

Searches for Tradition: Essays on New Zealand Music, Past and Present

Edited by Michael Brown and Samantha Owens.

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Reviewed by Martin Lodge

Searching for tradition in New Zealand music is itself now a tradition, one that began in earnest with Douglas Lilburn's famous talk given at the Cambridge Summer School of Music in January 1946. At that time, the seminal talk had no title. It was only forty years later that Lilburn gave it the name *A Search for a Tradition*, when music historian John Mansfield Thomson edited it for publication.

In *Searches for Tradition*, editors Michael Brown and Samantha Owens have organised thirteen chapters into five themed sections plus an epilogue. There are some fascinating things to be discovered and plenty of fuel for thought. The editors begin with an introduction that provides an excellent summary of the principal themes and scholarly tools so far applied to the history of music in this country. It will become the first stop for music students and others looking to understanding the shape of debate and why the literature published to date reads the way it does.

The opening chapter by Elizabeth Nichol on immigrant composers working in New Zealand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a model of how to shape up a mass of highly detailed material and present it with flair. What could have been dry parade of minor figures instead becomes a cavalcade of surprising colour. For instance, the importance of having – or appearing to have – some kind of exotic background, so often touted by composers, performers and teachers in those days, is exemplified by the case of “Maurice Leon-Driver who (in a French accent) claimed to be a pupil of Liszt, but was in fact from Thames, Coromandel, and Leo Carri, whose deceits and lifestyle were such that his descendants have stated “we would rather forget him”.”

Samantha Owens provides an engaging account of the contribution made by German musicians to the development of New Zealand art music, nicely counterbalancing the received wisdom that the British tradition was overwhelmingly dominant in the first few decades after the signing of the Treaty. Her account of arguments that raged in 1906 for and against the establishment of a national conservatorium of music has an oddly familiar ring to it today.

Given the general dearth of writing in the area, it is heartening to see two chapters in *Searches for Tradition* on aspects of Māori music. Refreshingly, Valance Smith does not hesitate to open up some of the thorny issues around ideas of cultural authenticity – what Māori music is or isn't, the validity of acts of appropriation (especially Māori taking Western musical materials and repurposing them) and processes of acculturation. He also questions the basis on which judgements about such issues are made. How properly to conceptualise these matters is still work in progress and any answers some way off, but what an engaging journey this is proving. Smith suggests that depth of cultural and linguistic knowledge is the central determinant of real understanding.

A chapter on taonga pūoro is jointly authored by Awhina Tamarapa and Ariana Tikao. The first section, by Tamarapa, provides a useful historical overview of the revival of traditional instruments and the playing of them that has taken place over the past 35 years. In doing so, questions concerning the nature of this revived tradition, the ways in which knowledge is being restored or recreated, and how it may move forward are raised. Complementing that, Tikao offers an insider's personal story of discovering the instruments, meeting the exponents of them, and becoming a respected performer and teacher of them herself. This chapter forms a complement to Richard Nunns' book *Te Ara Pūoro* and the two incomparably clear and elegant books on the instruments and traditions of carving by practising master carver Brian Flintoff.

Searches for Tradition includes a substantial genre-specific section on jazz. In this potential minefield (What is jazz? How culturally specific is jazz?) Norman Meehan leads off with a clearheaded and practical approach to the key issues that surround jazz history as it applies to far-flung New Zealand compared with its home turf in the USA. Meehan suggests that successfully synthesising multiple influences and sources is probably the key to creating a credible jazz tradition that is distinctly New Zealand's. It is a strong case, and the same formula could be argued equally for art music and popular music. The challenge remains how to actually achieve it in practice, especially in the age of instant communication where much new music is disseminated in virtual space rather than in a physical place. Aleisha Ward paints a detailed picture of the rise of jazz as a genre and its corresponding community of players and aficionados in New Zealand in the 1940s, while Nick Tipping focusses on examining the Wellington jazz scene and its local characteristics.

In fact it is striking that nine of the book's fourteen contributors are Wellington-based and that the contents are largely Wellington-centric. Perhaps that is not so surprising given that the publisher is Victoria University Press and both editors are senior figures in Wellington academic music circles, but it does come across as a little parochial. When it is asserted by one of the Wellington authors, for example, that in the late 19th century there existed a 'climate of interracial sociability and intellectualism centred in Wellington not seen before or arguably since', one has to wonder how such a claim could possibly be sustained. In the 19th century, most interracial socialising, debate and theorising actually happened in places where the balance of races was more equal and where the conceptual sphere was not so totally determined by the colonial side. To read Michael Belgrave's *Dancing with the King*, for example, with its revelatory and highly detailed record of Māori-Pakeha social interaction and negotiation though the prolonged dispute over sovereignty of the King Country is to quickly have one's preconceptions shaken up. The role of music in those social and political occasions makes fascinating reading too.

Of the authors who aim to provide a wider perspective, Anthony Ritchie traces the changing pattern of acceptability of minimalism as a stylistic basis for young New Zealand composers, especially the use of a strong metrical pulse. The evolution of critical responses to minimalist concert works he cites makes entertaining reading. The trend is clearly towards a less doctrinaire stance from both critics and the academy over the last 20 years. Michael Norris offers a new formal framework for recognising similarities of harmonic practice between compositions from all three of Lilburn's creative periods. A fresh insight into Lilburn's late electroacoustic works and how they sat uncomfortably in the composer's view of himself and his role at the time comes from Fiona McAlpine. In an account that is vividly personal, she

reveals significant connections between Lilburn's social persona and the contemporary reception of his experimental compositions in the new electronic medium.

A provocative epilogue is provided by Peter Walls, who takes issue with many of the casual axioms of discussion about musical tradition, including Lilburn's *Ur*-statements about the situation in New Zealand. Walls questions whether the continuing fetishising of national identity in the arts (as evident in Creative New Zealand funding criteria, for instance) is more than simply misguided. Could it have become an unwitting tool of the neoliberal agenda to mask an underlying erosion of sovereignty and citizen rights in the face of global economic agreements? Similar re-evaluations of the relationship between musical tradition and political power are currently developing around the case of German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler and his attitudes during the Nazi era, when in the face of unpalatable policies he pursued a 'pure' determination to preserve the 'real' national soul of Germany through symphonic music, that supposedly absolute art that lived beyond social and political concerns in a spiritual realm. The evidence today points very much the other way and against Furtwängler's claim. To the editors' credit, *Searches for Tradition* has begun to open a window onto the situation in New Zealand today which allows a more realistic consideration of art and power to get under way.

All the material included in this anthology is interesting and it is good to have it available. Nonetheless it is a pity the opportunity was not taken to move beyond the established path of tradition-hunting as defined by Lilburn 70 years ago and try to cover more inclusively the varieties of chronology and patterns of music-making in New Zealand. A research topic calling loudly for attention is that of the listener, the audience, a vital part of musical life but not paid much particular attention in this anthology – or anywhere else in the existing literature of published New Zealand music studies. There is a gap between the music most people listen to in this country (that is, non-geocentric music accessed online or otherwise electronically mediated) and how they think about music, compared with scholarly writings on New Zealand music. Other questions that need addressing include how musicology might reformulate some of its paradigms and tools to deal with musical creativity and consumption in a post-genre situation, especially in a country like New Zealand where aesthetic expectations, cultural politics and economics are diffuse and fast-changing. Some of the authors in the book give tantalising glimpses into these wider realms of possibility, including Michael Brown in his welcome chapter on Lilburn's early musical influences. Brown notes that "the relationships between art, popular and vernacular traditions in New Zealand music would repay much greater investigation than they have thus far received". That is certainly true, and this book would have been a perfect place to push forward with just such an investigation.