

Songs Stories Tell and Intersecting Cultures

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Abstract This chapter synthesizes a personal narrative and an analysis of a project begun in early 2013. Although “Songs Stories Tell: Music at the Intersection of Life and Ethnography” as a music composition project began to take form during my 3-month term as the University of Otago Wallace Resident at the Pah Homestead in Auckland, the project has roots in research I did for my 2008 Ph.D. Dissertation, “A Confluence of Streams: Music and Identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand.” For my dissertation I used socio-historic and ethnographic methods to build a picture of diverse elements of New Zealand culture as witnessed in the musical life of the nation. For the *Songs Stories Tell* project, I build on the ethnographic materials I collected and the methods I originally used in my dissertation to continue to gather and assemble elements of sound, music, image and place and associated stories of participants, but now as source material for music composition and performance. These materials were sourced in (and of) New Zealand among various people including Māori and Pacific Island peoples as well as people of European descent, who may be said to be, or to have become “indigenous” in the sense that they “belong” to the place. More to the point, these folk are instrumental in making our place and its future. Indeed it is my thesis that the sharing and exchange of music and cultural meanings is constructive of new, local meanings and it is my purpose with this project to participate in the process. Through sharing of sounds, stories and music, all of the participants in this project are engaged in a musical conversation that is mutually and reflexively constructive of our identities as New Zealanders.

Keywords Auto-ethnography • Music and narrative indigeneity • Ethnomusicological community • Symbolic interaction • Syncretic music • Music and identity

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1 Prelude—Sensations of “Home”

When I think of the feeling of “home,” three moments come to mind. The first is the sense of loss I felt when I revisited the site of my childhood home in Cleveland Ohio in the 1980s after decades away and found that you couldn’t even tell that my house, the site of so many dear memories, had ever been there. The second was when I first came to the shore of the Chesapeake Bay at a place called Carr’s Beach, just south of Annapolis Maryland, and I looked out on the water and surrounding greenery and felt as if I could imagine the place centuries removed and that I had somehow returned to some special destiny. That beach has long since been redeveloped as condominiums and no longer has public access. The third is the only one that is still repeatable, is touching down at Auckland airport in the wee hours when the international flights from the USA arrive. And as you step out into the pre-dawn, the air is thick and humid and has the smell of the Manukau Harbour and the soft breeze of the Pacific night, and it breathes you in as you breathe it, and you are home.

2 Intersecting Cultures

My life in New Zealand is at an intersection of cultures. When I migrated to New Zealand in 1984 as a self-identified African American musician looking to retain my sense of self even as I sought to find a niche in a new country, I came to realize that my musical identity was based on a set of signposts which referenced a particular cultural, geographic and historical landscape, and that, in order to find and establish an identity consistent with my past in a new place, my musical identity would have to be translated, transformed and re-negotiated locally, through the construction of common landmarks and new points of reference—at my point of intersection with New Zealand and its culture(s).

I had expected that notions of what would be considered “pop” music and sentimental song would be necessarily subject to local tastes and circumstances, but what I didn’t expect was that local understanding of (presumably “universal”) genres like “jazz” and blues would be so much at variance with my sense of these musics, not only as indigenous vernacular or cultural expressions but also (and even) as regards musical vocabularies and terminology, canons and repertoires, skill sets and notions of basic esthetics.

In order to establish and orient myself as musician, I had to learn a new set of meanings so that I could begin to “translate” between cultural and idiomatic landscapes and expressions in order to establish continuity with my origins and my past and also to make a way forward.

After more than 30 years of study, playing and teaching music and learning local and national vernacular expressions in New Zealand. I am now looking to construct new meanings. Through sharing these experiences and providing some actual

accounts of the process I want to demonstrate a method for how intercultural understandings may be reached and new meanings grown.

3 Songs Stories Tell

After years of listening and observing how people responded to music and participated in music making, I began to ask people to share songs that were particularly meaningful to them with the understanding that I would respond in kind with my take on their song, in an effort to make it my song, too. My initial responses would be meaningful to me—I am invested in the work, and I work hard in the hope that I might do justice to what they have shared. But I'm not always sure that my response will work for the donor—that it will add to the original meaning—but I am committed to working with them, in dialogue, until we have come to a shared understanding.

At its philosophic and conceptual core, this project, “Songs Stories Tell,” is about receiving and making meanings. And “meaning,” in this musical context, is about value, worth, investment and caring. Musical meanings can run a gamut from sentimentality and nostalgia to hierarchical, professional, or hegemonic. It seems that a good place to start in order to parse musical meaning is to ask “Why do you care?” Indeed the idea of “caring” implies notions of value and investment. These meanings have a connotative dimension that often relies on how people are culturally embedded.

Musical meanings may also be found in more denotative, quasi-linguistic syntactical and morphological structures where abstract forms and genre-specific conventions are primary features—landmarks—on the cultural landscape. As an expressive medium, music is unique in the opportunities it affords for blurring lines, for reflexively intertwining, juxtaposing and conflating connotative and denotative meanings.

For me, *Songs Stories Tell* is about my relationships: with people and the places and spaces that we occupy together and separately. These places are both literal and metaphoric: they are places “in the heart and mind” as well as professional and social spaces and hierarchies. And, in my interactions with my sources and with the musicians who play the music (and in the process become new sources), I begin to locate and orient myself to an emergent historical and situational landscape.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my discussion to a few examples that serve to outline the shape and some of the content of my method.

[insert graphic—Songs Stories Tell steps/process

Basic process

Step-wise, the Songs Stories Tell method follows a basic process:

[Inward process]

- Personal cultural geography: personal introspection in a cultural frame

[Outward processes]

- Solicit/collect/assemble source materials based on observation, personal introspection and interaction with others
- Parse into meaningful (environmental, linguistic, cultural, and musical) “phonic” elements
- Map meaningful elements onto an (potentially) appropriate compositional framework
- Solicit participant musicians to evaluate and perform the initial “seed” composition
- Encourage musical feedback/conversation in the form of improvised comment on seed themes and material
- Report back to original sources for comment
- Collect musical responses and extract material for further composition
- [Repeat with added meanings/value]

4 Introspection and “Inward” Process

The beginning of the journey is about getting one’s bearings: coming to an accommodation if not an understanding of my inner state as it relates to my interface with the external world. This involves identifying my “normal” or preferred milieu or genre and understanding its functionality for me in terms of personal value, worth and meanings.

5 Ancestral Memory, Gospel and the Blues

Musical forms, genres and sub-genres trace an historical and genealogical arc, a musical career that springs from the distant past and proceeds to the present. Thus the career of the “Sorrow Songs” began as murky African retentions—fluttering dreams of lost languages and culture as embodied musical utterance—that Frederick Douglass described in *The Singing of Slaves, an Explanation*, flowing through like a river to their transformation and presentation as European art song by the Fisk Jubilee singers, and on to their re-emergence as rural, and then urban blues, largely through the creative impulse and religious redemption of Thomas A. “Georgia Tom” Dorsey, and re-imagining as jazz. The career of this music, these musics, spans centuries and was accompanied all the while by a concomitant merging of European language, technology and musical technique with ancient ancestral retentions of African ways being, speaking and singing.

6 Parsing the Personal and the Cultural—Exploring Genre and Ways of Making Value

So genres have a cultural history—of origins and embeddedness—and a “career” that flows from dynamic changes in the functionality of genres in relation to communities and the resulting changes through time in their meaning for originating cultures as well as overlapping communities that share and borrow and render them into a shared symbol set.

Genres are modes of expression—structures that evolve as particular ways of making and performing music and art that may be said to be unilinear or narrowly targeted in that they are generally associated with particular groups of individuals or specific segments of humanity and their ways of being and making value. As such genres are often emblematic of some kind of group identity and have evolved in order to meet people’s needs—physical and spiritual.

For example, Black Music forms in the New World may be said to have originally been dictated by slavery and bondage and the condition of a people in its aftermath: songs that have been told have been shaped by need and have functioned to fill a void of agency, and a structural deficit of human dignity and lack of recognition of cultural and personal human value,—“I’ve been buked and I’ve been scorned...” And the career of the music may be said to have evolved from those origins and shaped by that initial structural condition and subsequent changes.

Individuals may be born into or choose or gravitate towards a particular genre as a vehicle for personal expression and self-fulfilment. Individuals are not constrained to any single genre, but rather tend to choose a range of expressive genre in order to suit a variety of moods, purposes and situations. This is a variety of “code switching” whereby a person develops a stylistic repertoire that is a reflection of their multiple identities—an admixture of who they are and who they become as they deploy different modes of expression in changing social circumstances. And those genres are performed as means to make or preserve meaning in away that is consistent with core identities or objectives in changing cultural contexts.

The choice of specific genre is driven by an individual’s orientation and how they are embedded within a cultural milieu at any given moment. What they do with the genre is a function of how they are able to make value with it, either working within its confines, or by innovating, deconstructing, or building upon its elements using the genre itself—its grammars and conventions—as a starting point. “Value” in this context can take different forms—audience makeup and appreciation, fandom, financial reward, peer acceptance, self-satisfaction or gratification (either internal or externally generated), etc. Indeed the choice of the genre is largely driven by individual needs or desires and disposition relative to who they are and where they find themselves.

7 “Jazz” as Vernacular, Fine Art and Dialogic Medium

For me, the improvisational art form with deep African American roots that some people call “jazz” is my genre of choice, my native tongue.

As a young person (and as an aspiring musician) I was exposed to a variety of musical genres and “cultural” musics. I was weaned on expressive forms like spirituals (the “Sorrow Songs”), gospel, soul, pop, and rhythm and blues (and later, rock), interspersed with Western “fine art” traditions, choral and symphonic. All of these forms became part of my personal “toolbox”—the vocabulary for my self-expression. But for me the ultimate expression, the pinnacle of accomplishment and my aspirations was Jazz music, which seemed to embrace all of the possibilities of the other genres.

I became aware very early that the primary virtue of Jazz was honesty of self-expression coupled with the courage and technical ability to make one’s self manifest in sound. Translated to a cultural value, this meant prioritizing self-worth, strength, independence and courage of one’s convictions in word and deed—qualities entirely commensurate with and reinforced by my family values. For me the music was an expression of cultural confidence and the sure knowledge that we stand on the shoulders of giants and that great art was our heritage. Most importantly, the music was about agency—freedom—a way to assert oneself in the world, to rise and fly high on an updraft of one’s own making through self-possessed innovation.

But these essential musical attributes are also inclusive by definition, and although I was firmly rooted in the African American musical and intellectual traditions, my heroes were diverse, from Sarah Vaughan, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington and Count Basie, to Benny Goodman, Paul Desmond, Bill Evans and Stan Getz. The point here is that, as a music, jazz has traditionally welcomed all comers as long as they brought a willingness to invest their true selves with them.

More importantly for this project is that jazz is at its core a dialogic medium—it is based on patterns of call and response whereby musicians “speak” and respond to one another and build new meanings, in the form of improvisations on a shared theme. It is important to note that this process goes beyond the notion of antiphony as it is sometimes presented in standard music theory—it is not a simple alternation between groups, but rather involves a true conversation in the sense that new meanings are made based on interactive listening and responding. These new meanings are dialectical in the sense that, while they reflect initial inputs, original meanings may change and grow in subsequent iterations. To the extent that the music is representative of the “true selves” of the participants, this means that individuals come to the musical meeting place with a willingness to be changed as the result of musical interaction.

So, after initially “receiving” a shared musical moment, I set an idea (that has now become my comment on the original) as a composition in an improvisational frame. This enables me to not only share the idea (or at least my interpretation of it)

more widely, but also to seed feedback from the musicians that take up the theme, that further comments on the seed material.

8 Looking Outward—Listening, Hearing, Observing

The journey begins with introspection and then continues with a taking stock of “external circumstances”—other people and the environment. The beginning of this outward process has been the assembly of a repertoire that can serve as a lexicon and as a “map” or outline that sets out some significant cultural “landmarks” that set a stage for establishing and navigating my own social and cultural geography relative to the new place. The next step is an analytic process: an attempt to understand and relate to sounds, stories, songs and musical material, as a kind of “loving deconstruction” of source material. Subsequently the composition process continues as a reflexive dialogic process of mutual construction of new meanings.

Taking linguistic anthropology and descriptive linguistics as a starting point for deciphering relationships between people and the places and spaces that we occupy, a person cast ashore in a place where people speak an unknown language, bombarded by an incomprehensible chaotic jumble of sound, would seek first to discern which sounds were meaningful, to separate the signal from the noise. The first step would be to separate out meaningful sounds, words and phrases. Now able to discern the borders of meaningful utterances, they would seek to understand the deeper meanings.

As an outsider, unfamiliar with the lived history of a place, discrete and potentially meaningful units of sound are initially only an undifferentiated blur. And the first order of business is to discern a difference between background noise and global chatter—the enervating sameness produced by an outpouring of indiscriminate noise, primarily from commercialized film, television and radio—and sounds, music and speech, that actually have local context and meaning.

9 Repertoires—Soundworlds and Relationships

My grasp of New Zealand musical culture begins with discovering and getting a feel for what I call “community repertoires,” sets of songs that might stand in as a representation, perhaps a rationalization, of an otherwise chaotic soundworld. I see these repertoires not as passively given or received, but rather populated by songs and utterances that people actively embrace and choose to sing. These songs, this music is to be distinguished from globalized media clutter consisting of pre-packaged music and played only in the background, but rather is music that has come to have special local significance. (Oddly enough the process is greatly simplified by learning to listen and to correlate embodied sounds to a living source—by watching people’s lips move.)

I began with some musical material in mind—pieces of music and melodic, timbral and rhythmic elements and motives that I had encountered in the environment and that resonated for me as having a specifically New Zealand or Pacific character—pieces like Englebert Humperdinck’s “Ten Guitars,” a song that had immense popularity in the Pacific but was known elsewhere only as the B side of the more popular “Please Release Me,” and “Ma Wai Ra,” a traditional Māori “tangi” (literally “to cry out”) or funeral song.

Widely known (and performed), songs like these have an environmental quality to them—they form a background in the sense that they become so much a part of the cultural landscape that they are almost taken for granted. And while the act of gathering them is in some ways more passive than directly soliciting a response from an individual, there is a compositional challenge in the analysis, to try to extract and refine a sense of what it was about the music that carries meaning and to distill and reuse that essence. Looking ahead to the composition process, the idea is to actively assemble a repertoire that frames a perspective on the culture and who I might be in relation to it. Indeed my goal is not just to passively understand the local musical “language,” but to actively produce it—to compose and perform it in a meaningful way so as to extend it and to merge my fortunes with it. The goal is to master the musical language(s) of the place in a way that would enable me to express myself and my origins—where I have been and what I bring with me—and also to go beyond to make music that is relevant to myself and others in a new set of circumstances. In other words, to make music that is expressive of my cultural intersections. Ultimately the songs I choose as source material form a kernel for my version of a New Zealand “community repertoire.”

10 “Ten Guitars”

In the early 1990s when, as I was conducting a workshops on music composition and improvisation, I suggested to the assemblage that a strong starting point for composition and learning the art of improvisation was to confront an “ear worm” or other melodic figure that had an insistent or persistent (possibly irritating) quality and then to reconstruct it as something more satisfying.

One member of the group said, “You mean like Ten Guitars?” I had no idea what he was talking about and several years went by before I began to understand the significance of the song. The B side of Englebert Humperdinck’s “Please Release Me,” “Ten Guitars” was a massive hit in New Zealand and other areas of the Pacific beginning in the late 1960s, but hardly anywhere else. According to Dalvanius Prime, “It was just schlock that was adopted by an entire generation of kiwis...”¹

The song was received through media but was taken up—sung at parties and get togethers and repeated and reproduced in so many live circumstances that, more

¹ Cawthorn, Geoffrey. “Ten Guitars.” 47 min. New Zealand: Messenger Films Ltd., 1996. Accessed online 14/11/2014, <http://geoffreycawthorn.com/ten-guitars/>

than 20 years after its introduction, it had been indelibly written into the fabric of the culture. The song stumped me in a way because it didn't easily lend itself to deconstruction to be recasted into a more "satisfying" composition, the terms of the exercise. This was a seminal moment for me, because it was the beginning of my understanding that musical satisfaction was not only a matter of rhythm, harmony and melody, but also something deeper.

Dalvanius's characterisation of "Ten Guitars" as "schlock" was pretty much spot on—it is, in fact, a simple song, and it certainly qualifies as an ear worm. But even in its simplicity it has deep hooks into cultural ways of being, and taken as an exercise in meaningful dialogic composition it is non-trivial.

Some of the cultural elements of the song that elevate it to anthemic status and that would entail a loving and non-destructive deconstruction and musical remapping include: a lyric with a simple story line but with strong textual referents to social groups and functions (e.g., men playing guitars, camaraderie, etc.); self-effacing humor; an infectious melody, easily sung and with a simple 3 chord harmony; a harmonic rhythm viscerally reminiscent of and complementary to familiar motions and activities (i.e., worksongs for shearing sheep or repetitive motions in abattoirs and freezing works, etc.). And the song has what might be deemed a recursive quality—the lyrics refer to a loose band of fellows in a social situation, entertaining each other. And that is exactly how the song was performed at many a party where alcohol and conversation flowed, and people had a wonderful time!

Ultimately to honor this song (and people's affective engagement with it) would require a serious effort to retain the songs playful affect, relaxed (and non-judgmental) delivery, and general frivolity. This is a theme well worthy of Olivier Messiaen's exhortation to embrace "the charm of impossibility!"

One way to render a deconstructed "jazz" version of this piece (especially given my origins and musical language and conservative of some of these "cultural" characteristics) would be to score it as a playful cross between calypso (a la Sonny Rollins's "St. Thomas") and Ornette Coleman's "Blues Connotation." The question of whether these characteristics might have something to do with an "island" character presents itself...

11 "Ma Wai Ra"

In 2006 I attended the annual birthday celebration for T.W. Ratana at Ratana Pa in North Island New Zealand. During the series of powhiri where dignitaries from the government, political parties, and tribal groups were welcomed onto the marae, I heard the song, "Ma Wai Ra" performed in support of a speaker. It is a common practice among Māori, and by extension all New Zealanders, to sing as a response to or in support of individual speakers at formal social gatherings, particularly those that involve meetings between different tribal groups, public sector officials, and/or cultural/ethnic groups.

“Ma Wai Ra” is a particularly appropriate song and is frequently sung at such gatherings. The title of the song might be translated as “Who will take responsibility for the future?” The song is a tangi, a funeral song, that was traditionally sung on the occasion of the passing of a person who was a vital presence in a community whose loss would be deeply felt. And the implication of singing the song at a gathering of diverse groups is that everyone present has a stake in the future of the community. It is also an acknowledgment of the appropriateness, the desirability of adopting a Māori kaupapa (method and rationale of action) for matters related to belonging to the land, the construction of what I call “narrative indigeneity.”

The song has a somber tone and rhythm and employs a very simple motive of consecutive falling thirds followed by a funereal pedaling on the tonic. It has a small range and is very easy to sing in a group. And while singers may embellish the melody, it retains its power even in its simplest form. It is a classic example of how people can come together around a simple theme to make common purpose.

From a compositional perspective “Ten Guitars” and “Ma Wai Ra” may be taken as the seed of a “community repertoire,” and the motivic content of the two songs is easily cast in a complementary fashion (“Ten Guitars” may be rendered as consecutive rising thirds). More importantly, the juxtaposition of local cultural content—situated and highly specific variety humor vs. gravity and community concern for a cherished place—is a seed for epic composition.

12 Environmental, Personal and Cultural Interaction and Intersections as Musical Meeting Places

Ultimately music may function as a kind of meeting place, where songs are a manifestation of individual’s stories told (or sung) round a metaphorical campfire and rendered as duets, trios and ensembles. And composition is the rendering of the notes of the meeting as a musical conversation that takes place at the intersection of various life experiences and ways of being, hearing and understanding.

My approach initially entails musically parsing my own “story”—what is meaningful to me and how I am generally situated in the world and specifically in the moment—at the beginning of a dialogic process. The initial compositions are a set of tentative musical sketches, usually in a single voice, that are an expression of what I “hear” and what I believe I understand—in other words, how I imagine myself relative to other people, beginning with my primary “sources,” and moving on to other musicians and ultimately to audiences. Based on the initial sketches, subsequent choices of genre and instrumentation begin to locate the stories relative to larger social and cultural contexts but always with reference back to the primaries.

So I begin to sing my version of their stories and I use the composition process as a way to interrogate my relationships—to the landscape and other people as well as social and cultural institutions—by re-presenting and performing analogous,

overlapping or contrasting meanings and ways of being, and sending them back for comment. In this way music making and composition becomes the construction of a repertoire of a set of received, discovered and exposed meanings rendered as musical expression and interaction.

13 Musically Mapping Atmosphere, Affect and Environment

Sometimes we occupy overlapping spaces, and perhaps share a feeling or a disposition in relation to a place, a space or a moment in time. Music has tools for expressing or even reliving those feelings or those moments.

“Touching down at Auckland airport in the wee hours when the international flights from the USA arrive, as I step out into the pre-dawn, the air is thick and humid and has the smell of the Manukau Harbour and the soft breeze of the Pacific night, and it breathes me in as I breathe it—home.”

This feeling, this image literally resonated for me as I began this project. All of the elements of the dream, this recollection of a place and the grounded feeling I have in relation to it, had a palpable musical component in my imagination. The deep, dark Pacific sky, long before sunset had a timbre like the chalumeau register of a bass clarinet, the poignant sweetness of the soft air summed in the interval of a major sixth, and clean soft breeze, a major second. All wrapped in a meditative mood and a cantabile-like smoothness.

I met Taupule Tania Wilson, a New Zealand born Samoan, in the early 1990s when I first moved to Auckland from Dunedin on the South Island. I met her and many other people at that time who were eager to experience and learn about African American musical genres and I was happy to share. She was a member of Auckland’s Heaven Bent Choir during my brief tenure as conductor of the group. I spent as much time trying to coax Pacific musical materials from the group as I did teaching traditional African American songs and repertoires.

For this project, Tania shared a song she learned from her mother, “Moe i le moega i le po.” The song text describes all of the elements of my dream of soft Pacific air and darkness and deep affection, and its poignancy was reinforced by the nature of the gift and the fact that Tania’s mum had passed less than year prior to her singing the song for me.

Tania’s song and mine came together on an elemental level—all of the timbral, intervallic, affective and dispositional elements were met in the resulting composition and I was able to alternately foreground Tania’s and my melodies so that one served as the accompaniment for the other and vice versa.

14 Morphology: Musical Genres, Grammars and Expressive Techniques in Microcosm

Music lends itself well to symbolic rendition of appositions, contradictions and juxtapositions (e.g., through line and counterpoint) that can be said to exist between our individual understandings, situations and dispositions (e.g., through tone, tempo, rhythm, instrumentation and timbre) in relation to our place in the world and how we live and how make our way in that place—how we dance and how we sing, and who we dance and sing with and for, what (and who) we love and what we shun, what we embrace and what embraces us, and where our emphasis is.

Similarly social structures and hierarchies may be mirrored in the makeup and structure of performance groups, and the range of expressive and esthetic possibilities and hierarchies are manifest in repertoires that resemble bibliographies.

So music has a “linguistic” dimension—it functions as a way of symbolically making and transmitting meanings. But all of this begs the question of how might conventional language and the spoken word contribute to the idea of music as an interactive meeting place?

15 Parsing Musical, Linguistic and Phonemic Elements

I am conscious of the significance of language, not only as regards its rhetorical and lexical dimensions—how people use word choices and grammatical constructions and shapes to convey meanings, perhaps in order to persuade or convince—but also the musical dimensions of language itself, particularly language as it is spoken or sung, with particular attention to the use of tonal inflections and rhythms to impart meanings and emphasis, and to performances of individual and group identities as ways to make or assert value in the world.

These aural elements have what might be termed phonemical attributes—they are sounds that embody and carry immediate and personal meanings—they are the “smallest meaningful units of sound.” But these “musical phonemes” also have contextual and cultural referents and meanings that flow from how, where, when and by whom they are assembled and performed, and from the “rules” that govern how musical sound is received and judged by different groups and under different circumstances. These morphological, syntactical and grammatical considerations are deeply implicated according to genre and audience, but also, and perhaps just as importantly, according to the orientation of the musicians who perform the music.

16 Spoken Word Becomes Lyric

In the Western imagination, the “literal” dimension of words, at least in “normal,” prosodic English usage, tends to be hard edged and specific—indeed this is the “virtue” of the Western word, it is prized for its denotative precision. Yet in human interactions, spoken words rely heavily on a connotative dimension to achieve their end—they derive meaning from context or association as well as from tone, inflection and delivery—“it’s not what you say, but how you say it.” In this sense music bears a strong, and potentially synergistic, relationship to the spoken word but with an emphasis on virtues like quality and nuance.

Pacific languages in general, and especially, te reo Māori, Māori language—its rhythms and tones and accompanying gestures, its ways of making meaning, its performance conventions and ways of making value—is a central feature of the soundworld of Aotearoa as a place where peoples dwell. As such it is potentially a platform, a stage for a meeting place for intersecting cultures where we might construct new, mutual meanings.

17 No te hohonutanga

On a late summer day in the graveyard of St. Agnes Catholic church in Kaihu where many of his ancestors are buried, Bernard Makoare chanted Psalm 129–130, *De Profundis*, the “Psalm of the Dead,” No te hohonutanga in Māori, as his contribution to *Songs Stories Tell*. The psalm is part of a Māori Catholic liturgical experience that is a central feature of Bernard’s history and way of being in his ancestral homeplace in northern New Zealand. For Bernard, who chanted the psalm for me in the presence of his ancestors, this chant is about family history and relationships between the place, Catholicism and Māoritanga.

Using Bernard’s chant as a starting point for composition entails understanding some separate and mutual “investments,” his and my own, in the source material, and exploring the possibilities for rendering those meanings into music. The process is about musically exploring commonalities while respecting allowing for differences and gaps in understanding and making spaces for conversations to address those gaps and lapses in communication.

Catholicism itself is an important point of tangency for Bernard and I—we share an overlapping set of symbols based on and derived from growing up in the Catholic faith. I was raised Catholic and I attended a Catholic elementary school and was an altar boy as a young child.

Culturally my family was “split” on Catholicism—my father, had Protestant roots and a skeptical disposition, whereas my mother and especially her mother, my grandmother, were deeply devout people with a mystical bent. (These attributes seem gender related in retrospect—my sister and I are dispositionally split along similar lines).

Even as a child I was something of a skeptic and stood apart from total acceptance of religious experience, I felt almost like a kind of a commentator or neutral observer (I distinctly remember questioning aspects of the dogma as early as age seven), but I still gloried in the rituals and the sounds even as I danced around the dogma. And I was respectful of the serious nature of the subject matter—morality, good and evil, death and resurrection, human suffering and the desire to do good—and I was ever mindful that people’s feelings and beliefs were important.

Although I have not been an active participant in Catholic ritual for many years, my childhood experience forms an important part of my social and musical development. I loved singing the responses to the Latin mass and some characteristics of those chants—the monody, the solemnity of the tone, the measured pacing of the delivery, the small compass cadences, etc.—stand out for me and form a part of my musical and emotional vocabulary. I have internalized much of the music and ritual.

I maintain a distance to the ideology, borne of time and personal and intellectual disposition, as well as family history, even as I cherish the experience of the music and its symbolic, linguistic and sonic efficacy. Bernard on the other hand is devout—as we sat in the graveyard, he pointed out the headstones of multiple generations of his family, all buried in that sacred place—and his Catholic faith has deep roots in his family and cultural history.

18 The “Puzzle”

So the question is how to musically represent these different perspectives and dispositions in an appropriate manner—how might the differences be reconciled and what might the characteristics of the finished piece be?

Parsing this story as a set of general musical elements: the basic mood of the piece would be sombre or serious, but it should allow room for a contrasting perspective, a contrapuntal element that “dances” around a serious subject matter.

Several elements of the composition may be more or less directly derived from Bernard’s solo performance. And his chanting displayed many characteristics that match my remembered experience of Catholic liturgical style: monody, solemnity of the tone, measured pacing of the delivery, and the small compass cadences.

With regard to genre, Bernard’s description of how the psalm is performed with a congregation—a song leader reinforced by the congregation joining in at will—has implications for the makeup of the ensemble and the style and manner of the performance. People chant the words together in imperfect unison—they might not breathe together and the enunciation of the words is not perfectly synchronized. And, just as in a jazz ensemble, the commonality of the destination and the understanding and acceptance of a common goal is what binds the group and fuels the

action of the performance. Structurally (and for content) the words and their import are paramount—They should set the tone of the piece, and the rhythmic quality of the words and phrases are key to mapping the motivic structure of the piece.

19 Initially (Keeping in Mind That There Will Be Multiple Draft “Solutions” to the Problem)

I scored the piece for a jazz orchestra with brass and winds “chanting” the psalm in a heterophonic rendition of the monodic line—the heterophony is accentuated by “spontaneous” harmonies and call and response refrains, and is punctuated by improvisations on the basic lines. I used the Māori language text of the chant as the main structural element to give form to the phrasing of the melody and to the periodicity of recurring phrases. I rendered the confidence and steadfastness of faith—as a recurring 3/2 rhythmic figure overlaid with a trenchant 4 (dotted quarter notes) against three feeling in the bass and alternated with sections in 6/4. The 6/4 sections are characterized by an angular bass line cross rhythmically set off against a steady eighth note pattern in the upper voices that is limned out by the (for the most part) Māori language text. The angularity of the bass line represents my character’s dance around and through the weighty material, but also in support of the serious import of the psalm.

20 Dialogues

So far we have provided examples and discussed the inward/introspective processes of mapping one’s personal “cultural geography” as a method of discovery and personal introspection within a cultural frame. Next we tackled “outward processes” that involved soliciting or collecting and assembling source materials based on observation and interaction with others; parse these materials into meaningful (environmental, linguistic, cultural, and musical) “phonemic” elements; and mapping meaningful elements onto an (potentially) appropriate (i.e., morphemic) compositional framework.

In the dialogic phase of the method, we begin to test the validity of our observations and analysis by first soliciting participant musicians to evaluate and perform the initial “seed” composition and then encouraging them to provide musical and critical feedback in the form of conversation and improvised comment on seed themes and material and finally by reporting back to original sources for comment. Ideally we would like to have our sources see themselves in what we have made with their input—does the music I have written invite the originators to join in? Is my rendition of a chant in Māori singable? Does it make sense and does it resonate for listeners? How might I adjust the composition to enable and encourage ongoing

participation for people as performers or audiences? We would also want the musicians who play the music to invest their talents and skills to deeply engage with the material, so we ask them, “does this music work for you—do you want to play it?” And, “how can this be written to bring you closer to the material?” These are all questions to be asked and meditated upon.

To complete an iteration of the process, we would gather our various musical and critical responses and extract material for another round of the process and further composition. The goal is to bring the participants—originators, musicians, audience—together in a cultural frame to make common or shared/overlapping purpose. And the process begins again with introspection in a cultural frame.

21 Conclusion

I have always been captivated by Mozart comic operas like the Magic Flute because they achieve the seemingly impossible task of making multiple melodies and narratives simultaneously comprehensible—they encompass worlds of sound and melody and multiple perspectives on stories all in an instant. Indeed one of the most magical things about music is its capacity to render multiple voices on the same field, at the same time in a manner that allows all of them to be heard and understood. And in the context of a pluralistic society, music can provide a model for hearing and honoring diverse voices.

An explicit focus on what people care about and how that might translate into music is at the heart of the approach I have modeled here. From a pedagogical perspective, relating music to stories of cultural embeddedness and caring mated with processes of personal discovery and self expression, invites student engagement. And explicit focus on what people care about reflexively cultivates respect and empathy. The *Songs Stories Tell* approach draws students into all the possibilities of multiple worlds of music and ways of being. It not only allows them to “like what they like,” but also encourages them to delve into the why and the how of their own musical expression as a starting point to go further to explore how their personal “meanings” might play out in other performance traditions. It frames acquisition of skill sets and technique as a means to this end and in so doing, it provided an engine for them to learn with purpose. And it encourages students to hear the world in multi-vocal perspective and to learn to express themselves, not just for themselves, but so that others might hear.

Through the *Songs Stories Tell*, I’ve learned to use music as a way to listen, really listen, to my own voice and to begin to hear the diverse voices of the peoples of a Pacific nation, and to begin to sing with and to them in turn.

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ing and transforming historical and cultural studies into a set of living narratives and musical performances. His compositions celebrate the diversity of New Zealand music communities and feature the intersections of musical expressive vernaculars that define New Zealand's musical identity.