

PETER JOSHUA SCULTHORPE AO OBE

1929–2014



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Peter Sculthorpe, who died in Sydney in 2014 at the age of eighty-five, did more than compose a substantial body of works in many of the major categories of concert music, with additionally representative scores in theatrical genres. His much rarer achievement was to be widely recognised as a composer by the Australian musical public and by Australians in general. It is not too much to claim that he was the Australian composer most readily and warmly identified for his contribution to orchestral and chamber music in recent times. Additionally, a strong case can be made for the proposition that no other Australian composer working in his preferred genres has ever enjoyed such general and unhesitating acceptance in this country. The main challenge to this statement is likely to be based on the high international reputation and the persistent, if limited, fame maintained by the achievement and personality of the Melbourne-born Percy Grainger since that composer's death more than half a century ago. Grainger's originality of outlook, coupled with his impeccable craftsmanship, have secured deeper allegiances for him in the two English-speaking countries, Britain and the US, where he did most of his work. His tours of Australia, while certainly prompted to

a significant degree by his strong personal identification with his native country, did not give him time to establish a consistent and representative adult presence here; and his adoption of American citizenship at the time of the First World War acted for many people as a limitation on the degree to which they felt able to claim national ownership of him.

Sculthorpe's generally favourable scrutiny from Australian musical publics and music professionals occurred as a result of a rare combination of individual and professional qualities. His personal charm, exercised without any taint of self-conscious cleverness and calculation, allowed him to communicate with patrons, politicians, musical administrators and performers in a way that eliminated distrust or mystification from their encounters and made him an ideal partner in their shared enterprises. His habit of giving an impression of friendly, non-threatening uncertainty in his public talks or his appearances on concert platforms to acknowledge applause removed any suggestion that he was revelling in public notice. The first major pieces of ensemble music with which he secured sympathetic attention from diverse Australian audiences were his *Irkanda IV* and his String Quartet No. 6, commissioned by Musica Viva Australia. The predominant tone of these pieces was passionately elegiac but essential contrasts in them were secured by faster music of a stiffly accented kind or by other easily grasped devices. It is true that his earliest pieces for full orchestra (or at least those first heard by regular concert audiences) might have been thought likely to encourage negative reactions from conservative listeners. The first piece in his *Sun Music* series, for example, established its sonorities for strings through columns of adjacent pitches at approximate quarter-tone intervals and constructed a passage for brass from an example originally prepared by Sculthorpe for educational purposes of the multiple serialisation of musical elements, an idea much discussed and promoted in the post-Second World War period. These effects were enthusiastically encouraged by the conductor Sir Bernard Heinze in the period of preparation in 1965 for a Commonwealth arts festival in London and an extended European tour for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra; and it may have served Sculthorpe well if he seemed at the time to bring with him a touch of *avant-garde* venturesomeness.

In the long run, however, one of the reasons for Sculthorpe's special place in contemporary Australian music has been his ability to establish a recognisable creative identity even when he has made use of unfamiliar styles and traditions. By the time he reached *Sun Music III* in 1967 he was able to mimic Balinese gamelan music while inserting within its strophes a fastidiously measured piece of lyricism which was, particularly in its presentation, both at ease with its quasi-Balinese surroundings and utterly typical of the composer. Later ventures into other styles of music retained this consistency of personality. Sculthorpe rarely ventured beyond accompanimental patterns combined with serene or anguished melodic entries or beyond interludes of spectral dance patterns. He refrained for the most part from complicated textures and rarely, if ever, sought to overwhelm his listeners with intricacies of structure or part-writing. At the time he was introducing his musical personality to a wider circle of listeners his music was often compared with the more radical works of his contemporary Richard Meale. Indeed there were attempts by misguided enthusiasts to construct hostilities of contrast between the two composers. Meale's adventurous discoveries eventually retreated, in a later stage of his composing life, into a surprising impersonation of late nineteenth-century traditions while Sculthorpe, without abandoning his consistency of musical personality, actually became bolder and more animated in the major scores of his middle years.

Sculthorpe's instinctive understanding of how to make his music relevant to people living in Australia (and also to people visiting this country) caused him to endow many of his orchestral works and some of his chamber works with the names of places or types of terrain. So *Kakadu* and *Mangrove*, two of his best instrumental works, are orchestral impressions of a particular place or a particular terrain to which many Australians can relate from actual or imagined experience; *Port Essington* and *At Quamby Bluff* (a movement from his String Quartet No. 12, its spirit also informing a score for string orchestra) re-inhabit, in chamber music terms, places with colonial histories embodying doomed futility and racial brutality. The tug of the southern Pacific Ocean and the cloud-fringed seascapes of tropical latitudes are part of this composer's imagined geography of his native country and its surroundings.

Sculthorpe's progress through private music education in his native Tasmania, training at the Melbourne University Conservatorium and studies at Oxford (interrupted and ended by the death of his father) left only the most basic influence on his musical style, once brief experiments in postwar modernism were experienced and abandoned. His musical vocabulary was relatively small but its consistency proved resistant to any but marginal adjustments or simple, self-explanatory

additions and made self-borrowing or adaptation in other works or variations in scoring stylistically trouble-free and persuasive. A short opera, *Quiros*, originally produced for television, demonstrated an ease of manner in musical theatre which the composer never chose to explore again. He preferred to deal with fundamental entities and symbols of human experience in his major theatrical score, *Rites of Passage*, and to express the plaints of individual loss in works of smaller scale. His commemoration of the reality of death expressed itself in numerous works involving varied musical forces, from solo cello to major assemblies of musicians. This preoccupation reached its summation in his choral-orchestral *Requiem*, composed when he was seventy-five and representing a major distillation of his gifts. At the same time he was always ready to write comparatively light-hearted occasional pieces and to meet the responsibilities of the eminent position he attained in Australian music and life by making arrangements of the national anthem and writing songs and other pieces for national occasions. He wrote a piano concerto but published no score labelled symphony. His most frequently used title and format from concert traditions was that of string quartet, which he applied to eighteen scores containing much of his most personal and subtly varied invention. Sculthorpe's lasting association with the University of Sydney, where he occupied a personal chair in composition and was later an Emeritus Professor, brought him into fruitful association with many young musicians of a creative bent. His method of teaching involved a minimum of prescription and a maximum of participation, from lesser to greater tasks, in a kind of co-operative process of composition.

One of Sculthorpe's most striking and surprising achievements was the incorporation of elements of Australian Aboriginal music into many of his later works. It had been assumed by many musicians that any such attempt at an interaction of musical cultures would be an inappropriate, even grotesque travesty of the richness of reference of music in Aboriginal ceremony and of its rhythmic subtlety. Attempts by Western-trained composers, such as Clive Douglas and Mirrie Hill, to come to some sort of terms with Aboriginal ceremony seemed to confirm this. Even John Antill's far more accomplished ballet score, *Corroboree*, was an intelligent and sensitive observer's impression of Aboriginal ceremony as a theatrical event rather than any kind of participation in its essential spirit. Consideration of well-meant approaches to Aboriginal musical culture (which was also a major part of Aboriginal culture in general) inevitably recalled the ideals of the self-titled Jindyworobak movement, centred in South Australia, which sought to find a key to the thousands of years of Aboriginal experience of Australian land, water, sky, birds and animal life through the use of Aboriginal words. The obvious weakness in Jindyworobak reasoning

was that any words chosen on the basis of their time-tested use and significance had no currency among the peoples more recently declaring themselves as Australian inhabitants. Traditional music, on the other hand, if absorbed in a reasonably plausible way into a Western type of concert music, can become a revived form of itself and can be recognised as such. Sculthorpe's typically diplomatic and respectfully developing use of Aboriginal themes, whether these themes had been remembered within the limited capacities of musical amateurs in colonial times or transcribed carefully and sensitively from recordings made by ethnologists and ethnomusicologists, became a part of his musical thinking. Favourite themes reappeared in more than one work and could serve expressive purposes ranging from wounded grief to jubilation. The clinching element in the composer's homage to Aboriginal music was his recognition of the part that could be played in such pieces by the incorporation of sympathetic improvisation on a didjeridu by a master player such as William Barton. Sculthorpe revised some of his scores to take account of

this and also produced new scores in which the activity of Barton is a pre-planned element. The practical logic of this development is a response to the recent history of the didjeridu. It has become a popular instrument, played with many degrees of skill by Aboriginal musicians who understand its history and by other players who have no real knowledge of its function and significance. Although the didjeridu is known to have been restricted in its use to tribal peoples inhabiting substantial areas of northern Australia its modern transformation into an instrument that can be used to represent Aboriginal culture in general and to escape, through its range of uses, from the glass display case of tradition, is an important modern instance of instrumental change and survival. Sculthorpe's involvement in this process represents one of his foremost achievements as a harmoniser, not only of sounds but also of the society of which he has been such a prominent and well-liked member.

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