

ROGER SMALLEY AM

1943–2015

FELLOW · ELECTED 1991

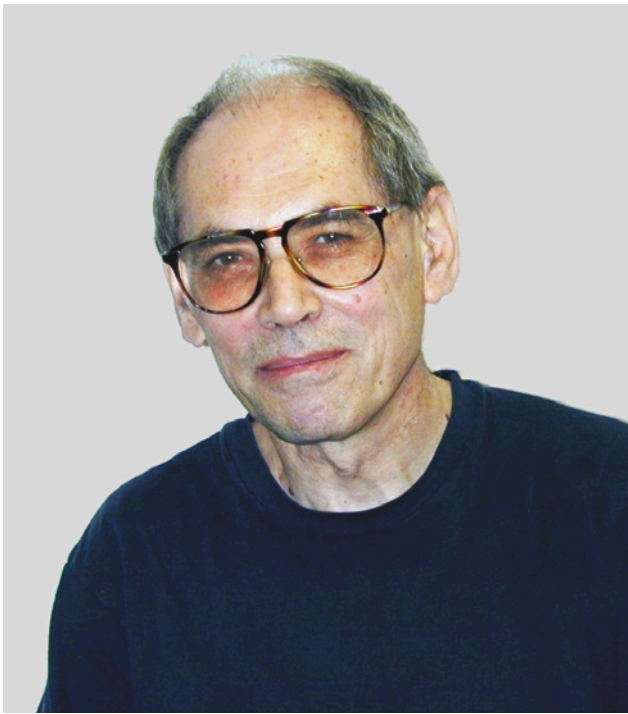


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One of the most outstanding musicians of his generation, Roger Smalley first came to live and work in Australia in 1974, as a visiting artist at the University of Western Australia. He later became a member of staff there, and was made an emeritus professor on his retirement. Afterwards, he moved to Sydney and was appointed an honorary research associate at the Sydney Conservatorium. His skills as pianist, conductor and – above all – as composer and inspiring teacher became legendary.

Roger was born in Swinton, near Manchester in the UK. His musical gifts were revealed in childhood when his brilliance as a pianist won him a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. His teachers there and later included Anthony Hopkins, Peter Racine Fricker, John White and Alexander Goehr. He also worked with Stockhausen in Cologne.

Roger arrived in Perth with the reputation of a revolutionary musician thanks to his use of improvisation and live electronics. He soon displayed his extraordinary knowledge of style and repertoire reaching back to much earlier times and to music outside Europe. Whatever

he touched became as though ‘to the manner born’. For example, when directing the West Australian Symphony Orchestra’s Contemporary Music Ensemble it seemed as though his main training had been as a conductor, so economical and authoritative was he. He was also constantly surprising those who thought of him only as a ‘difficult contemporary composer’ when they heard him play Chopin, Grieg and other romantics.

His international reputation was widened when his Piano Concerto (1985) – a BBC Commission for the European Music Year – was placed by the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers at the top rank. Each year UNESCO (through the International Music Council) chooses one or two works for broadcast performance over some thirty radio networks. His *Birthday Tango* (later re-titled *Footwork*), composed for the thirtieth birthday of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, received the award for the best composition by an Australian composer (2007). The respect with which he was widely held is reflected in various other awards he was given: Doctor of Music (University of Western Australia), the Don Banks Fellowship awarded to a senior artist of high distinction, Member of the Order of Australia, and Western Australian Living Treasure.

Like a number of other creative artists who have come from overseas to live and work here, the ‘Australian experience’ had a deep influence on Roger. The first influence (and one that Roger acknowledged) came about in an unexpected way with the appointment of John Culshaw as a Visiting Creative Arts Fellow in 1977. Culshaw was Head of Music for the BBC and previously a producer for Decca, his most celebrated production being the first complete recording of Wagner’s *The Ring Cycle*. It was agreed that the two gifted musicians – Culshaw and Smalley – would collaborate in the performance of an opera, *William Derrincourt*, specially composed by Smalley for the occasion – a rare venture into the genre. It was a leap into the unknown for him, for up until now he had composed works for experienced professionals and in a thoroughly contemporary vein. Described as an ‘entertainment’, the opera’s text was taken from the memoirs of a convict who was transported to Australia for theft. As a musical event it involved a baritone/bass soloist playing Derrincourt plus a male-voice chorus who commented on the action and provided some minor characters. Basically it was written for amateur

performers, except for the instrumental part, scored for two pianos and percussion. Needless to say, Roger found a way to maintain his creative originality while taking into account the musical imitations of his cast. He found it a refreshing challenge and one that marked a new stage in his evolving style. In his own words:

‘I wrote a music-theatre work *William Derrincourt* which was very important for me because... I had to deal with real dramatic situations: there’s a dance scene, there are parades, there’s the singing of the national anthem. This had a very liberating effect on me... because it forced me to do all kinds of stylistic things which I would never have done before, and it broadened my musical palette.’ (Interview with Andrew Ford, 1992)

In 1984 Roger extensively revised the score for performances by the University of New South Wales Opera. The score is published by Faber Music.

As well as writing music Roger also wrote about music. He wrote over a hundred short articles – mainly reviews – and gave seventeen radio talks for the BBC. Listening to

Roger’s music and reading his writings about it, it is clear that his career was a never-ending journey of discovery. He thought deeply about music in its widest context, and doing so led him to self-discovery as a composer. Every work was a new step on that journey. He was a joy to converse with and one of my abiding memories is of someone who never seemed to utter a commonplace or trivial remark when discussing music. Yet it was also always a conversation laced with humour.

Unlike many a composer, Roger enjoyed teaching and leading his students into a creative world that opened up new perspectives for them. It is no wonder that he had a profound influence on all who came to learn. Those of us who were privileged to know Roger Smalley as colleague and friend remember him for the various facets of his brilliant gifts – not least his unbelievable facility to play from sight the most fiendish scores. His personality, his music and discourse enriched us all, our only regret being that the end came after a long and debilitating illness.

DAVID TUNLEY AM FAHA