

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Organic Development: An Interview with Andrew Aronowicz

Sascha Kelly

Andrew Aronowicz is a composer and educator based in Naarm, Melbourne. He holds Master's degrees in both composition and teaching from the University of Melbourne, and enjoys working regularly with both professional and school-age musicians. Andrew is interviewed by Sascha Kelly, currently Content Director of ABC Classic and ABC Jazz, who has previously held roles at Classic FM, Musica Viva Australia, English Touring Opera, and the Royal Opera House. She is passionate about the role broadcasting plays in representing the excellence and diversity of our contemporary music scene to Australian audiences.

Andy, I want to start with a bit of a navel-gazing question, because we've known each other for over a decade, and intersected professionally in a variety of guises. So, as a place to begin, can I ask how you describe yourself professionally in 2025?

How do I describe myself professionally? I think I've found, somehow, a professional identity that's a mix of being a teacher and an artist and ... something else. I entered the teaching profession properly last year, teaching high school music. Alongside that, I've kind of returned to being a composer. I have always been a composer, since the age of ten, but now I feel like I am leaning back into that again.

I'm curious that you say entering the teaching profession properly, using that qualifier. I feel that education and teaching has always been at the core of your identity, informing your professional work, even though it wasn't necessarily your title. Is it accurate to describe you that way?

Absolutely. I say 'properly' this time because I've actually attained my Master of Teaching! I spent the time doing dedicated study, having previously studied a decade ago for my Bachelor of Music and Master of Music in composition. This time, I feel I've entered that point in my life where I knew it was something I needed to do, to a more thorough level: investing mental energy in skilling myself up and leaning into this very real passion of mine.

Yes, I had been teaching, and education-adjacent, certainly as long as you've known me. When I finished high school, I thought being a violin teacher was always going to be viable and sensible. And while I pursued formal qualifications at that point, I don't think at that stage I necessarily knew that music education was to become this core part of my identity. At that time, I was going to become a 'composer'.

I always managed to teach during my studies. This eventually turned from teaching violin privately and at schools, into being invited to tutor at university, and eventually, being invited to lecture as well. Here, I think, grew a quiet sense of vocation towards being a teacher. The more I did it, the more it became part of myself, and who I wanted to be.

I am struck, and I think this will be a theme of our conversation, by 'I knew this is something I needed to do now.' You've spoken of a kind of organic development of an educational thread in your career, but going back starting at the Conservatorium as a young composer, did you feel that there was a sense that you should know what you need to do? Or that you should know what kind of art you need to create when you're that age? Perhaps it's only something, with that decade of experience, or getting into an established part of your career, that you realise the art is exciting because you don't know what you need to do?

I can start by questioning this sense of 'knowing' or 'feeling' what you need to do. I can't be the only person in late high school who didn't have a clarion sense of what my future was to be, because high school is an insular kind of system by design. I don't know that I knew what I needed to do. I think I was, like so many, searching for some kind of sign for what I should do.

I'm very interested in concepts of identity, and know that my identity as a musician or as a musical person had very much galvanised when I was at high school. That was critical, and I think it's quite typical. I've done a fair bit of reading on this, and learnt that when people are deciding what are they going to do after high school, they're often looking at personal interests. Certainly for me, as someone who'd come from a medical family, I knew I didn't want to do that! Music was so much a part of myself: I thought, 'this is something I really want to try.' I'd also had the other critical thing that happens at that point: people you respect, whether they're mentors or teachers or peers or whomever, saying, 'Oh, you're really good at this. You should try this.'

I reflect back on that time, and there was also a lot of doubt about being a musician, because popular opinion holds that musicians lead challenging lives, financially and socially—it's not a clearly structured pathway. I was very aware of that, and didn't know what it would necessarily mean. But there were enough people to instil a sense of belief, certainly by the time

I was in third year at university, that I could self-identify as a composer. People were talking about me as a composer, too.

At that time, the sense of being a music educator didn't have the same pull in terms of identity. As I described, I thought of it more as a way of earning an income, which might sound really shallow, but that's just where I was. I also knew that I wanted to have a go at other things first: I wanted to be a freelance composer, and have other industry experience. And I had a feeling that there would be a point where it was time to enter the teaching profession. Some teachers know that straight after high school, that is what they are going to do. For me, it came later. The idea matured.

I think I'm going to keep revisiting this theme of shifting identities, and the need to organically explore what your artistic practice and identity is going to be. Recently, a piece of yours, *Komorebi* 木漏れ日, was performed by the MSO as part of their Cybec 21st Century Australian Composers Program, which develops works for a chamber-sized orchestra. I've told you this privately, so don't mind re-commenting publicly, that I was impressed by how confident the work felt. It felt like you were confident to spend the time allocated to explore one concept, without the need to say too much. I think that was felt by the audience, too.

I know that you've written for that same chamber-sized ensemble far earlier in your career, so I'd love to talk about what I'm identifying as maturity (but you don't need to accept that term!). I'm wondering if that has been something that has organically developed, or can you pinpoint a moment where that understanding of how ideas are accepted by an audience, and the need to contain your thoughts, was something you had a real 'aha' moment about?

I think there are a few factors that can answer your question. Firstly, thank you for that lovely feedback. I'm really glad that came across, because it was something I was trying to convey. [A score excerpt is reproduced in the 'Composition' section following this interview.]

One thing I haven't mentioned is the freelance composer / artist career that I had before—I took a step away from that to pursue an entirely different career for nearly six years, working as a producer at ABC Classic. During that wonderful period, I didn't get much time to compose. While it wasn't totally dry, with occasional commissions and occasional projects, it wasn't a kind of rich, music-happening-all-the-time spell. I described myself as a kind of dormant composer at that time, who had mini-eruptions, mini-moments, brief flourishings of creative activity. They were fairly infrequent.

At the end of 2023 I left the ABC, and didn't take a full-time job in teaching: I took a part-time job, because I was intentional about having time to compose. I think having not composed for a while meant that I had a very different perspective on it. It contrasted to when I was freelancing, which had presented its own challenges as it was a big open world of possibility. Of course, as a freelancer you have to find your own opportunities, write grants, hustle, and be your own ambassador. That can be very challenging alongside actually being creative and composing, let alone if you have another job, or part of your portfolio. I perhaps hadn't resolved the tensions of what I'd envisaged it would be with the reality of being a composer, which made the actual act of composing challenging. I wanted time to not feel like that, and to feel secure in myself.

The other aspect is that I'd had opportunities to compose in a very different way. I describe a lot of my composing, and that of other composers who study at an institution like a conservatory,

as typically engaging in writing (for want of a better term) art music, or concert-hall music, or music whose sole purpose is art. And by that, I mean its value lies in how critically engaged it is, or what it is trying to say, or otherwise the kind of elevated experience it's trying to offer. Others may disagree with that, and that's fine, because that's the purpose of art. But one core experience I have had that has led to a kind of 'aha' moment, and maybe this comes back to what we were talking about earlier about identity, is my involvement with the Border Music Camp. Border Music Camp takes place every year in Albury, and its main mission is to provide musical education experiences to young people in that area and across regional Australia. Young people, adult amateurs, and other educators come from all over Australia to participate, and I've been Composer in Residence on and off since 2015. Here I've had the opportunity to write what I might call educational music, as opposed to art music. Music that's enjoyable to listen to, but also teaches. And I think writing in that context, a lot of the language that I developed as an art music composer was not necessarily what I could draw on: rhythmic complexity and extended techniques were not off limits, but I had to be mindful that for young people who are discovering their instruments and are much earlier in their journey, they're looking for ways to become motivated and find the joy in music. The same applied to me: I would just lean into what was just directly joyful for me. It's mutually beneficial.

I wanted to draw on that in this recent Cybec opportunity. In 2013, when I first participated in the Cybec program, I wasn't thinking about leaning into joy; I was thinking about leaning into art. Whereas this time, my thinking was that if someone finds it artistically rewarding, that is fantastic. But the key question, and what I value now when I write music, is whether it is enjoyable for me, and whether it is nourishing for me, which will in turn be nourishing for the audience. That's important. Maybe this time I didn't feel like there was something I wanted or needed to prove? If that's maturity, sure. Last year also coincided with my first year of teaching, which was both amazing and stressful, so there too I wanted my composing to be something that was both nourishing and enjoyable.

I'm going to pose something to you as a theory, as another question. I've been reflecting on the fact that I would say that we're starting to enter our established section of our careers, as opposed to emerging. We're trying to, or we're starting to, shed that word. In a sense, there's never been a time where there seem to be more opportunities for emerging composers. And between the two of us, I think that we know plenty of peers who've had extensive opportunities to write for chamber ensembles or smaller forces. But when I think about what that next stage looks like, to really cement yourself as a composer who's going to have the kind of established career that might sit alongside Peter Sculthorpe, Brett Dean, or Liza Lim, as a name, that's where I think the landscape suddenly looks quite different.

As you talk then about the idea of young people discovering their instruments, and using that art music language as something to inform, but not drive the conversation, it feels to me like you've opened a door into a new room of possibilities to become established. Perhaps you don't necessarily need to be defined as a 'serious' composer by the kind of ideas that maybe we've traditionally had, such as the need for a symphony or opera commission. What you're talking about is finding the joy in music, and writing music that nourishes others.

I think I keep re-evaluating this theme of a career in music that is never quite what you imagine it to be. Success looks like, if not a linear path, certainly a projected path. And

actually, upon your journey (that overused word), you find other ways to create that sense of security for yourself.

I completely agree. There is absolutely a legitimacy question around the career of a composer. Expectations abound: you have to write a symphony, or an opera. And while I love tradition, classical music, symphonies, and operas, it's a crazy benchmark. We still have this notion of that being what a legitimate composer is. It's true, I felt that, and I think a lot of young people feel that as well.

Many creative paths are non-linear, and that's where joy can be found. These unexpected pathways happen in a career, whether it's composing or in music more generally. An analogous situation might be anyone starting at the Conservatorium, say to study their instrument, with the sole focus of gaining a place in an orchestra, or a company. It doesn't always happen that way, and sometimes, what's required to get there dims that appeal, or the day-to-day experience of living it is maybe not actually aligned with your identity, or what you value.

Of course, at the same time, I'm open to this idea of linearity. If anyone's looking to commission a symphony or an opera, I am here—reach out!

That's not the message that you want people taking: 'Oh, Andy doesn't want to write those things.' Exactly.

For so many composers, and so many artists, there is of course an eagerness to work on spectacular, star-studded projects. But I learned, and reflected on a lot before beginning at the ABC, that because the life of a freelance composer is so uncertain, you don't know what projects are going to come your way, and you don't know what grants are going to be accepted. That uncertainty can feed a lot of anxiety, fear, and other challenging emotions. I found I had to practice learning to kind of go with it.

Go with the universe, a lot. That's a privileged thing to say if you've got the means to eat, and those sorts of things, because not everyone is in that situation. But I think more broadly, there needs to be a certain amount of comfort with ambiguity, and possibility. The joy for me has been the unexpected things, like the Border Music Camp, that I never expected I would necessarily do.

What is given as an artist, as a composer, as a teacher, and as a person cannot fully be quantified. Not that I'm giving advice here, but I think for everyone entering a career in music, while we may have an idea of what that career is, the lived experience of it is something very different. But it's exciting, because you get to create it and develop it as you go.

That was a great answer.

I think that's a perfect way to end the conversation: the inspiration of the unknown.