

1989

The Song of Tailitnama for voice and piano (Peter Sculthorpe)

Michael Francis Hannan
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Hannan, MF 1989, 'The song of Tailitnama (Peter Sculthorpe)', in M Noone & R Parker (eds), *Anthology of Australian music on disc. Handbook*, Canberra School of Music, Canberra, ACT, pp. 75-77. ISBN: 1875161015

The pdf of the published article reproduced in ePublications@SCU with the permission of Canberra School of Music.

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.

Peter Sculthorpe
The Song of Tailitnama (1984)

The Song of Tailitnama was written for an ABC television documentary film, 'Sun Music for Film', directed by Stafford Garner. Much of the film was concerned with my conception of the work, its composition, rehearsal and subsequent performance.

'Tailitnama' ('Tai' pronounced 'tie') is an Aboriginal totemic centre in central Australia. For my text I chose four verses, in Aranda, from a rock wallaby song associated with this area. The verses concern the glowing of the mountains, the coming of dawn and the singing of the Ilbirbia bluebirds as they soar to the sky. *The Song of Tailitnama* opens with a slow vocalise, followed by a short episode which leads to the main part of the work, a long dance-like section, in the latter half of which the Aranda verses are sung. These verses lead to the climax, after which follows an expansion of the opening vocalise and a short coda.

Peter Sculthorpe

The Song of Tailitnama is a reduction for voice and piano of a work of the same title composed in 1974. The original, scored for soprano, six cellos and percussion (two players), is an important work in Sculthorpe's development. It was his first work to take inspiration from Japanese *gagaku* and the first to draw in an obvious way from Koori music. The use of Japanese scales in the opening and closing sections is, however, not so overt as his borrowings of *saibara* melodies in later pieces such as *Mangrove* (1979) and *Piano Concerto* (1983). Until this time Sculthorpe had been obsessed with many aspects of Japanese culture but unable to find a way to assimilate qualities of the music into his own style. He had previously embraced Asian music as an antidote to the modernist European influence on Australian new music; and although he had been able to incorporate Indonesian sounds into his works, the way to tap creatively into Japanese traditional music had eluded him. Similarly with Koori music: he had used texts from Aranda songs in *Rites of Passage* (1972-73) but nothing concrete in the traditional musics had filtered publicly into his work until *The Song of Tailitnama*.

In the formulation of the quick sections of *The Song of Tailitnama* Sculthorpe combined an Aranda text with an adaptation of a Groote Eylandt song melody. His development of a concept of repetitive melodic structure from a fragment of a song transcription quoted in Covell's *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*²² formed the basis of a style of composition used extensively in later pieces. The adaptation of the Groote Eylandt melody was a simple matter of changing one of the intervals from a tone to a semitone and omitting one of the tones from the descending melodic line (see Figure 93).

Figure 93



Sculthorpe claims that his music 'doesn't sound like Aboriginal music; even where I have used an Aboriginal melody, I've sort of put it through my own system and it comes out as something else'.²³ Despite the change in the quoted melody to a Japanese sounding interval structure and despite the complex accompanying texture, it is difficult not to hear a strong affinity with northern Australian music because of the distinctive melodic contour and the prolonged repetitive structure. The six bar melody is repeated sixteen times in each of the two quick sections with only slight variation.

The process of reworking pieces or sections of pieces into new compositions is intrinsic to Sculthorpe's creative method but it is also often a matter of expediency. When a favourable opportunity has arisen for Sculthorpe to write a work for a particular medium, he has sometimes, when short of time to compose a new work, rearranged an existing one. The version of *The Song of Tailitnama* for voice and piano is a good example of this practice.

In adapting the work with so many accompanying forces, compromises have been forced upon the composer and some of the most impressive qualities of the original have been lost in the process. For example, the intricacies of rhythmic counterpoint in the texture of the quick sections have been lost in the new version. More serious is the organisation of the melodic material in the quick sections.

In the original work, the first quick section is entirely instrumental and the adapted Koori melody is taken by cello 1. In the second quick section the same melody is scored for the voice and there is a cello 1 countermelody which soars above the voice. In the version for voice and piano Sculthorpe decided (correctly in my view) that the voice should participate in the first quick section since the piano alone would not be capable of the necessary intensity of expression. His solution to this problem was to score the countermelody for voice and the melody for piano in the first quick section and, in the second quick section, to score the melody for voice and to omit the countermelody, again ostensibly because the piano would have been an unsuitable vehicle. The result of these judicious compositional choices is that the growth of intensity from the first quick section to the second is frustrated by the absence of the soaring countermelody in the second section.

As intimated above, the version of *The Song of Tailitnama* for mezzo-soprano and piano is in four sections according to the following plan:

Bar numbers	Section	Tempo
1-16	A ₁	slow
17-144	B ₁	quick
145-276	B ₂	quick
277-316	A ₂	slow

Section A₁ comprises a vocal melody with sparse piano accompaniment. The melody is based on the pentatonic scale of D flat, D natural, G flat, A flat, A natural. In section A₂ this same melody is developed in an expressive way. A transposed form of the scale (A flat, A natural, D flat, E flat, E natural) is used in conjunction with the original scale and with the addition of C natural. The accompaniment consists of harmonies derived from the tones D flat, D natural, E flat, G flat, G natural, A flat, A natural (see Figure 94).

The harmonic language is typical of Sculthorpe's style. There is a drone-like centring on D flat with occasional contrasting chords such as that from bars 283-5. In bar 279 the clash between the D natural of the vocal melody and the E flat in the right hand of the piano part is a reference to the heterophony of *gagaku*.

The setting of the text is quite unusual since it only occurs in the second quick section of the work. Elsewhere the voice simply carries the syllable 'a'. The text, like that of the Rites movements of *Rites of Passage*, has been taken

22. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967, p. 326.

23. Interview with Laurie Strachan, *Bulletin* (26 July 1988), pp. 140, 143.

from T.G.H. Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*²⁴ and is set in the Aranda language. Strehlow's translation follows:

The spinifex tips on the mountain are glowing;
The bold forehead of the mountain is glowing.

'Fathers and sons, upon us before all others
The sun is hurling its spears of light.'
Hark, the birds! Singing they soar to the sky,-
The birds, the ilbirbia bluebirds.

When the morning is young, singing they soar to
the sky,-
They, the massed messengers of the birds!

The work seems to rely on the text more for its nasal sound quality than for its capability of informing the musical treatment in the section where it is used. The text is noticeably subservient to the melodic requirements. For example Sculthorpe has set the four verses in the pattern {1, 3, 1, 3, 2, 4, 2, 4} in order to achieve a characteristic phrasal structure. Each line of text is treated according to a formula where the last four or five syllables of the line are set thrice so as to fit the distinctive melodic lines of the composer's version of the Groote Eylandt song.

Figure 94

The musical score for Figure 94 consists of three systems of music. Each system has a vocal line on a treble clef staff and a piano accompaniment on a bass clef staff. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a triplet in the vocal line. The second system includes a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking in both parts. The third system is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte) and shows a vocal line with a fermata and a piano accompaniment.

As stated above the structure of the quick sections is repetitive with subtle variations on the melody, accompaniment, and counter melody (in the case of the first quick section). The piano accompaniment of the first quick section consists of a series of left hand syncopated *ostinati* on A with punctuating intrusions of E, D and B flat. This is combined with the Groote Eylandt melody in the right hand. In the coda of this section (bars 121-44) the tones G and E flat also assume a punctuating role and the coda ends with a cessation of the regular repetitive patterns in favour of cadential chords. The vocal counter melody in the main body of the section contrasts rhythmically with the syncopated 6/16 rhythms of the accompaniment by its use of duplet values. The countermelody employs all the tones of the Phrygian mode transposed to A (A, B flat, C, D, E, F, G) but focuses on the semitonal intervals of B flat-A and F-E.

Since the Groote Eylandt melody is taken by the voice in the second quick section, the piano accompaniment is able to be more toccata-like. Again the repetitive *ostinati* are centred on A with additional tones (E, D, B flat, F) acting as punctuation. In the coda of this section (bars 249-76) there is an attempt to create a more dramatic conclusion before the return of the final slow music.

The Song of Tailitnama is one of Sculthorpe's most powerful works, even in this less inspiring version for voice and piano. Unfortunately, because of its unusual instrumental forces, the work is not played in its original form as often as it deserves to be.

Michael Hannan

24. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971, pp. 419-20.