

ACMC 2011, A Review – Warren Burt

From July 4 to 11, I was in Auckland, New Zealand, for the 2011 Australasian Computer Music Conference, which was held at the University of Auckland, organised by John Coulter and a very efficient, friendly and capable crew. My trip was paid for by one of my employers, Box Hill Institute. Usually, I rely on Gordon Monro to write up a report on the conference for those who weren't there, but since Gordon was over in Europe, I'll put my hand up for this. There were all sorts of events at the conference that I was unable to attend. Apologies in advance for all those whose events I couldn't make it to. Obviously, one person can only do so much.

The conference ran over 4 days, on 6-9 July, at a variety of venues at the University of Auckland. It was hosted by the National Institute of the Creative Arts and Industries, and just from the name of the school, I noticed an immediate difference from the Australian environment. In Australia, the word “Art” is rapidly being removed from the names of institutions – we have Centres for Creative Industries, and so on. Anything to get a buck, or government approval. The Kiwis seem to be made of sterner, or sneakier, stuff. They've gone along with the industrialisation rationale, but maintained the connection with the concept of “art.” Good for them. As the week progressed, I saw that this was not an isolated incident. In many ways, the New Zealanders seemed to have managed to tweak the difficult educational, economic and cultural conditions we both live under in a more subtle, and affirmative way than we have in Australia.,

Wednesday, July 6, 2011

First day of the conference. Meeting dozens of people. Among those I met in the morning before the first session were Martin Wesley-Smith, Robert Wolf, John Cousins, and Simon Emmerson. Old friends all. I missed the start of Simon's keynote address because I was setting up for the performance of my piece, “The Bird is the Word.” Got back in time for the end of Simon's address, then heard Ian Whalley's keynote address, which concerned remote performance over the internet using indigenous and technological music tools. It was a very interesting work in progress report, one that I felt a lot of sympathy and resonance with.

Went to lunch with the crew from Western Australia, Cat Hope, Lindsay Vickery, and Malcolm Riddoch. There was a nice and cheap Japanese-Korean place just north of the Uni – a good time was had by all.

Then it was time for the lunchtime concert. The concert opened with an enjoyable and subtle “tape piece” (I guess the right term these days is “fixed-media piece”) *Entre mi cielo y tu agua* (*Between my sky and your water*) by Ricardo Dal Farra, originally from Argentina, but now teaching at Concordia University, Montreal. By coincidence, there were three Argentinians at the conference, Ricardo Dal Farra, Gerardo Dirie, and Jose Halac. Their presence gave another flavour to the conference – their approach to musical and aesthetic matters was different from both the Aussies and the Kiwis, and they were often the life of the party, too.

The second piece was Michael Norris's *Eight Maps for the Lost*, which was a piece for cello and live electronics. The electronics amplified and extended the cello. The work was extremely subtle and controlled, sometimes so subtle it almost seemed to disappear. The ritual of its theatre, helped by the softness and refinement, helped make it memorable. I've enjoyed those pieces of Michael's that I've heard in the past, and this piece continued that enjoyment.

I then performed *The Bird is the Word*. I felt the performance went well, and received a number of compliments, and although the length of this performance – about 11:30 seemed good, I really think that the piece needs to be longer. The performance was videoed, and I'm really happy with how the

video came out. It clearly shows the “theatre of tiny gestures” I’m trying to develop using my portable, nano-sized equipment. Since performing at the concert I’ve made a 23 minute version of the piece, and I’m really happy with that. Both the video and the longer version of the piece are now up on my website (www.warrenburt.com).

The rest of the concert consisted of a video composition *Blooms and Death 3* by Brigid Burke, who wasn’t at the conference; and *Suffering* a ritual piece by Susan Frykberg, from Whangerei, which featured gorgeous sounds and ritual actions by two actors, including pouring water, crucifixion, embracing, and reciting words. Brigid’s composition featured fractured sounds and a succession of computer treated graphic imagery. I’ve seen a lot of her work, and being placed in this context removed the aspect of familiarity from it, and I was able to appreciate its intricacy and rugged qualities more. Frykberg’s very enjoyable piece combined elaborate sounds with sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure theological imagery. The juxtaposition struck me as both moving and strange, a combination I hadn’t experienced before, and one I found most inviting.

Afternoon papers included papers by Lindsay Vickery and Malcolm Riddoch, both from Edith Cowan Uni, Perth. Vickery’s informative paper was on indeterminate strategies for live electronic performance, and we saw the fruits of that work in his piece a couple of days later. Riddoch’s paper was on the philosophical bases for his feedback and live instrument works. The first 2 minutes of his talk were devoted to explaining how his work fits into the new Australian ERA – excellence in research for Australia – project. ERA really is about shoehorning humanities research into a science bias, and the discomfort of this part of his presentation was an implicit criticism of the whole project. The techniques he talked about for controlling and shaping feedback and the concepts behind the work were far more interesting and engaging than the convoluted hoops he (and all other Australian academic humanities researchers) was forced to leap through in the name of ersatz legitimisation. It really is just too bad.

Two papers from Dugal McKinnon, and Michael Norris, both from the New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University, Wellington, examined the conference theme – organicism in live electronic music. Organicism is the late 18th century idea that musical themes are like plant seeds, and that musical compositions grow naturally, as plants do. (One 18th century writer, quoted by Norris, almost seemed to be making an analogy between musical themes and sperm cells, something which might be more appropriate for cock rock than electro-acoustic music!) This ideology pervaded thinking about tonality in the 19th century, and when music technology came along, even pioneers in the field such as Pierre Schaeffer subscribed to it. The idea of building compositions from a single technologically extended sound is at the heart of *musique concrete*, the immediate ancestor to today’s electro-acoustic music. This is contrasted with non-directional structures such as Cageian indeterminacy and other process-oriented forms, which are now (following Thomas DeLillo) called “inorganic” forms. Both MacKinnon and Norris made the point that technology can extend sounds so much that the old structural ideas based on notes no longer apply. The simple act of time-stretching places one inside the harmonic structure of a single sound, something note-based composition (with the possible exception of some moments in the symphonies of Anton Bruckner, or some of the pieces of James Tenney or some contemporary French spectralist composers) can’t do. The other aspect of “organicism” is using natural sounds in technological music. That’s especially relevant in New Zealand, where the use of Maori and Pacific instruments is very prevalent, and where the whole tradition of electro-acoustic music stems from the work of the late Douglas Lilburn, an international pioneer in the composition of work which integrates recordings of environmental sound with electronics.

Continuing the theme of the use of indigenous materials in electro-acoustic music was Te Mana-aroha Rollo, a 3rd year PhD student from Waikato University. Her talk was about her use of Maori waiata (ritual songs) and taonga puoro (traditional instruments) in electro-acoustic music and her

struggles to get this music accepted by the Maori community. She was a very lively and enthusiastic speaker – a great way to finish the day. On the basis of her paper, I felt that she was a composer we'd be hearing a lot more from in the future. When I heard her stunning piece *Te Taniwha Matekai (The Hungry Invader)* the next day, I was sure of it.

Wine and cheese followed at the Kenneth Myers Centre – the old Radio New Zealand Studios, which the Music Department of the University of Auckland acquired a couple of years ago. What a fantastic facility! Beautiful acoustic spaces, one with 24 channels of sound temporarily installed in it. We heard a sound installation by Simon Emmerson which was subtle and quite mesmerising. After that, we were exhausted, and made our way back to our hotel, unfortunately missing David Rylands' installation. Maybe another time.

The overall thrust of this conference, so far, is on electro-acoustic music as part of the classical music tradition. That is, all the works are being presented in concert listening situations where people actually listen and do nothing else. The thrust to make electro-acoustic music part of popular music, at least in its pub-based manifestations, seems to be absent here. I think people (or at least, the concert organisers) have gotten really sick of not being listened to, and are wanting people to actually hear their sounds and deal with the issues raised in their pieces rather than having their music treated as background for a party.

Thursday, July 7, 2011

Thursday began with a presentation by Maori artist Jason Phillips, in which he demonstrated a number of Maori traditional instruments (*taonga puoro*) (sounding treasures). The sounds were mesmerising, and Phillips, who also works as a traditional healer, brought an aspect of gentle spirituality and reverence to the conference that was quite purifying. The spiritual aspect of the morning continued with a presentation by Susan Frykberg, describing a project of hers collecting electro-acoustic music that dealt with spirituality in some way. Examples were played of some of the works collected. I wanted to hear more of the works, and I thought of a number of works that hadn't made her list but which would be quite relevant to her project.

Jose Halac, from Argentina, gave the next paper, which was a report on electro-acoustic work using ethnic sources, and his approach to using them, which he called *syncretic*. Although he shared the New Zealanders' concern with respecting the integrity of his sources, I felt that his work was more about an artist using sources from other cultures rather than using the material as a centrepiece in a cross cultural communication. This was followed by a panel discussion chaired by John Elmsly, in which Simon Emmerson (UK), Susan Frykberg (NZ) and myself (Aus/USA) were the panelists. Various issues in electro-acoustic music were tossed about, such as performance context, support mechanisms, place of the music in society, and even, at the end, our favourite softwares. There was a good exchange with the audience, and a lively time was had by all.

I was delighted by the lunchtime concert, which featured student works, all of which were universally good. If the young'uns are producing work of this quality and interest, the field is in very good hands indeed. After an absorbing "entrance music," *Tierra y sol*, by Ricardo Dal Farra, first cab off the rank was Te Mana-aroha Rollo, with *Te Taniwha Matekai (The Hungry Invader)*, an excellent piece retelling a Maori legend in sound. This piece featured beautiful sounds isolated in silence. Although the piece sounded nothing like Morton Feldman's music, her work reminded me of his sense of concentration on the single sound and its sense of deliberate pacing. Eva Li's *Nostalgias* featured attractive textures, which was followed by an engrossing video *Patoises: Wave 1: Blue* from Melody Eotvos. Jason Erskin and Bridget Johnson's *Gendru wo / Yamato Damashii* was a lot of fun – it was performed with some wonderfully funky interfaces, and featured very clear interaction between the two performers. Two pieces by Australians followed, *Construction for*

Flute and Electronics by Andrew Bishop, and *Derivations* for sax and electronics by Benjamin Carey. These were probably the two pieces on the conference most concerned with pitch and pitch relationships in the traditional musical sense. In Bishop's piece the use of sampled breath sounds formed an interesting contrast with recorded and live flute sounds, while in Carey's piece, which used live modification of sax sounds, a lot of the computer sounds, even the most modulated ones, clearly related to the pitch structures articulated by the instruments. The pieces were of such uniform high quality that voting on them afterwards (for the audience favourite) was an agony, albeit a pleasant one. The decision of the judges for the Young Composer's award went to Benjamin Carey, and the People's Choice award went to Jason Erskin and Bridget Johnson.

I was able to attend four paper sessions during the afternoon: papers by James Herrington, Robert Wolf, Tim Opie and Jasmine Chen. Herrington's comparison of the Reactable with the Korg NanoKontrol dealt with issues of physicality and flexibility of control in commercial and semi-commercially available controllers. Robert Wolf's report was on his continuing work with writing counterpoint writing programs in Prolog. He showed how the structure of Prolog was particularly well suited to creating structure generating programs such as this. Tim Opie continued his explorations of Eco-Structuralism – using information extracted from the environment as control information for electronic sound production. I felt he emphasised the notion of self-criticism a bit too much in this paper – it seems to me that a lot of the “proof of concept” of eco-structuralist work will rely on the listener's reception in completing the piece, rather than with the composer refining things too much. Jasmine Chen's paper dealt with issues of performance as they are affected by identity, heritage, transplantation and the adopting of other cultures. This was a continual theme with the New Zealand papers – identity and building cross-cultural musical initiatives seem to be areas of much interest there – much more so than in Australian technological musics at the moment.

The evening concert was again, filled with sonic delights. It also featured two pieces, which while excellent on their own, were most thought provoking when placed on the same concert. The opening work, *The Road Home*, by Xinh-Xo Nguyen, currently at Mills College in Oakland, California, was for dan tranh (Vietnamese zither), tuned in Just Intonation, and electronics. It was a stunning work – one of the best on the conference. There was a lot of working with the timbres of the danh tranh, fantastic modifications of them, and an intense, energetic lively performance – the best of acoustic and electronic worlds combined. The next performance, Robert Mackay's *Equanimity* was a double treat. Not only for the music, in which clarinet and environmental sounds combined, but also to see the legendary Gerry Errante perform. I very much enjoy the fact that the ACMC continues to attract international visitors as well as the Aus and NZ crews. Our small scale annual gathering is always a source of good contacts and good conversation with folks from around the globe.

A small glitch delayed the start of John Elmsly's *East Wind* for Alto Flute and 8 Channel Sound, enthusiastically played by Melody Lin. But once the glitch was ironed out, the piece was a winner – the flute line was intriguing, well-constructed and enjoyable, and the live electronics featured very clever pitch responses to what the flute was playing. Two lively fixed media pieces, for electro-acoustic sound and video followed, both by Argentinian visitors: *Gutenberg on the slide of his page*, by Gerardo Dirie and *Universalis*, by Jose Halac with graphics by Jana Kluge. Both pieces featured lively, loud and forceful surfaces – a kind of emphatic nature not experienced too much in the Antipodean pieces.

The first half ended with magic. Phil Dadson and James Charlton's *Conversation with Stones* featured Charlton doing a live video mix of Dadson's performing with river stones (his technique is phenomenal) and live electronics. A theme which emerged in the conference was that of New Zealand composers sacralizing commonplace objects. This was so for both Maori and Pakeha composers. Phil's performance held me spellbound for its duration. The sharp sounds of the stones

were extended, delayed, stretched and sent around the hall. Phil is one of our living treasures – a true sound shaman.

And speaking of sacralizing objects from nature, Jason Phillips then followed with a riveting short improvisation on taonga puoro, traditional Maori instruments. His performance was beautifully concentrated – Jason, through his concentration and demeanour (and the amazing sounds he gets from his instruments) is able to command the complete attention of an audience. You coulda heard a pin drop, both literally and metaphorically.

Leah Barclay, another bright young rising talent, followed with *Dhakan*, performed by her and Jo Tito. This was the only Australian work on the program that dealt with indigenous sources, from both Australian and New Zealand, and it was an affecting work – in its structure, the background soundscape the performers used reminded me of a piece for radio. The medium of radio piece with live performance component was one that was mostly absent from the conference, so I was glad to see/hear pieces by Barclay and later, Chris Cree Brown which represented this medium.

The final piece on the program was *Melancholia for Two Percussionists, Twenty-Four Found Objects and Eight-Speaker Sound Diffusion, no. 406b* by Andrian Pertout, from Melbourne. His piece featured a multi-layered electronics part, made of polyrhythms played on found objects, with two live percussionists adding even more layers of complexity on the same found objects. It was a thrilling work – my ear had a great time hearing all those rhythms and their combinations. In comparison with the Phil Dadson piece, however, I feel these two pieces epitomised one of the big differences between (at least some) New Zealand and (at least some) Australian composers today, at least as represented at this conference. Both Dadson's and Pertout's pieces used found objects. Dadson's were simple objects from nature, Pertout's were urban detritus. Dadson's piece dealt with making the commonplace sacred, while Pertout's piece used found objects in the service of a very clever formal scheme. In so many of the New Zealand pieces, sounds from the environment, indigenous materials, personal experiences were used for their iconic or narrative value, establishing something special about the materials and the artists' relationship to them. In many of the Australian works (my own included) materials from the environment were used in works in which the formal structure – the sound or structure for its own sake - was paramount. This seemed to apply, at least as an overarching metaphor, to every Australian piece on the conference, with the single exception of Leah Barclay's work. I'm sure one can point out counter-examples, but in the context of this conference, that contrast was (to me at least) pretty keen, and keenly felt.

Wow. A new music concert of excellent works from around the world that actually articulates (to me at least) an issue, and provokes both artistic enjoyment AND thought. Congratulations all around to both the organisers and the performers and composers.

Friday, 8 July 2011

Friday morning began with an early morning musical meditation session with Jefree Clarkson. Clarkson, 60, is a commercial composer who has been doing New Age and meditation music for many years. For this morning's session, he played a Yamaha VL1 physical modelling synth and a Yamaha KX5 with a wind controller and an extended ribbon controller. The KX5 was used with an Indian flute sound, and he used it as a melody line to his beautifully put together accompaniment tracks. He used just intonation in some of his pieces, and in some of his work, there were quite intriguing modulations, which were quite unexpected in a New Age context. The sparse attendance at this 7:30 session also meant I could have a most enjoyable extended chat with him – quite a pleasure in the normally compressed, fast-paced time of the conference.

The formal papers got under way with Gerardo Dirie, from Cordoba University, Argentina and the

Queensland Conservatorium. He analysed three *musique concrete* pieces which used external references – that is – the samples were used with narrative intent. His paper had a nice concentration on the musical technologies and techniques used in the music. Next up was John Cousins, now an Emeritus Professor at Canterbury University in Christchurch. Following up on Jason Phillips presentation about Maori Instruments, and the nature of the sacred object, John gave a passionate presentation about how the loudspeaker is as much a sacred object as Maori taonga puoro – how it is as much a “sounding treasure.” This was enforced by his caressing the loudspeaker, accompanied by a denunciation of those of us who had been disparaging the loudspeaker as “just a box.” Much interesting conversation flowed from that. Although I was one of the “just a box” people before his talk, I have to admit that he won me over, totally, to his ideas by the end of his talk. Last paper of the morning was by Ricardo dal Farra, late of Argentina, but now working at Concordia University in Montreal. Continuing the moral and ethical theme of the morning, he talked about the composers' responsibility in times of ecological and economic crisis. Again, much interesting talk flowed from this. During the discussion, I observed that Australian composers seem to have capitulated to the economists' takeover of everything, and have withdrawn their art into various private spheres, and concerned themselves with formal musical problems, rather than fighting back against the uber-monetaryization of society. To my disappointment, no Australian composers present disagreed with me.

Another excellent lunchtime concert followed. If it sounds like I was having a wonderful time at this conference, that's because I was. The weather outside may have been miserable, cold, and rainy, but inside, the mood, or at least my mood, was warm and sunny.

Each of the lunchtime concerts started with a “tape” piece from Ricardo dal Farra, designed to act as entrance music for the event. They were all quite exciting, but today's piece, *Ashram*, was my favourite of the lot. It was made with Mukha Veena sounds – that's an Indian double reed instrument – a bit like the Nagaswaram, but a little less edgy. The sounds slid and combined in a most wonderful way. Although this was entrance music, I could have listened to it on its own for a very long time. Lindsay Vickery's *Improbable Games*, performed by Decibel, was a mesmerising piece for flute, bass clarinet, cello and electronic processing – the computer generated scores in real time which the performers had to play as the music appeared. It was a thoroughly absorbing piece, and it affirmed for me that for many Australian composers today, formal concerns are their main interest.

The next work was *Backstage Pass* by Lidia Zielinska, a Polish composer who, regrettably, I didn't get to talk with until the very last day of the conference. Her piece was made with interior piano sounds, and in the middle, suddenly, a “normal” piano appears, but spliced and filtered in large chunks so that you suddenly have the impression of listening to a piano that's 20 meters wide. It was a very effective piece, and that bit of aural *trompe l'oeil* in the middle made the piece even more amazing. Andrew Brown's *Generative Structures* was a live coding piece full of very attractive environmental sounds. The computer code he was writing in real time was projected and juxtaposed with a video of his hands typing. It was a very attractive graphic, and the music was sonically enticing, but seeing the code reminded me of a lecture on serialism, full of a language I couldn't quite understand, even if the music had nothing to do with serialism or a desire to use obscure language. In fact, as I understand it, one of the purposes of making the code visible in live coding is to communicate with the audience about the processes being used and the decisions taken in real time.

Martin Wesley-Smith's *For Clarinet and Tape* is a 30 year old piece – the tape part was made on the Fairlight CMI way back when. Excellently performed, the piece is still very effective, and it was refreshing to hear a pitch and pulse oriented piece in the middle of all the sound-texture oriented pieces in the conference.

Of the afternoon papers, I only managed to see two: Leah Barclay's report on some environmentally and socially engaged works created by her and Ros Bandt, and Cat Hope's paper on non-programming composers re-engaging with programmers in a collaborative process as reflected in a number of her pieces. I enjoyed both papers – they gave me food for thought, but by this time, my energy was flagging, so I went back to my hotel and crashed for a while.

But not for long. At 4:30, back at the Kenneth Myers Centre I heard *Choke*, John Cousin's searing anti-war 8 channel sound and video piece. It was very violent, and very hard to take, but excellent. Like all John's recent music, it was narrative and political (in many senses of the word), and it also featured that intense care and precision of sound that, for me, has become his trademark.

That was enough for me for Friday. The ACMC party was that night, but my energy level wasn't up to it. Three big events waited on Saturday as a conclusion to the conference.

Saturday, July 9, 2011

Saturday at 9am, I heard Chris Cree Brown's 80 minute 2 channel *Pilgrimage to Gallipoli*. It was a very moving and effective 2 channel piece (with a brief trumpet solo at the end) diffused beautifully (by John Coulter) in the Auckland 24 channel setup. I had a bit of trouble with the politics of the piece, but the narrative was compelling, the sounds were gorgeous, as is usual for the narrative electro-acoustic pieces coming out of Christchurch, and the experience – this was a true cinema for the ears – was riveting. Pretty amazing for a 9am Saturday morning event. This kind of cinema for the ears used to be practiced a lot in Australia – we had an outlet for it on ABC Classic FM with the various radiophonic programs. But since they've been axed, work in that field – or at least my consciousness of it – has really declined. This is another clear example of how forms of culture follow opportunities that are offered.

At 10:30, I attended the Multi-channel Workshop given by John Coulter. There was lots of valuable information here, such as the ways Coulter has made very cheap and ingenious solutions to the problem of field recording. We learned how the set-up worked, and the problems they faced in learning how to drive the system. I was also surprised to learn that the setup was temporary – they set it up once or twice a year in the concert room of the Kenneth Myers Centre, and do all their tests and performances there. Talks by David Rylands and John Cousins about how they used the setup were also valuable, and the workshop concluded with Gerardo Dirie's 8 channel *Kallawayra Rondo* for Bolivian flutes and recorded sounds. This piece is unique in that the 8 speakers surround the intentionally small audience, who all have to play the flutes and dance while listening. Dirie gave the very basic instructions, and then we all performed while listening. This was a very refreshing change from all the sitting still and listening we'd been doing, and was a delightful blurring of the distinction between performer and listener.

Scheduling difficulties meant that I had to miss Nolwenn Hugain-Lacire's NOP workshop, which I would have liked to have attended. The idea of community performance with an orchestra of joysticks is one that is close to my heart, and I would very much have liked to see how that worked. Maybe another time. I also regret not being able to attend David Rylands' *Abandon*, a one-person-at-a-time multi-channel sound installation, but again, scheduling, and my level of exhaustion meant that that, too, did not happen. In the middle of a sound feast, the sonic glutton tries to get down just one more delectable morsel!

At 2 pm, I went to the Maori instrument workshop with Jason Phillips. As part of this workshop, we each got to make our own Maori flutes! I was interested to see that if you make your own flute, you derive its measurements from the proportions of your own body. There's a nice combination of communalism – instruments easy enough for anyone to make – and individualism – each instrument

tailored to the body of its maker at work here. A computer music conference that ended with a workshop about building your own acoustic instruments? It seemed like a perfect ending for a music technology conference – dealing, physically, with a physical music technology (working bamboo), after a week of living in the virtual realm. And 2 and ½ months later, I can report that I've almost – almost – gotten to the point where I can reliably get a good tone out of my flute!

It was a great conference, and I enjoyed myself thoroughly. My mind was tweaked by the large contrast between the socially engaged and/or narrative music of the New Zealanders, and the very attractive Australian works, which were mostly concerned with formal musical issues. It's curious to me how two environments which outwardly seem so similar could have ended up with such divergent cultures, at least in the music-technology sphere.

One thing I did notice was that although there were Maori composers and Pakeha composers using Maori materials at the conference, I didn't notice any participation from Polynesian musicians in the conference. Given that Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world, I wondered why this was the case. Meanwhile, while I was attending the morning performances and workshops, Catherine was visiting the Otara Market, the largest Polynesian market in the world. She brought back a treasure trove of DVDs of Pacific Islander music, including one by the Auckland based Samoan Nanai Brotherz, one of the happiest sounding hip-hop and pop albums I've heard in a long time. After a week of computer music, the breezy fun of the Brotherz, cheezee synths, autotune, and all, was extremely smile inducing. Google them for some sonic fun.

Once again, congratulations and thanks to John Coulter for organising the conference, and to all who were involved. It was a very fun and rewarding 4 days, with lots of good information, sharing of ideas with colleagues, and above all, a lot of excellent and stimulating music. Hoorah.