

# Germany's Pianoforte: Globally-Minded from Birth?

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**Abstract** This chapter is an auto-ethnographic essay from my perspective as an Australian radio producer and child of suburban Australia. It tries to answer two questions popular in the Australian-German cultural dialogue: Why is Berlin colloquially referred to as an outer suburb of Melbourne? And secondly, can one establish a link between the ethic of Germany selling pianos at the Exhibitions of 1880/1888, and the present-day openness of Germany to Australian musicians and cultural conversation? In this chapter, I draw on personal experiences in Australia and Germany, interviews with prominent German politicians and musicians and historic data. The pianoforte here acts as a metaphorical connection, as well as a factual exemplar of German-Australian musical and mercantile connections since the time of the Australian gold rush, when German pianos suddenly found their way into more living rooms in Melbourne than from any other country. I argue that it was in that moment Germany forged a connection to Melbourne that endures to this day.

## Introduction

There is an amusing line, uttered in certain artistic circles, that Berlin is Melbourne's northernmost suburb. It is an idea so geographically preposterous, and yet so grounded in a persistent pilgrimage-like behaviour of musicians, artists, writers, composers and the like, that the myth is not too far from the truth. This connection is a post-War phenomenon that has seen a constant stream of movement, from the global South to the global North and it is clear, that the physical traffic has usually been one-way. However, the foundations for this were laid soon after the formation of the German Empire in 1871. Meaning that the basis for this cultural pathway became a lively two-way conversation that still persists to this day. This is evidenced by personal experience.

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Firstly, let me share my context in all this because, as a long-time radio program-maker and academic with a focus on Europe, my experience of Germany and German institutions became significant for me when I was awarded a journalism prize from the German Government to closely examine the idea of German identity.<sup>1</sup> I grew up in Australia, in suburban Melbourne in a thoroughly Anglophile environment. My background is a solid mix of English and Scottish heritage. My parents never travelled abroad from Australia and if they would have been asked, they would have said they were of British origin, not European. Europe was a land of foreigners, foreign languages and foreign cultures, and was therefore largely unknowable. If you add to this their lived experience of a world at war during the twentieth Century and an environment of British dominance in the telling of stories and control of propaganda, it is not hard to understand their unsophisticated and highly-mediated attitudes to non-British cultures and peoples. Therefore, it is through this filter that I grew up viewing the European Continent and, in particular, this instilled in me a quite unconscious, but very powerful post-World War II aversion to Germany. I had no curiosity about German people and German culture. Being born in 1960, I am also a child of the Cold War global environment, while having no direct experience of what that meant beyond the abstract. And while many of my peers found Cold War Germany quite riveting, I simply wasn't interested—my upbringing had guaranteed that this would be the case (Fig. 1).

Why am I telling you all this? The point is to highlight just how utterly blind-sided I was by my first visit to Germany at the age of fifty. I had lived in London in my early forties and had spent a considerable amount of time in my late forties conducting research in Paris. I considered myself to be moderately European-minded, but it wasn't until I was involved in making a series of radio documentaries looking at the fate of European culture in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis that I found my way to Germany. For me, it was just another stop in a long list of what I considered were far more interesting countries.

Two comments changed all that in my mind. The first was from the former Secretary of State and Senate Spokesman in the Berlin Government, Richard Meng. I was interviewing him for my radio documentary series (Shirrefs 2012, "Who is Germany? Pt.1") on German identity and especially the identity of Berlin, with regard to its turbulent and fractured past. After the interview I asked him if he was tired of having to endlessly trawl through these issues of identity and memory for outsiders. He said that despite the desire to be allowed to move forward, Berliners know that they must never forget their past—an idea understood throughout Germany as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. But it was his next comment that really struck me. He said that it didn't matter if people came to celebrate or criticise

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<sup>1</sup>M. Shirrefs [Producer/Presenter] (2012) 'Who is Germany?' [3 pt. radio documentary], *Creative Instinct* (Melbourne: ABC Radio National), Nov–Dec. 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/creativeinstinct/features/who-is-germany/>.



**Fig. 1** Michael Shirrefs contemplating his suburban childhood in Melbourne in the early 1960s

Berlin, as long as they kept talking. His reason was that the city's current incarnation, since the fall of the Berlin Wall is still very young and the new identity is not yet fixed. He said that Berliners start to know who they are by looking into the eyes of visitors. This comment was so surprising because it suggested self-awareness and vulnerability. This was not a fortress mentality, but an acknowledgement that Berlin is still changing shape, still forming, after so much upheaval over the decades. It also suggested a sophisticated awareness that identity,



Fig. 2 Michael Shirrefs interviewing Nele Hertling in Berlin in 2012

in a globalised, cosmopolitan world, is formed as much by external forces, as it is by an internal life. This was unlike anything I had encountered elsewhere in Europe, where identities are rigid and fixed with a misplaced certainty that is impervious to outside engagement. This was further highlighted during my interview with the former Vice President of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, Nele Hertling (Shirrefs 2012, *Who is Germany?—Nele Hertling*). She stressed the many differing identities across Germany, saying that, while most parts of Germany were somewhat insular and mono-cultural, Berlin was unusually and proudly heterogeneous and open to the idea of *the foreign* (Fig. 2).

The second surprising conversation came over lunch with some officials from the *Auswärtiges Amt*, the German Federal Foreign Office. I was idly mentioning that I would very much like to move to Berlin, but added that I imagined this would be complex and difficult. One of the officials immediately looked at me and said, ‘You tell us where the obstacles are and we will try to move them.’ It was an astonishing remark and I wondered whether, because I was a foreign media producer, I was being treated as a special case. But the more time I have spent in Germany and the more I engage with the German system, the more convinced I am that I am not special and that there is a genuine desire in contemporary Germany not to create artificial barriers to engagement. This became abundantly clear as Europe had to solve the massive influx of refugees during 2015–16. Germany understands too well the downside of building and retreating inside walls. So, how do we thread this present state of being, back to the origins of modern Germany? In order to answer this question, you will have to bear with me as I now adopt an historian’s hat.

## The German Pianoforte in Australia

Picture this. It is 1880, and Melbourne, for the first time, is hosting an International Exhibition. These extravaganzas are the biggest peacetime events on the world stage and everyone is invited. This is an era of burgeoning internationalism, spurred on by the technological advances and rampant ambitions of the second industrial revolution in Europe. In spite of this, global travel is still a major undertaking, and Melbourne, in a relatively small and immature British colony at the furthest point of the Australian mainland, is a long way from the Continent. So why would anyone bother to come? What is the lure? For individuals or businesses, one answer is that there is a definite mood of blind optimism about taking a chance in new markets. In a very crowded Europe, frontier logic is a powerful motivator. Moreover, at this very moment, Melbourne is arguably the wealthiest city per capita in the world, as a result of gold rushes in many parts of the country, and especially the Colony of Victoria, of which Melbourne is the Capital (Hunt 2014, pp. 309–311).

The magic of this tantalising golden lure has power, not only on the European mind, but also on the imagination of both the rag-tag citizenry of Victoria and the Colony's ruling elites. The consequence of this extraordinary moment of anti-podean history is that the cultural, political and structural architects of Melbourne recognise a chance to build a city that would match the unimaginable riches that are pouring in from the goldfields. However, instead of conjuring up a vast and grotesque monument to wealth and greed, the Colonial founders want a civilised city that will rival the ideas and cultural splendour of the best that Europe can offer (Edquist 2013, pp. 2–5). This ambition means that Melbournians not only build the sorts of cultural and intellectual buildings and institutions that they believe to be the equal of their European counterparts, they also create an environment for transnational conversations that place Victorians as equal to anything that comes from the North. But which part of the North they look to, in this moment, is an open question. As a new colony, Australia, and Melbourne in particular, can pick and choose. This snapshot of Melbourne in 1880 was critical in forging a cultural and civic confidence that persists to this day. Melbourne managed to conjure an event that was rural and urbane; sophisticated and practical; grand and inclusive. They then matched this, eight years later in 1888, with another International Exhibition to celebrate the first hundred years since European settlement in Australia in 1788.

Why is this significant in a discussion about German-Australian relations, or in this case the connection between Berlin and Melbourne? The reason is that Germany seemed to respond very positively to the signals that Melbourne was sending to the world. The evidence for this is in the enthusiastic way the German delegation engaged with the two exhibitions in Melbourne, and a useful symbol of this ardour is the pianoforte—an instrument that, by its very name could demonstrate the range of expression from soft to loud is an elegant metaphor for styles of international engagement. Soft diplomacy, as we understand it today, usually comes via the mechanisms of trade and culture.

Of all the Australian colonies, Victoria was perhaps most successful in subverting some of the trailing shackles of the British class system, and in so doing, a wide spectrum of Melbourne society developed what we would later call middle-class aspirations (Pascoe 1995, p. xiii; Boyce 2008, pp. 158–161). As crucial to this ambition as the pursuit of hi-tech appliances is today, was the desire to own a pianoforte (or piano as it became commonly known) in the mid-to-late 1800s. For many years, this musical instrument market was dominated by France, far outstripping their German rivals. In an article penned by the French virtuoso pianist Henri Kowalski for the French language paper *Le Courrier Australien* in 1892, the author states that: ‘In 1869, France sent 2000 pianos annually to Australia; Germany only 200’ (Kowalski 1892, p. 2). Although this 10:1 ratio seems a little too neat, the figures work as an indication of the scale of difference and there does appear to be an undeniable French dominance. However, the 1880s changed all that in a way that still persists, as music continues to serve today as a prime example of contemporary Australian-German relations.

The shift came with the two Melbourne Exhibitions. For some inexplicable reason, France misread this young international marketplace, and while it is difficult to know the extent of the pianoforte offerings from both France and Germany at the 1880 Exhibition, we do have a much clearer image of the 1888 Exhibition (Centennial International Exhibition 1890). And it is interesting to note that the evidence of a German takeover of the market comes, not from the Germans, but from a Frenchman—one of the two representatives of the French commissariat, sent to take part in the international juries at the Exhibition, Monsieur Oscar Comettant. Described by the Melbourne *Argus* newspaper as a ‘journalist, composer, humourist, man of letters, critic and braver garçon’ (*The Argus* 1890, p. 6), M. Comettant was also a pianist and music teacher. He therefore knew his subject, and he found it difficult to hide his dismay and embarrassment at his Country’s meagre offering of instruments, in stark contrast to the Germans:

It is true that French piano-manufacture was represented by only five pianos in Melbourne, superior in every way to those of Pleyel, Wolff and Company, while Germany had sent over two hundred instruments. This was all, and it wasn’t much, given the importance of our production of musical instruments both from the artistic and the commercial points of view. Only five French pianos, standing on an elegant but modest platform, must have looked very paltry beside the 210 German pianos, to name the exact figure (Comettant 1890, p. 32).

While Oscar Comettant leaves the reader in no doubt that he considers the German pianos to be greatly inferior to those of his own country, he grudgingly admits that the German theatrical marketing strategy, what he describes as a ‘cunning *mise-en-scène*’, had clearly worked:

At one end of this vast square, which might have been called *Pianopolis*, was a large stage, ornamented with discreet but rich draperies, and half-filled with grand pianos and harmoniums. This stage was at once the podium from which the virtuosos gave concerts, and a triumphal throne. [...] The whole effect was one that was sure to impress the townfolk of Melbourne and the country people who came to visit the Exhibition. (*ibid*)

Oscar Comettant's concerns were well-founded, because, the impact of this musical 'coup' by Germany on the drawing rooms of Melbourne's well-heeled, according to Henri Kowalski, was almost instantaneous:

In 1890 the latter [Germany] landed 3900 instruments; France, only 92 specimens of manufacture. What a turnaround! What change in view! We certainly do not deserve this degree of honor or unworthiness. (Kowalski 1892, p. 2)

Both Comettant and Kowalski are dismissive of the German pianos, suggesting that their success is due to a triumph of quantity over quality. But Cyril Ehrlich, in his book *The piano: A history*, says that the standard of German pianos changed dramatically because Germany embraced change in that period: '...there was a willingness and ability to adopt new technology, backed by the best system of technical and commercial education in the world and a widespread respect for applied science.' (Ehrlich 1976, p. 71). So, why do we see such a dramatic difference in the way the two European rivals presented their wares in Melbourne? A large part of the answer is in the timing. The 1880 Exhibition comes just nine years after France's defeat at the hands of the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War. This moment was critical, and the distinctly different responses of each side went on to form certain national characteristics that are strongly evident today.

The victory in 1871 finally enabled the somewhat disparate German States to finally unify—thus forming the German Empire. However, the odd mix of royal kingdoms, duchies, principalities and independent cities, meant that a singular German identity was hard to define and even harder to manage. In spite of this internal identity crisis, the triumph over the French provided sufficient regional glue and provided powerful impetus for a radical increase in the prosperity of this new German Empire, and one way of convincing its own constituencies of the value of togetherness was to confidently export the image and the artefacts of a united Germany.

In 1892 Henri Kowalski left his French-speaking readers in Australia in no doubt of what he believed to be the cause of the new-found Australian passion for German products:

Since 1870 the importation of French goods in Australia dropped significantly after the effect that the German victories had on the minds of the Australian public, who then adopted it as fashion, applying a sort of trademark *Vae Victis* [woe to the conquered], to the French productions. This warlike influence seems to continue (Kowalski 1892, p. 2).

Despite this sentiment, history suggests that Germany's successes were not due to some perverse celebration of German victory by punishing the defeated France in the marketplace. It was merely that Germany had capitalized on that moment and had used the momentum of optimism to enter the new industrial era of science and technology. The evidence for this is simple. Figures show that English piano exports suffered to the same degree, as did the French exports. In 1880 Australian consumption of English pianos eclipsed that of the German manufacturers by a factor of ten to one, but by 1900 Australians were importing ten times as many German pianos compared to the English instruments (Ehrlich 1976, p. 82).

Fast forward to the period of two World Wars, when Germany again had to jump through major hurdles to regain some measure of integrity and status. For the Allies, German people were the enemy and Winston Churchill had decreed that German products, art and music were banned. Some people, for example the English author Virginia Woolf's husband Leonard, resented this conflating of art and politics, and determinedly listened to nothing but German music for the duration of the Second World War. But what is most remarkable is how quickly the pre-eminence of German music and musical instruments was restored. Composers like Bach and Beethoven, or brands like Steinway were still synonymous with greatness, especially for young people growing up in post-War Australia. The subsequent onset of the Cold War again placed Berlin right at the epicentre of global events. As the symbol of the competing ideologies of East and West, Berlin became the world's fishbowl and a space for heightened cultural expressions. For artists and musicians—people who are trying to push cultural boundaries—this also made Berlin into a lightning rod, as they were drawn to the physical boundary of the Wall.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe had seen a flourishing of avant-garde cultural forms, due to a massive boost in funding from America. In particular, the CIA saw that music, especially the rousing romanticism of Wagner and Strauss, had been a powerful mechanism during the Nazi era, used by the Fascists to inflame the passions of the masses. They believed strongly that the clinical and unromantic experiments of Modernism were to be encouraged, and so, from the early 1950s the CIA bankrolled composers and festivals and organisations that promulgated these 'counter-Fascist' forms (Saunders 1999, pp. 213–233). By the mid 1950s though, the CIA had begun to see Communism as the new threat, and so they broadened the target for this avant-garde weaponry to include any form of totalitarianism. But while Germany, along with many other European countries, especially France and Italy, became a giant laboratory for new, hybrid acoustic art forms, Berlin was cultivating something else as well.

By the late 1970s, music from both sides of the Berlin Wall was taking on a strong counter-cultural flavour. The politics and social impact of living in a divided city started to be reflected in lyrics, and the stark, battered environment produced a style of sound that was dark and industrial and had an aesthetic of uncertainty and danger. This sound reached the ears of musicians and audiences around the world who had been happily consuming the edginess of British Punk. For many young people in Australia and elsewhere, this grungy, hard-edged brand of music from Germany was the most eloquent and accessible expression of fear and frustration in the Cold War, sitting as it did alongside the perpetual threat that an uneasy political impasse could turn into nuclear war.

The influence that this unique Berlin sound had on musicians in Australia and Melbourne, in particular, was profound. A new hybrid breed of post-punk musicians and songwriters blasted into the pubs and clubs of Melbourne, sounding chaotic and dangerous. But the sound was less British and far more like an unhinged German burlesque soundtrack, and it wasn't long before many of these



bands and musicians took this new form to Berlin. One of the catalysts of this was Nick Cave who, along with many of the members of Melbourne band *The Birthday Party* moved to Europe and found an instant rapport. Within a very short space of time, numerous collaborations between Australian and German musicians were forming, of which the most significant was *Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds*. This group became a cultural bridge between Berlin and Melbourne, with the line-up changing constantly, and both German and Australian musicians bringing a crazed circus-like quality to the band's sound and live performances. Many Australian musicians also went on to join other major German acts, work with German filmmakers or become writers, including Rowland S. Howard and his brother Harry; Ash Wednesday; Mick Harvey; Anita Lane; Hugo Race; Genevieve McGuckin; Conway Savage. All of which points to the fact that the music market connects Australia and Germany, and that the past exchange was centred on the notion of being modern and international by having a quality piano from Germany—which brings us to the here and now.

## Threads to the Present

While there was always an eager audience back in Australia for this style of edgy, hybrid music that had largely been spawned out of Melbourne's darker, cultural underbelly, there was a far smaller audience for the more experimental artists who'd been influenced by the European avant-garde. Nick Cave and his cohorts were, after all, still rock musicians, with a very clear antenna for the tastes and appetites of the mainstream. Their music was visceral and unkempt, unlike the 'cooler' creations of artists who saw that music could be an intellectual pursuit, as well as a physiological, aesthetic and sonic phenomenon. Avant-garde and experimental styles of music have found followings in Australia over the years and there are numerous solo artists, ensembles, composers and academics who all wanted to add an Australian voice to the wider body of thinking and enquiry into the nature of sound. But this was not a populist form and Australia is a country that generally mocks culture when it becomes too cerebral. Add to this the limited available audience in a relatively small country, and the reasons for musicians going abroad become clear, and as they do so, they tread the well-worn path between Melbourne and Berlin that was established in the 1880s

One such musician who has followed this path is Anthony Pateras. Born in 1979, Anthony is a composer, pianist and electro-acoustic musician from Melbourne, whose parents migrated from Aegean Macedonia. He began playing piano at the age of five and played a lot of western European music. And if you're wondering what sort of piano he grew up with, it was (of course) German. He also grew up surrounded by music from the Balkans playing around his house, and as well as the sounds of the American music that his siblings were listening to. As he got older, Anthony became heavily immersed in the Melbourne live music scene, which at the time included everything from pub bands to experimental music collectives. So his

tastes became quite varied. He first visited Europe at the age of seven, and that early experience made him determined to return. But with his Macedonian background, Anthony had to fight hard, over 5 years, to get a European passport. He first lived in Berlin in 2006, when there was still a bit of the old grittiness of the very German music scene of the Cold War era.

The whole idea that you could be in the centre of a city—the centre of a major international hub Berlin and be paying very little rent and be able to ride your bike everywhere and shop very cheaply was just very attractive to us. Because we've always been freelance musicians and composers [for fifteen years], so it seemed to make a lot of sense (Pateras 2016).

Berlin is not just a singular destination for many artists and musicians, because it also behaves like a portal into the northern hemisphere for some Australians. For Anthony, it was a good base from where to go back to the family origins in Macedonia, but it made sense to him as a gateway to another place entirely:

When I was young I was also really into the whole 80s New York, East Village culture and was really into John Zorn and reading a lot of alternative, left-of-centre literature and cultural theory and that whole thing around visual art, and coming out of Morton Feldman and Earl Brown and John Cage and all that stuff. I mean that was all big for me and so being in Berlin, it was closer to New York. So I went over to New York a few times, just to play a few gigs and to see what was going on, and so it all made a lot of sense to be there. (ibid)

For people like Anthony, Berlin had a feel and a broad community of musicians that felt easy and natural. But the city had also become an important cultural crossroad, offering artists clear passage to any number of other destinations in search of inspiration and audiences. This issue of audiences is very important if you come from Australia and simply do not fit the mainstream musical styles. The population sizes across Europe guarantee that, not only are there many sizable niche audiences for all manner of musical styles, but these audiences are much more attuned to the European-ness of an avant-garde mode of creative thinking. As a consequence, many Australian musicians, belonging to bands such as *The Necks* and *Machine for Making Sense*, have spent a considerable amount of time working across Europe, but the majority base themselves in Berlin, and more recently in Leipzig as Berlin becomes more gentrified. So why don't artists base themselves elsewhere? The reason is easy, Germany is central, but more importantly, Germany welcomes outsiders in a way that most European countries do not. Natasha Anderson is a musician and composer, and is married to Anthony Pateras. Together they initially tried to avoid the cliché of moving to Berlin, instead attempting to settle in Brussels. Natasha had done her early training in Amsterdam and could speak Flemish, while Anthony could speak French, but Belgium resisted their efforts:

That was an eye-opener. The bureaucracy [in Belgium] is inoperable, it just does not work as a foreigner. And Anthony's OK because he has an EU Passport, but I don't. So we just kind of gave up. So Berlin ... we've got lots of friends there, we went on a holiday and we looked at each other and said 'Why are we resisting this? It's so much easier here'. Germany, famous for its bureaucracy, it was very clear what you needed to do to get a visa (Anderson 2016).

## Conclusion

After all this, do I believe that Berlin is Melbourne's northernmost suburb? I think I do. And I also believe that the connection has had a strong cultural influence on a great many people. More than that though is the question of whether this reflex for engagement that we see today is a direct consequence of Germany's desire to make global connections back in the 1880s. Germany is a country that shares borders with nine other countries, meaning that it must negotiate every one of those different cultures and languages separately. History tells us that some of Germany's negotiating strategies were disastrous, which is why I believe the German Federation has returned to a posture of great openness in the post-War period. It knows it dare not do otherwise.

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