Keith Humble, the Music-Maker with a Message

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Melbourne, Australia and the international contemporary music community suffered a great loss on 23 May 1995 with the passing of Keith Humble: Australian composer, pianist, conductor, improviser, theorist and founding Professor of the Department of Music, La Trobe University. Even though Keith received the Order of Australia (AM) for services to Australian music in 1982, few Australians genuinely understand the significance of his contribution to contemporary music, and this is not likely to occur until scholars begin to assess his life's work from the enlightened perspective of musical creativity that Keith himself promoted for more than three decades.[1] In this article, it is only possible to indicate something of the depth and breadth of the musical knowledge, experience and expertise that Keith was able to offer Australian musical development and to survey a few aspects of his life's work, his ideas and his opinions.[2] Only the earlier, lesser known part of Keith's career is outlined in any detail in order to allow discussion to extend beyond a mere biographical sketch. What follows is a simple tribute to Keith, whom the respected Australian composer and former *Age* critic, Felix Werder, once described as being 'without question the finest all-round musician this country has produced since Percy Grainger'.[3]

Keith was born in Geelong in 1927, on the eve of the Great Depression and at the close of the exciting and relatively optimistic period known as the Australian Jazz Age. It was in the midst of the Depression that Leslie and Victoria Humble moved to Melbourne with their son Keith where they settled in the working-class suburb of Northcote.

Keith's working-class and non-musical family background is sometimes commented upon.[4] It should also be noted that until the Depression, the Humbles had a high social profile in Geelong and their achievements form part of Victoria's history. The Humble Foundry in Geelong especially designed and built numerous machines, bridges and steam pumping engines to government specifications. It manufactured Victoria's first refrigerator, its first wool press and its first motor car. The founder of the family firm, William Humble, was the Mayor of Geelong in 1888, and one can find both a Humble Wharf and a Humble street in Geelong.[5] Therefore in trying to understand the Humble phenomenon, we should note that Keith was born of—at least on the Humble side of the family—determined,

industrious, inventive stock, people who were good at putting things together.[6] Keith brought all of these qualities, and more, to his own music-making.

Keith began his education at Westgarth State School (later Westgarth Central School) and went on to University High School for a little over two years until he, in his own words, 'dropped out' at fifteen years of age to pursue a musical career. Neither his primary nor his secondary schooling provided him with any formal music training.

Keith was an only child and his parents were a cheerful, self-sacrificing couple who supported his early career with every resource they could muster. As they were not musically inclined, Keith did not have the early exposure to musical culture commonly associated with outstanding musical careers. His two successive piano teachers, Miss Butcher and Miss Estcourt, were competent, conscientious, firm and very supportive, but there was seemingly nothing exceptional about their teaching. While Keith showed an early aptitude for both music and sport, he was somewhat disadvantaged in the former by his limited hand-span and in the latter by his short stature.

A clue to Keith's success is provided by his friend, colleague and former biographer, the late Laughton Harris. In a recent conversation, Harris described Keith's most outstanding qualities as fearlessness, determination and a refusal to compromise.[7] It was probably the early appearance of these particular qualities coupled with a deep sense of gratitude to his parents, teachers and others (mentioned below) that encouraged Keith to become a quite outstanding pianist, even before leaving for England in late 1949.

From about nine years of age, he appears to have entered as many piano contests as was humanly possible.[8] At the end of 1943, he toured Tasmania billed as 'the Brilliant Boy Pianist' and shortly afterwards he passed his London College of Music Licentiate with 93%. His scrapbook of newspaper cuttings shows that in 1947 his first year at the Melbourne Conservatorium, he was dux of the year, winning both the Ormond prize and the Lady Turner prize. The following year he again won the Ormond prize, and also won the Open Concerto section of the South St Eisteddfod at Ballarat and the state-wide Royal Schools Scholarship. This scholarship provided two years of free tuition at the Royal Academy of Music, London. During 1949, his final year of study in Melbourne, he topped the
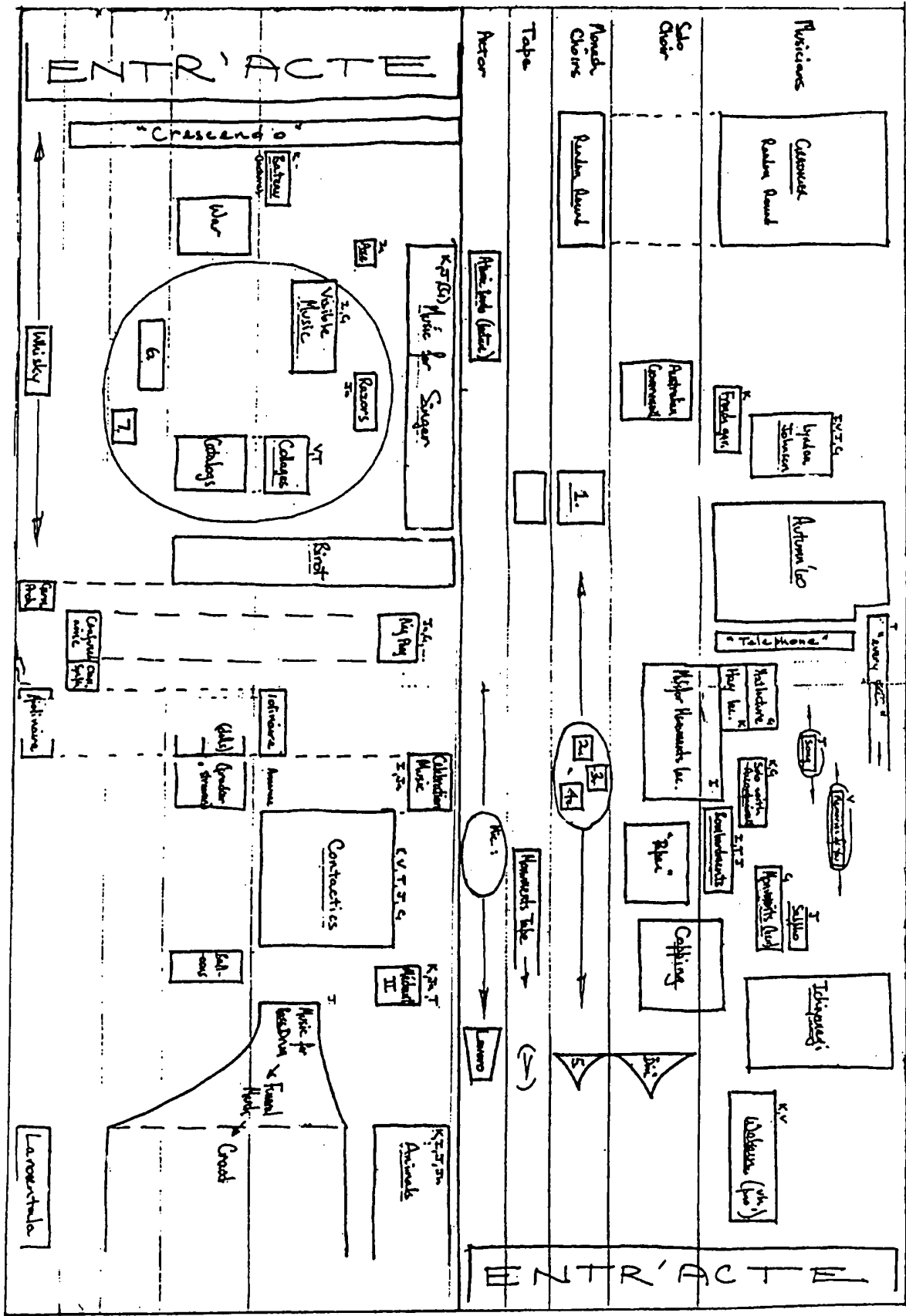
Keith Humble. Director's 'score' for 'Nunique IV' (1969).

Conservatorium honours list and won both the Wright Prize and the State Government Plaque of Honour.

In the 1949 State Finals of the A.B.C.'s Annual Concerto and Vocal Competitions, his performance, accompanied by the Victorian Symphony Orchestra, was rated well above that of all the other pianist entrants.[9] The recording of his performance of Khachaturian's Piano Concerto in Db major from this contest demonstrates the explosive intensity that Keith was able to bring to his playing.[10] In addition to his many public performances, the people of Northcote set up a special public fund to assist his overseas studies. This culminated in a farewell concert on 25 October 1949 at the Melbourne Town Hall in which Keith performed with the 3DB Symphony Orchestra. Later, at the Royal Academy in London, he went against his piano teacher's advice and took the Academy's piano performance exam (L.R.A.M.) prematurely. He still received 95%, the highest mark seen there since the end of the war.[11]

The intensity of this early performance background suggests why, later, he so consistently upheld the notions of the performer/composer and collaboration between performer and composer, as opposed to that of the composer who works only with the notated representation of sounds.

Keith held a lifelong conviction that a continuum of practice exists between improvisation and composition. This was undoubtedly also influenced by the fact that he was a jazz musician in the 1940s. As a teenager, Keith—like his colleagues Don Banks, Douglas Gamley and others—found jazz improvisation to be a useful outlet for his creative urge. In the culturally isolated Melbourne of the time, these musicians experienced the impression that there were no living composers. To quote Keith, they felt that 'to be a composer you had to be dead'.[12] Keith did not draw a line between jazz and other forms of improvisation. At the Conservatorium, he was commended by Roy Shepherd among others for his non-jazz improvisation at the piano; at the same time, he had also begun to improvise in the style of Bach to a jazz rhythm section with some of his jazz colleagues.[13] Nevertheless, he enjoyed listening to and playing specific styles of jazz for their own sake. As a student, playing jazz also provided him with a much needed source of income.[14]

Keith arranged for and led groups such as his 1948 All Star Orchestra at Ziegfield's Palais, Hawthorn. He also played in some of the leading palais bands of the 1940s, including those led by Bob Gibson, Ian Holland and Jack Liddle. In 1947, *Australian Music Maker* described him as a 'sensation' with the Tommy Davidson Orchestra, in which he had replaced Bernie Duggan, one of Melbourne's best big band pianists of the time.[15]

An important manifestation of his exposure to big band Swing was a later preference for types of improvisation that were tightly framed within some form of predetermined structure.

In the early 1950s, Keith moved from London to Paris where his studies eventually led him to the conductor, critic, composer and theorist, René Leibowitz, a former pupil of Webern. He subsequently worked as Leibowitz's assistant, copying parts, accompanying and doing anything else required of him. At last he had found his 'living composer'. Through Leibowitz in particular, he developed a lifelong passion for the elegance, discipline and logic of serialism. The most important event of this period however, was the beginning of a lifetime partnership with the talented pianist Jill Dobson, whom he married in 1955.[16] Without her unfailing support, many of the events described below probably could not have occurred.

In 1956, Keith returned to Melbourne to take up a position at the Melbourne Conservatorium. He arrived bursting with ideas and enthusiasm to contribute to Australian musical development. What he encountered was a closed culture—an inward-looking community deaf to his ideas, music and general approach to teaching. His return—of less than a year's duration—was a confidence-destroying disaster that forced his sudden departure to Europe, and from which he took several years to recover.

Keith spent a considerable portion of the 1950s, both before and after his disappointing return to Australia, touring Europe as an accompanist to vocalists such as Ethel Semser, John Riley and Robert Gartside, and also the cellist Marcel Hubert. His comprehensive collection of programs and review cuttings illustrates the astonishing amount of accompanying that he undertook in the 1950s, and suggests why he later maintained a connection with the lieder tradition, as both a composer and an accompanist.[17]

The 1960s were the major turning point for Keith. By 1960 he had fully recovered from his setback in Australia and had also gained more experience as Leibowitz's assistant in various recording and teaching projects. In 1960, Keith founded and began to direct the Centre de Musique (CDM), a fluid collective of performers and performer/composers based at the American Center for Students and Artists in Paris.[18] By the mid-1960s, the CDM had performed a remarkable spectrum of new music, including controversial music-theatre works by composers such as Guiseppi Chiari. By 1968, many major figures in American and European contemporary and experimental music had either visited or had their works performed at the CDM. Keith had also collaborated with avant-garde playwright Marc'O and produced scored/

improvisatory theatre music for his confrontational theatre works, *L'Entreprise* (1963) and *Printemps* (1964).

These brief comments fall far short of expressing the uniqueness and significance of the CDM. The CDM rivalled Pierre Boulez's famous Domaine Musical in the performance of contemporary music and provided a forum for radical works that otherwise would have remained unheard in Paris. It also provided performance opportunities in Paris for works by Grainger, Don Banks and other Australians. However, the French composer, performer, theorist and former CDM co-director, Jean-Charles François, describes a much more significant function of Keith's concept:

> The greatness of Keith Humble's intuition in the '60s was to take full measure of the catastrophic disappearance of the meaning of the 'masterpiece' and of the 'hero composer'. Not only was he able to help us accept this fact of life, [he] was able to propose in very practical terms the way to recovery from this illness.[19]

Keith had seen the calcified musical environment that he had encountered in Australia in 1956 as partly the result of the over-centralisation of musical authority around the notion of 'the conservatorium'. The CDM provided a dynamic alternative model based on creative exchange and a receptiveness to new ideas and ways of doing things.

During his time in Paris, Keith had also begun to visit the U.S.A. to perform and lecture. On his 1964 trip, he also visited Melbourne and gave a workshop to an enthusiastic group of musicians who, shortly after this, formed a Melbourne branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM).[20] During this short visit to Melbourne he promoted some of the concepts he was working with at the CDM such as 'spontaneous composition' and the breaking down of barriers between performers and audience.[21]

In 1966, Keith returned to Melbourne from Paris to take up a position as Senior Lecturer in Composition at the Conservatorium. One of his first activities was to establish the Society for the Private Performance of New Music (SPPNM) at the Grainger Museum. Keith always referred to it as the Grainger Centre because he wanted Grainger's building to be a living centre of creative action, not a museum.

By this time, the Melbourne branch of the ISCM was well established and was already showing some signs of conservatism. The SPPNM therefore provided a forum for some of the more radical young 'outsiders' in the Melbourne new music community, such as Barry McKimm, Syd Clayton, Robert Rooney and Clive O'Connell. Other activities established by Keith at the Grainger 'Centre' included an electronic music workshop and creative music sessions for children. His intensive use of Grainger's building was also intended to draw attention to the neglect that Grainger and his ideas had suffered in Australia. Keith took every opportunity to promote the performance of Grainger's lesser-known works, such as *The Warriors* and *Random Round*.[22]

Keith became the acknowledged and controversial leader of Melbourne's avant-garde, and from his first concert, he encountered savage criticism of his attempts to promote new music. For example, in 'New Music Has New Horrors', reviewer Linda Philips, herself a composer, complained that the SPPNM's music:

> seemed inspired from a mixture of machinery sounds and the taking-off of an aeroplane and very close to the more unpleasant noises of musique concrete....[It] included a singer shrieking into the bowl of the grand piano, groans, thuds, and squeaks and everything but—music.[23]

The most controversial aspect of Keith's activities was his creation and direction of music-theatre works such as the *Nunique* (music for now) series (1968- ; see p.4) and the multi-media work *La Légende* (1970). He was also savaged by the critics for his direction of, or collaboration in, the production of other music-theatre works such as François' *Zootoo*, Chiari's *Teatrino* and Dieter Schnebel's *Glossolalie*. At the same time, he continued to perform, conduct and promote less controversial items in the contemporary music repertoire including works by Webern, Schönberg, Bartók and Stockhausen.

His activities in 1969 alone, the year he was joined in Melbourne by his CDM colleague, François, amount to an astonishing explosion of activity and creativity: staging and performing in several music-theatre works; direction of the ABC Contemporary Music Workshop series; working to establish a private radio station to promote new music; staging and/or performing in numerous new music concerts; and writing seven pieces of the *Arcade* series, including the symphonic work *Arcade 5*. This is not to mention his teaching, conducting, electronic music activities, committee work and preparation for a visiting professorship in the *USA*.[24]

Many Australians have had direct experience of Keith Humble the performer, composer, conductor, teacher or theorist, particularly after he established the Department of Music at La Trobe University in 1974. Keith's better known overseas achievements after 1970 include his professorship at the University of California, San Diego (1971-74), his association with its famous Centre for Musical Experiment, his membership

of the international improvising ensemble KIVA (1982-90) and, after 1989, his consultancy to the European Community's New Music Literacy Program. Important amongst his many Australian achievements was his co-founding and direction (1975-78) of ACME, (Australian Contemporary Music Ensemble). ACME provided the prototype and the impulse for later contemporary ensembles such as Flederman and Pipeline.

Before concluding with some comments about Keith's significance to music in Australia, it is important to mention something about his approach to creativity. Keith had a special interest in process—the idea of music-making as action rather than as product—which shaped his work and his influence on others. To understand the significance of his concern for process, it is useful to consider his frequent claim that all his works were 'frozen improvisations'.[25] Keith recognised a number of improvisatory processes which had influenced his approach to musical creativity by the mid-1960s. These can be categorised as follows:

1. The intuitive organisation of material within 'closed' systems:

(a) The spontaneous realisation of internalised formulae in performance. This ceased to interest Keith after the 1940s.

(b) The spontaneous organisation of internalised paradigms: the notion that a fixed system (e.g. serialism) can be internalised to the degree that composing on paper virtually becomes the transcription of sound relationships as they unfold conceptually.

2. More exploratory or 'open' processes:

(a) Creative interaction: the process by which a work is created or modified by a director/ensemble or collective interaction.

(b) The intuitive, but highly informed, juxtaposition or layering of sound complexes (textures, sound masses, genres, media, etc.).[26]

This last process—intuitive juxtaposition and layering—can also be observed on a greatly expanded scale in the unfolding process of Keith's own musical and intellectual life. His entire creative output represents an ongoing exploration of possibilities for music, or music education. Thus individual experimental projects superseded each other, overlapped or unfolded concurrently. In the case of music, each extension of an individual project was generally marked by a one-off outcome, or 'frozen improvisation', which summarised that stage of the project. Each project and individual work-in-progress also generated 'raw material' which, in turn, was recycled for use in the extension of that particular project, a concurrent project, or as the basis of, or for use in, an entirely new project.[27]

A special characteristic of Keith's creativity was his ability to work in seemingly opposite modes of activity. For example, while informed intuition was an integral element of his approach to creativity, he also worked for more than forty years to develop a specific theoretical and practical approach to musical composition. His theory, which is outlined in a statement written shortly before his death, is expressed in his *Symphony of Sorrows* (1994), which will probably be seen as his most important fully notated work. While Keith considered his theory to be still at an embryonic stage of development, he believed that it was of landmark importance for Western contemporary composition.[28]

In attempting to summarise Keith's overall significance to Australian music, the most important thing to be said is that he was a visionary.[29] He returned to Australia from Europe in 1956 with a vision for contemporary music which was not acceptable in the Melbourne of that time. Only a few years later, that vision found acceptance in Paris and America. He returned to Australia from Europe again in 1966 with a still clearer vision for Australian musical development, backed by his European success, maturity, a wealth of practical experience and a degree of support from his employers, the University of Melbourne Conservatorium. This time he did have some impact on Australia's musical culture.

By the 1970s however, the personal cost of pursuing a vision that was rejected by the dominant grouping in Australian music began taking its toll on Keith. Again he found that Americans—namely his colleagues at the University of California, San Diego—were eager to grasp all that he had to offer. He returned to Australia from the *USA* in 1974 with even more experience and enthusiasm, and this time succeeded in setting up a progressive Music Department at La Trobe University that could embody and project his vision through its staff and graduates.

The vision for Australian music which Keith worked so hard to project was based on a number of strong personal convictions, of which the following were particularly important. Keith believed that the art of others must be trusted, even if its meaning is not immediately apparent. He also believed that the locus for artistic interaction should alway be 'a place of conflict'—an exciting, turbulent artistic environment in which musical dogma was challenged and new ideas could emerge. Most importantly, he believed that 'composing' should be about music-making—about people becoming involved in the whole process of making music happen—not just writing music.

Keith Humble drew much inspiration from the work of an important but little-known French poet, playwright and theorist, Pierre Albert-Birot, who died

in 1967, just as Keith had begun his often lonely crusade for musical enlightenment in Australia. One of the characters invented by Birot is Larountala, the messenger who was destroyed because he was misunderstood. This character had special significance for Keith and the melancholy spectre of Larountala emerges in many of his works.[30] The parallel between Birot's character and Keith is obvious. Keith touched the lives of many of Australia's most creative and productive musicians of the last three decades. Yet in many ways he remains—in Australia—the messenger who was misunderstood. It is hoped that Australians will now make a belated attempt to understand Keith's ideas and, more importantly, his music.

Notes

[1] An important aspect of this perspective is discussed in John McCaughey, 'Notes on Contemporary Music', *MUM* (Melburne University Magazine) 1970, pp.45-49.

[2] This article is the redrafted version of an untitled tribute to Keith presented to the University of Melbourne, Faculty of Music Centennial Conference on 7 June 1995, in place of the scheduled paper, 'Keith Humble: A Voice for International-ism or a Broader Vision for Australian Music?'. While source references are provided, the article draws on a much wider array of sources than it is possible to indicate here. These include a decade of informal discussions with Keith about his life and work.

[3] 'We Give Our Artists Great Farewells', *Age* [Melbourne], 21 July 1973, p.19.

[4] Humble describes this background in 'Keith Humble', De Berg Tape 417:1 transcription, National Library of Australia, 1969, p.1.

[5] See 'William Humble' in James Smith ed., *The Cyclopedia of Victoria* (Melbourne: Cyclopedia Company, 1903-05), p.462. Taped interview, Whiteoak/Keith Humble, 6 June 1986.

[6] According to Jill Humble, however, Keith's mother, Victoria, was the industrious determined one in Keith's immediate family. Personal communication, Whiteoak/Jill Humble, Geelong, 25 August 1995.

[7] Telephone conversation, Whiteoak/Laughton Harris, 6 June 1995.

[8] The data presented on Keith's early pianistic achievements is extracted from his collection of 1930s and 1940s examination and contest results, comments and certificates, and an unpaginated scrapbook of mostly undated, unidentified press cuttings. These documents are currently held by Jill Humble as part of the Humble estate, but I hold photocopies of all the programs, cuttings and other documentation referred to in this article.

[9] The other pianists are listed as Ronald [Farren-] Price, Max Cooke and Alison Linden. Keith was narrowly beaten by the violinist, Donald Weekes. 'Victorian Concerto Finalists' in *Australian Musical News and Digest*, n.d.

[10] The original acetate records are held by Jill Humble but they have been duplicated for the Keith Humble Research Collection currently being established at the Department of Music, La Trobe University.

[11] Reported in 'Paris for Brilliant Pianist', unidentified cutting in the Humble scrapbook. See also 'Keith Humble',

transcription of De Berg Tape 417:1, p.5.

[12] 'Keith Humble', transcription of De Berg Tape 417:1, p.2.

[13] Taped Interview, Whiteoak/Keith Humble, 6 June 1986.

[14] For further discussion of Keith's Melbourne jazz context see John Whiteoak, 'Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice, a Melbourne Perspective: 1836-1970', Ph.D. thesis, La Trobe University, 1993, pp.479-99.

[15] *Australian Music Maker*, 20 February 1947, p.28.

[16] They were close friends in Melbourne before 1950 and married in August 1955.

[17] Keith's collection of programs and review cuttings are held by Jill Humble. The preliminary catalogue of Humble's original scores prepared by Jill Humble and myself lists twelve songs written between 1949 and 1989.

[18] A partial account of the CDM is presented in Nelcya Delanoë, *Le Raspail Vert, L'American Center à Paris 1934-1994: une Histoire des Avant-Gardes Franco-Américaines* (Paris: Seghers, 1994), pp.69-109.

[19] 'In Memoriam Keith Humble', a tribute delivered by Jean-Charles François at the Keith Humble Memorial Concert, Northcote Town Hall, 16 July 1995, and accepted for publication under the same title in *Perspectives of New Music* 33.2 (1995). See also James Murdoch, *Australia's Contemporary Composers* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1972), p.123.

[20] The Melbourne branch was formed by early 1965. See 'Music', *Farrago*, April 1965, p.8.

[21] See Kenneth Hince, 'Concert in the Round', *Australian*, 24 October 1964, p.15.

[22] Shortly after Keith's return, Felix Werder wrote that 'even the sleepy Percy Grainger Museum awakened to the Humbelian kiss of modernism and produced from its darkened corners all sorts of odd percussion instruments restored by loving student hands to their former glories'. 'A Talent Returns', *Age*, 3 December 1966, p.22. Also see Whiteoak, 'Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice', pp.552-60.

[23] *Sun* [Melbourne], 13 September 1966, p.13.

[24] Data from Keith Humble's programs and reviews for 1969 held by Jill Humble.

[25] Discussed in John Whiteoak, 'Interview with Keith Humble', *New Music Articles* 7 (1989), pp.21-26.

[26] Laughton Harris also noted relationships between certain of Keith's works and projects, for example, '...the tendency for smaller works to germinate from larger works-in-progress, or works just completed...'. Laughton Harris, 'Keith Humble', in F. Callaway & D. Tunley, eds., *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.121.

[27] Whiteoak, 'Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice', pp.567-88.

[28] Keith's handwritten statement and the documentation relating to the research and development of a compositional system based on this theory is held by Jill Humble as part of the Keith Humble Estate. These documents will be duplicated for the Humble Research Collection. A La Trobe postgraduate student, Tony Hughes, has already begun to study this theory.

[29] Telephone conversation, Whiteoak/Harris, 6 June 1995. This aspect of Keith is also strongly emphasised in François' 'In Memoriam Keith Humble'.

[30] Whiteoak, 'Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice', pp.583-87.