

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Hooper. *Australian Music and Modernism, 1960–1975*

London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2019

ISBN 9781501348204. Hbk/e-book. 306 pp. ills.

E-book reviewed by Sophie Boyd-Hurrell

Michael Hooper's *Australian Music and Modernism: 1960–1975* offers welcome relief from the marginalisation of both Australian music and modernism within contemporary scholarship. The book arrives at a time when the very existence of the humanities is being called into question at Australian universities, and it throws the present abandonment of contemporary arts institutions into sharp historical relief. Given the longstanding neglect of arts funding in Australia, the globalisation and casualisation of the Australian academy, and the latest punitive withdrawals of university humanities funding, we will likely continue to see Australian music studies slide further into what Peter Tregear in January called 'a landscape of decline.'¹ Whilst this decline is structural and persistent, the history detailed in Hooper's book offers us hope that our situation might not be terminal.

Australian Music and Modernism casts new light on Australian musical modernism by arguing that Australian art music of this period was substantively different in approach to the music that came both before and after. Unlike the outward-looking and nationalistic music that typified the music of either side, Hooper presents modernist music in Australia (1960–1975) as characterised by avant-garde compositional techniques, internationally oriented, and concerned with matters of composer identity. The book's breadth is surely its most striking quality: Hooper traverses the music and lives of Don Banks, Richard Meale, Nigel Butterley, Peter Sculthorpe and David Lumsdaine, teasing out the shared musical concerns of these prominent Australian composers. Matters of compositional style are considered alongside

¹ Peter Tregear, 'Neglect of Music History "Our New Cultural Cringe"', *Australian*, 9 Jan. 2020.

contemporaneous histories, particularly within important institutions such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the Australia Council, and universities. Hooper shows that the music of each of these composers was notably 'embracing neo-tonal aesthetics, and supporting a form of Australian Music based on personal identity' (p. 3). Weaving together archival research and musical exposition, as well as historical and theoretical reflection, Hooper offers an appealing analysis that will be of interest to musicologists and historians of modernism alike. Broadly articulated, the book offers a reassessment of Australian nationalism (via Banks, Sculthorpe and Lumsdaine), a reconsideration of the place of the relationship between Australia and Britain (via Banks and Butterley), and an articulation of what Hooper calls the 'internationalist stance' (via Banks and Meale).

The book opens with a description of the nationalist fervour surrounding the 1988 bicentenary, illustrating the ongoing link between nationalism and the concept of 'Australian Music'. Hooper's hope is to problematise Australian Music as an idea, and he laments that: 'the problem with "Australian Music" today is that the term is almost never contested' (p. 11). Hooper notes the traditional conception of Meale and Sculthorpe as the two poles of Australian music—Meale as abstract and introverted, Sculthorpe as programmatic and extroverted—but rejects this dualism. Hooper is at particular pains to differentiate Sculthorpe's music from the period 1960 to 1975 from his later works and their reception, noting that during this time Sculthorpe's dominance in Australian musical life was still yet to come. Hooper goes on to consider Australian Music from within the contemporary academic discourse and convincingly makes the point that academic conversations around Australian music and modernism have been framed by nationalism. As he shows, the celebratory model of Australian musical discourse that emerged during the 1970s tended to downplay the importance of the works from 1960 to 1975 in favour of an overarching narrative of Australian musical nationalism.

The second chapter considers the music of Don Banks—in particular, his plainly titled *String Quartet* of 1975—in light of the proliferation of new cultural organisations during the early 1970s, such as the ABC, the Australia Council for the Arts, and the Australian Music Centre. Hooper shows that, nestled under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's wing, there was not just an increase in funding for the arts, but an entire system of support that allowed music to flourish during this period. He draws a link between the serial and technically-sophisticated musical structures of Banks's string quartet—indebted to the works of his international mentors Milton Babbitt, Roberto Gerhard and Luigi Dallapiccola—and the new institutional structures in Australia that were supporting new music during this time.

Hooper dedicates two chapters to Richard Meale: one on his time in Sydney and another on his time in Adelaide. The latter establishes Meale as central to the emerging internationalism of Australian modernism by considering his rejection of British culture and his Francophilia. Here, Hooper casts Meale as something of a foil for Banks: self-taught, without major personal or artistic connections, and with less technical music. Meale's sense of alienation and isolation from the musical mainstream is juxtaposed with his institutional clout, his appointment at the University of Adelaide having been 'arranged directly between the Minister of Education, the State's Premier and the Vice Chancellor' (p. 164). Hooper considers Meale's exploration of the tension between serialism and tonality, and his thrilling analysis of *Incredible Floridas* (1972) shows Meale distorting 'the associations [of] both tonal and serial practice, transforming one through the other' (p. 196). For Hooper, Meale's bifurcated virtuosity signals the apotheosis

of 'the crisis of modernist Australian music,' with Meale and his contemporaries folding over into 'silent periods' and 'accessible music' by the mid-to-late 1970s (p. 181). Hooper's argument—that the transnationalism of Australian modernism, exemplified by Meale, 'works against ideas of nationalism such as "Australian Music"' (p. 179)—risks simplifying nationalism as globalisation's antithesis. As Benedict Anderson explains, it is through imagination and discourse that the nation comes to life, and some exploration of how the concept of Australian Music functions, as much as a statement of desire as of fact, would have been useful here.

Nigel Butterley, in contrast to Meale, was a proud Anglophile, and Hooper's aim in the fourth chapter is to explain Butterley's modernist aesthetics in relation to Anglophile and Anglican Australian nationalism. In order to properly understand Butterley's work, Hooper suggests that we need 'a different conception of modernism' (p. 94), one alive to the possibility of a certain modernist conservatism (pardon the paradox), given that 'Butterley's voice ... was less radical ... more introspective and less polemical' (p. 93) than the other composers under consideration. The analysis of *Lourdes* (1960) and String Quartet No. 1 (1965) illustrates how the 'obfuscation of tonality was a defining part of his aesthetic' (p. 131). Hooper does draw on Elliott Gyger's analyses here,² although he offers some interesting alternative interpretations. Perhaps most importantly, this chapter convincingly dispels Roger Covell's notion that Australian composition in the 1960s amounted to a wholesale rejection of British heritage and culture.

In Chapter Five, 'Australian Music and Nationalism,' Hooper casts Peter Sculthorpe as 'a different kind of modernist' (p. 133), whose programmatic concerns revolve around a specifically Australian sense of isolation, alienation and rejection. These themes—the supposed flatness and sameness of the Australian landscape, and anxieties around loneliness and the hostility of the land—are, as Hooper notes, nationalist. Hooper's digression through the Jindyworobak movement is a particular delight, its contradictory formulation of the relationships between the local, the international and the modern suggesting that 'different kinds' of modernism were already part of the Australian cultural landscape—at least in poetry and literature—by the 1940s. This chapter reads as a recuperation of Sculthorpe for modernism, and a refutation of the caricature that might cast him as a 'mere' landscape composer. Perhaps some of these matters could have been viewed through a broader lens, as there were many opportunities for critiquing Sculthorpe's music in relation to Australian identity and nationalism more broadly.

In the final chapter, 'Landscapes in Painting and Literature: Lumsdaine and Sculthorpe,' Hooper argues that artistic endeavour transcends national identity through personal connection. Although Hooper's biographical interpretation is undoubtedly interesting, his desire to show internationalism triumphing over parochialism risks erasing important political considerations. Hooper begins the chapter with an analysis of Lumsdaine's *Aria for Edward John Eyre* (1972). Whilst Hooper attends to the etymology of the 'Air,' a 'hidden homophone that awaits discovery,' which 'emphasizes the role that sound can take in textual understanding' (p. 206), he makes no mention of the history of 'Eyre.' As such, Hooper risks making himself complicit in the perpetuation of two fantasies: first, that of *Terra nullius*; and second, that politics, history, and aesthetics—specifically musical aesthetics—have little to say to one another through interpretation. An analysis of Lumsdaine's *Aria* would surely have been an apt opportunity for an exploration of the desire for settler cultures to erase all that came before

² Elliott Gyger, *The Music of Nigel Butterley* (Kingsgrove, NSW: Wildbird Music, 2015).

them. Lumsdaine's lament that, 'everybody remains a stranger in that country' (p. 33), speaks not only to the 'homelessness' of art music in Australia, but also to the repressed knowledge that 'we'—as Eyre's settler inheritors—live on stolen land. In light of the Change the Date, Black Lives Matter, and Me Too movements, the lack of political reflection seems a missed opportunity here. The absence of any consideration of contemporaneous women composers is unhappily noteworthy and cements the hegemonic reading of modernism in Australia as wholly exclusionary of women, and entirely institutionally bound.

Through his in-depth musical analysis and important archival research, Hooper has provided a substantial contribution to, and reappraisal of, our understanding of Australian musical modernism.

About the Author

Sophie Boyd-Hurrell graduated with a PhD in musicology from the University of Melbourne in 2017. Her thesis, 'The Speculative Ear: Explorations in Adorno and Musical Modernism,' argued for the enduring relevance of philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's work for musicology today.