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1985

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Michael Francis Hannan
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Hannan, MF 1985, 'A critical survey of the music of Vincent Plush', *AMC News*, vol. 10, pp. 22-23.
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A critical survey of the music of Vincent Plush

by Michael Hannon

Vincent Plush is the 1985 Composer in Residence at Musica Viva. Founder of the Seymour Centre in 1976, in late 1985 he has formed the Magpie Musicians, whose particular purpose is to explore Australian music from colonial origins to the present day. He has also been very active as a music broadcaster, most recently with the ABC FM series, Main Street U.S.A., which sprang from his 2½ year period of residence in the U.S. Vincent's commitment to community-based work is well known; in particular, he was responsible for the establishment of the Composer-in-the-Community project for Arts Victoria: Music '81, in which twelve composers were placed in various country and metropolitan areas of Victoria.

The music that Vincent Plush has undertaken to compose in the next few years seems to be a vindication of his commitment in the last decade to a particularly overt form of musical nationalism. This can be seen not only in the proposed sources of inspiration but also in the significance of the occasions and situations for which the works are intended. There are works for the Australian Bicentennial, works to commemorate important anniversaries of ABC FM and Musica Viva, works for Australian festivals and, significantly, works intended for a more community-oriented purpose.

Plush's Australian-ness seems even more intense than that of Sculthorpe. Oddly enough, at the time when Plush was composing **Australian Folksongs** (1977-78), a watershed for his personal style, Sculthorpe produced two not dissimilar works, **Port Essington** (1977) and **Eliza Fraser Sings** (1978). Both composers were attempting a marriage of Australian musical artefacts with their own more contemporary idioms. It is likely, however, that Plush's obsession with the incorporation of folk music and colonial cultivated music is Ivesian at its root. Certainly the jarring quality, intentionally sought in works like **FireRaisers** for solo trumpet and ensemble (1984), as well as the selection of musical quotations for the potency of their symbolic significance, are hallmarks of the approach. But it is an approach which, when applied to purely instrumental music, presents the danger that a work might be incomprehensible without the aid of programme annotations.

Bakery Hill Rising for solo horn and eight accompanying horns (1980-81) is less susceptible to this criticism than **Fireraisers** because it revolves solely around a powerful juxtaposition of "The Duke of Marlborough" fanfare (representing the imperial impulse) and "Freedom on the Wallaby". Yet, despite the potential of this duality, the composer's reliance upon simple textural devices, such as rhythmically free canons, and his primitive approach to harmony and shifting tonal centres, makes the work less satisfying than it might have been if the degree of invention of the later **Gallipoli Sunrise** for solo tenor trombone and seven other trombones (1984) had been evident.

The similarity of the forces of the two works is reinforced by the use in the later one of two Australian songs, "The Road to Gundagai" and "Waltzing Matilda". The comparison of the two pieces ends there however, since **Gallipoli Sunrise** displays a density of textural interest not even hinted at in the earlier piece. Plush also demonstrates a concern for instrumental technique reminiscent of his impressively executed earlier solo flute composition **Chu No Mai** (1974) written for Geoffrey Collins. A similar close association with Simone de Haan was evidently responsible for the inclination to incorporate effective contemporary instrumental devices into a highly detailed textural concept. In **Gallipoli Sunrise** the folk songs are also more effectively integrated. The version of "The Road to Gundagai" is supported by cleverly implemented minimalist textures, interesting enough to stand by themselves. The more melodically-transformed "Waltzing Matilda" is accompanied by an engaging counterpoint of fragments of the tune and glissando figures.

Although **Gallipoli Sunrise** perhaps represents a musically workable interplay of symbolic quotation and personal idiom, it is in his works for voice and instruments that Plush's real contribution to Australian music might lie. The theatrical elements of **Australian Folksongs** set a pattern for work ranging from the charming and cleverly scored **The Maitland and Morpeth String Quartet** (1979/85) to the dramatically serious **The Plaint of Mary Gilmore** (1984).

Australian Folksongs was the work in which the main elements of Plush's idiom were first assembled. The format owes something to Peter Maxwell Davies' **Eight Songs for a Mad King**, a work featured by the Seymour Group in its heyday, but Plush's own concept of musical parody is far more lighthearted. Indeed the most successful sections of this theatrical setting of four Australian folk songs are the surreal "Shearer's Dream" and the comically grotesque "Jacky-Jacky". The more serious "Denis O'Riley" and "Moreton Bay" sections are lugubrious by comparison. "The Shearer's Dream" employs a particularly skilful collage of humorously unsettling harmonies, a German waltz with varying pitch suggesting a maladjusted gramophone, a number of references to the opening of the **Tristan** prelude and a crashing tray of glasses, amongst other effects. The "Jacky-Jacky" setting, intended, according to Plush, "to create something of the soundworld of the corroboree", involves an irreverent barrage of drone-like and percussive sounds from traditional Western instruments and other instruments like phonofiddle, didgeridu, clapping stick, stockwhip, bullroarer, bush bass, wobble board, lagerphone, pilsnerphone, fosterimba and eucalyptaphone, the last three being inventions of the composer. Despite its festive extravagance, it does not possess the structure and density of wit evident in "The Shearer's Dream" segment, and it may even be construed to be indecorous by some listeners.

The composer's tenure as a Harkness Fellow (1981-83) exposed him to many compositional trends and nurtured a political concern first exhibited obviously in **Bakery Hill Rising** and then fostered by a reaction to the Chile situation in **On Shooting Stars — Homage to Victor Jara** for ensemble (1981). This was written immediately prior to his leaving Australia and completed in Hawaii. **Facing the Danger** for speaker and any instruments (1982), written for Flederman's 1983 US tour, is of more general political concern. Employing an impassioned anti-nuclear poem as its text, the work demonstrates the composer's interest in minimalist instrumental techniques, and possesses a frenetic urgency befitting the subject of the poem.

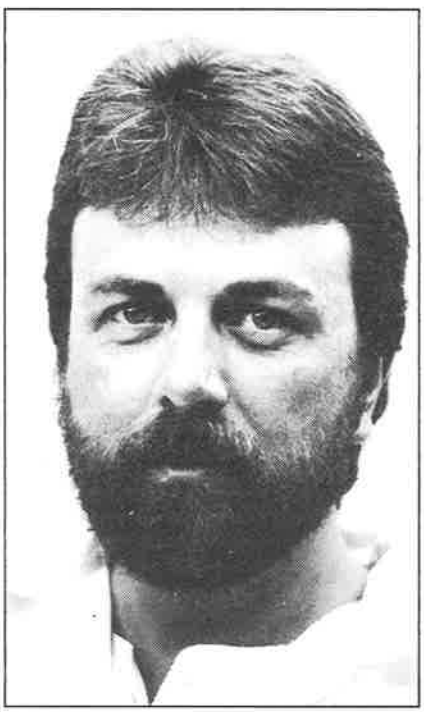

photo: Hildegard Negyesy, San Diego

Since his return to Australia, Plush's most impressive composition has been **The Plaint of Mary Gilmore**, a song cycle mostly based on letters written by Gilmore and hingeing around correspondence in 1903 with A.G. Stephens, then editor of **The Bulletin**. The emphasis of Plush's selection of texts is strongly feminist as it highlights Gilmore's struggle for self-confidence and individuality, the problems of gaining professional acceptance as a woman, and the conflict of interest in her perceived roles.

The musical language of **The Plaint of Mary Gilmore** is in some ways unexpected. Plush's compulsion to quote melodies of symbolic significance is restricted to a few segments towards the end of the long piece. Throughout there is evidence of minimalist influence in the piano textures, is mostly very angular in character as it tracks both the anxious and exuberant thoughts of Gilmore.

It is plain that the neomodality of **The Plaint of Mary Gilmore** represents a fertile new direction for Plush, especially considering his espousal of the post-avant garde philosophy of the accessibility and demystification of composers. Certainly, there are many sections of Michael Wilding's draft libretto for the proposed music theatre piece **O Paraguay!**, which would lend themselves to this kind of approach; and Plush also intends to write a companion piece to **The Plaint of Mary Gilmore**, based on letters of Gilmore's friend Henry Lawson.

Author's postscript:

Having completed and posted the above article, I was fortunate to attend a superb performance of **FireRaisers** at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music. This dispelled some of the doubts I expressed about the structural viability of Plush's purely instrumental works. The theatrical gestures of the performers imbued the piece with a level of wit difficult to imagine from a reading of the score, and at no time was I aware that the musical structure of the piece was problematic.

Michael Hannon lectures at Queensland Conservatorium of Music, and is the author of the book **Peter Sculthorpe: His Music and Ideas** *(University of Queensland Press, 1982).*