

# Composers' lives: a note on writing a biographical dictionary

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The writing of any kind of dictionary can be a perilous affair, from the rarefied heights of the *OED* to a humbler matter such as a *Biographical Dictionary of New Zealand Composers*. Musical dictionaries have their own complications inherent in the nature of the material and in the processes of selection, the latter especially, being likely to cause misunderstandings even when spelled out in an introduction, often unread. After several stormy episodes following publication I was relieved to discover Nicholas Slonimsky's 1978 preface to a great American publication of a similar kind, the sixth edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. He cited the melancholy case of John Wall Callcott (1766-1821) whose 'mind gave way from overwork on a projected biographical dictionary of musicians. He recovered, but not sufficiently to continue his work... Callcott reached the letter Q and then quit'. Another music editor, working on the same dictionary, rented a room on the ground floor, 'in case he was tempted to jump out the window in despair'.

I felt I should give you some account of the genesis of the Dictionary and of the way it reached its particular form. In writing my *Oxford History of New Zealand Music* (1991) I had tried at first to find a way of including a substantial amount of biographical material on contemporary New Zealand composers. How should this be presented? Douglas Lilburn thought that Aubrey's *Brief Lives* might make a satisfactory model, for above all it was necessary to avoid pompous academic assessments which nobody would read. But after examining Aubrey, I felt that if I followed its often bawdy truthfulness I might end up in the libel court. Who could describe a figure as 'lit with the lusts of the bedchamber' and remain friends.

Reluctantly, I turned to other models such as that of the Canadian composer Murray Schafer, whose *British Composers in Interview*, was published by Faber in 1963. Here the author interviewed a number of articulate leading figures such as Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, Humphrey Searle and Malcolm Arnold, to produce a perceptive picture of the composer at work within a tradition that had a long history of aesthetic and philosophical discourse. I soon found that this did not apply in the New Zea-

land context. Most composers did not conceptualise in this manner and many had not made contact with the literary and artistic issues that surrounded them. They may not have read the poets nor even the two crucial statements on New Zealand music, Lilburn's *A Search for Tradition* (1946) and *A Search for a Language* (1968). There seemed little critical assessment of the various styles and schools impinging on them from outside, such as the once influential Darmstadt and its successors, the work of Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle or the minimalists of America. A valuable move in this direction however came through the discussions in the composers' own journal *Canzona*, which over the years had striven to close the gap in communications.

I had nevertheless accumulated a good deal of valuable material, mostly through interviews for the Archive of New Zealand Music at the Turnbull. These included several with composers living in or visiting England such as Robin Maconie, Lyell Cresswell, Gillian Whitehead, Denis Smalley and Barry Anderson, which under no circumstances should be wasted. Many of the New Zealand sessions produced similarly rewarding portraits so that gradually a pattern emerged of the background, the roots even, of a New Zealand composing tradition. My work was so far confined to composers working within the European inheritance, not yet taking account of Maori music which had developed almost exclusively in quite different and usually more popular fields. Even although I had been persuaded to include several composers whose work lay principally in the lighter areas they nevertheless wrote for the symphony orchestra and used the techniques of their 'classical' colleagues. Maori music and musicians appear in strength in accounts of New Zealand rock and reggae but a complete picture, including the traditional field of waiata, needs, I believe, a book to itself.

It became apparent, especially in view of the space limitations set by the publisher of the *Oxford History* (100,000 words), that any extensive biographical treatment of New Zealand composers, apart from longish sections on Hill and Lilburn, would be impossible. The biographical material had to go elsewhere. I could have produced a series of profiles of selected composers (Hill, Lilburn, Tremain, Carr, Farquhar and so on), but instead, I felt that a dictionary that collected *all* the material in an accessible form, that added historical figures such as Maughan Barnett, Robert Parker and Thomas Tallis Trimmell, would, at least for a first edition, be a useful collation. There is not yet an encyclopaedia of New Zealand musicians

and many figures of the past who needed tidying up in brief biographical surveys would not find house room in the big *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. So a *Biographical Dictionary of New Zealand Composers* it became.

In New Zealand we lack composer biographies apart from my earlier *A Distant Music* on Alfred Hill. This is written in the life and times genre because the subject, although important historically, did not fit the usual requirements for biography. This may seem a disparaging thing to say, but I think Alfred Hill himself would have concurred. As his daughter Isolde put it, 'My father is a simple man, he's not complex. For instance, he had the greatest difficulty in ever depicting evil in music'. There might have been material for a 'social' biography if the family connections had been explored more fully, thus portraying the life of a professional musician of the period, but the circumstances of the breakdown of Alfred Hill's first marriage, his wife's mental illness, and the publicity surrounding the separation, fully recounted in the press of those days, and his subsequent marriage to one of his young students, Mirrie Solomon, were still painful to some members of the family. Altogether I felt it inappropriate at that time to detail them so what I have presented is a public rather than a private portrait.

One composer who deserves a biography and who should publish his autobiography is Douglas Lilburn: his literary gifts leap off the page whenever he sets pen to paper, in letters, anecdotes and historical sketches. Nevertheless, a series of short monographs on New Zealand composers would be useful although attempts to launch such a project have so far lacked funding. In the meantime, comprehensive articles on composers appear regularly in William Dart's *Music in New Zealand* and essays on Luscombe Searelle, Alfred Hill and David Farquhar are included in *Opera in New Zealand: Aspects of History and Performance*, (1991), edited by Adrienne Simpson. From 1991 onwards *Canzona* will be published annually so may well be able to encourage more of the aesthetic critical writing whose absence I earlier commented on.

### **Patterns and influences**

Although the *Dictionary* entries are not properly suitable for statistical sociological purposes as they come from disparate sources rather than from a standard enquiry form they do suggest some significant patterns. They show the importance of being born into a musical family, a notable exception being Lilburn, son of a Scottish-born farmer and a New Zealand born

mother with English connections. There was only a modicum of music in the home and were no musical antecedents as far as is known at present. The entries show the over-riding importance of the New Zealand band tradition: Lyell Cresswell for instance, says of his uncle Ray, who wrote for the Salvation Army: 'I cannot imagine that I'd have taken to composing without his example. Because of this there was never any difficulty for me in accepting the notion that people write music'.

The skills and personality of music teachers have considerable importance. Certain teachers crop up again and again, such as Ernest Empson of Christchurch and Gordon McBeth of Wanganui. Gifted music masters at schools are similarly formative - L. C. M. Saunders at King's College in Auckland encouraged Jack Body, Clifton Cook at Christchurch Boys' High did the same for Ross Harris, Johannes Giesen at Otago Boys' High for William Southgate, Christopher Norton for many students at Scots and Tawa, and today, the composer David Hamilton is a stimulus at Epsom Girls' Grammar. University music departments are crucial: the effect of Page, Lilburn and their successors would take up a seminar in itself. Most composers mention the name of at least one inspiring university teacher. Some might have similarly referred to those who discouraged and undermined them. There are other influences - the bursary system, the nature and quality of musical organisations in the composer's home town or those experienced while he or she is at university. There is the stimulus of the National Youth Band, Orchestra and Choir, the latter reflecting what is still perhaps the most vigorous of all New Zealand musical groups. One could add the composer-in-schools scheme, the effect of Kiwi Pacific recordings, the publications of Price Milburn and notably, the Waiteata Press of this University, music journals and books. The annual Cambridge Summer School of Music transformed New Zealand musical life from 1946 onwards until it closed in the 1980s. The liveliness of staff of the music sections in public libraries has been vital to a number of composers such as Noel Sanders and Dorothy Ker. The concert programme of Radio New Zealand, the regular Music Federation concerts and those of the NZSO have also worked their spell. Herein lies the ground bass of a New Zealand musical tradition.

*From a Stout Centre seminar held on 26 September 1990. The Biographical Dictionary of New Zealand Composers is published by Victoria University Press, Box 600, Wellington at \$24.95.*