamen Square. Three important elements inspired the work and demonstrate the relationship to its socio-cultural context. These elements consist of: a statement from one of the Chinese students in hiding; a newspaper photograph of a bereaved mother whose child was killed in the massacre; a Chinese folksong.

The idea for centering this analysis on the body evolved as I considered these three elements. For me, as a woman and a mother, the newspaper photograph had great emotional impact, particularly in light of Boyd's statement that: '...it shows you the shape of the tune. It's a mother with her arm upraised covering her face...' (1).

It seemed intriguing, from an analytical perspective, to see if it were possible to trace the way in which this bodily gesture insinuated itself within the work, for in the creation of *Black Sun*, Boyd uses the body as signifying medium. She takes an embodied gesture of grief and despair, transforms the gesture into musical material and uses it as a foundation for the musical work. Thus she communicates grief and despair, as it is expressed in the body, by a complex process of signification throughout the work.

It is one of the peculiarities of the musicological world that an art form so dependent on the body should often ignore the body's existence. Or, more precisely, as Grosz points out, it is not that historically bodies have been ignored, but rather that they have only recently 'come to be understood as more than an impediment to our humanity' (2). Cusick explores the possibilities of an approach to analysis based on the body, stating that:

The relationship of notes to each other, because susceptible to apprehension as mind by mind, could not contain Hensel's story as I hear it, the story of a biological and metaphorical woman seeking entry into masculine discourse. Nor could music theory as I have known it help me tell the story I thought I heard, because it is a discipline that identifies nearly totally with the composer as mind, and which identifies music as mind...Music, an art which self-evidently does not exist until bodies make it and /or

receive it, is thought about as if it were a *mind-mind* game... (3).

Cusick argues that by including the body within analytical discourse an holistic picture of the composer's humanity – mind and body – is considered thus leading to a fuller understanding of the musical works themselves. In the same way I argue that the centering of the Boyd analysis around the body will provide a reading that is not only plausible, but also reveals something about the author in the process.

Boyd attempts to imbue her musical figures with semantic content by tapping into medieval notions of equating grief with descending semitones and the tritone as the 'devil's interval' (4). She also uses direct quotations in this case from Chinese folk music, which is another means of signification in music.

Programmatic musical context

The musical materials of *Black Sun* closely follow a programmatic narrative based on the Tiannamen Square massacre. Four different motives, representational of one aspect of the narrative, are woven throughout the piece, and it is the use of these motives in the various sections of the work that define its overall structure. The motives are as follows:

1. The grief motive (fig. 1). This symbolises the grief of the mother of one of the students killed during the massacre. On a broader and more profound level it also represents the grief of humanity at the abuse of human rights.



Fig. 1. Grief Motive (Flute, bars 1-2).

2. The dragon motive (fig. 2). This is taken from the Chinese folk tune 'The Ancestor of the Dragon' and symbolises all that is positive about the ideals of Chinese culture.



chords, a triplet figure of semitones taken from the inverted and fragmented grief motive, and much use of static clusters in seconds, drawn from the tanks/guns motive. In this section of the work can be found the fastest tempo of the piece, the greatest increase in harmonic rhythm and the longest use of tutti, although the dynamics do not attain their maximum.

The climactic section is representational of the struggle between good and evil (6) and, as the work moves towards its final conclusion, all dissonances are resolved as the work ends with material drawn from the dragon motive, in the symbolisation of the triumph of goodness. The overall design of the work is therefore completed with a return to this mono-thematic concept.

The grief motive

The most significant musical element that comprises this work is the grief motive, which dominates much of the piece. It can be found in various permutations in just over half of the work. As mentioned, the idea for the grief motive came from a newspaper photograph of the mother of a dead student dissident. In Boyd's own words:

There's another picture — a mother with her arm upraised covering her face...it shows you the shape of the tune. The woman has clearly lost her only child, probably a son, in the massacre and the gesture says it all, doesn't it? She's being supported by these wonderful young people in her grief and that's where the grief motive came from, that gesture of the arm — see that arm and the hand (7).

It is of profound significance that the gesture of the arm and hand of the bereaved mother is taken up into this work and is used as the dominant material. In the photograph (front of score), the bereaved mother, in a state of collapse, is being supported by two young people. Her right arm, the arm from which the grief motive is taken, is supported by a young male who seems almost helpless at the mother's anguish, while a young female supports the mother's body as it seems to sink towards the ground in a gesture of utmost despair. The hand itself is a gentle curve that descends, followed by the more angular downward slope of the arm. Boyd takes this gesture of the arm, with its distinctive contour, and through musical representation places it as the centre-piece of the work which is essentially a memorial to the dead.

Musically the work begins with a grief motive, a sigh built from the intervals of three falling semitones plus a tritone — intervals which in themselves express utter darkness and despair (8).

Boyd is consciously blurring boundaries. She substitutes one element for another — bodily gesture for musical gesture; the visual for the aural. In doing so, she brings the physical body itself as a dominant force into the work. She subverts, in a sense, the traditional focus of the orchestral world on the mind and the intellect, and places instead the body — a female body — squarely within the framework of the orchestral genre. Through a process of signification, Boyd represents the agony of a bereaved mother through this gesture of the arm, which in turn is represented musically by the

contour and intervals of the grief motive. She chooses as musical material descending semitones — intervals which historically represent sorrow: a musical representation that is still familiar to many within the Western art musical aesthetic even today. These descending semitones are followed by a leap downward of a tritone, or 'devil's interval'. It is of interest to note that Boyd speaks of the 'embodiment' of the mother's grief through the music itself: 'First the cry of grief and then...the translation of the embodiment of the agony of this woman through music as though remembering the death' (9).

To Boyd then, the depiction of the mother's grief through music gives this grief a sense of the tangible, that is, substantiality. In a curious process of signification, bodily gesture (belonging to the physical world) generates musical material (from the temporal world) to express grief (the emotional world), thereby giving the grief substantiality (the physical world). In tracing the use of this motive throughout the work, an understanding of the significance of its use, its relation to other musical material, and its relation to the narrative program becomes apparent. Through this process an understanding of the motive's importance compositionally and symbolically within this work, both on a macro and a micro level, can be reached.

Boyd uses the grief motive in a variety of ways (see Figures 6–9 inclusive). In the opening section of *Black Sun* the grief motive, a descending figure of semitones and a tritone combined with a rhythmic motive, begins in flutes followed by three staggered entries of the grief motive taken by the winds. Accompanying figures in the strings, providing some sense of stability as a foil to the descent of the grief motive, are slow moving stacked thirds which outline complex chords. Perhaps these accompanying figures could be likened to the young people from the newspaper photograph who support the bereaved mother in her grief. And yet these accompanying figures provide an 'uneasy' stability. The stacked thirds add dissonances — sharp 9ths, sharp 10ths, sharp 11ths, and 13ths — and there is a great deal of tension in the overall sound. As the piece unfolds, the uneasiness — the tension — increases and the grief motive is taken from the wind and given to the strings, while the woodwinds take over the static accompanying chords from the brass.



Fig. 6. Grief motive (flute, bars 1–2).

Boyd subjects the grief motive to a variety of treatments, sometimes extended, augmented, or inverted. Throughout the work the grief motive grows from the short 6 note phrase of the opening bar to phrases consisting of up to 17 notes which are cycled as they are subjected to transposition.

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Fig. 7. Grief motive extended (violins I, bars 15 – 21).

When the grief motive is inverted, it symbolises the ascent of the student souls to heaven (10) and, through this musical gesture, Boyd projects a glimmer of optimism into the work.



Fig. 8. Grief motive inverted (vibraphone, bars 92 – 94).

The pitch, rhythmic, textural and timbral elements of the grief motive are developed and extended as the work progresses. Each time the grief material is restated, it is subjected to a variety of treatments: extension by oscillation; extension by pitch repetition; and extension by repetition of the tritone leap (see Fig.9).

Textural development of the grief motive also occurs. For example, at bar 1 the grief motive (2 – 3 bars in length) begins in solo flute. The other instruments join in with staggered entries; at bar 2 the oboe begins, followed by the bassoon at bar 3 and the clarinet at bar 4. Because of the short length of the motive the staggered entries produce a texture which is very sparse, and this, combined with the score prescription that all instruments are to be played 'solo', produces a very thin texture. At bar 15, when the grief motive is given to the strings, the texture thickens to 4 heterophonic lines in violins 1 & 2, viola and cello (the double bass maintains an A flat pedal). By bar 58, when the grief motive section returns, the motive is passed back to the woodwinds (divided) and there are now 9 heterophonic lines which cycle the grief motive. At bar 83 the grief motive again returns, and although there are still 9 heterophonic lines the orchestral colour has become much more complex with the use of piccolo, flutes (divided) glockenspiel, vibraphone, harp, violin, viola and cello.

Martin: Symbolism and Bodily Metaphor



Fig. 9. Diagram of ways grief motive is extended.

The grief motive also develops extensively on a rhythmic level, mostly through the use of embellishment on the original pitch material. The first time the grief motive is stated it is as a simple rhythmic idea.

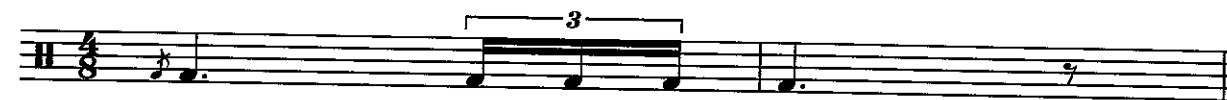


Fig. 10. Diagram of opening rhythmic material (flute, bars 1 – 2)

With every restatement there is a rhythmic variation through extension and embellishment. The rhythmic elements of the grief motive progressively become more complex.



Fig. 11. Diagram of extended rhythmic material (violin I, bars 15 – 21)

The sections which contain the grief motive are heterophonic and have a distinctive contour — either descending, as in the first part of the work, or ascending as in the second part — while, as

will be demonstrated, the other motivic units are mostly homophonic, have little or no harmonic or melodic contour, and have an inherently static quality. So the conscious process of development, in combination with its distinctive contour and textural interest, differentiates the grief motive from the other elements with which the work is composed, and in so doing accords it a place of prominence befitting its role as the original inspiration for the work.

The dragon motive

For Boyd the melody of the *Ancestor of the Dragon* symbolises 'the beauty and strength of the ideals of Chinese culture...(11). Boyd describes the impact of first hearing this tune:

These little children from many different countries joined together...and proceeded singing...There was scarcely a dry eye by the concluding chorus in which we all joined. The tune haunted me for weeks... (12).

The opening phrase of this Chinese folk-tune is used as the dragon motive. This motive, with a small ambitus of a major 3rd, is first used in the second mono-motivic section, in which the folk-tune is harmonised in a simple quasi-chorale style over ostinato accompaniment in the strings.

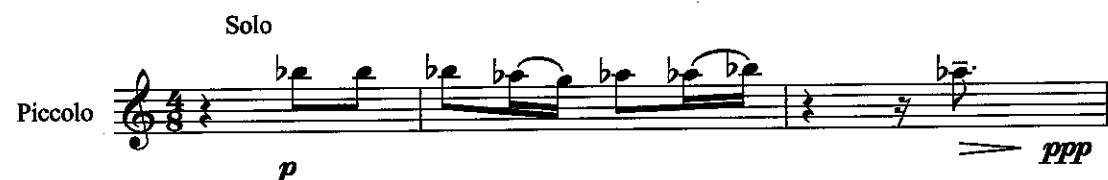


Fig. 12. Dragon motive (piccolo, bars 24 - 26)

Although there is some variation in the harmonisation of the melody, some slight variation in the orchestral colour and a very slight rhythmical variation, there is no true development or organic growth within this section.

The second time the dragon motive is heard is in a quasi-aleatoric section. Here the dragon motive, augmented but not harmonised, cycles as each instrument playing the same version of the dragon motive is introduced one at a time, until the whole orchestra is involved. This quasi-aleatoric section is broken up by loud tutti chords that hammer out repeated notes taken from the beginning fragment of the dragon motive.



Fig. 13. The Dragon motive augmented (double bass, bar 75)

The work finally comes to rest on a chord made up of all the notes of a pentatonic scale taken from

the dragon motive — A, B, D, E, F sharp — on the dynamic 'fff'. Thus the work ends with the dragon motive, which functions as a symbol of beauty and hope.

'Purity and innocence are thus seen to triumph over tyranny and repression. The students have not died in vain (13).

Yet there is not any true sense of development in the dragon motive and only one variation (augmentation). With the staggering of the entries of each instrument in the second of the dragon motive sections there is some textural build up, but it is a textural build up that utilises only one idea from many possibilities.

The tanks/guns motive

As the first of the dragon motive sections draws to a close, abrasive semitone clusters employing static pitches begin suddenly at dynamic 'f' in the trumpets. These clusters, according to Boyd, 'remind of tanks and machine-guns.' This tanks/guns motive, utilising the brass and percussion section of the orchestra, is tossed around amongst the instruments. The tanks/guns motives are rhythmically disparate but within a few bars they come together in rhythmic unity. There is a staggered build up of the instruments, so that some textural thickening occurs, although, as before, it is not a true textural development. Within each instrumental line there is no rhythmic or pitch development of the motive.



Fig. 14. Tanks/guns motive (trumpet, bar 35 - 36).

The death motive

The death motive comes in at bar 52, after the build up of tension in the preceding tanks/guns motivic section. The death motive consists of the highest possible note, played by all strings, and begins as two semi-quavers, the second of which is tied to a minim and sounds over 18 bars, after which it glissandos downwards. Here again the pitch is static. The death motive is sustained over many bars, acting as a high pedal note against which the grief motive gradually descends. After the descent of the glissando the death motive is followed by a 'Long Pause' — a moment of silence in remembrance of the dead.



Fig. 15. Death motive (violin I, bar 52).

Appropriately enough within the programmatic context the death motive is inert: quiescent.

It is somewhat paradoxical that it is the grief motive — based on intervals of 'utter darkness and despair' — that provides the work with motion, fluidity, development and organic growth. These are attributes associated with life — with living bodies — against which the limited development of the dragon motive, the static quality of the tanks/guns motive, and the death motive are juxtaposed. The grief motive provides *Black Sun* with a sense of the vital and viable. With processes akin to the body — growth, development and so forth — the grief motive represents or symbolises intrinsic qualities of the body, and through this symbolic representation motion and organic growth are embedded and disseminated throughout the work. The grief motive with its strong associations with the body, from which it was originally taken, supplies *Black Sun*'s sense of inherent motility and thus provides a generative compositional element within the work.

Summary

It is through the grief motive that Boyd (herself a mother) projects her empathy with another mother's grief, and it is through empathy that Boyd comprehends the anguish of the bereaved mother. In a sense, through this empathetic process, Boyd herself takes on some of this anguish, which in turn finds expressive outlet in the creation of this orchestral work, and Boyd projects herself into the framework of *Black Sun*. It is perhaps significant that Boyd begins the work with solo flute, the instrument that she has played since she was a girl, and one that has been a powerful instrument of cross-cultural meaning in her entire oeuvre.

It is interesting therefore to note the power of this work as a political statement. Responses by two different orchestras highlight the power of this work's trace. In the first instance *Black Sun* was taken up and used in a programme celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in America. In the second instance, this time in Australia, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra took pains to make public the fact that the performance of *Black Sun* on the third anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre was purely coincidental thereby distancing the programming of this work from political comment. Both orchestras recognised the significant potential for political commentary that a work can make.

Through *Black Sun*'s use of musical allegory and metaphor, Boyd propels into the public sphere a complex web of ideologies and stances and with the creation of *Black Sun* she creates a temporal memorial to the dead. Importantly, through the way in which the musical materials themselves are manipulated, *Black Sun* projects a glimpse of hope in the midst of despair, hope that is symbolised in the inverted, ascending grief motive and the resolution of dissonance into material drawn from the dragon motive. *Black Sun* is also the vehicle through which Boyd is prophet: 'This composition is unashamed in its intention as political allegory — I profoundly hope that as prophecy it will also be fulfilled' (14).

Endnotes

- (1) Boyd, A. 1998, pers. comm., 23 July.

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