

Resonating Voices

Australian Women Composers and Musicians in the Oral
History Collection of the National Library of Australia


A paper by Jenny Gall, Oral History Branch, National Library of Australia, given at the National Festival of Women's Music Loose Canons conference in Canberra, September, 2001

Regardless of when an interview takes place, the resulting recording provides a unique document about the individual's life. The interviewee is able to give an account of her life in her own words, and the resulting sound recording preserves her distinctive patterns of speech and thought for future generations of researchers. An oral history interview, unlike a written biography, has a vital blend of intensity and spontaneity that allows the interviewee, through her interaction with the interviewer, to reflect on her achievements in the context of her whole life experience.

The Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia has three main categories: Eminent Australians, Social History and Folklore. While interviews with women composers of art music are found amongst the Eminent Australians, I also want to discuss the women musicians who are found in the Folklore collections. Some of these women are composing using either traditional settings for their music or a fusion of folk, jazz and new music influences. Other older, or deceased women musicians, like those in the John Meredith and Rob Willis collections, perform as composers in a traditional sense: the songs and tunes which they reproduce are played in their distinctive style and with adaptations of words to fit the location where the musician lives.

The oral history interviews with eminent women composers are valuable for a number of reasons. They reveal what or who inspired them to follow a musical career, who taught them and what they thought about the methods employed by their teacher; how they developed their compositional techniques, where they find inspiration to compose, what fires their imagination, how they proceed, where they compose and the tools they use, and of course, the gossip about their contemporaries. Their experiences are inspirational for both dedicated musicians and musicologists and for general researchers of all ages wishing to learn more about Australia's cultural identity.

Interviews with Australian women composers held in the NLA are: Mirrie Hill, Margaret Sutherland, Peggy Glanville Hicks, Dulcie Holland, Miriam Hyde, Mary Mageau, Ros Bandt, Sarah de Jong, Cathie O'Sullivan, Eileen Joyce, Ruth Lee Martin, Helen Gifford, Moneta Eagles and Alec Brahe son of May Brahe, talking about his mother's work.

I have selected the following excerpts from several of these interviews with open access conditions. This is Margaret Sutherland in an interview with Mel Pratt, in 1972 (TRC 121/31):  Listen

PRATT: When did you first become interested in music?

SUTHERLAND: Oh, the minute I was born.

PRATT: Were your family musical?

SUTHERLAND: Yes, very musical, all of them and I had nothing but---I was allowed to play the piano, strum and that kind of thing, from the minute I almost breathed, so I never remember anything different, you see. My mother and father were very musical.

PRATT: Was there a piano in the house or violins or other instruments?

SUTHERLAND: Always a piano, there might be other things but always a piano. You see, a lot of people don't understand, they think you must have gone to the Conservatorium and you must have followed this and followed that. I couldn't. You see, I got it from the family, it just went on.

PRATT: Did you in fact have a formal musical education?


SUTHERLAND: No. Not at all, because I had to earn, you see, as soon as I left school I was earning.

As you can hear, it is an elderly woman speaking, but her determination and the disdain for institutions that characterised her career are all here. She goes on to talk about the inspiration of her early European journey and then discusses the painful decisions she needed to make about ending her marriage to pursue her composing career. There is discussion of the struggle to establish the Victorian Arts Centre, and the revelation that the composition that pleases her most is *The Haunted Hills*, because, as she says, "This is to do with the Aborigines".

Like many of the women interviewed, Miriam Hyde recalls the great influence of her mother's passion for music on her own composing (DeBerg 847-848, August 1975)---

Interview with Hazel de Berg.....):  Listen

Miriam Hyde : I can hardly remember the time when I was not trying to compose music. Firstly, of course, it would be just picking out a melody on a piano, long before I could write it down, and my mother used to write bar by bar some of my earliest compositions, as I played them, from memory, bit by bit, at the piano. I do remember to this day a little tune I wrote for a poem which began "Apples, mellow apples, high above my head", and I remember thinking of that tune, singing it spontaneously to those words one day when my mother was tidying out her work basket.

Dulcie Holland, in her interview with Hazel de Berg talks about the impetus to compose (De Berg 824, April 1975):  Listen


‘To get started on a composition, there is always a great hurdle to be overcome. People have often asked me, ‘How do you begin? Where do you start? Do you think of a tune first, or do you sit down at the piano and doodle, or what do you do?’ and I always say, ‘Every piece of music comes to birth in a different way.’ You might be thinking of a particular performer, as I would have done in this particular piece that was mentioned before, thinking of the performer makes you think of a lovely phrase that they would play, and around this phrase you then begin to build a piece of music. Sometimes it is the fact that a competition is announced and there are conditions, and you read them, and you think, ‘I could write something like that, ‘ or maybe you think, ‘I couldn’t write something like that, so that’s a challenge to me, I’d better have a try,’ and this triggers you off into some sort of activity.’”

Mirrie Hill In her interview with de Berg (De Berg 840, June 1975) reminisces about writing *The Arnhem Land Symphony*, trying to interpret aboriginal music in a sympathetic western setting:

‘And so that was how I came to write the ‘Arnhem Land Symphony’”, because Mr Mountford had lent us a tremendous lot of recordings of the natives singing their songs, but it was very difficult to take them down in our idiom. However, I did my best, and became so fond of these tunes that I thought I would like to incorporate them in a symphony, but write them in a more western way, which I did, and called this ‘The Arnhem Land Symphony.’”

Mary Mageau discusses a different kind of synthesis in her interview: (de Berg 1194, September 1980):

‘So I decided to write, a work which I entitled *Fantasy Music*, and it does link back to this idea that I’ve always had of synthesis in my music. I wanted to use a very avant-garde sort of vocabulary. I played the insides of the piano as well as the keyboard, I let the violin do things that were more colouristic rather than just the literal writing for strings, and yet I organised this work very carefully on a dramatic form. The language, the sounds, the preoccupation directly with sound, wasn’t off-putting to an audience, because of course it was presented in a very clear sort of form. Even to this day I look back on that work and I feel that it perhaps was one of the most successful things I have achieved.’”

Peggy Glanville Hicks recorded her interview with Diana Ritch (TRC1548, July 1983) in her late 60s when she had finally returned home after a life of composing abroad. She reflects on the powerful influence of Nadia Boulanger on her composing direction and her acceptance in America:  Listen

‘I then went to Paris and studied with Nadia Boulanger. Nadia Boulanger was a very special kind of teacher, because she taught each composer to become what it was they potentially were. She didn’t end up, as for instance, Hindemith as a teacher, producing schoolroom after schoolroom of little Hindemiths, and it took them years to establish their own style, having learned the technique only in terms of his style. But Boulanger was very exceptional, perhaps it was because she was a woman; she took quite a long time to find out what your own trends were, your inclinations, your feeling for style, and then she showed you how to get there. For that reason she, I think, was probably the greatest teacher of composition in the twentieth century.’”

The search for a new and unique personal style in Australian women's art music interviews is a constant theme in these interviews. In comparison, the folk music recordings and interviews are fascinating because traditional music is a thread reaching back through successive generations. Performers are custodial composers of a traditional item. Often the songs describe emotions or relationships that will always be relevant, and the singer can suit the song to the occasion by altering names. Song melodies are varied as well. Tunes become the performers' through their use of ornamentation or technical characteristics like fiddle bowing or use of bellows with an accordion and through employing different keys or tempos. For example, the jig Paddy Faheys' can be played in either a major or a minor key and varied greatly with speed and melodic variations. Often tunes are adapted: a melody that has been learned as a waltz is altered to become a Schottische to meet the requirements of a particular dance occasion.

The great power of folk or traditional music stems from stories and melodies that have been sung or played, sometimes for centuries, yet, because their message remains relevant, these ancient songs and melodies have endured; they have sometimes been modified, sometimes altered very little, because their essence is important to our lives even now.

I have been associated with oral history projects of many different kinds, including a project on the musical heritage of the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. This project yielded historical documents and interviewees ranging across a broad spectrum of music teachers, elderly folk with Gaelic, Italian and English musical heritage, those with knowledge of brass band history, church musicians and dance musicians. The musical life of any community, large or small, and oral history is an excellent tool for exploring how lives are shaped by the pursuit of music and the kind of music that evolved to meet community needs. I am also interested in the long search for a distinctive Australian musical voice, and again, oral history offers the means to explore this issue.

Many of the collections in the Oral History archive contain examples of music from diverse ethnic communities in Australia: including Greek, Maltese, Vietnamese, Finnish, Italian, Turkish and so on. One of the earliest sound recording collections of Australian traditional musicians is that of John Meredith. His earliest recordings represent rural people as they lived and played their music in the 1950s.

Meredith learned accordion from his father and was sought after as a musician at country-dances in his own right. He moved to Sydney in the 1950s and began to collect field-recordings of Australian folk songs and dance tunes. His collecting and dedication to Australian music continued up until his death this year, and the National Library has issued a double CD in his memory, entitled, 'Sharing the Harvest.' There are many women represented in Meredith's collections, often recording their music confidently, others, less self-assured, assuming a more retiring, but just as important role, 'helping out' with the words or the first bars of a tune for their husband, like Ruth Blackman, who has a beautifully sweet voice in this rendition of **Babes in the Wood**. (TRC2222/R07, June

1984)  Listen

Sally Sloane is the best known of John Meredith's women musicians. Born in Parkes, 1894, Sally learned many of her songs and tunes from her mother, who in turn had learned them from her mother, Sarah, who had come to Australia from County Kerry in 1838. Sally learned concertina, button accordion, mouth organ and piano from her mother. She

learned to play fiddle and tin whistle as well. From an early age, Sally played for small bush dances, and sang to entertain audiences. Her distinctive repertoire is described by Dr Edgar Waters, (who with Peter Hamilton founded the Wattle Record company which released some of the earliest recordings of traditional Australian folk music):

‘Mrs Sloane’s style of singing was handed down to her along with the family songs. The manner in which she produces her voice, her feeling for melody and her control of melodic variation, her use of free and sensitive rhythms – these are some of the marks of a style of folk singing that has been transmitted in a remarkably pure form. Australian folk song in all its aspects, seems to have been greatly influenced by various forms of ‘popular’ music; Mrs Sloane’s style of singing seems to be completely free from such influences.’ (Dr Edgar Waters in *Australian Traditional Singers and Musicians*, Record Notes, Australian Folklore Society, Sydney, 1957)

Here is a fragment of *The Green Bushes* sung by Sally, which demonstrates her particular vocal style.

GREEN BUSHES 1 (TRC2539/005, Recorded1953)  Listen


And here is the same song sung some 30 years later by **Cathie O’Sullivan**, a Canberra Musician.

GREEN BUSHES 2 (*Artesian Waters*, Larrikin Records, 1980)  Listen

This song comes from Cathie’s first album, *Artesian Waters*. Her music has developed from these pure folk renditions to become a unique blend of folk influences, jazz and new music elements. Her choice of sparse instrumentation and her style of vocal delivery create a distinctively Australian sound, communicating the spaciousness of our landscape, which of course represents loneliness and isolation as well as freedom and natural beauty. Like other earlier women composers, she also acknowledges the aboriginal relationship with the landscape in her music.

Her performances are recorded in the folk music collection in folk festival recordings, and her oral history interview discusses the particular difficulty of composing music that falls outside convenient terms of classification.

This last sound example is a recording of a living musician who carries on the tradition of Australian dance music that Sally Sloane was part of. **Eileen McCoy** was born in Ulverstone, Tasmania, and was raised on a farm, helping with the milking and tilling the potato crop before and after school. In the notes for the CD recording of her music, she describes how she managed to sneak out her father’s fiddle one wet day: ‘When Dad came home he could tell what I was trying to play. He said, ‘If you can play me a tune tonight when I come home I’ll buy you one’, and he did”. Eileen has had a lifetime of playing dance music since that event.

The following track is from the album, *Eileen McCoy, Apple Island Fiddler*, produced by Rob Willis and Alan Musgrave. The first tune is identified by the musician who played it rather than by the composer: *Pop McCoys Jig/I Want to Go Home Again/ Captain Jig of the Horse*.  Listen

The recordings I have referred to represent the breadth of the holdings in the Oral History and Folklore Collections. There are rich rewards to be found by the researcher who wants to investigate the creation of music at its human source.

If you wish to listen to the audio excerpts you will need to download and install [RealPlayer](#). This is a free plugin available to download by clicking on the icon:

