

# RICHARD NUNNS: THE RENAISSANCE OF TRADITIONAL MAORI MUSIC

**Peter Beatson**

First published in 2003 in *Music in the Air*. 16. pp. 17-33

## **Preamble**

For many years I have owned a small, exquisitely carved koauau (a traditional Maori bone flute) made by the carver Brian Flintoff. Although I can extract tunes from the European flute, my Maori one remained obdurately silent no matter how many hours I spent blowing into or across what I presumed was its mouthpiece. I finally gave up, blaming my failure on the instrument itself, which I accused of having been created simply as a visually pleasing artifact never intended to produce real music.

Then in April 2002, my friend Richard Nunns came round for lunch after giving a demonstration concert of traditional Maori instruments at the Manawatu Museum. I handed Brian's koauau to him, complaining of its stubborn muteness. Richard put it to his lips and the house was instantly filled with a haunting, plaintive voice that seemed to speak straight from the ancestral Maori past. The koauau was still very much alive, only waiting for someone who knew the secret of coaxing out the music lying dormant inside.

What happened in my house that day was a recapitulation in microcosm of what must surely be one of the more interesting stories in the history of music. It is the story of an instrumental tradition that had been extinct (or, as it turned out, dormant) for over a century, but which against the odds has been brought back to life within the last 20 years.

From the 1970s in New Zealand, a "Maori renaissance" is often evoked. The term usually refers to the revitalisation of traditional Maori crafts like weaving and carving, along with the appearance of a new Maori literature in English pioneered by Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Less is said, or even known, about an even more remarkable re-birth which also had its origins in the 1970s – the re-awakening of traditional instruments that had been lying silent in museums for generations. Today, New Zealanders have grown accustomed to hearing the voices of these instruments in the background of any radio or television programme devoted to the Maori side of national life. Without thinking too much about it we simply assume that the music has always been there.

This is far from the case. Without the commitment, patience and hard work of a handful of individuals, who combined artistic ability and dedicated scholarship, the ancestral voices would still be silent. One of those individuals was standing in my house that day in April 2002, conjuring sweet, sad music from a small, hollow bone tube. How did it come about that he could perform this apparent miracle, after the art

of playing the koauau had been lost generations ago? Forgetting lunch, I sat Richard down, thrust a tape recorder at him, and asked him that one simple but fecund question.

Some five hours and many cups of tea later, I had on tape the fascinating story of the renaissance of traditional Maori instrumental music, as narrated by one member of the triumvirate who have done most to bring it about. I'm extremely grateful to Richard for his patience over those hours in submitting to my flow of questions, and also for reading, correcting, amending and approving my edited transcript of the interview.

## Peter Beatson

### Early Years: the apprentice trumpeter

Music was an integral part of Richard's life from early childhood. His grandfather, an immigrant from Yorkshire to Gisborne, had been an eminent brass bandsman, and his seven sons grew up in the brass band ethos. Richard's trumpet-playing father, however, was a renegade from the family tradition, preferring instead the swing bands of the 1930s. He was part of a pre-war big band movement around the East Coast, and during World War II was in the entertainment section of the air force in Fiji .

Richard was born in 1945 and like his father rebelled against the family brass band tradition, although always retaining a vestigial nostalgia for it: "I didn't feel part of that ethos. I didn't like uniforms and marching, and I didn't like the music. Despite that, whenever there's a live brass band in the street it makes the hair on the back of my head stand on end, and I usually go and have a squiz".

He steeped himself instead in his father's collection of 78 big band records, and in the live music Nunns Senior brought into the home: "On Sunday evenings, the dance band would practise at our home. It was a real rinky-tink, old-style country dance band, but I used to get inordinate pleasure after my once-a-week bath to listen in my dressing gown. It was probably horrendously awful, but I thought it a tremendous privilege to be allowed to hear it. I felt I was really in the centre of things. "

His father put Richard onto the trumpet when the latter was about eight, teaching his son himself. His training on that instrument stood Richard in good stead in his later exploration of traditional Maori instruments: "Playing the trumpet makes huge physical demands, and it was my first step towards developing the educated, adaptable lips which allow me to make music out of anything that can be blown. Such adaptability is essential for the instruments I play now, since they are all individually crafted, not factory produced. I need versatile lips to get around their unique nuances, subtleties and angularities. "

The trumpet also suited his particular musical bent: "Musically, I'm a linear thinker. I concentrate on single lines. I can hear and respond well enough to harmonic architectonics, building blocks and their movements, but they are not part of me. My head is full of melodic lines - that's where I live. "

Though he learned to read and play music fluently from his father, he had no theoretical training in harmony, composition and arranging. This formal lacuna in his musical education was probably irrelevant, however, as his musical intelligence operates on different lines from those of many musicians, a difference Richard attributes in part to a neurological quirk: “I am profoundly left-handed. It seems I have systems of learning that don’t match those of right-handed people. I don’t learn step-by-step. I learn one particular strand or filament that at first stands on its own, not attached to anything. Later, another filament may join it, then others again, linking up like a spider’s web. The lectures I later heard on educational theory at Training College never made much sense to me because I had a different way of learning from right-handed people. I seem to think and act differently. My way of learning may not at first appear efficient, but it goes deep and it stays for life.”

Richard played his trumpet in country school orchestras and in dance bands which performed fairly straight, conventional music where improvisation didn’t feature much. However, he had come across jazz improvisation on early Andre Previn and Dave Brubeck records, and although at that stage he was still mainly just listening, the improvisatory dimension of jazz intrigued him and was later to become a key element in his musical journey from ‘rinky-tink’ dance music to the lost world of traditional Maori instruments.

There is a little vignette Richard remembers from his school days worth quoting here. Something caught his attention in a weekly magazine, apparently irrelevant at the time but pregnant with future significance:

I’ve still got a cutting from *The Auckland Weekly News* I clipped out when I was in the fourth form. It was written by Arthur Kitson, and was about Maori instruments in the Auckland Museum. He said how beautiful they were, and how sad it was that they had long since fallen silent. Nobody living knew what their voices sounded like. The story and the accompanying illustrations obviously fascinated me, as I took the trouble to cut them out and keep them. That article must have planted the seeds of my own interest in the lost traditions of Maori music, although they lay fallow for many years.

### **Christchurch: discovering jazz flute**

In 1965, Richard exchanged small town, East Coast life for student bohemia in Christchurch. He dropped out of university after a year, with the rather forlorn hope of making a living as a full-time professional trumpet player, supporting himself in the meantime with foundry work. He plunged himself into the diverse Christchurch music scenes of the time, playing in university revue orchestras, singing in Mervyn Thompson’s production of *Marat Sade* and picking up some much needed cash by performing in a backing band for the folk music club: “Folk was the big thing back then, and the club was always packed. It contained luminaries like Annie Whittle, Phil Garland, Tony Brittenden and Ron King”.

Richard felt most affinity, however, with the thriving, hard core jazz scene. Older musicians such as Stu Buchanan, Graham Cooper, Paul Dyne, Neil Pickard, Neil Totty, Dave Innes, Jim Langabeer and Kevin Nicholl took the young trumpeter under their wing and initiated him into that scary musical tightrope

walking - jazz improvisation. He adapted himself like a chameleon to the jazz greats to which they introduced him, feeling particularly at home with the low-register playing and the spare muted sound of Miles Davis.

Despite the money to be made out of touring with the folk club, Richard soon realised that unless you were a really top virtuoso there was no full-time living to be made out of being a professional jazz trumpeter. He swallowed his pride and enrolled at Teachers Training College. Although it was the last thing he wanted to do at the time, it turned out to be the best decision he could have made. As well as eventually providing him with a meal ticket, it forced him to settle down in a semi-disciplined way and get his life in order. Just as importantly, it gave him the opportunity to specialise in music, and to receive three years formal tuition in a new instrument – the flute.

He took to the flute like a duck to water, and it soon replaced the trumpet as his preferred instrument. In fact, within two years he had his own jazz quartet with Nunns on flute, Paul Dyne on piano, Ted Meager on drums and a bass player.

Miles Davis was now replaced as a model by flute players like Yusef Lateef and Roland Kirk. An extended quote from Richard about their avant-garde technique is apposite here, as it prefigures the cultural leap he was to later make from contemporary jazz flute to atavistic methods of producing sound on taonga puoro (traditional Maori instruments):

Flute players like Yusef Lateef, Sahib Shebab, Jeremy Steig and Roland Kirk went beyond what for most jazz musicians is the boring purity of the European flute. In attempting to deconstruct the concert flute's rather plain sound, they fed voice and guttural exclamations into it, so that it became an extension of their bodies. Jeremy Steig, for instance, can sing harmonies with himself while he is playing the flute line.

The flute has great potential for entering into an organic relationship with its player. It was something I found came easily to me. Not being much interested in being just a straight flute player, I grafted on a whole range of other vocal techniques. I enjoyed making a raw sound. A whole bunch of us in the Christchurch jazz scene would get together in jazz clubs and festivals, experimenting and pushing forward into new sound frontiers.

### **Spirit voices: Maori flute vocalisation, sacred and profane**

At this point in his chronological narrative, Richard digressed to link the avant-garde jazz experiments of the 1960s with traditional techniques for producing vocal effects on the flute:

We thought we were breaking through into unexplored musical territory, but in fact there was really nothing new in what we were doing. For thousands of years, traditional musicians throughout the world have created uncanny vocal effects by playing the flute itself while singing, grunting, whispering or whatever. It's a great instrument for doing extra-musical things with.

We're beginning to think that Maori tohunga used this kind of vocal effect, this illusion of hearing a disembodied voice, in matters of matakite (prophecy). Spiritual information and illumination were thought to come to the tohunga through songs from the spirit world. Names for this phenomenon included ororua (an imagined voice) or rangirua (second voice, double voice or even spirit voice). This, incidentally, was the name given to a 2001 recording by Richard Nunns and saxophonist Evan Parker to which we shall return later.

These spirit voices were acoustic emanations from the landscape. There were certain places, notably Irirangi ("voices in the air") in the Rangipo desert and Moawhango near Ohakune which were well known to give rise to those oral phenomena. The old ones would go and sit there for spiritual guidance, possibly starving themselves into an ecstatic state. The area where they sat was like an invisible cone – a sphere of spiritual influence. It must have been like sitting in an acoustic spotlight.

We are also beginning to suspect that when the tohunga was in need of spiritual guidance and the voices – that is, the acoustic phenomena he used for guidance - didn't come through, he could give them a helping hand by employing instrumental techniques for producing the required message. It was done by generating the effect of a disembodied voice through singing into the flute as well as playing it, creating a shifting, uncertain, multiphonic tension. It's hard for us now to know for sure whether there was any intelligible verbal content in such vocalising, but there may well have been, as it is said that as well as learning the skills of playing the actual instrument, traditional tohunga acquired the technique of injecting cryptic coded information as a second line in their playing.

Richard himself now owns a koauau named Ki a Piopio which was said to be the vessel for communicating such messages, though in this case they were secular rather than sacred. According to legend, it originally belonged to a skilled flute-player who fell in love with a puhi (high-born virgin) belonging to another tribe in the Mokau area between Maniapoto and Taranaki. His passion was reciprocated by the woman herself, but being low-born he was not acceptable to her family. After being warned off, he was seized and was going to be put to death by being thrown over a cliff. He begged to be allowed to play his flute one last time, a request they granted because of his renown as a musician. As he played, he injected an encrypted message into the music, telling his sweetheart where they were to meet up again: "Ki a Piopio. Ki a Piopio." He then managed to give his captors the slip and got away. After a few months, the family relaxed its guard on the girl and she took off to join her lover at the designated rendezvous at Piopio. The last her tribe heard as she paddled away were the words "Ki a Piopio" – hence the name of the flute Richard now owns.

From this anecdote, Richard moved to another that is not really germane to our present story, but which casts such an unexpected and irreverent light on Tutanekai, the most famous romantic hero in Maori folklore, it deserves to be included. It is a story Richard heard from some Te Arawa elders.

Tutanekai was a famous flute player. The legend goes that when Hinemoa heard him playing out on Mokoia Island, it was so beautiful that it lured her to make her epic swim to him across Lake Rotorua.

The truth of the matter, apparently, is that although Tutanakai looked magnificent and cut a very impressive figure, he couldn't for the life of him play the flute. He could scarcely get a sound out of it. The real virtuoso was actually his friend – some say his slave - Tiki. Tutanekai would stride forward and mime playing the putorino or koauau, but it was Tiki, crouching behind him in the bushes, who actually made the music. There's a fragment of a song, purportedly composed by Hinemoa herself, contained in Anderson's *Maori Music*. In essence, it says that if she had known how totally useless Tutanekai was, she would never have married him.

In the above, we have been following Richard's stream of thought associations from avant-garde musical experimentation through vocalising on traditional Maori instruments to scepticism about Tutanekai's legendary musicianship. In doing so, we have jumped ahead of ourselves a little in our chronological narrative. Let's return to the Richard Nunns who graduated from Training College as an English and Drama teacher in 1969, was steeped in contemporary improvisatory jazz, had tucked away in his possessions an article about the Maori instruments lying silent in the Auckland Museum, but as yet had little experience or knowledge of the Maori dimension of life in Aotearoa. What led this Pakeha muso into the Maori world and eventually transform him into a latter-day Tiki?

### **Hamilton: induction into the marae**

In 1970, Richard moved with his wife Rachel Bush to Hamilton to begin his teaching career. By 1975 he was a PR2 in Drama at Melville High School, where a community marae was being created. It was through his involvement with this project that the first steps of a long journey of discovery were taken:

I initially became involved in the marae as a way of forging bonds with my Maori students and their parents. At a deeper level, though, it brought about a kind of Joycean epiphany – a moment of consciousness-raising, you might even say revelation. I realised in a variety of very personal ways that there was a mode of being in this country about which I, at the age of thirty, knew absolutely nothing, but to which I was intensely attracted. It was the whole Maori world.

This growth of awareness took place slowly over the two years in which the marae was built. I initially got involved just by asking if I could be of any use lending a hand during the weekends. I poured concrete, built boxing, swept the floor in the carving room, sat on one side of the tukutuku panels being growled at by the aunties for poking the strands through the wrong holes, and generally making myself useful in an inept kind of way.

At the same time, I was being introduced to kai Maori – puha, fish-heads and the whole range of Maori food. More importantly, I was inducted into concepts of community and togetherness about which I had little inkling, but which I found interesting and attractive.

I also acquired the basics of a rich and beautiful language as I was quietly schooled in very basic arts of whaikorero and mihi. In fact, when the marae opened I found myself the chief kaikorero or spokesman.

I acquired this role pretty much by accident. Quite a lot of the time I was the only male, Maori or Pakeha, who happened to be around the marae while it was being built. The classroom where I taught was only a few metres away, so I was the most convenient male to call for when visitors arrived and required a formal welcome. The call would go out: “He manuhiri!”. Off I’d go to speak a powhiri, then I’d return to my class.

Even today, however, Richard makes no claims to fluency in te reo (the language). He can manage a small amount of social chit-chat, has acquired the correct linguistic formulae to assemble for answering mihi (welcome speeches), and has amassed a considerable arcane vocabulary of little-used terms relating to traditional sounds and instruments – words unknown perhaps even to Maori elders, but not much use for everyday discourse. His recognition knowledge is much greater than his conversational skill, but even there he can quickly lose the thread of what is being said: “It’s a trap for young players, because the meaning of whole utterances hangs on small particles that can flip either way. If you miss the significant signal you can get completely the wrong end of the stick. I try to follow programmes like *Te Karere*, but quickly get lost in the speed, complexity and idiomatic utterances.” Having been immersed in many all-Maori situations, and having a reasonably acute ear, his pronunciation is good as far as it goes, but any fluent speaker could catch him out in ten seconds: “Con conversationally, I’m back in the primers. In fact, a kohanga reo kid could do better”.

So far as tribal affiliations went, the Melville marae was something of a melting pot of shifting tribal populations, including Tainui, Tuhoe and Ngati Porou: “Hamilton at that time was very alive politically and educationally, and there were a number of movers and shakers who came regularly to the marae project, including John Rangihau, Timoti Karetu, Joe and Rose Pere and Te Whati Tamati, a koroua who acted as spokesperson for Dame Te Atairangikahu. Napi Waka was in overall charge of the marae project, who amongst other things was both a carver and a musician. They all accepted and were very good to me. I worked away quietly in the background, and little by little they released information to me”.

Given his own musical bent, the fascination that traditional instruments of all sorts held for him, and perhaps recalling that long-ago article about the silent flutes in the Auckland Museum, Richard was particularly eager to acquire knowledge about traditional Maori music. Here, however, his cautious enquiries were met by even more cautious responses, the silence of the instruments themselves matched by an equal silence on the part of his interlocutors.

It was his own flute playing which eventually allowed him to get a foot in the door, as it were, but mystery still surrounded what lay behind that door:

I felt close enough to the venerable kuia Rose Pere, and sufficiently trusted by her, to say that I had been a professional musician, had played a number of different instruments, and was intensely interested in the traditional instruments of the Maori people. Could she tell me about them? In the nicest possible way, she appeared not to have heard the question. I knew enough about Maori ways not to push the subject.

However, a year or two later we were asked to stay with the Peres at their Waipiro Bay farm, where I gave a hand in the shearing shed. At the end of the day, I sat in the dusk on a stack of wool bales playing my flute. Rose came out in the half-dark, swept me into her arms and said: “You make that flute sound like human beings speaking. You remember you once asked me about the instruments of the old people? ....”

I thought excitedly: “Here we go! I’m going to hear something interesting now”. But all she said was: “If you’re meant to find out, you will”. To me that was like the sound of one hand clapping. When I thought about it afterwards, though, it seemed to be the sanctioning of the beginning of a journey. It was as though she were saying: “We have watched you, seen your interest, your enthusiasm, your seriousness. We support your journey to find out”.

### **Whakaiti: acquiring knowledge the Maori way**

Rose Pere’s Zen-like utterance: “If you’re meant to find out, you will” lead Richard to an important reflection on how traditional wisdom is acquired in the Maori world:

Rose’s enigmatic pronouncement fitted in with what I had already begun to understand about the nature of Maori knowledge and its acquisition. Knowledge is a component of mana. If you desire information, Maori people want to be absolutely sure you are worthy of receiving it. Even if Pakeha are totally genuine in their desire to understand the Maori world, they won’t find out anything important just by going and asking straight out. You have to put in the time, which means attaching yourself to an iwi group and being prepared to stick in there for the long term, starting off in the kitchen - peeling spuds, washing dishes, serving at table, not talking too much, just soaking up everything you hear. You don’t walk in the front – that’s rather like gatecrashing Buckingham Palace. If you really want to know things, you go around the back and move up through the gradations of the house through a slow process of waiting and listening to the people you’re working alongside.

Don’t be taken in by appearances while you’re back there in the kitchen. You may be working with a rough-looking guy in blood-soaked overalls cutting up a cattle beast. Then the call will go out and he’ll disappear. If you go around the side and have a look, you’ll find he’s a respected elder, now speaking formally in a suit and tie. It’s part of the immutable multi-layering of Maori life.

In that life, you’ll be given information when they consider you are ready to receive it, not when you go assiduously hunting and asking questions. It’s long-haul stuff. They want evidence of commitment and stickability. Most importantly of all, you must observe the principle of whakaiti (making yourself humble). This came hard to me, since both as a performer and a teacher I tended to be a bit of an extrovert.

Something which even eminent Pakeha scholars don’t always fully appreciate is that you have to develop a working relationship *kanohi ki kanohi* (face-to-face) with the people to whom the culture belongs. You cannot really understand traditional Maori culture by working in academic isolation. You

have to put in the spadework. Maori people want personal contact. They want to be able to poke you in the arm and ask what you're up to. Sometimes they speak their minds in quite a scary, even aggressive way. That's the nature of the discourse. It can be a bit frightening, but it goes with the territory. If you want to work with Maori material, you must consult, refer back and make it a two-way partnership.

If you sit and study Maori music or literature in isolation from its community, it is inevitable you will make mistakes. Take the tradition of moteatea (traditional songs) for instance. I believe this is even more important than whakapapa, since it is moteatea that transmit genealogy and history down through the generations. The language in those songs is cryptic and archaic. You need assistance and training to untangle it. It's rather like modern scholars trying to understand Middle English. It's hard to decipher without the insight provided by those who own the tradition.

Many old terms have gone out of use, others are names for rocks and other features of the landscape peculiar to one particular whanau or hapu, others again may be nicknames of tipuna (ancestors) whose connotations are not understood by outsiders. There are pitfalls galore in untangling and analysing songs that date back hundreds of years and spotting their allusions. You can make a lot more progress if you forge personal contacts and defer to family knowledge than if you stay in your ivory tower.

### **Traditional Music: the broken thread**

In the foregoing, Richard is talking about gaining understanding of oral traditions such as moteatea where, although much is obscure, there are threads of continuity if scholars know where and how to look for them. This was not the situation, however, with the kind of knowledge he was seeking – the techniques of playing traditional instruments. The evasiveness of Maori elders on this subject appeared on the surface to be due to cultural reticence about handing arcane knowledge over to an outsider, but their reserve concealed a more fundamental issue. Though nobody would say it outright, Richard's interlocutors themselves did not possess the knowledge about which he was enquiring: "Saying nothing can be a dignified way of concealing the fact that you know nothing".

All other strands of Maori culture have remained unbroken, even though the ancestral knowledge may now be held only by small pockets of elders. With instrumental music, however, the thread was definitively snapped. There was a complete disjunction between "then" and "now". The instrumental strand within the weave of Maori culture was severed in the 19th century. A number of factors were involved, but Richard feels the British missionaries were the main culprits:

They recognised that those instruments were the cell phones to the divine world, used for dialling up spiritual aid. Less flippantly, instruments were regarded as voices of the gods, and in fact some of them were called precisely that - nga reo o nga atua. They were employed to provide the sacred dimension to activities like aiding conception, easing labour, promoting the growth of plants, smoothing the passage from life to death and passing knowledge down the generations. All rites of passage required the use of musical instruments, and they were also the vessels of matakite (prophecy). At a deeper level again, in Maori cosmogony the gods were said to have sung the world into existence.

The last thing for which instrumental music was used was sheer entertainment - mahi whakangahau – as it is for modern Westerners. For us, music is a form of consumption, something to while away our leisure when there is nothing more important to do. This probably dates back to the old Puritan work ethic. Exactly the opposite was true of all traditional communities. Music was a functional necessity to get things done the proper way, and instruments were integral elements in all ritual and ceremony.

In order to convert the Maori to the bright, shining path of Christianity, the missionaries had to pull the plug on the Maori belief system – a system which was far more profound and coherent than they had anticipated finding amongst barbaric savages. Given the centrality of music to the maintenance of the Maori spiritual world order, it, too, had to be expunged from consciousness. Get rid of the instruments, and you went a long way to destroying the rituals of which music was the aesthetic outer shell.

Maori themselves colluded wittingly or unwittingly in this expunging of traditional music. Many treasured instruments were hidden away or buried, never to be recovered. Even more tragically, whole families of instruments were publicly broken by people converting to Christianity: “You smashed your graven idols to demonstrate the sincerity of your commitment to the new faith. Apart from a few preserved in museums, the old instruments were lost, and with them went the technique for playing them.

This did not mean, of course, that music itself disappeared from the Maori world. On the contrary, the vacuum left by the loss of the old instruments was quickly filled by the advent of new European ones. Maori enjoyed the challenge of musical forms such as SATB hymnody, and they took with great facility to the Pakeha instruments which were arriving by the boat-load – jew’s harps here, bagpipes there, brass band instruments, banjos, pianos... Maori played them with great skill, but in the rush for the new, the old music fell silent.

### **The Journey Begins: the meeting with Brian Flintoff**

The story of how the silent instruments were stroked back to life is also the story of a remarkable working relationship between three people with different but converging cultural backgrounds, craft skills and modes of artistic creativity: Richard Nunns, Brian Flintoff and Hirini Melbourne.

Richard had already begun his first tentative steps into the lost world of Maori instruments during his Waikato years evoked above. He had learned some traditional moteatea melodies and tried them out on the European flute. He had also been granted access to the instrument collection in the Auckland Museum, which he examined, photographed and attempted to coax into sound.

Paradoxically, however, the real take-off occurred when he left the Maori community at Hamilton in 1978 to become Head of English at Nelson College for Girls. It was in Nelson that he met and began collaborative work with the second member of the eventual triumvirate – Brian Flintoff.

Brian had quit teaching to work full-time as a carver in bone, stone, wood and shell. He had a particular interest in creating functional artefacts – ones that could be used in everyday life rather than set aside for respectful contemplation. When Brian met Richard, he had already made his first experimental attempts to re-create traditional Maori instruments, but they remained stubbornly silent in his hands: “He had made a couple of koauau which were virtually unplayable. ”. He and Richard put their heads together to figure out how to turn Brian’s carved artefacts into living musical instruments: “Brian was the silent partner, as it were, while I applied the skills I’d acquired on European instruments to producing sounds on Maori ones. He was the design engineer, I was the test pilot”.

This was no easy task: “There was the sheer difficulty of coaxing voice out of very beautiful but unforgiving objects – tubes and containers that gave you nothing, none of the keys and other assistance given by modern European instruments. They are really hard to play. Brian took a whole year to get a sound out of one of the instruments he made”.

If just producing a sound is hard enough, it takes enormous technical skill and personal dedication to turn that sound into genuine music. Making a noise on a koauau is one thing: “It’s quite another to uplift a singing voice out of nothing but a hollow length of bone with three holes in it. That requires the application of the totality of your whole being – something most people cannot be bothered doing once they have reached the point of just making noises. They get discouraged quickly and can’t be bothered persevering to transform noise into music. It requires total commitment and a lifetime journey to do that.”

## **Rhythm in Traditional Maori Music**

Producing a melodic line from taonga puoro (traditional instruments) was only half the story. Richard also had to master the nuanced, inward rhythmic dimension of traditional Maori music, quite different from the exuberant drumming of the Pacific islands:

The rhythmic element in New Zealand Maori music is far more subtle than the extrovert polyrhythms of Cook island drumming. The latter is very stirring and compelling, but the patterns can become rather boring. The percussive element in Maori music is just as strong, but it is held under. The informing patterns come from breath, heart beat and a notion of pulse called tumatakokiri. My feeling for this subtle, sinuous rhythm came partly from listening to oral chants, and partly from attending to the sounds of the landscape. I have spent a long time listening to the voices of the natural world.

Richard went on during the interview to speculate on significant differences between the uniform rhythms of today’s performances and the more individualised patterns of former times:

We think that the rhythms of traditional music were more ragged and overlapping than the unison patterning of modern kapa haka, poi and waiata-a-ringa performances. In the old music, you were part of a group, true, but set your own pattern of individual defiance, challenge or whatever. This would have

produced a really interesting overlapping effect. Some contemporary groups like Matarae o rehu in Rotorua are working to incorporate those effects into their performances, rather than the usual kind of Broadway precision and on-the-beat choreography.

Now back to our main narrative line. We were watching two Pakeha autodidacts in Nelson a quarter-century ago, creating new instruments from traditional models, and discovering how they could be persuaded to sing. This convergence of skills and interests was necessary but not yet sufficient for the coming renaissance of traditional Maori music. After all, up to this point we only have two non-Maori pursuing their complementary personal interests on the fringes of the Maori world. There was a third player waiting in the wings who possessed the qualities essential for bringing the project together and launching it out of its Pakeha tributary into the mainstream of Maori cultural life. Enter Hirini Melbourne

### **Hirini Melbourne**

Richard had met Hirini a few times in other contexts, but their working partnership really began at a regional wananga (conference), held at Te Araroa by the East Coast branch of Nga Puna Waihanga (the Maori artists and writers association). The prime movers were Ivan Ehau and Ngapine Allen, also called Ngapine Te Ao. The hui was intended to act as the impetus for the reconstruction and performance of ancestral instruments, notably the putorino and koauau. It was possible that the East Coast was the last place where those instruments were heard: “Let’s make it the first where they are revived.”

Richard was asked to act as a tutor at the conference, along with Joe Malcolm who had been working on the revival of the koauau with a group at Victoria University. Brian Flintoff was present as a technical advisor. Hirini was there in the modest role of student, but he had already pondered over the instruments in the Auckland Museum. In fact, he had written a song called “Taku Putorino” in which he evokes himself pressing his nose against the glass of a museum case, wondering what the instrument would sound like if he could play it.

At the time the present interview was conducted, Richard had recently attended a ceremony at Waikato University to recognise the achievements of the critically ill, 54-year-old Hirini Melbourne. Hirini had been awarded an honorary doctorate for his services to the university, to scholarship and to the Maori community. At the same function Richard and Hirini were awarded a Golden Disc by representatives of the Recording Industry of New Zealand for their album *Te Ku Te Whe*, and Hirini was presented with a pounamu mere (greenstone club) by the Awanuiarangi wananga (house of learning) at Whakatane. Around 1500 people attended the ceremony, including many organisations, communities and iwi whose lives had been touched by Hirini. A number of musicians, like Hinewehi Mohi, performed, as did Richard and Hirini themselves. The occasion was joyous but also very sad, given the severity of Hirini’s illness. Still close to the emotions aroused by the Waikato ceremony, Richard interrupted the chronological narrative of the interview to reflect on the background, personality and talents of the man who had been his close friend and working associate for the last 20 years:

Hirini was deeply steeped in Tuhoetanga. Tuhoē is a very staunch iwi grouping who managed to preserve their language and culture in a way few other tribes had. Because they were a comparatively small, tight-knit group, were geographically isolated, and had for many years placed a rahui (ban) on Pakeha entering the area, they were able to keep their identity intact and hold onto their traditions better than others.

When I met up with him at the Te Araroa hui, Hirini had already acquired considerable standing in both the Maori and Pakeha worlds. He was a writer, a poet, a composer, a beautiful singer and a self-taught guitarist with a particularly beguiling finger-picking style. He spoke Maori as his first language, and possessed profound knowledge of archaic and classical culture. This ancestral wisdom underpins the apparent simplicity of his songs. These capture their audience with their catchy European melodies, but he injects into them the elements of the classical Maori language which old people so revere and are keen for the young to acquire and use as models in their idiomatic day-to-day speech. Trained as a teacher, he had great facility for working with young people, whom he also reached through his writing in school journals.

Hirini bestrides the two sides of New Zealand life, acting as a broker between Maori and pakeha cultures. With his natural warmth, generosity and charm, he moves easily and comfortably from one to the other, interpreting Maori to Pakeha, but also brokering Pakeha access to the Maori world. His support was invaluable for me and Brian, initiating contacts for us with Maori communities and acting as our emissary into areas we would not have been able to access on our own.

People have said of our cross-cultural partnership that it embodied the whakatauki (saying) of Te Wherowhero: “Kotahi te koohao o te ngira e kuhuna ai te miro maa, te miro pango, te miro whero” (There is only one eye of a needle through which the white, black and red threads pass).

### **Reconstructing the Fragments**

The partnership between Richard, Brian and Hirini clicked into place at that hui some 20 years ago, and the three of them have worked together ever since:

We couldn't have achieved what we did without the confluence of our separate sets of skills. We've worked closely as a symbiotic trio, moving around the country together. There was Hirini's superb musicality, his compositional skills, his first-language facility in Maori, his traditional knowledge and his deep roots in the Maori world. Brian had superb carving skills, plus an ability to think laterally when tackling musical problems. He contained layerings of composite knowledge and intuition concerning materials which allow him to solve technical acoustic difficulties - a quality remarkable in a non-player. I had the facility to play the instruments that Brian made, and to weave them into the music Hirini composed.

A lot of initial work was required just figuring out the basic dynamics of the instruments – the spacing of

the holes and so on. We were all involved in measuring, collecting, photographing, playing, recording, pondering in museums and reading whatever literature we could get hold of. We tried to extract what information we could glean from early documentation – Best, Anderson and so on - the earlier, the better. That basic legwork took years, and it's still going on.

Their laborious research was later supplemented from unexpected sources. Once the trio had acquired or created a considerable body of instruments and a musical repertoire to perform upon them, they found themselves in demand. They began travelling around the country demonstrating them in Maori communities. While they had something precious to offer – the sight and sound of instruments about which many Maori themselves had forgotten – the information flow was by no means one-way. Direct questioning about the past produced a blank, even when done by Hirini in Maori. All knowledge of the old instruments seemed to have been erased.

Then something remarkable began to happen. Little by little, people started volunteering information they had forgotten they even knew. The very acts of the trio in laying out, discussing and above all playing the instruments triggered off long-buried memories – “fragments and shards of memory locked away in the minds of kuia (old women)”. These were not first-hand recollections of their sound, as nobody living had heard this, but memories of what a grandmother or great-grandmother had said about the use of the instruments in the old days. These priceless fragments of korero (story) covered all aspects of traditional music – what instruments looked like, how they were made, the materials from which they were constructed, the tools that were used, the ways they were played, the settings in which they were performed, their ceremonial functions and so on.

Kuia would come up to them after a performance, sometimes in tears, and share remembered snippets they themselves had forgotten until the sound of Richard and Hirini playing restored them to consciousness. Richard stressed the strong female component in what was being disclosed. Their informants were almost always female, as was the original source of their recovered knowledge. Richard has lists of celebrated women flute players from the old days. The voices of the instruments themselves are often female, and many of the ceremonies at which they were played were related to uniquely female activities and functions, such as the karakia performed during child-birth and healing.

At first these recovered memories were just isolated threads, but as they accumulated and corroborated one another from a variety of sources in different parts of the country they began to form a pattern from which the centrality of instruments in communal life could be glimpsed. In effect, and with no prior conscious intention, Richard and Hirini were pioneering a potentially fecund ethnographic technique for revitalising long-suppressed oral recollections, the sound of the instruments themselves acting as catalyst. It is a methodology which can be employed across cultures, and one in which professional ethnographers are beginning to take an interest.

### **Alternative Sources of Learning**

What such verbal shards cannot reconstruct, of course, is the precise nature of traditional music itself.

Richard cannot be certain that what he plays today is what people heard 200 years ago. That said, the sounds he makes – the timbre, pitch, range and so on - are dictated by the structure of the instruments themselves, and these are meticulously based on originals in museums. Thus, he cannot be making up his own sounds with no relation to the music the ancestors must have created. What he does is not arbitrary. The voices he produces are inherent in the actual instruments. There are only certain ways it is possible to play the koauau – the flute itself dictates what you can do with it.

Richard makes no claims to absolute certainty. All he can say is that he works within “a vector of possibilities”. There were no gramophone recordings he could copy, nobody to teach him who had learned in the old ways. Thus he can't say for sure: “This is the stylistic shape, this is the way they used to be played. ” All he can say is that he thinks he is reasonably close to the original voices, but – in the language of political polls – within a margin of error.

Although he is extremely reluctant to talk about it in non-Maori circles, Richard's confidence in the authenticity of the music he produces is strengthened by his own intuitions:

I've known for a long time how the instruments should be held, stroked, caressed, breathed into voice – and I don't mean just the technical side. The knowledge has literally come to me in a series of dreams. With the rational side of my being, this is something I've agonised over, and I'm chary of talking about it outside the Maori world. It could be dismissed as New Age gobbledygook: “Nunns has gone whacko!”

Yet when I finally plucked up the courage to mention it to the old ones, the response was total relief. Maori elders sometimes feel uneasy about my ability to play their instruments. They do not possess the knowledge themselves, and my playing may generate tension and anxiety. They poke me and demand: “Where did you learn to play like that, eh boy? Who taught you that?” I'm an enigma to them. It doesn't help when I say nobody gave me instruction, as there is nobody who could.

Once I tell them about the dreams, though, the tension is released. Instant relaxation: Ah! Back to the card game. They are totally comfortable with dreaming as a system for acquiring information. In some cases they practise it themselves, and it sanctions my knowledge of the instruments.

I keep dreaming wide open as a source of information. Maybe it's something to do with my left-handedness. Whatever the source, this kind of intuitive knowledge has informed my use and playing of traditional instruments, allowing me to make progress within a vector of possibilities.

I may also receive *tohu* (signs) while I am actually playing, which appear to affirm the rightness of what I'm doing. I have the sensation of stepping apart and watching myself play. At such times, it is not so much I who am playing, as the entire tradition that is moving within me. I am just the funnel through which it pours. I do not will myself to make the music – it is something I am compelled to do.

On other occasions, I have the feeling there is a group of people at my shoulders, tightly packed around

me, giving me support. I interpret these as signs that there is a correctness in what I'm doing. Make of it what you will.

## **Performing at wahi tapu**

Once word spread about the work the trio was doing, they were in demand to contribute to the ritual dimension of community life. Richard estimates they spent about 60% of their working time travelling around the country at the request of small groups seeking their assistance on ceremonial occasions. As Richard recounts some of his experiences, he appears to be operating with a double cultural focus, seeing situations simultaneously with the naturalistic eye of the post-Enlightenment European and the mythopoeic sensibility of the Maori participants:

We were asked in round-about ways to come to play at wahi tapu (sacred sites) where the voices had not been heard for several hundred years. Often we were not playing so much to people themselves but to features of the landscape like burial caves, trees, rivers, springs, mountains, carved houses or the bush. In doing so, we have had many remarkable experiences.

In one case, I walked with a group of a dozen or so elders miles up the Arahura river till we came to a large, still pool. At their request, I played to this pool, standing facing the river with my eyes closed while the old people stood behind me. After a while, I heard sounds of animation, excitement and astonishment from the group. At first I thought they were reacting to my playing, but when I opened my eyes I realised they had been watching a fish swimming into the pool. They asked me to wade in and fetch it. What I discovered was not a fish but a beautiful piece of greenstone. They told me that it kept changing colour as I played. I was given the stone, and it now travels with me. Of course, if you want to be cynical you could say someone had placed the greenstone there for me to discover – but I prefer their version that the ika pounamu (greenstone fish) had swum into the pool in the form of a fish.

On another occasion, I found myself in the far north playing to singing snails. It was at the request of a senior kuia called Saana Murray. The snail was a very rare indigenous species called pupu harakeke (flax snails) or – for reasons I'll explain in a minute – pupu whakarongo taua (snails who hear the war party). We were taken to a place where the shells of long-dead creatures could be found in a bleached, sub-fossil sequence.

For people of the far north, particularly Te Aupouri and Ngati Kuri, the pupu whakarongo taua is a kaitiaki (guardian), because when it sees strangers creeping through the harakeke (flax) around which it feeds, it is said to sing to warn its people in the village.

This could be dismissed as sheer romance, as snails have no vocal equipment to sing with. There is a perfectly rational, naturalistic explanation, however. Those fellows feed with their great blue bodies six or eight inches outside their shells. When they are frightened, they jam themselves quickly back inside. This compresses pockets of air trapped in the mucus, which release high-pitched squeals that would be perfectly audible to the villagers. This could be very handy if your life depended on knowing when

potentially dangerous strangers were hanging around.

But the elders were not interested in naturalism and biology. For them, the singing snails were tribal kaitiaki. We were taken to the colony of bleached shells, and standing on a high promontory we played to them as a gift or blessing – a way of placing the voices back into an area where they perhaps hadn't been heard for hundreds of years. We were playing the snails back to life.

These were just two of many occasions in which Richard has joined with elders at sacred features of the physical environment, supplementing chanted karakia with his instrumental performance. The most recent occasion was out at the end of Farewell Spit, helping to re-bury parts of a human skeleton that had been exposed amongst the shifting sands by the wind.

### **Te Ku Te Whe**

The ceremonies evoked above were by their nature private and ephemeral, Richard's performances heard only by small groups and by features of the natural world. In 1994, however, the instruments and sounds that Richard, Hirini and Brian had resurrected from oblivion were captured in a permanent form and entered the public arena. The renaissance of taonga puoro moved from the Maori hinterland to the cultural mainstream, their music becoming an integral element of national consciousness.

It came about through the initiative of the people behind the Auckland recording company Rattle Records, working out of the Progressive sound recording studio. It is a small company, dedicated to the promotion of pioneering New Zealand acoustic instrumental music of a kind usually passed over by purely commercial record companies. The Rattle team heard Richard and Hirini performing on a TV3 programme, and invited them to contribute to their compilation album *Different Tracks*, a showcase for inventive, technically rigorous and emotionally engaging New Zealand music.

The decisive step for injecting traditional music into the national bloodstream, however, was a proposal for a full-length CD dedicated entirely to the voices of traditional Maori instruments. The Rattle executives offered them three weeks in the Progressive studio, but Richard and Hirini did the whole job in a day and a half. The landmark recording they produced was called *Te Ku Te Whe*, literally meaning "loud and soft" – the full range of sounds heard in nature.

At one level, the CD is an ethnological archive of traditional instruments, giving the general public an opportunity for the first time to hear their resurrected voices. These included the sounds of tumutumu (tapped percussion), pukaea (wooden trumpet), putatara (conch shell), putorino (wind instrument), hue puru hau (large gourd), pakuru (tapping stick), ku (single-stringed instrument), hue rara (small rattle), koauau ponga ihu (small gourd played through the nose), porotiti (small disc swung on a cord), koauau (short three-holed flute), purerehua (bull roarer), poiawhiowhio (small gourd swung by a cord), karanga manu (bird call), roria (sliver of sprung wood or bone placed against lips and plucked), hue puru hau (rattled gourd containing dry seeds), ororuarangi (flute made from long bone or neck of gourd), tokere (castanet-type percussion) and pupu harakeke (flax snail shell).

At another level, *Te Ku Te Whe* is much more than a compilation of archaic sounds. It is a through-composed, multi-layered cultural artefact in its own right. The overall structure is provided by the metaphor of the whariki (mat) that was traditionally laid out (takapau horonui) at the birth of a high-born child, and rolled up again (takapau tuwhera) at death:

The whariki was the physical, visual metaphor for the new-born child's whakapapa and the life journeys it was expected to take. The images of weaving and of journeying encapsulate our own work since Hirini, Brian and I began collaborating. We have been repairing the broken thread in the woven mat of traditional musical knowledge. Or to use another metaphor, the piece symbolises our own journeys - our voyage of research into the past, and our travels around the country to restore the lost voices to the communities to whom they belong.

But it's not just our own story that is narrated. The symbolism has many layers. It takes you from pre-birth to post-death, through all the activities of a lifetime, including the passage from innocence to experience, and it provides a roller coaster ride of diverse emotions ranging from mourning to joy. It tells many stories, explores many dimensions of natural, communal and spiritual life, and contains many forms of knowledge. The structure is cyclical, emerging from and finally merging back into te po (eternal night). Its ultimate referent is to a fragment of the Maori creation myths, where sound was conceived as preceding human consciousness.

Once created, *Te Ku Te Whe* took on an unexpected life of its own. Wherever and whenever things Maori, particularly te ao tawhito (the ancient world), are mentioned on television, radio or film, they are almost invariably accompanied by sound effects from Richard and Hirini's CD (sometimes used without permission or acknowledgement). The uses to which their music is put range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Richard gave as a short sample list the use of sound bites from *Te Ku Te Whe* by *Waka Huia*, the Holmes show, a women's weight-watchers group in Ruatoria, the TV comedy *Havoc*, the promotional material for the launching of the Warriors rugby league team, *Marae Justice*, Mitsubishi and Auahi Kore (Smoke Free) ads, a Kiri Te Kanawa album of Maori songs and a number of TV documentaries including *Nga Morehu* and *Shattered Dreams*. Sometimes its use set up unfortunate associations, such as with the Nfgati Porou radio that used koauau passages from the album in its death notices. This created negative connotations in the minds of the young, making it difficult to run koauau workshops around Ruatoria, where people incorrectly now regard the koauau as a tapu instrument associated only with death.

*Te Ku Te Whe* has thus become ubiquitous – the soundtrack for just about all media allusions to the Maori side of national life.

### **Work with New Zealand Composers**

Richard had a serendipitous encounter in the early 1990s that was to add a whole new dimension to his musical journey. He was invited to conduct a workshop at the NZ Choral Federation's triennial *Sing Aotearoa* festival, where he met up with composer Gillian Whitehead. Out of their exchange of ideas

and discovery of mutual interests a collaborative partnership was forged, giving birth to a number of projects which wove together two previously distinct instrumental and stylistic traditions – those of the taonga puoro of the ancestral marae and of the contemporary European concert hall.

The first major fruit of this cultural symbiosis was Gillian Whitehead's opera *Outrageous Fortune*, performed by the Otago Opera, in which Richard played a variety of traditional Maori instruments both in the orchestra and on-stage. The incorporation of these instruments into a dominantly European art form was not gratuitous, but an integral component of the opera's theme. The libretto by Dunedin writer Christine Johnston tells the unusual story of two Maori brothers on the Otago goldfields, one of whom had left behind a pregnant wife. Richard has since performed Rona's aria from the opera, with Deborah Wai Kopohe, as a stand-alone concert piece on several occasions.

More accessible to the general public, thanks to another album from Rattle Records in 1998, is the cross-cultural piece *Ipu*. This was conceived by Whitehead on the basis of a modern folk story about the love between a kowhai tree and a war canoe written by the actress Tungia Baker, translated into Maori by Wena Tait. The tale is narrated by Baker, kowhai is represented by NZ-born, Sydney-based pianist Judy Bailey, the waka (canoe) by Danish cellist Georg Pedersen, while atmospheric, natural and narrative effects are provided by Richard on a wide variety of reconstructed traditional Maori instruments. It is a work of "directed improvisation": Whitehead provided the concept and a notated score for the cello, but left Judy Bailey and Richard free to improvise on the basis of her written indications or graphic figures. The three musicians developed the concept over several days, by the end of which the cellist had largely abandoned his score in favour of his own improvisations.

A third piece conceived by Whitehead to blend Maori and European instruments, and to combine notation with improvisation, was created for Richard and the American-based New Zealand flutist Alexa Still. Its subject is the Maori patron goddess of the flute Hine Raukatauri braiding her hair. The Maori flute is represented by the putorino, the European by C-concert and alto flutes and the piccolo. Richard and Alexa first performed it in front of around 3500 flute players at a conference of the American Flute Association at Atlanta in 1999, where Richard was a featured presenter/performer. He has since performed the piece several times with Bridget Douglas of the NZ Symphony Orchestra. As with the cello in *Ipu*, the flute line is through-notated but the flutist is at liberty to ad lib. Richard's partners on the classical flute have progressively developed the courage to depart from the written score into the risky waters of improvisation, so that each performance is effectively a different piece.

At the 2002 Wellington Arts Festival, Richard participated in yet another conversation between Maori and Western musical traditions devised by Gillian Whitehead. This time the European side was represented by the New Zealand String Quartet. The piece was named for Hine Pu te hue, the goddess of peace, whose earthly representation is the gourd. Appropriately, many of the 16 or so instruments on which Richard performed were created out of gourds of various sizes and played in a variety of ways – blown, swung and rattled. The European and Maori instruments interwove and engaged with one another in a variety of different combinations. The string music was through-composed, but as with the other works, Gillian (who herself has considerable knowledge of Maori instruments and their qualities) simply provided Richard with general indications of the sounds required as the music unfolded.

Gillian is not the only “classical” New Zealand composer with whom Richard has collaborated. In 1999, his taonga puoro were woven into Gareth Farr’s work *Rehu Ma Tangi* (flute voices from the sky) for the Nelson Recorder Week (played again the next year in Christchurch): “It was a fascinating piece, skilfully constructed to include the diverse skills that co-exist within a multi-ability ensemble, ranging from fiendishly difficult passages for a professional recorder quartet to easy bits for beginners. Its flowing rhythmic sequences and patterns of calls and responses from different parts of the orchestra were reminiscent of the gamelan performances with which Gareth has been involved”.

Richard worked again with Gareth when the latter was invited to create musical events for the Te Papa millennium dawn ceremony, and later for the pre-match musical entertainment at a 2002 Bledisloe cup match at the Jade Stadium in Christchurch. Again in 2002, they joined forces to record what Richard termed the “soundfield” or “musical plot” for Nancy Brunning’s revival of Witi Ihimaera’s play *Woman Far Walking*, which toured New Zealand and overseas from its base at the Takirua theatre.

Richard’s expertise with taonga puoro has also been called on by the bicultural composer Helen Fisher . The rendering of the lament “Listen to the Weeping” by Richard and Bob Bickerton, on Maori and Irish flutes, was a highlight of her 1998 *Taku Wana*, which traced the colonial history of Maori/Pakeha relations in the Nelson area from initial mutual respect and support to the Wairau massacre. Richard and Hirini later supplied the traditional Maori element to the multi-media *Pounamu* at the 1999 WOMAD festival in Auckland, a work composed by Helen Fisher and choreographed by Merenia Gray. Their major contribution to WOMAD that year, however, was their own piece *Te Ara Puoro*. The following year, they performed a similar work entitled *Voices of the Land* at the Wellington International Festival.

## Free Jazz Improvisation

The term “improvisation” has been cropping up regularly throughout this interview, ever since Richard was introduced to this risky type of musical tightrope-walking by Christchurch musos back in the mid-1960s. Down the subsequent decades, he has entered into a number of musical partnerships with pre-eminent exponents of the art of free improvisation. We are not talking here about orthodox jazz improvisation, which gives an appearance of spontaneity but actually observes fairly strict forms, operating through variations on standard chordal conventions and melodic formulae. Really “free” improvisation is an avant-garde, virtuoso art form that breaks all conventions, including those of jazz itself. It aims for total originality and genuine spontaneity, pushing instruments beyond their formal capabilities and generating sounds for which they were not designed: “It’s right off this planet.”

As we have seen, when creating *Ipu*, Richard worked with pianist Judy Bailey, whom he describes as Australia’s “duchess of improvisation”. Since then, he and Judy have played together again, recording material to be honed and shaped into an album. He is also a member of the 16-piece free jazz group Urban Taniwha, the brainchild of the visionary saxophonist Jeff Henderson with Waimihi Hotere as lead singer. The group invited the volcanic, internationally acclaimed American pianist Marilyn Crispell to

play with them at the 2001 Wellington International Jazz Festival. She and Richard struck up a rapport, and hope to record together before long.

A third meeting of traditional Maori taonga puoro and Western avant-garde jazz is already on the market in the form of the 2001 *Rangirua* CD, the product of a partnership between Richard and Evan Parker. Parker is arguably the most eminent post-Coltrane saxophonist in the world. Working mainly with the soprano sax, he has pushed forward musical frontiers not only through his own stylistic experiments but also through the wide range of unexpected collaborative projects he has entered into.

Parker extends the three octaves of the soprano to around five, and creates the illusion of polyphony by extracting sound from the reed and bell areas of the instrument as well as the body. "It is like a revolving ball of steel wool." He has also mastered the ancient art of circular breathing practised in many traditional cultures, and has laid down whole albums without ever seeming to pause for breath. As well as extending the repertoire of free jazz in the European and North American traditions, he enjoys working with people from other musical communities, having played, amongst others, with Tuvan throat singer Sainkho Namtchylak and with a Sardinian launeddas player - not to mention the post-rock soundscapes of Jah Wobble.

Parker and Nunns met up some years ago when the Alexander von Schlippenbach's free jazz Trio, of which Parker is a member, was invited to New Zealand by the Goethe Institute. The two musicians struck up a rapport when they discovered their shared literary enthusiasm for Samuel Beckett. They subsequently performed together to a packed Paramount Theatre in Wellington when Evan Parker was invited to the 1999 International Jazz Festival. They didn't rehearse beforehand, just had one brief discussion which Evan summed up by saying: "It's the going there and finding out that matters." Parker felt he and Richard shared a common musical language, an affinity which led to the recording of the *Rangi Rua* album by Leo - probably Europe's most significant label for free improvised jazz. The album has subsequently been reviewed favourably in six or so major international jazz magazines: "although for most people's taste it would come into the category of seriously weird music".

### **Preserving the Integrity of the Instruments**

Richard concedes that purists might take issue with his employment of traditional taonga puoro to create hybrid Maori/European musical forms. However, he feels such miscegenation is legitimate so long as he preserves the integrity and identity of his instruments. He distinguishes his approach to cultural cross-pollination from other currently fashionable forms of "World Music", which tend to produce amorphous, homogenised sounds where the distinctive voice of each tradition is merged into polyglot cosmopolitanism. Richard is doing something different: "I'm trying to find ways of enabling distinct genres to engage in conversations, and to find out what we have to say to one another. That's different from creating super-smooth, homogenised music".

When evoking the musical "conversations" into which he enters with Western performers, Richard stresses a significant difference between his approach to instrumental performance and that of his

partners – notably Evan Parker. Whereas the latter deliberately outrages musical conventions and forces his saxophone beyond its formal limits, Richard respects the traditional voices of the taonga puoro. Unlike avant-garde European performers, he does not torture his instruments into yielding sounds for which they were not intended. His performances are “free”, in the sense they are not pre-scripted, but he does not grant himself licence of an Evan Parker to push into new acoustic territory.

In thus observing his instrument’s conventional functions, it is inevitable that there are strict limits to the range of sound he can produce on each. He compensates for this intrinsic lack of range within any one voice by the wide variety of different instruments he brings to each performance, and by the diverse techniques employed to generate their acoustic effects – whirling, blowing, breathing, plucking, rattling and tapping.

Furthermore, with each he explores subtle nuances of pitch and timbre, bending and modulating the sound sometimes within a single note. Variety is achieved through exploring the interior nuances of instruments rather than exploiting their external range. This respect for the internal world of his instruments commands a corresponding respect in those who hear them played:

There is a beauty and a magic in those tiny areas within each tone which I seem to have the gift of extracting. This in turn has the power to produce attention and quietude in listeners. People attend to the music with almost palpable intensity. Racketing, rioting children come and sit at your feet the minute the music begins – keeping kids quiet is quite an achievement in itself! At other times, we’ve had to follow rock bands at festivals. As we walk past the microphones, go down to the audience and start playing, the amplified din is replaced by pin-drop silence. It’s partly caused by the sheer drama of the instruments themselves, but there is also something compelling about their voices which demands intense, hushed attention.

## **Moana Maniapoto**

Although performing solely on traditional Maori instruments may at first sight appear a rather limited and arcane specialism, what the foregoing reveals is that it has enabled Richard, in his own words, to cover “the full 360 degrees” of musical experience from atavistic nature rituals to sophisticated international jazz. His collaboration with yet another group adds a further dimension again to his musical odyssey, while at the same time bringing him full circle back to the Maori world. This is his membership of Moana Maniapoto’s group Moana and the tribe.

It is an impressively multi-talented ensemble comprising Moana and the Moahunters (who first came to public attention with their cover version of “Black Pearl” in the early 1990s), the kapa haka performers of Ihu Waka, and regular guest contributors such as Richard and Hirini. Like much Maori pop music, their performances combine groovy contemporary dance, soul, ballad, hip-hop and reggae with traditional chants, rhythms and instruments. The mixture is at once catchily contemporary and profoundly chthonic, enhanced by the powerful haka and weaponry displays of the tattooed dancers. Their music weaves together political, social, cultural and spiritual themes, promoting Maori identity

and mana, celebrating movements and leaders like Ratana, Ringatu and Titokowaru, fostering mana wahine (Maori female pride), exposing Treaty of Waitangi issues, fostering te reo and pressing the “no smoking” button.

Richard can be heard on Moana’s first two albums *Tahi* (1993) and *Rua* (1997) with tracks like “Hine Te Iwaiwa”, “Calling You” and “Kahu” (the latter guest-produced for Moana in his private studio by Neil Finn). He has also been on tour overseas with the group, including three weeks in Italy in 2001, where they played to Florentine audiences of between four and six thousand. In 2002 he joined the Tribe again to play in Rome.

The incorporation of taonga puoro into the mix goes much further than mere ambient atmospherics. Richard and Moana consult about regional differences and the significance of diverse instruments, ensuring their appropriate use for the specific kaupapa (purpose, philosophy) of each song, be this prophecy, birth, death, journeying, the relationship with the natural world or whatever. It is a two-way, symbiotic relationship. As a result of his years of research, Richard is in a position to give advice to Moana on certain points. On other occasions, knowing the capabilities and significance of the instruments, Moana designs a piece with these specifically in mind. Either way, the taonga puoro are organically integrated into their contemporary context, not just culturally non-specific local colour.

### **The Rest of the Iceberg**

The collaborative work with Moana Maniapoto, Gillian Whitehead, Evan Parker, Marilyn Crispell, Gareth Farr, Bridget Douglas, Alexa Still, Urban Taniwha and Helen Fisher we have just been describing are only the tip of a much larger iceberg. Richard did not have time, in what was already a long interview, to cover the full range of his musical activities. He was only able to mention in passing his musical partnerships with people like Jan Bolwell, Mere Boynton, Mark van Tongeren, Leo Tadagawa, Dan Poynton, Hamish McKeich and Ariana Tikao. With some of these, he was playing in a group called Stroma, in which members of the NZ Symphony Orchestra explore cutting-edge contemporary composition, mainly by New Zealanders. As well as these live collaborations, his work appears on over 30 albums, including Gillian Whitehead’s opera *Outrageous Fortune*, David Hamilton’s “Offering for Parihaka” on the *Parihaka* CD, Anika Moa’s *Thinking Room* album and the NZ music compilation *SounzFine 3*. He also provided bridging instrumental passages between traditional moteatea on the *He Waiata Onamata* double album, put out with an accompanying booklet in 1998 by Te Reo Rangatira Trust and Huia Publications.

Since our interview was recorded, Richard has also entered into what promises to be an exciting experimental partnership in Australia with pianist and composer Paul Grabowsky and the electronics virtuoso Ollie Olsen from the band In Excess. The project – which has the provisional title “Tu Tangata” - involves taking the ancestral voices of taonga puoro and very subtly morphing them electronically in real time under Paul’s direction. Richard was only able to mention this recent work-in-progress as a last-minute addendum to the text of this interview, but it is a project with exciting musical potential which he looks forward to developing further with Paul and Ollie in the future.

## The Instruments

The instruments themselves are major actors in the drama that has been unfolding since Richard, Brian and Hirini began working together in the early 1980s. Each is a beautifully shaped taonga, commanding respect in its own right over and above the voice it contains. Brian has carved precious artifacts which are highly valued in Maori communities, as well as being displayed in museums around the world. In fact, this very reverence is sometimes a cause of frustration to him, as his guiding strategy is to create objects to be handled and used regularly on the marae, not locked away in iwi treasure houses like Tainui's Mahinarangi:

Sometimes Brian tears his hair out when an exquisitely carved object he has made is laid down as a gift on a marae, only to be born away with great honour and formality and locked in a display case. Nobody gets to touch it, as it is regarded as too tapu. Brian's idea is that you create an instrument for it to be picked up and played. The recipients, on the other hand, regard it as such an extraordinary treasure, they shut it away in a tribal museum, which is the complete reverse of his strategy for putting instruments into the community for everyday use. It's a bit of a paradox, since indigenous peoples frequently criticise European museums for locking artefacts away from the heart-beat of the community – but this is what Maori themselves sometimes do with Brian's instruments.

Richard has accumulated a collection of around 85 such instruments, each a small masterpiece in itself. They are created out of a wide range of natural material – gourds, stone, shell, wood and bone, much of which is rare and covered by restrictions from both the Maori and Pakeha sides of the cultural divide:

I should think that around 90% of material used for the instruments requires consent and documentation from the Department of Conservation (DOC), as well as sanctions and blessings from the local iwi. Most of my instruments have had karakia (blessings) said over them to assist their passage into the world of being. In the process, they are often given individual names, chosen for a variety of reasons relating to their raw material, their construction, their provenance, their function and so on.

There are Pakeha laws as well as Maori customs to be observed. All native wild life comes under the governance of DOC, and some forms of material are extremely difficult to obtain. Several of my flutes have been created out of albatross bone, a very scarce material, as are the whale teeth, jawbones and ribs that have sometimes been used. I have an instrument decorated with the precious feathers of the rare kakapo, and I perform on the shells of highly endangered snails we've been privileged to be gifted, each associated with a story to be related when it is played. I'm currently cataloguing the whole 85 of them, having them measured and photographed by DOC staff, and they will eventually be loaded into a computer database. I'm also working away on a major book on the traditional instruments of the Maori.

Perhaps the most unusual raw material to be fashioned into musical instruments is iwi tangata (human bone). Richard has flutes made from the humerus and femur he acquired from the science department at the school where he worked. They were part of an unused medical skeleton: "It was just rattling around in boxes". All they knew about it was that it was female and probably belonged to an Indian

‘untouchable’ in the late nineteenth century, a time when India was the main source of such specimens.

Using human bone as raw material for a musical instrument may appear a little macabre to some, but Richard feels it is a very dignified way for a person to end up. It’s not, however, a form of immortality people can choose for themselves:

It’s no use putting it in your will that you want your bones turned into flutes. There are endless legal obstacles, including the Human Tissue Act, if you want any part of your body used for unorthodox ends like making music. Personally, I like the idea that generations of my descendants could have me sitting there on the sideboard in the form of a koauau. They would be able to say to visitors “This is the old fellow. He was a pretty weird old bugger, but this is what he sounded like”.

The presence in their midst of instruments fashioned out of iwi tangata is more taken for granted in the Maori than the Western world. Its communal acceptability, along with an example of how an instrument receives its individual name, are encapsulated in the following anecdote:

I have two koauau made out of human bone, each of which has been given a name by Tuhoe. I played one of them up at one of the ana koiwi (burial caves) way up on the side of Maunga Pohatu. I went there with Nga Morehu (the survivors – followers of the early twentieth century prophet Rua Kanana). There was talk, there were tears, and I played on the koauau iwi tangata. Afterwards, we came down the mountain to an old house Rua had built in the 1920s called Tanenuiarangi. There was no electricity – just the light of a single candle. Mahuetawa, a descendant of Rua, was asked what the name of the instrument I’d been playing was. He lay down for about 40 minutes, then sat bolt upright and announced: “Tutemangaroa. This is the name of the pinnacle at the side of Maunga Pohatu, up where the burial caves are. It is now the name of the flute I played there.

Richard is now a regular international traveller, performing, giving seminars and workshopping in many countries round the world from Hawaii to the Dudelsack festival at Strakonice in the Czech Republic . However, the nature of his instruments creates major problems for him not encountered by conventional musicians as they cross frontiers:

I’ve found myself in real trouble with border controls, particularly in the United States . Once they gave me the choice of having 15 of my instruments confiscated or being arrested. I opted to surrender the instruments, and they delayed me for hours while I had to sign documents waiving all rights to them. I eventually got them back, but only with huge difficulty. I’ve got a pile of papers about half an inch thick containing the fax war that went on between me, DOC and its American counterpart. That was just one of several really unpleasant encounters I’ve had.

I’ve even had serious problems getting back into New Zealand with instruments I took out only a few days earlier. I’ve got all the correct fumigation documents and so on ,but even so they go over the instruments with a fine-toothed comb. It is a very slow process to get through customs. Of course, they are quite within their rights, as they are just enforcing the international agreement preventing trade in

endangered species. But because of the hassles this causes, there are about 35 of the instruments I simply won't travel abroad with any more.

Another layer of difficulties has been added since September 11 2001. Many of the containers in which the instruments travel look like weapons. In fact, many of the instruments themselves look like weapons! That adds another dimension of fear and misgiving when I travel with them.

## **Mahi Aroha**

The Richard Nunns who, as a young boy, felt really at the centre of things as he sat in his dressing-gown listening to the rinky-tink music of his father's country dance band is now a cosmopolitan virtuoso, performing with national and international celebrities in genres ranging from hip-hop to avant-garde jazz. He is also a pre-eminent musical researcher and scholar, who has not only uncovered and documented scores of traditional Maori instruments, but has also coaxed them back to life, restored their voices to the Maori communities to which they once belonged, injected them into the national soundscape and introduced them to an international audience. His work in these areas has been recognised, amongst other things, by honorary life membership in the Flute Association of New Zealand and a citation from the Composers Association of New Zealand "for services to New Zealand music".

During the quarter-century or so since he began this musical odyssey, he mainly supported himself by teaching English, fitting his music into weekends and holidays, relieved only by occasional visiting residencies (University of Colorado, Victoria University, Waikato University). In 2002, he took the risky financial step of resigning his teaching job, thereby fulfilling an ambition he first conceived in Christchurch back in the mid-1960s of devoting his life full-time to music. He is rather self-deprecating about his employment of a business manager, and is a little uncomfortable with the self-promotion involved in pursuing a professional music career. A certain amount of commercial practicality is required to put bread on the table, but it doesn't sit entirely comfortably with the art of whakaiti (making yourself small) he has been cultivating since his induction into the Maori community some 30 years ago.

Commercial success, however, is not his major concern. This, now as at the start of the journey, is for the instruments themselves and the people to whom their voices really belong: "Financial calculations don't come into that". He has stood in lonely places with small groups of Maori elders, summoning spirit voices to rivers, trees, mountains, ancestral kaitiaki, burial spots and carved houses. Today he may rub shoulders with international celebrities, but the real work at the flax roots continues as before. His commitment to taonga puoro remains, as it began, he mahi aroha (a work of love).

### **Epilogue: "Sleep Well, My Brother"**

Early in January 2003, Richard sadly added these final words to the text of this interview:

My most recent project has been laying down the material for a sequel to *Te Ku Te Whe* with Hirini and

the academic/singer Aroha Yates. This new offering incorporates layered sequences that are much more developed than *Te Ku Te Whe*, and they will interweave the taonga puoro with Aroha's evocative voice into a very different kind of whariki from the first album.

The material for this new album was recorded between the ninth and thirteenth of December 2002. On Monday 5 January 2003, Hirini died.

## **Moe mai ra, a taku tuakana**