

The hammer of justice

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Presentation to Music, Community, Justice: Australian sounds, a one-day conference hosted by La Trobe University in association with the Gorgeous Voices Festival and St. Luke's, Bendigo, Friday September 8th, 2006 at the Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo

Always was, always will be blackfella country.

I'm a boat person (a ship person, actually). I thank those who know what it means to belong this country for the opportunity they may offer my daughter (who was born here) to learn what belonging may mean. The fact that this gift may still be available, in the face of all that has happened in the last two hundred years constantly fills me with wonder and gratitude.

So, 'Music, Community, Justice: Australian Sounds'.

I feel enormously privileged to have been asked to speak at this forum. Gratified but under-experienced – not that is, in talking, but in the practice inherent in the topic.

I'm no expert on the work of contemporary songwriters; I have an extremely limited knowledge of Australian musical history; and the sounds I employ are pretty much all non-musical.

But I can talk up a storm, so please bear with me.

I'll start with a story of how one or two of today's themes have cross-fertilised in my life.

My only concerted effort at regular singing has been doing the lullaby thing as the father of a colic-affected infant daughter.

As a general rule, I don't sing. While I can singalong OK, when I'm left to my own devices, I have virtually no tune recall, and bugger all lyric memory. So my repertoire was, and remains, limited to the very few songs that have buried themselves in my body. And, despite the best efforts of some great teachers, I'm still struggling to re-experience this childish practice.

I discovered to my horror that most of my embodied songs were hymns and Christmas carols: 'Jerusalem', 'Silent Night', and so on.

Much as I often succumbed to la-laing these beautiful tunes, I was constantly searching my depths for other fragments that may have stuck - ones that did something other than celebrate the supernatural.

I found three.

Before I go on, a slight digression. Two weeks ago I attended a concert celebrating the life of Clifford Hocking. The final performance was by Paco Pena. He played achingly beautiful guitar for ten minutes and then told us he was going to sing. He said that he was an awful singer, but that he'd once shown some of his songs to Cliff, who had responded by insisting that Pena record them - which he never did. He wanted to celebrate Cliff's life by doing something he didn't think he was very good at. What followed was a breathtaking ride through bittersweet joy, longing, wonder and awesome vulnerability.

It emerged that Paco Pena was a perfectly adequate singer. I, on the other hand, am not.

Back to the lullabies.

Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,

Onward the sailors cry.

Carry the lad that's born to be King

Over the sea to Skye

The 'Skye Boat Song' tells the story of the English defeat of the Scots at the Battle of Culloden and subsequent flight of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1746. 300 years later, my mother sang me to sleep with that song, and 50 years further on, I find myself doing the same thing.

They're rollin' out the guns again, hooroo, horroo,
They're rollin' out the guns again, hooroo, horroo,
They're rollin' out the guns again.
But they never will take our sons again,
No they'll never take our sons again,
Johnny I swear this to ye

This is from 'Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye' a traditional song from the early 1800s when Irish regiments were raised by the English for the East India services. I first heard it on the 1961 recording, 'Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem' (although this verse isn't in their version)

It's the same the whole world over,
It's a shame, a wretched shame,
It's the rich what gets the pleasure,
And the poor who gets the blame.

I first heard this on a 1962 Folkways album, 'She Was Poor But She Was Honest', a compilation of Music Hall songs put together and sung by Derek Lamb.

It turns out that it's not from the Music Hall era at all (ie, 1840-1920). It was written in 1930 by Weston and Lee and made popular by the comedian Billy Bennett during the Depression years in Britain.

So Lucy went to sleep with these fragments, along with a verse of 'Bella Ciao', a couple of lines of 'Summertime', some mantras and sundry bits of Beatles.

Pretty limited repertoire really. Which simply reinforces the fact that there's very little you can learn from me about activities musical.

But if trying to express, in words, the function that music plays in our lives, is to your taste, then I may be of some small value.

All three songs from which I 'sang' snatches, have a take on justice. This is a good excuse for me to choose 'music and justice' as that small element of the themes of this day to focus on. After all, for the rest of the day, you'll be hearing from people, far more accomplished than me, on all the other connections emanating from the big idea that informs this forum.

Nelson Mandela said: "It is through music that we express our deepest emotions, the joys and sorrows of our people - and our deepest beliefs."

The 16th of June this year was the 30th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising. I dedicate this talk to the memory of the hundreds of people killed then, and before, and since, in defence of their right to a decent life.

I've chosen Soweto as a signpost because it's a struggle that we cannot think about without recalling its music.

Indeed, there hasn't been a liberation struggle in Africa that hasn't had a memorable soundtrack.

In Zimbabwe, Thomas Mapfuma invented an entire musical style, chimurenga (the Shona word for struggle), as his contribution to the fight against the white Rhodesian rulers.

Similar outpourings have been integral to every anti-colonialist movement on that continent.

Nor is this just an African thing. Our memories of struggles: for civil rights, for Irish independence, for an end to war, are as much of songs:

'We Shall Overcome',

'The Patriot Game',

'Give Peace A Chance',

as they are of actions or dates.

Any struggle against oppression, anywhere, any time, has a soundtrack:

The American labour struggles gave us:

'Which Side Are You On?' by Reece,

Oppenheim and Kohlsaats 'Bread and Roses':

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.

The rising of the women means the rising of the race.

No more the drudge and idler - ten that toil where one reposes,

But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

Solidarity Forever by Chaplin,

Joe Hill's 'The Preacher and the Slave':

You will eat, bye and bye,

In that glorious land above the sky;

Work and pray, live on hay,

You'll get pie in the sky when you die

Woody Guthrie singing 'This Land is Your Land'

And I came to adulthood singing along with:

Dylan's 'Masters of War',

Country Joe McDonald doing 'One, two, three, what are we fighting for?'

'What Have They Done to the Rain?' - Malvina Reynolds,

Pil Ochs and 'I Ain't Marchin' Anymore', and

Buffy Sainte-Marie's 'Universal Soldier'.

Even Hollywood understood - remember the 'Marseillaise' in Rick's Bar in Casablanca or 'Edelweiss' in the Sound of Music.

I don't think I need to say any more to show that the most obvious manifestation of the connection between music and social justice is the anthem.

There's a sixties poster showing a Fabulous Furry Freak Brother exhorting - 'Remember kids, when you're smashing the state, keep a song in your heart!'

Music provides the stirring singalong anthem in the struggle for justice; but there are many other strings to music's bow.

Three of the most obvious are the narrative, the lament and the exposé.

Along with the praise song (otherwise known as the singalong anthem), the four constantly overlap and meld in the identities, aspirations and memories out of which a community's music emerges.

Consider this sample from the blackfella canon:

'Blackfella Whitefella' (Warumpi Band),

'We Have Survived' (No Fixed Address),

'Treaty' (Yothu Yindi),

'Took the Children Away' (Archie Roach)

'From Little Things Big Things Grow' (Carmody and Kelly)

These are multi-functional musics, in which praise and lament, personal biography and social history, vision and memory, demand and prayer, intermingle and combine.

But music is more than a hammer of justice.

It is the companion and equal partner of the Law.

Justice is an essential ingredient of community.

To live together we need to agree on a social response to what are agreed to be unacceptable behaviours. That negotiation becomes the Law.

But Justice is more than equal access to, treatment under, and right to determine, the Law. Justice is respecting, validating, honouring, embracing, and celebrating diversity. Liberations that easily match the limitations inherent in a social contract.

The most accessible, most enjoyable, most emotional, most affective and most memorable way of directly experiencing this other side of justice is with music.

Music is the joyful face of justice.

The Law is one visage, music is the other.

We have forgotten this.

We live in unbalanced world

The Department of Health is actually the Department of Illness and Injury

The Department of Justice is actually the Department of Punishment

We formally express our sense of justice through our legal system and we celebrate our achievement as civilised citizens as being the acceptance of the Rule of Law.

Which is to say that we (formally) define the operations of society in punitive terms - THOU SHALT NOT (OR ELSE).

This may be necessary, but it is hardly attractive (and certainly unbalanced).

Perhaps this is the fundamental awareness behind the movement for a Bill of Rights. The awareness that a well functioning society needs a formal and definitive statement of our co-operation that expresses the positives: a statement that expresses the rewards of living together as strongly as we are prepared to express the obligations, limitations and punishments for transgression.

Where this is going is that the social contract would not have been enjoined in the first place unless the rewards were as palpable as the obligations.

It's easy to tick off a bunch of medium term benefits that a family joining a community could expect - increased security, access to specialists, access to a more diverse gene

pool, town water etc but most of these could arguably be accessed without having to go all 'community'. Margaret Thatcher certainly thought so – 'there's no such thing as society'.

What's becoming increasingly difficult to remember is what the immediate gratifications must have been for agreeing to sign on.

Imagine small groups of hominids wandering out of the jungles into the savannah. Larger groups survive better – what can evolution accentuate in order to attract members to these larger groups? Intense pleasure in musicking together. And so our physiologies continue to remind us.

If the law is codification, interpretation and enforcement of rules, then music is both parallel and opposite – the exercise of liberation. A society whose members don't make music is not well.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg. Scientists and scholars have been speculating for years now that without music, there'd be no justice.

Now that's call and a half, even the most dedicated of you might say. But let's go there for a while.

Ian Cross, Director of the Centre of Music Science at Cambridge University is one of these claimants.

He spoke at the Oct 2005 Musicological Society of Australia's Annual Conference called, surprise, surprise, 'Music & Social Justice'. His essay, 'Music & Social Being', based on his presentation there, can be downloaded from his website.

In it he claims:

'The most important abstract concepts that frame and give meaning to human interaction - such as social justice, that aspect of morality which is concerned with the achievement of equity in human relations - have their roots in human musicality.'

Cross, along with many other serious thinkers, is proposing that music is not (just) this fun thing to do that makes us feel good.

It is also a stage in our development (both evolutionary and individual) and an integral part of the journey of our lives through which we joyfully experience and explore our own identities and ways of sharing space, time and intention with others.

With music-making we get to practice social behaviour in a free and fearless space and we come to understand, physically and emotionally (that is, not necessarily intellectually or consciously) that there is fulfilment in co-operation. We get to be flexible, and to enjoy being so - across and between all the domains of our existence - physical and mental, rational and emotional, secular and spiritual, individual and social.

A couple of years ago, as part of an intro to CMV, I wrote:

'Traditionally, making music together has been one of the most important binding agents within and between communities.

'When people make music together, connections develop. These connections can transcend profound difference, illuminate unexpected unity, bring cathartic joy and extend into everyday life. Through creative practices, we discover and develop connections that join our collective beings in imaginative and intuitive ways that transcend the rational.

'We often use 'harmonious' as a description of the society we aspire to live in. This is no accident. Our bodies respond physically, sensually and emotionally to harmony – the connections between sounds moves us. Making harmony in the moment is a joyful and uplifting experience; a tangible manifestation of our dreams of oneness built on diversity.'

When I wrote this, I wasn't aware that there were biological and evolutionary rationales to support these claims. Imagine how excited I was to discover that science, that most rational of perspectives, can help us to understand, or at least to express and justify, what we intuitively know.

And it gets better.

It may be that this music thing does not just introduce us to an operational mode (learning to share) but to the values that underpin a healthy existence.

After all, where do values come from?

If we accept, for a moment, that they aren't handed down on stone tablets then they must come from experience.

The scientists speculate that one of the most important moments in the evolution of the human being was becoming bipedal - learning to stand on two feet (it's certainly a critical moment for our infants).

(What has this got to do with justice? I can hear you muttering - well, just hang on, I'll get there)

To stand on two feet requires a quite spectacular level of balance control and the constant interplay of pressure between our two connections to the earth, may well be our first introduction to controllable rhythm. And then we walk, and the dancing begins.

What learning is embodied through this experience? Balance is necessary (and, not surprisingly, the ear is critical to its achievement). And it's not such a huge jump to imagine how a function that is necessary becomes idealised into a value that is 'good'.

I think that, intuitively, this is what I was trying to get at when I talked about harmony in the CMV intro. Sonic diversity pleases the ear, therefore diversity is good. A physical action (related soundwaves striking a drum that vibrates sympathetically) transforms into a moral value. This is not such a big leap.

But it is a long way from the idea of music as a practical here-and-now weapon, tool or instrument for the achievement of social goals - what often gets called the power of music.

Sound qualities (pitch, timbre, melody, rhythm, imagery, wordplay) are created with music that can profoundly affect both makers and listeners.

Music's capacity to affect emotions and mood, energy sources and health, the sense of social and individual identity and connection, and the quality of empathetic response, has been experienced, witnessed and documented for as long as we've been making it.

Perhaps the most impressive argument for this power can be found by exploring the reverse of all this positive stuff.

This, after all, is the way of the scientific researcher:

Don't ask, 'Does child love mother?'

Don't ask, 'Why does child love mother?'

Ask 'What causes the one who doesn't to be like that?'

Understand the pathological and the path to health becomes clearer

The elemental power of music to socially cohere is a quality that has not gone unnoticed by the powers of darkness. As has its capacity to induce states of ecstatic emotion.

These are powers that can be harnessed to evil as easily as to good. For every anthem of humanity there is one of inhumanity. For every dance of peace there is a march to war. For every paeon on welcoming strangers there is a hymn of xenophobic patriotism. For every exhortation to excellent behaviour there is a catchy ditty promoting consumerism.

In fact, the advertising industry has understood and harnessed the power of music better than anyone.

Not only do they cause clever jingles to be created, they appropriate and pervert songs that, before the touch of their hands, were in some way, difficult for me to express, community property. What comes immediately to my mind is a new car ad that features 'Revolution' as its backing track. Even though this Beatles song is defiantly anti-revolutionary it nevertheless became the symbol for a generational spirit utterly at odds with owning expensive motor vehicles (no matter how many of these the composers themselves actually owned).

And just as music's developmental capacities extend far beyond their direct affect, so do its capacities to be used as a means of social manipulation.

One piece of Paris 68 graffiti went 'Consume, Be Silent, Die'. As far as music-making is concerned we've taken that on board with a vengeance. Most of us do a lot more listening and a lot less making than our forebears.

And not only have we become consumers primarily, we're encouraged to become discerning consumers, aware of the social consequences of being seen to appreciate particular strains

And music-making, like so many once commonly held skills, becomes specialised, professionalised, individualised, mystified, idolised. And the amateur practice, often patronisingly head-patted, is perceived to have no more than leisure activity status. The function of collaborative grass-roots creativity and expression has withered away. We have forgotten much.

But the monsters haven't.

And, just as monsters eat, drink and breathe so do monsters sing.

Music is as essential to human life as food, drink and air, but that does not mean that it cannot be used for indecent purposes AND it means that it CAN be used as a weapon of disempowerment, just as the withholding of other life-essentials can.

Nevertheless, just as there can be no justice without food so can there be no justice without music.

I have written that perhaps our cultural rights could be expressed in one sentence:

- The right to actively participate in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society.

Perhaps this could be more simply expressed:

- The right to sing and dance together

Now that would be justice!

Music may not be the answer, but without music, there can be no answer.

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