

BOOK REVIEW

Amanda Harris. *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930–1970*

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E-book reviewed by Georgia Curran

In *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930–1970*, Amanda Harris sets out a history of Aboriginal music and dance performances in south-east Australia during the four-decade-long period defined as the Australian assimilation era. During this era, and pushing its boundaries, harsh government policies under the guise of ‘protection’ and ‘welfare’ were designed forcibly to assimilate Aboriginal people into the mainstream population. It is striking while reading this book how few of these stories are widely known, particularly given the heavy influence that Harris uncovers it having on the Australian art music scene of today. As such, the book makes an important contribution to the ‘truth telling’ of Australian history while also showing that—despite the severe policies during this era, including the banning of speaking in Indigenous languages and restricting the performance of ceremony—Aboriginal people have remained active agents in driving their own engagements and asserting their own culturally distinct modes of music and dance performance. This resilience against significant odds has been aptly described by one of the book’s contributors, Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Warrung cultural leader, visual and performance artist, curator and opera singer Tiriki Onus, as ‘hiding in plain sight,’ referring to the ways in which Aboriginal people ensured the continued practice and performance of their culture by doing so in public, the only place they were allowed to.

The book includes a Prelude, an Interlude and a Coda placed around seven chapters. The chapters are presented chronologically and each deals with a decade-long period, forefronting the particularities of performative histories and how these responded to shifting government policies for Aboriginal people. Lingering behind these stories is the prevalence of national identity building, in which Australia was continually reformulating ways to represent itself internationally. The chapters move through the lead-up to and officialisation of assimilation policies in the 1930s (Chapters 1 and 2), the impact of World War Two in the 1940s (Chapter 3), the further-entrenched assimilationist thinking led by Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck in the 1950s (Chapter 4), the appropriative practices based on Aboriginal music and dance in the 1950s and 1960s (Chapter 5), and a 'new era of Australian performing arts' following the increased rights granted to Aboriginal people after the 1967 Referendum (Chapter 6). Each of these chapters describes key performance events that were largely ignored in media reporting and have been consistently left out of conventional history. Harris has sought to uncover this important history by reading deeper into historical materials and engaging with the descendants of prominent Aboriginal performers, who repeatedly show up driving these engagements across this period. Harris tells of the Yuin, D'harawal and Ngarigu people who represented their distinct Aboriginal cultures to the nation at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge; the *All Aboriginal Pageant* at Wirth's Olympia led by Pastor Doug Nicholls and Bill Onus; and the *Aboriginal Moomba – Out of the Dark* led by Bill Onus at the 1951 Jubilee Festival, to name only a few examples of performance events led by these prominent Aboriginal entrepreneurs.

Additionally, Harris overviews the prevalence of non-Indigenous artists who referenced Aboriginal culture—particularly John Antill, Beth Dean and Victor Carrell—and contextualises their role as 'self-appointed' spokespeople for Aboriginal music and dance in the Australian 'high' arts scene. The book's penultimate chapter, 'Too many Peter Sculthorpes?', enters bold territory in raising important questions for many contemporary musicians and musicologists around the inclusion of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal themes in Australian art music. With the 1970s' emphasis on self-determination, shifts occurred in the worlds of Aboriginal theatre and dance that saw the establishment of many of today's well-known performing arts organisations such as Bangarra Dance Theatre. Yet, as Harris argues, Australian art music was slower to take on Aboriginal-led contributions. Instead, hybrid representations of Aboriginal music by non-Aboriginal composers in what has been called an 'Australianist' style have dominated. Harris calls for the questioning and rethinking of these taken-for-granted histories that have been highly influential on some of the most esteemed composers in Australia today.

Real gems in this book are the Prelude, Interlude and Coda, each authored by an Aboriginal person linked to historical figures and events featured in the chapters. These 'disruptions' to the 'overarching chronological structure,' as Harris describes them, provide an effective model for inclusion of Indigenous voices and illustrate the value of this kind of collaborative research. In the Prelude, D'harawal saltwater knowledge-keeper and artist Shannon Foster describes that, from its beginning, 'an important element factored into the project was that information was to be shared and that collaborations and acts of reciprocity for the community would be prioritised' (p. 17). In Foster's Prelude, she tells of how, through archival research, she came to know more about her great-grandfather Tom Foster, including his important role in the 1938 Day of Mourning—'one of the first civil rights protests in the entire world'—and his significant role as a performer, musician and carver of boomerangs. She describes that she

feels an obligation to 'tell [his] stories in an attempt to reawaken them from the erasure and oppression of Australia's "silent apartheid"' (p. 19). Tiriki Onus, in the Interlude, tells of his grandfather Bill Onus's cultural ambassadorship as a performer of theatre, of film, of souvenirs and artworks. In Onus's words, 'the very fact that these stories are still here to be told ... it's pretty damn important [...] This is about being visible and being present and at the same time taking the form and then subverting people's understanding of it' (p. 87). The book's Coda by Yuwaalaraay songwriter, storyteller and performer Nardi Simpson reflects more broadly on Aboriginal performers of this era and her own role as a product of this history.

As an ethnographer of contemporary Indigenous Australian music, the rich stories told in this book have given me a much deeper awareness and consideration of the history that has shaped Aboriginal people's attitudes towards performance today, particularly surrounding cultural brokerage, compensation and retribution, and self-representation. In *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930–1970*, Harris has contributed significantly to understandings of this history and of the performance events that have shaped the development of Australian art music. She sets out a plea for this history to be more widely understood, particularly in the world of Australian musicology in which many art music composers have been inspired by Aboriginal music, yet they rarely reflect on the historical circumstances and performance histories against which 'Australianist' art music developed. The book will also be appreciated by contemporary Aboriginal people seeking to know more of the under-documented histories of their ancestors. In the final paragraph of the book's Coda, Simpson eloquently captures why this is so important by emphasising that 'History, the past, is always right up there close to us. We're always bringing forth the past because we can't go anywhere if we don't have that' (p. 153).

About the author

Georgia Curran is an ARC DECRA fellow based at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Her research focuses on Indigenous Australian songs, rituals and performance. She has worked collaboratively with Warlpiri singers from Central Australia since 2005, including for a recent book *Sustaining Indigenous Songs* (Berghahn, 2020).