

THE QUEST FOR THE LONG WHITE WHALE: NATURE IMAGERY IN NEW ZEALAND CLASSICAL MUSIC

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INTRODUCTION

This article weaves together three intertwining threads. Firstly and most importantly, it is intended as a modest contribution to the academic study of New Zealand classical music. For a very small country, we have an impressive line-up of composers, of whom 105 are listed in John Mansfield Thomson's 1990 *Biographical Dictionary of New Zealand Composers*, yet the discursive content of their work receives far less analytical attention in sites of intellectual discourse than their literary colleagues. The present article is not intended as anything like a total survey, but I have attempted in its course to introduce the names of a significant number of composers and their works to indicate in purely quantitative terms the size of this rather under-valued component of our national culture. Here, then, is the first thread: putting it simply, I just wanted to write something about New Zealand classical music!

However, that initial impulse was a little too vague, inchoate and open-ended. To limit the field, and to give the discussion manageable structure and direction, I made the strategic decision to focus on just one theme, namely the ways in which the natural world is represented in our national music. I will therefore not be discussing self-referential, abstract music with no aspirations to be anything other than a sonata, quartet, symphony or whatever, nor programmatic works (such as operas and songs) with subjects other than nature. These exclusions will, of course, rule a large amount of music out of bounds for the present discussion, but we will still have plenty to get our teeth into, as a surprising number of New Zealand works take nature as their overt subject. Furthermore, the semiological challenge of representing nature in music (our central preoccupation in this article) is a trickier business than it may first appear, so even if we are limiting ourselves to the subset of New Zealand music which attempts this legerdemain, a considerable amount of space will be required to analyse it. Thus, even though I will be exploring only one facet of musical composition, I hope readers will not feel short-changed!

As just mentioned, my central theme throughout this article will be the semiological devices through which our composers have tried to fuse the disparate worlds of nature and culture. However, within this over-arching preoccupation, I will propose a mini-thesis concerning two different forms which nature can take as it is incorporated into culture. These two distinct modalities of nature are expressed in the following extended quotes:

A new experience came my way last February, playing a Lilburn piano sonata of the forties to an audience of Londoners and expatriate New Zealanders at New Zealand House. The northern night was freezingly cold, wet and black, yet suddenly another world emerged vividly out of the sounds, a world of light and sun, of spacious green paddocks and splendid Alps - those very things I was missing so intensely. As I played, I was aware of an almost possessive acuteness of listening by the audience, many of whom were vividly moved by the music's call to their own private

longings and memories of home. Margaret Nielsen

If one could stretch one's ears enough and one's brain enough, you could hear all the diverse and individual rhythms of the world as forming a web of one enormous, vast, over-all rhythm. All those rhythms affect us. I believe that geo-physical changes are passing through us and affect our bodies constantly at very subtle levels. Annea Lockwood

I will label the approach to nature represented by the Margaret Nielsen passage above 'landscape music', (where the term landscape is used generically to include seascapes, skyscapes, flora, fauna, weather and any other local evocations of the spirit of place). It characterised New Zealand music from the 1940s through the 1960s. The Annea Lockwood quote, on the other hand, encapsulates a shift from landscape to what I will term 'environmental music', characteristic of the last two decades or so.

Landscape music constructs images of specific New Zealand scenes, either for aesthetic enjoyment and/or to make rhetorical statements about the relationship between New Zealanders and the topography of these islands at the antipodes of mother England. The rhetorical statements just mentioned constitute an aspect of Pakeha cultural nationalism: 'Nature' is used as a legitimising principle for the naturalisation of European art in Aotearoa, and therefore for the fraction of the educated middle classes who practise and consume that art. Composers in this genre are doing in music what poets such as Charles Brasch, Denis Glover and Allen Curnow have done in words, and visual artists such as Rita Angus, Toss Woollaston and Colin McCahon have done in paint. These artists have worked to construct an 'authentic' indigenous Pakeha cultural identity by using representations of specifically New Zealand natural images as guarantors of that authenticity.

By contrast, environmental music comprises the aesthetic wing of the more general green movement which has gathered momentum since the ecology-conscious 1960s. It is less concerned with problems of national identity and more concerned about an accurate understanding of how ecosystems function and about promoting action aimed at protecting such systems from the damage inflicted by hyper-industrialisation. Viewed sociologically, however, the green movement is as discursively loaded as cultural nationalism, being an attempt - again by the educated middle classes - to construct a meaningful metanarrative that will give them a significant role to play in world destiny. As artists go to the rescue of nature, nature in turn rescues them, not so much from pollution as from a sense of existential irrelevance.

I realize that these brief sketches are extremely over-simplified, and may indeed appear a little cynical. They are intended only as a preliminary orientation for the more detailed analyses of artistic strategies which follow. I would like to say before starting that at the personal level, although I am somewhat sceptical about the validity of the discourses that are coded into and surround New Zealand music, I have almost total and unreserved admiration for the music itself, and for the extremely gifted, dedicated and often embattled composers who create it. Indeed, my primary reason for writing the present article is not so much to conduct intellectual analysis as simply to pay tribute to the creative artists whose work has incited that analysis.

LANDSCAPE MUSIC AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Captain Lilburn and the Long White Whale

I will begin my narrative by introducing its main protagonist. In 1940, aged twenty-five, Douglas Lilburn returned to New Zealand after studying music in England. In the same year, his works *Drysdale Overture* (1937), *Festival Overture* (1939) and *Prodigal Country* (1939) won the major prizes in a composition competition held to mark New Zealand's centennial. In the following fifty years, his drive to establish an indigenous art music tradition and his personal vision of what that music should entail have dominated music-making in this country, especially that of the landscape genre. He is to music what Allen Curnow has been to poetry and Colin McCahon to painting.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Lilburn created an oeuvre of conventional music which demonstrated to younger composers that serious music of world class quality could be composed in this small nation on the fringe of global culture. Then in the mid-1960s he led a break-through into the medium of electronic composition which placed the next generation of local composers in the world vanguard of experimental music. He has been a key figure in the professionalisation of the role of composer in New Zealand, and he has also forged links between classical music and other media such as drama, dance, poetry and film.

Given his almost daunting pre-eminence, I shall take Lilburn as my main point of departure and orientation in this section, discussing other composers' work as extensions or developments of his pioneering activities. This gives the unbalanced impression that all later composers are, as it were, contained within the giant body of one single Romantic superhero. To rectify the balance, I should repeat what was said in the Introduction – the present article is limited to the genre of landscape music and the cultural nationalism associated with it. Not all New Zealand composers have pursued this particular mode of cultural nationalism, so my discussion is necessarily selective. Just to give one example amongst many, it ignores the quite different approach of Jack Body, who has forged creative links between New Zealand and the musical traditions of Indonesia, China and Japan.

In developing my thesis about cultural nationalism, I will begin with two strategic premises, from which a range of tactical semiotic manoeuvres will be developed. My first premise is that throughout his career, Douglas Lilburn has been executing in New Zealand a project of nation-building through music. This is an essentially modernist project whose protagonists have included Dvorak and Bartok in Hungary, Greig in Norway, Rimski-Korsakov and Borodin in Russia, Copland in America, Sibelius in Finland and Vaughan Williams in England. Lilburn's early work was strongly influenced by the latter two composers, particularly Vaughan Williams with whom he studied in England.

My second premise is that Lilburn strategically foregrounded natural features of this country as constituting the major component of our national identity. Different themes could have been selected, as they were by nationalist composers in other countries. For instance, our history, whether Maori, Pakeha, or the struggle between these ethnic groups, could have been chosen as the central focus of a nationalist myth. Lilburn presumably shared the view of certain mid-century writers that New Zealand was a new and empty country, devoid of historical events epic enough to warrant artistic treatment.

Accepting that the project is to be nation-building through musical representations of landscape, the question then arises as to what tactical means can be employed to transform the natural world into

musical forms. Nature - the referent, the ding an sich, the blatantly manifest yet epistemologically unknowable - lurks below the surface of the ocean of Being like a great white whale. The artist stands in a leaky boat, harpoon in hand. But how to drive the weapon home? By what rope can we haul leviathan to the surface? How ensure it does not escape or, worse, turn and destroy one's ephemeral craft?

Putting this in the terms employed by the classical linguist Saussure, how is a bond to be forged between a signifier called music, its signified associations in the minds of composer and hearer, and the referent - nature itself? We know from Saussure that the connection between signifier and referent is always arbitrary, a matter of convention and usage. How much more arbitrary, slippery and evasive is that bond when the signifying codes are the non semantic sounds of musical instruments, of voices, of taped and processed natural noises or the whooshing white noise and microscopic sine wave clicks of a synthesiser. It is one thing to want to put nature into music. It is another much more difficult task to pull off this conjuring trick. The hunt is on!

The following pages will look at a range of devices which Lilburn and other New Zealand composers have used to make that vital bonding. In essence, they insert a chain of secondary signifiers - the rope attached to the harpoon - which mediate between music and nature and graft them onto each other through association. What follows is a brief analysis of seven such mediating semiotic links by which Lilburn-Ahab and those who followed him have tried to grapple the long white whale of Aotearoa.

Titles

The most obvious and most superficial way of finding out whether a piece of music has nature as its referent is to look at the label. Douglas Lilburn called one of his earliest works *Aotearoa*, another *Drysdale Overture*. Through such titles, a viewfinder is immediately provided, a mind set established. When we are listening to these two pieces, a tenuous link has been forged between the first and the country as a whole, between the second and the Turakina sheep station Drysdale on which he grew up.

New Zealand music is studded with such stage-setting descriptive titles, tuning the listener in to mountains, to seascapes, to seasons of the year, to atmospheric conditions, to times of day, to the flora or fauna of specific localities. There are John Rimmer's *White Island* (1974) and *For the Kokako* (1978), Chris Cree Brown's *Aramoana* (1980) and *Neap Tides* (1983), Ross Harris's *Horizons* (1974), Jenny McLeod's *Earth and Sky* (1968), Christopher Blake's *Leaving the Plains of Canterbury* (1979), Larry Pruden's *Akaroa* (1974) and *Taranaki* (1976) - just to toss in a few at random.

Such preliminary tags serve the function of telling us, the listeners, what kind of a beast we are hunting and roughly where it is located. When we pull in the rope, however, we usually find the harpoon unblooded. That is, when we actually listen to the music we do not necessarily - indeed, not usually - hear anything which has an essential link with the title. We read the name *Aotearoa Overture* and obediently try to conjure up images of our turangawaewae. All we hear, however, is a symphony orchestra playing pleasant music which could have been made in and refer to any country where twentieth century music is composed. The chain of signifiers between name, music and nature falls apart after the first bar and we are left feeling vaguely cheated. Some semiological reinforcement is obviously required.

Extraneous Knowledge

The initial clue to the natural content of the music provided by its name is augmented if, via programme or CD sleeve notes or other sources, we are put in the know about the composer's intentions, where the music was composed or the occasion for which it was created. If we are told that Lilburn's *Sea Changes* (1946) was composed with the view from the Christchurch Port Hills in mind, we too are prepared to experience that view. If we are told that Jenny McLeod's *Three Celebrations* was commissioned to mark the centennial of our national parks, then we are mentally prepared for a sonic travelogue through native bush.

This extraneous knowingness may be given a further aura of verisimilitude if the composer lets us in on the historical associations that surround the piece of country involved. Thus Christopher Blake's *Sounds* (1985) was intended by the composer not only to record musical snapshots of a place in the Queen Charlotte Sounds he knew well, but also to evoke the historical people and events linked with that locality. Again, in composing *Breath of Hope* (1990), a symphonic and choral description of the Waikato river, Ivan Zagni coded into it associations with Te Puea and the Tainui people as described by Michael King.

Another form of knowingness is provided on occasions by descriptive passages of purple prose written by musical scholars, drawing our attention to the supposed natural imagery of the music we are to hear. Thus, on the sleeve to Lilburn's neutrally titled *Symphony No 2* (1951) we are enjoined to settle down for a piece of acoustic tourism:

Twenty-five years after its composition, this symphony with its subtle allusions to... the oppressiveness of West Coast weather and landscape (third movement), the opening-up of the mountain skyline (fourth movement) or, more generally, the sweep of the horizons around us in the first movement, has the power to arouse in New Zealanders an indefinable feeling of identity with their country.

Unfortunately, in spite of such additional information about composers' intentions, the occasion of the music, historical associations or what someone else thinks we should hear, we really have got little closer to impaling the submerged bulk of nature than when we read the title of the piece. Although we know that the composer had the Port Hills in mind, or the history of the Waikato river, or our wonderful native bush, we still obdurately hear violins, trombones, clarinets and tympani when we settle down to listen. Compositorial intentions or a commentator's rhetorical flourishes alone are not sufficient to guarantee the magical passage of nature into culture.

Those rhetorical flourishes warrant a comment on their own. Taking them apart critically would appear ponderous and petty, were it not for the fact that the assumptions they contain still surface when people talk about the privileged relationship that is assumed to exist between New Zealand nature and New Zealand music. Two comments at least are in order.

In the first place, assertions about what 'New Zealanders' are supposed to hear in contemporary classical music beg the question of who such hypothetical people really are. Are they Maori street kids in Auckland, whose musical horizons are largely encompassed by genres like rap, reggae, hip-hop, dance and the like? Are they the white petty bourgeoisie, whose ears seldom strain beyond yesterday's pop music or, at the limit, mainstream musicals? Are the writers of programme notes aware that even musically sophisticated middle class New Zealanders seldom venture out of the safe waters of eighteenth and nineteenth century European classical and romantic music, knowing

little, if anything, of the musical codes and conventions employed by contemporary New Zealand composers?

To state the obvious, the capacity to listen and interpret different forms of music is not given by nature to all citizens alike. We acquire musical tastes through socialisation, and we select what we hear according to our socio-cultural niche. The vast majority of New Zealanders are not likely to respond instinctively and patriotically to depictions of nature in contemporary music for the simple reason that they are not programmed to absorb such music in the first place. They don't like the stuff! They are therefore unlikely to perceive its alleged affinities with their natural environment.

Let us suppose, however, we have trained our ears to accept the conventions of contemporary music, and suppose also we do actually hear analogies or homologies between certain music and natural forms, colours and processes. There still is no reason why the scenes thus evoked should be specifically 'New Zealand'. If we hear a lowering, rain-drenched and melancholy landscape, could it not be Scotland, the north of France, or anywhere else which is for the moment meteorologically lugubrious? There is nothing specifically 'West Coast' in the slow movement of Lilburn's second symphony. I need not labour the point: the associations between what is played and what is signified by that music remain arbitrary, sealed by convention not by nature, in spite of the words by which music may be surrounded.

Musical Styles

The devices discussed above have started to nudge us in the right direction, but we are still a long way from an eyeball-to-eyeball connection with New Zealand nature in the raw. Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong place. Since music, not words, is the medium under discussion, it surely should be in the music itself that nature is ensnared? I would suggest that there are, in fact, two distinct ways in which composers may go about closing the gap between sonic signifiers and their natural referent by purely musical means. The first tactic can be thought of as association through convention, the second as association through mimesis (i.e. imitation).

Much of Lilburn's early work of the 1940s and 1950s exemplifies the first approach. The composer's problem is how to write music which is 'about' nature. One answer is to model one's compositional style on that of former composers whose work, to those in the know, is conventionally associated with the nature of a particular country. Thus, the music of Sibelius is said to evoke the feeling of the forests of Finland. The English pastoral scene is heard, if you wish, in the music of Vaughan Williams. Mix Sibelius and Vaughan Williams together, add a suitably New Zealand title: lo and behold! - indigenous nature music for Aotearoa. Skilful auditors have followed a line of association that runs from Lilburn's work back through a genre of European nationalist music to the nature from which that music purportedly grew. They end with the illusion that they are hearing the Southern Alps. The conjuring trick does not work, of course, if we have not learned the associations of the original musical codes – e.g. Sibelius = Finnish landscape. We have to be musically erudite to succumb to the illusion.

The real New Zealand landscape shrugs off such pinpricks with little difficulty and goes its way. It is grappled more closely, however, by what I termed above association through mimesis. In this case, the style of the music does not imitate a prior musical style, but rather attempts to approximate the actual colours, textures, movements, spaces and emotional tonality of nature itself. It is like a semi-abstract landscape by Toss Woollaston where, albeit sometimes with difficulty, the figurative outline of a natural scene can be made out.

Thus in Lilburn's *Summer Voices* (1969) we do not hear echoes of other musical styles nor the manipulation of Putney-generated sine waves. We hear the song of cicadas droning through the rustle of dried summer grass. In Lyell Cresswell's *Voices of Ocean Winds* (1990) we can hear in the agitation of the strings, the blasts of the trumpets, the agony of the percussion or the screams of the woodwinds, the frenetic movements of wind and sea on a stormy day. In the sparse and spacious electronic vistas of John Rimmer's *Where Sea Meets Sky* (1975) we can - if given the initial key from the record notes - visualise the tranquility, the cloud formations and immense blue void glimpsed on a flight over the Tasman from Australia to New Zealand.

It is harder for nature to get off this hook than the previous ones. Different listeners, even with untrained ears, may agree that what they are hearing could indeed be a storm, a vista of infinite space or the drone of summer insects. Unfortunately, however, a phenomenological study of such responses would also reveal discrepancies. The semiological viewfinder is always imprecise. Several people may hear a storm, but others might hear the sound of their stomachs after tequila and pickles, while others might hear a battle between aliens in outer space. Furthermore, even if one could force a consensus on the type of natural event being experienced, the literal-minded could still object that it was not necessarily a New Zealand soundscape they were experiencing. Rimmer's sounds could as well be the Atlantic as the Tasman. Cree Brown's neap tides could be running on any point of the earth's surface. Lilburn's cicadas could equally well be bestowing their favours on Siberian peasants or Californian lifestylers. Thus the composer's ingenuity in making instruments, voices or synthesisers sound like natural phenomena has still not succeeded in localising nature to a specifically New Zealand arena. Cultural nationalism is still floundering. We need, it would seem, more redundancy, more doubling-up, more reinforcement of the semiological net in which we wish to entangle leviathan. Perhaps the time has come to call in some allies.

Poets and Painters to the Rescue

To this point, composers have been on their own in their attempt to narrow the gap between art and nature. However, artists in other fields have been on the trail of the same quarry from other directions for years. Particularly in painting and poetry, in fact, the attempt to construct a national aesthetic through the contemplation of nature had become a deeply ingrained frame of mind by the 1940s, a frame of mind in which Lilburn also participated. It is scarcely surprising that in his effort to construct a national musical vocabulary, he should turn for assistance to those who had already tried to fit words to the local landscape.

In *Prodigal Country*, performed in London in 1940 and not heard again until 1986, Lilburn started a practice which was to typify much of his later work and was to be followed by many other New Zealand composers. In that work, he set the poems of New Zealanders Robin Hyde and Allen Curnow (along with American poet Walt Whitman) to music. The collaboration with Robin Hyde was particularly poignant, since she died tragically a few weeks later. Her poem is a sombre evocation of exile from New Zealand, conjured up through images of McKenzie Country sheep, bought for Russia and shipped off into the icy north winds of exile.

Since then, Lilburn has set numerous works by New Zealand poets to music. His three most successful graftings of poetry and music are *Landfall in Unknown Seas* (1942) with Allen Curnow, *Sings Harry* (1953) with Denis Glover, and *The Return* (1965) with Alistair Campbell. Many of the poems Lilburn has chosen to set to music explore the same themes which he has sought to establish in his music. Nature in these poems - whether untamed or pastoral, hostile or reassuringly familiar - represents the real, the authentic New Zealand, spiritual union with which is the highest consummation, exile from which is the greatest psychic wound.

Many other New Zealand composers have followed Lilburn's lead by teaming up with local poets to achieve a uniquely kiwi flavour. To name but a few, there are John Rimmer's settings of Ian Wedde's *Pukeko* (1972) and *Where Sea Meets Sky* (1975), Richard Marshall's *To the Horizon* (1990) with poems by Wedde, Fairburn and Glover, and Brigitte Bisley's *This Land of Water* (1989), a piece in which the composer sought to evoke the spirit of New Zealand landscape through the work of poets such as Hone Tuwhare.

A few literary liaisons have also been forged between composers and fiction writers, as when Ross Harris attempted to give a semantic ground to his electronic work *Poem* (1970) by incorporating a descriptive passage from Janet Frame's *Owls Do Cry*, or when Peter Scholes provided the incidental music for a National Programme reading of Little's novel *The Tree*.

As well as being closely associated with New Zealand poets, Douglas Lilburn was also the friend and supporter of New Zealand painters. I do not know if any of his music has been directly influenced by painting, but it is a critical commonplace to describe his and other New Zealand music in the visual terms borrowed from the vocabulary of painting. One composer who certainly has directly collaborated with a painter is Ross Harris, whose work *Horizons* (1975) was created in conjunction with the New Plymouth painter and composer Michael Smither for the latter's mural of the same name.

One of the most spectacular and impressive works of collaboration has taken artistic cross-fertilisation even one step further. Lyell Cresswell's *Voices of Ocean Winds* (1990) is a symphonic and choral interpretation of Charles Brasch's poem cycle *Six Watercolours*. This cycle in turn was a verbal translation of his encounter with six paintings by Doris Lusk, which in their turn were renderings of nature at Onekaka, Oaro and Totaranui. The layers of mediation between audience and nature are now growing increasingly dense. A painter sees a seascape which, on the spot or later in her studio, she represents in paint. A poet, who might or might not have seen the parts of nature depicted, interprets the paintings in words. An expatriate New Zealander reads the poems in Scotland. We sit in a concert hall or beside a radio and listen to a fearsomely raw and primordial assault of sound from choir and orchestra: the music is fierce and sublime, transforming Brasch's gaunt ontological apprehension into screams of cosmic terror. Am I being excessively literal, however, if I wonder whether this is what Doris Lusk heard when she was painting at Onekaka?

Here's my problem. Linked with a suitably mimetic style, the symbiosis of music with words and/or figurative visual images helps composers fill in the gap between themselves and the nature they seek to represent. Instead of having to face nature directly, their music becomes the signifier of a cultural referent - the poem or painting - which in turn becomes the signifier of the ultimate natural referent. This tactic overcomes composers' communicative problems in face of the semantic slipperiness and multi-directionality of musical codes. The buck of signification is passed over to the poet or the painter while the music can get on with the business of being music. Yet the problem of putting nature into music really remains unsolved. Whatever Onekaka beach may have looked like to Doris Lusk, it is only by courtesy of linked associations that it can be heard in Cresswell.

In spite of this, some of the best works of New Zealand music have emerged from such collaborations between art and poetry, ranging from minor gems such as *Sings Harry* through to masterpieces like *Voices of Ocean Winds*. Even so, leviathan, the awesome ding an sich which lurks beneath the surface of culture, has still not been drawn up on a line. The net of art is being

woven ever more skilfully but the prey - the natural world which is supposed to be the true source of spiritual sustenance - still roams free.

The Maori Connection

The Return by Lilburn and Cook Island Maori poet Alistair Campbell is a haunting and beautiful work of art. It is based upon a tantalisingly obscure but visionary poem by Campbell which Lilburn has framed within an electronically constructed sound poem. This work is not only very effective in itself, but also marks a dramatic turning point in the history of New Zealand classical music - the moment when Lilburn turned his back on conventional instruments and launched himself into the avant-garde of experimental sound. *The Return* is not just of aesthetic and historical significance, however. It also contains semiological devices pertinent to our present subject.

At the centre of his poem, Campbell creates a chain of metamorphoses whereby humans from the sea change into birds, which in turn are transformed into trees with rain jewelled, leaf-green bodies - plant gods, tree gods, gods of the middle world. In his sound poem, Lilburn has a parallel metamorphosis sequence. Out of a background of wind and native bird calls, a Maori voice emerges. At first it speaks only broken syllables which are closer to bird than human speech. Increasing in confidence, it begins to pronounce the Maori names of plants, reptiles and gods. The words become a continuous genealogical chant until, interrupted by an alien, European intrusion, the human voice contracts into the harsh croaking of some scaly, sub-human life form and finally vanishes back into the natural world from which it had emerged.

In a later work, *Summer Voices* (1969), Lilburn again makes effective, sparing use of Maori voices. This time he delicately weaves the whispered echo of the East Coast chanted lullaby *Po Po* into the drone of cicadas and the rasp and rustle of dried grasses. The sounds of nature and of the Maori language are so skilfully blended that Lilburn seems to have achieved the miracle of organically grafting cultural onto natural sounds.

A number of other composers have also anchored their music in the South Pacific through use of Maori language, images or legends. Edwin Carr, for instance, attempts to indigenise the four seasons in *Te Tau* (1979) by using their Maori names - koanga, makariri and so on. Ian McDonald made his cosmic song cycle *Ten Songs for the Sun and the Earth* (1979) more locally relevant by having his English words interpreted in Maori by Hone Tuwhare. Other composers have turned to Maori creation myths in which Tane Mahuta, god of forests and birds, stars prominently, as in the ballet *Wananga i te Rangi* (1980) by Jack Body and Ross Harris, the children's opera *Earth and Sky* (1968) by Jenny McLeod, and the piano concerto *The Coming of Tane Mahuta* (1987) by Christopher Blake. Elsewhere, composers such as David Hamilton and Gillian Whitehead have introduced a chthonic, earthy tone into their work by the insertion into a European orchestra of Maori instruments such as the putorino or koauau, usually played by the brilliant ethnomusicologist and performer Richard Nunns.

Sometimes these attempted Maori links are merely surface adjuncts. Apart from the name and a passage of Cook Island Maori drumming in the third movement, Blake's *The Coming of Tane Mahuta* has nothing Maori about it, and the nature resonances surrounding the Maori god are only present if we know we are supposed to hear them. However, at its best, as with Lilburn's work, the blending of Maori and European art forms, like that done on the other side of the ethnic divide by painters such as Cliff Whiting, John Ford and Buck Nin, are triumphs of bicultural dialectics and represent, to my mind, the real growing edge of a unique national culture.

That said, as a tactic for injecting nature into culture, the adoption of Maori motifs by Pakeha composers should be treated with considerable caution. The unspoken underlying premise of the attempt by European artists to find nature through association with the Maori probably goes back to Rousseau. It assumes that somehow Maori are closer to nature – particularly to local nature – than are shallow, civilised white people. Maori, it is assumed, are tuned in to the natural and spiritual force of Papatuanuku. If we can plug into the Maori world, that force will then flow into us and into our music. However, the philosophical premise that one ethnic group and its culture is more 'natural' than another is anthropologically bankrupt. Maori language, Maori instruments, Maori legends are no more chthonic, no more deeply embedded in the nourishing body of the Great Mother than those of any other culture. To use a Maori name for a tree or a season, rather than a European name, only provides the illusion of moving us closer to the natural, local referent. Wavering micro-tones on a putorino are only by courtesy of convention more natural than pure violin tones generated from within a European musical code. Thus, although the symbiosis of Maori and European may in truth engender a national identity unique to this country, it is an identity formed by the fusion of cultural horizons, not by the fusion of culture and nature.

Film and Television

Lilburn's pioneering work included the creation of sound images to go with the film *Backblocks Hospital*, (1947). Since then, scores if not hundreds of musical works have been created to back film and television documentaries, travelogues, tourist propaganda, soaps, series and feature films. Since New Zealand landscape inevitably bulks large in many of these, the music which accompanies them fits into the genre of nature music we are discussing. Dorothy Buchanan's *Queen of Rivers* (1985), for instance, was written for a restored documentary film about the Wanganui river, whose upper reaches the music is intended to evoke. Similarly, John Rimmer's *White Island* was composed to give sonic texture to thermal activity in the television documentary *Whakaari, Island of Mist* (1977). Again, Ian McDonald's *Kea Country* (1973) was composed for the NZBC documentary *Prince of Nosey Parkers*, the aim of the music being to capture the personality of the cheeky birds themselves, and also conjure up the atmosphere of the powerful, impersonal landscape they inhabit. To cite another example, much of the almost hallucinatory impact of the isolated valley in Vincent Ward's feature film *Vigil* (1984) derives from the spectral, agonised score created for it by Jack Body.

The great advantage that this fusing of music with immediate visual images has for our quest to sink the harpoon of art into the flesh of nature is that the hearer is presented with strong and immediate visual cues to the meaning of the music, just as the music heightens the impact of those visual images. We are not now, as we were with poetry, being passed from one signifying system to another. We are - or at least we have the illusion that we are - directly confronting the visual referent itself. We see puffs of thermal steam as we hear Rimmer's drifting sound clusters. We watch the water of the Wanganui as we hear Buchanan's saxophone. We see cliffs, sheep, hawks, mist as we hear Body's sonic translations of Ward's visual imagery. The gap between musical signifier and natural referent has finally been closed: where the poets failed, film makers have succeeded. With their assistance, composers can produce a music which is both nationalist and also rooted in the natural world of these islands.

This then is perhaps the road into the future for New Zealand composers? If nothing else, there is more money to be made out of commissions for television than for concert works. Practically, however, there are far more composers around than there are film projects. And even if a composer does take on a job for a film, that does not represent a full-time occupation. Furthermore, many composers are interested in exploring the aesthetic frontiers of their craft freely and do not wish,

even if it were possible, to have their work always constrained by the requirements of directors, script writers, editors etc.

At another level, the apparently intimate, even natural, link between sound and visual imagery only holds so long as the music is heard in conjunction with the film. If it is presented in concert or on record as a free-standing piece, as is the case with *White Island*, the seemingly natural bond between signifier and referent falls apart again, revealing itself - as in all the cases previously discussed - to be arbitrary and conventional rather than necessary. Heard by itself, *White Island* could equally well have been called *Composition 9*, *Fun with Sine Waves*, *Dream Sequence* or any other name. There is nothing in it which intrinsically suggests the content of the film for which it was made. Thus if our intention is to evoke New Zealand topography through music, then film and television do indeed provide a partial and fleeting answer for the occasional work of a few composers, But for most, most of their working lives, the problem remains unresolved.

Those Pesky Birds

I have saved the most persuasive tactic till last. As mentioned earlier, there is a scene in Lilburn's *The Return* in which human speech emerges from the background chimes of New Zealand native birds. Lilburn had first experimented with sounds recorded direct from nature when asked to write a score for a radio production of Allen Curnow's play *The Axe*. He went out to Island Bay to capture some live sounds where 'the surf was loaded with exhaust from Blenheim freighters and the bloody seagulls wouldn't sing for love or bribery' (Canzona Vol 1, No 3). In the later work *SoundScape with Lake and River* (1979), Lilburn again included recorded natural sounds - this time of waves and a stream from Lake Taupo - to anchor his music in a specific locality.

The sounds of water have been used by younger composers such as Ross Harris in *Horizons*, which also features whale song and sea shells. But above all, there are the pesky birds which chime, cluck, mope, click, grunt and squeak through so much New Zealand music. Sometimes they are imitated on conventional musical instruments, sometimes they are generated electronically, sometimes they are recorded live and either played straight or are electronically modulated. Some of the most effective sequences occur when live, electronic and instrumental bird sounds are blended and edited. We hear these birds in Lilburn's *Dance Sequence* for Expo '70 in Osaka, whose cast included a white heron, two huias, a kiwi, four fantails, a tuatara, four kakas, a pukeko, and two large and two small moas. Larry Pruden's compositions for documentary films on birds include *Legend of Birds* (1960), *Karoro - the big gull* (1978), *Royal Albatross* (1979) and *New Zealand Falcon - bird of prey* (1981).

Continuing our itemisation of the musical aviary, Eve de Castro Robinson based a 1990 fanfare for the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra on the carefully researched and transcribed sound of a tui that sang outside her window. In a more ribald vein, Ian McDonald's *Kea Country* (1973) contains not only the sounds of electronic keas but also a bawdy, kea version of *Friggin' in the Rigging*. And then there is William Southgate's *Symphony No 2* (1988) which contains transcriptions for piccolo of the North Island grey warbler, for oboe of the kea, for flute of the bellbird, for clarinet of the tui and so on. At the end of the symphony, the human players fall silent as the recorded songs of real birds fill the concert hall. Inadequate human imitations are dumb before the authentic natural songster.

New Zealand composers are not, of course, the first to use bird song in their music. Mimesis of the birds is possibly the oldest device in the musical lexicon. But it is particularly appealing to local composers because, unlike any other natural sound source, the songs of our birds are truly unique

and specific. Water, wind, whales, cicadas - these can be heard anywhere. Tui, bellbird, kokako, kea - these can only be heard in Aotearoa. By including these in one's music, then, surely at last the quest for a genuinely natural foundation of national music has been discovered?

I do not wish to be too dismissive of this notion. By and large, New Zealand composers have made sparing and aesthetically extremely effective use of native birds in their music. Audiences are not just subjected to gratuitous sound effects for the sake of a little local colour. The introduction of birdsong into the music can be genuinely moving, as in Southgate's work, and it can also be extremely witty as with Lilburn's treatment in several pieces. Yet one cannot base an entire national culture on the beaks of a handful of feathered choristers, no matter how piquant. Used with discretion, native birdsong can provide a kind of indigenous signature for our music. Used too copiously, it could degenerate into a mass produced logo, suffering the same trivialisation by overexposure as certain Maori cultural symbols.

Preliminary Conclusion

The quest for a national identity has haunted New Zealand Pakeha composers, as it haunted earlier generations of poets and painters. Like the landscape artists and poets, many composers have sought to ground this identity in representations of local topography. In doing so, they have ideologically sidestepped many crucial social issues such as our ugly history of race relations, the oppression of women and the exploitation of workers. These latter issues have not been entirely neglected by composers, yet by and large it has been the pastoral myth of New Zealand which has prevailed, in large part perhaps because of the dominant role played both aesthetically and ideologically by Douglas Lilburn in the construction of an indigenous art music tradition.

If much that really typifies our national life has been ignored by composers, their quest for the great white whale of Nature itself has - as I hope my preceding discussion has demonstrated - been largely fruitless. No matter how complex the hunting paraphernalia of semiological harpoons, hooks, lines and nets, the quarry always seems to slip away. This does not mean, however, that the project to construct the foundations of an indigenous art music has itself failed. On reflection, the hunt for nature was simply an alibi, like the quest for God in the art of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. It is the pursuit of an ideal referent, either divine or natural, which motivates or at least legitimises the creation of art. We never catch leviathan, but we do possess the intricately woven nets in which we hoped to snare him. The music itself is the true referent, for which the simulacrum of nature is the signifier. Our music has not authenticated itself through nature, yet through the cultural attempts to represent nature, our composers have created an authentically impressive national music.

FROM LANDSCAPE TO ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

As we saw earlier, when Douglas Lilburn went off to Island Bay to record sounds for *The Axe*, he noted with disgust that the surf was polluted by the waste from Blenheim freighters. The despoliation of the environment has, in fact, concerned New Zealand creative artists for over a hundred years. The destruction of native forests was recorded and mourned by poets such as Blanche Baughan in *A Bush Section*, and its erosive consequences generated the disastrous climax to Frank Sargeson's novel *I Saw In My Dream*. With the ecology and anti-nuclear movements of the late 1960s, and with local conservation battles into which artists were drawn such as those at

Manapouri, Clutha and Aramoana, conservation has become a major theme in much New Zealand art, particularly painting.

Nature as a building block of national identity (our subject in the previous section of this article) has waned in popularity as a theme amongst composers over the last twenty or so years, but nature itself has not vanished. Rather, as a source of creative energy it has taken on a new guise and new aesthetic forms. Nature is seen now not as a national logo, but as a beleaguered ecosystem that demands attention and respect, both in its own right and also because its destruction will bring about the demise of humanity as a whole.

In this section, I will suggest some of the devices which have been used to bridge the nature-culture divide by composers whose main interest has been in nature as environment rather than nature as landscape. My underlying argument is that while tactics and emphasis have shifted, the ideological programme of environmental art is similar to that of landscape art, namely the quest for a meaningful identity and social role for those whose education and status have cut them off from more local and pressing political and economic concerns.

Foregrounding Nature

While ostensibly 'about' nature, landscape music, poetry and painting have as their main priority the creation of aesthetically pleasing works of art. While not necessarily or always being aesthetically less well crafted, environmental art shifts attention from the signifier to the referent. Its concern is to draw attention to the natural world itself, a world which is to be accurately observed and described, a world into which humans must be corporeally integrated and, above all, a world which must be protected from the destructive excesses of industrial development and anthropocentric hubris.

At times, environmental art signals its concern with real as opposed to imagined nature by incorporating into itself the vocabulary of the natural sciences. Jenny McLeod's epic musical drama *Under the Sun* (1971), for instance, tells the story of the planet earth from its genesis millions of years ago to its ultimate destruction millions of years in the future. The genesis it portrays, however, is not derived from Maori or other religious mythologies, as is Blake's *The Coming of Tane Mahuta*, but from the scientific discourses of astronomy, physics and biology. The earth emerges not from Te Po and the subsequent separation of Rangi and Papa, but from swirling clouds of intergalactical gas. And as life begins to populate the planet, it is evoked not, as in Lilburn's *The Return*, in a Maori genealogical chant containing local flora and fauna, but in an encyclopedic litany of species and sub-species of progressively evolving biological forms. A similar use of scientific terms can be found in Ivan Zagni's musical description of the Waikato river *Breath of Hope*, whose flora and fauna is invoked not in Maori or English but through the use of botanical Latin names.

Another major work by Ivan Zagni exemplifies the attention given by some environmentally inspired art to the meticulous research and imitation of natural phenomena. This is the remarkable clarinet work *Migration No 1* (1986), which is based on the life cycle of the koekoea or long-tailed cuckoo. Unlike mimetic landscape art discussed earlier, in which the connection between music and nature is often only tenuous, the listener in this piece can clearly follow the whole story of courting, nesting, fighting and migrating of the bird against an orchestral and choral background of landscapes, seascapes and aerial atmospherics. I should add, though, that the piece is not simply a technically clever musical documentary. It is a brilliant clarinet concerto that tests the musicianship of the soloist to the limit.

Even more typical of environmental art than such instrumental mimesis of nature is the incorporation of 'found sounds'. The use of taped water, birds, etc has already been touched on in my discussion of landscape works such as Lilburn's *Soundscape with Lake and River*, but this creative tactic goes much further in environmental music. Thus Louise Johns's *Sheep Speak* (1990) is constructed from recordings of live farm noises such as sheepdogs barking, shepherds whistling and, of course, the sheep themselves. A larger environmental work, Annea Lockwood's *Sound Map of the Hudson River* (1982), reconstructs the life of the Hudson River from its source in the mountains until it finally flows into the Atlantic. It uses taped natural sounds, voices of those whose lives have intersected with the river, and visual images such as slides and photographs. Lockwood did for the Hudson what Dorothy Buchanan did for the Wanganui in *Queen of Rivers* or Zagni for the Waikato in *Breath of Hope*, except that she used the actual sounds of the river itself, rather than instrumental analogies. This points to a more general tendency of all environmental art, that is, its interest in 'sound' rather than 'music' - its preference for raw, uneven, untamed noises to the polished musical cadences of conventional instruments.

Performance Art

Lockwood's *Sound Map of the Hudson River* and McLeod's *Under the Sun* reveal another significant difference between landscape and environmental music. The former creates what one might think of as art objects, such as overtures, concertos or tone poems, while the latter, being more interested in processes than formally perfect artefacts, is frequently performance oriented. Furthermore, its performances on occasions allow for the participation of musical amateurs and are not the privileged space of professional musicians alone. Thus, McLeod's *Under the Sun* drew into its populist bulk not only a large number of local Palmerston North amateur musicians, but also just about every school child in the district.

The same democratic openness was part of the philosophy of Philip Dadson and other environmentally conscious performers who in 1970 organised *Solar Plexus*, a great drumming marathon held from dawn to dusk at the winter solstice in the crater of Auckland's Mount Eden. The *From Scratch* percussion group, which emerged from those early festivals and which combines music, dance, drama and sculpture, has over the last twenty years devised several works intended to draw attention to the destruction of the natural world, including *Pacific 3,2,1,Zero* (1985) opposing French nuclear testing at Moruroa.

Similar environmental concerns have also been represented in Michael Smither's performance works such as *Back Beach Time* (1980) for which he created the music and visual effects while Jamie Bull choreographed and performed the dances. This work focuses upon a beach near New Plymouth which Smither and others worked to preserve - a theme I shall return to shortly. Susan Frykberg is another composer whose work takes as its reference the destruction of the earth. She is interested in extending the range of human perception through the use of sound technology. Her performance piece *Garden* has as its main protagonist a giant, seventeen-foot worm which utters a variety of noises indicating wormy, existential angst as poems by Margaret Atwood about the destruction of the natural world are read. Frykberg, like the drummers of *Solar Plexus*, is also eager to get music out of the concert hall and into the actual physical environment about which it is speaking. The logical place for environmental music to be performed is in the very nature it is concerned to evoke.

From Contemplation to Action

While in real life - and on occasions in their art - landscape composers, painters and writers may be actively involved in conservation struggles, nature in their art is first and foremost an object of aesthetic contemplation. It is there to give pleasure, not to generate action. Environmental art, on the other hand, is part of a wider, action-oriented movement aimed at combatting pollution, erosion, radioactivity and chemical poisoning. Ivan Zagni links the significance of *Breath of Hope* with boyhood memories of swimming in an unpolluted Norwich river - something people cannot do today. Although his composition was intended primarily as an evocation of the Waikato, he also hopes that it will help raise listeners' consciousness of the dangers of pollution which threaten New Zealand as well as English rivers.

Painter and composer Michael Smither has taken ecological activism even further. As well as devoting many of his paintings and performance pieces to detailed studies of the New Plymouth coast, he has also organised efforts to save and restore the beaches which have inspired his art. For him, nature is not just something to be imitated in art or an arena in which art is performed. It is a living part of our heritage which must be actively protected. Conservation is itself a work of art. Aesthetic creation means not just making pictures or music, but also making or re-making the natural world that has inspired music and pictures.

International and Global Consciousness

Although environmental artists may feel strong attachments to specific New Zealand locations, their work is less narrowly nationalistic in outlook than landscape art. Local ecosystems are seen in the context of a broader ecological map which begins with the Pacific and at its limit includes the entire planet, or even the solar system as a whole. Environmentalists are prepared to borrow images and themes from other cultures who have the same concerns as they do. They do not feel obliged to be doctrinally pure about indigenous symbolism.

The performance piece *After Crazy Horse* (c1989) exemplifies this internationalist tendency. Based upon an American Indian's premonitory dreams and visions, it combines music composed by Brigitte Bisley with art work by Philippa Blair, a painter whose work has been strongly influenced by Indian art, and dance by choreographer Alison Easton. The same widening of focus can also be seen in the work of groups such as *From Scratch* whose opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific has already been mentioned.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this expansion of horizons culminates in a vision of humanity in its entire planetary context. Beginning with sensitivity to their situation within a local New Zealand ecosystem, environmental composers end with a total vision of vast cycles of sun and earth. This global consciousness is found, for instance, in Ian McDonald's *Ten Songs for the Sun and the Earth* (1979) whose point of departure is a rural commune outside Motueka but whose ultimate referent is the solar system:

The sun's rays initiate the production of food.

The sun is my father. His force impregnates the earth, producing me.

The earth is my mother. I am part of her body. I make myself from food, air and water.

The sun is strong. He is continually radiating, shedding his sperm.

Songs 3-6

The most ambitious acoustic embodiment of such global consciousness by a New Zealand composer appeared in Annea Lockwood's performance work *World Rhythms* (1975). In this work,

the audience is surrounded by ten loudspeakers, each emitting a sound from the natural environment. These include the radio sounds given off by a pulsar in a distant supernova, volcanic eruptions, geysers and mudpools, rivers, tree frogs, fire, human breathing, storms and the speeded-up sound of an earthquake that ricochets across the Tasman. Inside the circle created by the audience are Annea Lockwood, mixing the sound sources, and a performer who strikes a giant tam-tam and then traces her inner, physiological responses to the reverberations of the gong. This latter aspect of the performance is important, since Lockwood is concerned with sound not just as something which takes place in the head but as a creative energy which penetrates our whole bodies.

In her music, Lockwood wishes to communicate 'the aural aspects of energies of which we are only occasionally aware but which powerfully influence and interact with the rhythms of our bodies, themselves particles of the whole mass of the world's energies. It's hearing the world as a web of diverse and co-existing energies enfolded within one vast rhythm beyond our perceptions.' (Concert Programme, 1985)

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted three things. First, I have provided a limited survey of the work of New Zealand composers, work which is seldom discussed in academic publications but which is quantitatively and qualitatively significant and deserves more of the kind of critical and theoretical attention which is given already to our writers and painters. Second, I have suggested the devices used by composers to fuse the horizons of structured sound and of the natural world, devices that range from tagging a work with a descriptive label through to the incorporation of natural noises in a composition. Third, I have suggested that while the natural world has remained a central preoccupation of our composers for at least half a century, there has been a shift in its thematic significance. In the first phase, nature was presented in musical objects made for aesthetic contemplation and with the quest for national identity as their ultimate rationale. In the second phase, more emphasis was placed upon the referent and less upon the aesthetic devices by which it was signified. Nature in this latter phase is not cerebral contemplation but a system of interacting forces with which the listener is to become integrated and for whose preservation we are asked to mobilise.

Oblivious to all this, a great white shape hurtles upwards from the ocean depths, its mouth gaping open.