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Archiving the new, now, for future users yet unknown

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Abstract

Associate Professor Cat Hope, along with colleague and collaborator Tos Mahoney, is one of Western Australia's leading proponents of New Music, and the instigator of the development of the Western Australian New Music Archive (WANMA), that was launched on 20 May 2015, at the State Library of Western Australia. As co-curator of WANMA, alongside Mahoney, Hope is a key determinant of its contents. Consequently, Hope's working definitions of new music and of the role and function of an archive are critical areas of interest and key to realising the communicative vision of this project which is also sponsored by Tura New Music, the State Library of Western Australia, the National Library of Australia and ABC Classic FM. Using guided reflection, this paper interrogates the principles and purpose of constructing a digital archive and the ways in which it is designed with future users in mind. It considers the challenges posed by an archive that captures and contains an art form which is often site-specific or ephemeral.

Introduction

The Western Australia New Music Archive (WANMA), launched on 20 May, is the outcome of five years of recent research and a further quarter century or more of collecting (Green, Mahoney, Hope & MacKinney 2014). Its importance is recognised by the status and commitment of the archive's industry partners: the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) the National Library of Australia (NLA), ABC Classic FM and Tura New Music, one of Western Australia's peak community-based arts organisations. It addresses a gap in current collecting practices relating to music: very few archives have knowledge of, or significant holdings in, Western Australian new music. Yet, for almost thirty years, new music has been a particular focus of the Australian cultural mix, producing some important internationally composers such as Australian National Treasure Roger Smalley, James Ledger, Iain Graindage as well as experimental sound artists such as Ross Bolleter and Alan Lamb. The archive itself is designed to commemorate and celebrate works which date from 1970 onwards. The first University in Western Australia to offer Bachelor of Music degrees was the University of Western Australia. Whilst the first Bachelor of Music students from the course graduated in 1965, the first postgraduate students were conferred in 1971 (Meyer 1999: 19-20), giving the archive its starting date

Populating the archive raises three particular challenges faced by curators of WANMA and it is these challenges that this paper sets out to explore: how is something determined to be (or not to be) Western Australian? What is new music for the purposes of an archive? What is a new music archive, with consideration of what aspects of new music can or should be archived? These three challenges reflect the very key terms in the name of the archive: Western Australian – new music – archive. This latter challenge is complicated by the fact that new music is designed and experienced as an ephemeral art form, often enjoyed in a site specific context. It could appear that there is a necessary contradiction in attempting to archive something which is transitory but bound by the space and place of its creation and consumption. Given these characteristics of new music, what kinds of imagined audiences (in the sense used by Anderson, 1991) are being constructed by the curators of this particular archive?

Methodology

The overall research question for this case study (Yin 2009) is “What is the purpose of the Western Australian New Music Archive, and how is that purpose to be achieved”? The motivating factor for this enquiry at this point was the recent launch of WANMA in May 2015, and the belief that the experience of interacting with users will obscure some aspects of the intention behind the archive, which can be considered in a generally essentialised form at this point in its existence. Consequently, these perspectives around the intentional activity which constructs the archive need to be captured now.

This paper takes as its starting point the perspective and experiences of musician, composer, curator and new music practitioner/academic Associate Professor Cat Hope. The data which inform the findings originated as a “guided reflection” interview (Johns 2002, p.3), which was then professionally transcribed and analysed by the authors for themes of relevance to the first part of the research question “What is the purpose of the Western Australian New Music Archive?”. While the second element of the enquiry “...and how is that purpose to be achieved?” does have relevance which is considered here, the ‘achieving’ of a digital archive involves a range of technical processes and decision-making which will be addressed in later publications.

Guided reflection outcomes result from “a process of self-enquiry to enable the practitioner to realise desirable and effective practice within a reflexive spiral of being and becoming” (Johns 2002, p.3). Furthermore, it allows “the emergence of voice” (ibid., p.7) and this paper reflects the authentic voice of Hope, the practicing musician and academic, as captured in the moment during the guided reflection. The aim of this guided reflection was to draw on Hope’s practice as the project’s chief investigator for insights about the purpose of the Western Australian New Music Archive, rather than to construct a solid theoretical explanation for the WANMA research project. However, the draft paper was reviewed by all authors during the process of development, including responding to referees, and reflects the primary perspective of Hope within this collaborative context. Given the participatory nature of the collaboration which resulted in this published outcome, however, there are comparatively few direct quotes used from

the interview. Instead, this paper serves in the place of a reflective statement constructed within the confines of a refereed academic output.

WANMA— an overview

The Western Australian New Music Archive (WANMA) collects and makes accessible, in digital form, new music associated with Western Australia from 1970 to the present day. WANMA also seeks to create new performance pieces for inclusion within the archive. The collection builds upon a seeding project which involved the digitisation of Tura New Music's archives. This made visible the fact that much public experience of new music is as a comparatively ephemeral and experimental art form, and many traces and recollections of iconic and everyday performances need to be collected soon to ensure they are not lost entirely. Alongside the technological and copyright challenges facing such an enterprise, WANMA seeks to engage with musicians and music lovers who might have materials of interest for the archive which can be digitised and then returned to the original owners. Such materials include, but are not limited to, recordings. Indeed, they encompass all conceivable peripheral artefacts of new music in Western Australia, from performance programs through to letters describing a concert, through to individuals' memories. The project aims to engage with, and fire the imaginations of, audiences past and present.

What is 'Western Australian' in the context of WANMA?

Western Australia (WA) is a vast state which contains approximately one-third of the land mass of Australia. It is comparatively sparsely inhabited, with a population of a little over 2.5 million people, almost 11% of the Australian population as a whole (which is about 23.5 million: ABS 2014). The main WA population centres are on the Indian Ocean, on the opposite side of Australia compared with the major cities of the eastern and southern seaboard. This means that Western Australia's capital Perth, with almost 75% of Western Australia's population (2013 figures, TWD, n.d.), is a considerable distance from the other capital cities. Given the costs of interstate travel, even using the ubiquitous road trip, there are limited opportunities for Western Australia's new music outputs to travel much beyond the state. At the same time, much new music is not a highly commercial product and its ephemeral, experimental and site specific examples (see below) means that people who enjoy it generally prioritise live performance. Unlike with rock and pop, new music musicians rarely get the chance to sell their musical souls, and when they do, they are on small independent labels.

At the same time, the whole question of what constitutes 'WA new music' is fraught, and somewhat contested. At what point should the archive include something that isn't by a West Australian, but involves West Australians? These are difficult problems that require working through, a process that has been aided by starting WANMA with the Tura new music collection of materials. This has provided the curators with an example of the range of materials that can be found in a collection. After analysing the Tura collection, decisions about what constitutes 'Western Australian' are easier to reach. However, these curatorial decisions remain a largely case by case process, and this has required to be

acknowledgment and acceptance. Blanket judgements have deemed to be inappropriate in this respect. For example, a composer may be Western Australian, but the artists might not. Likewise, Western Australian performers may feature in the concert of an international artist of high repute. In addition, some artists may live in WA for a brief period.

Tura New Music is an important touchstone in Western Australian new music culture. Its purpose is celebrated as “advocating for and supporting the full life cycle of New Music – the creation, development, promotion, presentation and distribution of New Music – for its artists, organisations and audiences, locally, nationally and internationally” (Tura, n.d.). The brainchild of Artistic Director, CEO (and musician), Tos Mahoney, Tura began just over a quarter century ago, in 1987. As “the peak body for New Music in Western Australia” (n.d.), Tura’s archives include materials relating to performances stretching back to 1970. It was the breadth and depth of this collection which made an archive of Western Australian new music a realistic possibility, and Tura’s collection forms the backbone of the repository. At the same time, that collection houses many works which fail the curators’ test of being ‘Western Australian’.

If Tura’s collection was one motive force behind the founding of WANMA, another spur was the fact that West Australian music was not visible in other collections: “national, so-called national collections” (Hope 2015). At the same time that there was an absence of Western Australian content in these wider archives, so advances in archiving technology offered an unparalleled opportunity to make content held in Western Australia more accessible. It was a significant challenge (to be addressed elsewhere) to create an interface that would allow seamless links between the WANMA resource and national and international library catalogues – such as the overarching catalogue, TROVE, used by industry partner the National Library of Australia. The WANMA interface is designed to allow users of the TROVE catalogue ready digital access to the content held on the State Library of Western Australia’s catalogues. These technical advances mean that “the materials that we have here in Perth [...] the materials that we’ve put into the catalogue at the State Library [can] go out to them. So we will be supplementing their collections whilst building a significant one here.” The significance in building a Western Australian collection is not simply in housing things which are Western Australian, but in making them exportable to the world.

Yet there is more to the archive than new music: the dimensions of the Western Australian audience are also implicit in the concerts and performances they enjoy. These audiences are an important part of the new music community “We’ve all had a lot of fun over the last 20 years music-making”, says Hope (2015), “but it’s people’s personalities, maybe but I’m kind of hoping, that this archive’ll go part of the way to filling some of those gaps”:

like when you have a video of a live performance, yes, you have a bunch of people playing instruments but then in the background there’s some person, drawing. There was a guy who used to draw at every concert. Or there’s someone talking at the bar, and you’re looking at them thinking ‘wouldn’t you be able to hear that?’ And yes, that was often a problem in clubs, though, was that there was somebody – sometimes it was me – talking, really loud, at the bar and Tos [Mahoney] would go over and go, you know, and these are the little things that I’m hoping will come out, and they’re the things about the

community that I really appreciate. So I'd – I think we're getting part of the way to filling some of those gaps and I think it's only now that we've actually been curating the material, looking at the materials more closely, that we're finding these little things.

It might be only in Western Australia that the person who drew at every concert is deemed an element of the new music experience. Yet if this material is not examined, how can its importance be recognised or dismissed? Until there are other archives like WANMA, permitting a comparison of musical cultures, it is difficult to know just how similar, and how different, the experience of new music is from place to place, and how it reflects the community that creates it.

What is new music?

If it is difficult to be certain about what constitutes Western Australian, it is equally hard to decide exactly what makes music new, in the 'new music' sense. Cat Hope is an accepted doyenne of new music and, indeed, the 2014 winner of the Australian Performing Rights Association (APRA)/Australian Music Centre (AMC) Award for Excellence in Experimental Music (Cat Hope n.d.). So can new music be considered to be experimental: or a subset of experimental music? Hope says not necessarily. She argues that new music has always been the music that's new, but sometimes it has been called other things too:

It got called the Avant Garde at the beginning of the 20th century and experimental music is another term that's often used. I would argue that that's no longer appropriate because what was experimental in 1920 for example isn't necessarily experimental now even though they call that music, still, 'experimental'. But I guess the term new music is very contested because technically anything that's being made now could be new music but in the archive we've defined what we are currently including [...] it's sometimes called new art music, or some people call it contemporary music although that gets used for popular music a lot of the time. Some jazz music you could call new music so [...] we're using a definition from the Australian Music Centre. (Hope, 2015)

The Australian Music Centre (AMC) is a national peak body that represents Australian composers. It tries to be inclusive in its definition of what a composer is: "anyone who's making music", according to Hope (2015). The AMC represents Australian composers who are no longer living, as well as those with an active performance profile, but they do not specify how far back in time 'new music' might be found. Instead, their definition is: "composition in sound [...] in real-time or by means of prolonged elaboration and definition including the following: Notated composition; Electroacoustic music; Improvised music, including contemporary jazz; Electronica; Sound art; Installation sound; Multimedia, web and film sound and music; Related genres and techniques" (Australian Music Centre, n.d.). So while there is a clear emphasis on 'new art music' the AMC also welcomes people who are playing music that might also fall under a different category.

Hope argues that a lot of jazz performers do not want to be known as new music artists, even though their compositions might be exploratory and somewhat experimental. The litmus test as to whether something is new music or not lies in the exploration of new ideas that might draw on the past – and

established genres of music such as jazz, or art music, or popular music – but which offer an original perspective on these: “I guess the focus at the moment is around music that has an aspect of originality that’s linked to the place and the time that it’s made more than to the styles that came before it” (Hope 2015). Another aspect of new music is that when it is taken out of context it has a different meaning. According to Hope, the original meaning inherent in the new music is linked to a place and a time and, to some extent, a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Hope, Mahoney & Green 2014). This is why it is so important to have an internationally accessible archive of Western Australian new music, to celebrate and memorialise these times, places and contexts.

Hope, as an artist whose work is included in the archive, sees it as an introduction to the entire community of new music practice in Western Australia:

the stuff in the archive as like a memory of my work rather than one piece, an experience of one piece. [...] Everything is downloadable but it’s designed to be delivered, to be seen or streamed, so experienced but not download and kept. So that’s a big difference between when you buy my vinyl LP with tracks on it and a photo, some text, you can listen to that over and over again, you can take it to your friend’s house [...] What the archive brings to my work is that you might look up that LP and when you do, you’ll see other album designs by the guy who designed my [cover]. You could if you wanted to. You could go ‘okay, album design – cover designs by this person’, and there’s a link, and they – you can kind of follow that trajectory. Or [you can say] ‘recorded by this person, what other things did he record?’ So there’s a whole bunch of relationships that are built into the archive that don’t exist when you purchase my one record. [...] I see the value of the archive not just for new music practitioners but for all the other people that are involved in new music so photographers, the ones I listed before – photographers, recording artists, writers: you know there’s a whole community of practice around one piece of music, there’s a whole load of people involved in the marketing of that, or the sharing of it. And I think that just all those connections will help build the picture of a community, not just of an artwork, and I think that’s important, to understand the artwork in a more comprehensive way. [WANMA] offers the opportunity to do that. To attempt to do that. (Hope 2015)

New music is thus constructed in WANMA as more than ‘just’ music, it is the whole new music community that is archived; the composers and musicians, to be sure, but also the ancillary artists: and the audiences. WANMA’s “impetus [is] to return to an artistic community the heritage that belongs to it, and which arises from it” (Green, Mahoney, Hope & MacKinney 2014).

What is an archive?

Jacques Derrida’s (1996) deconstruction of the role of the archive argues that it has a connection to memory and helps constitute a form of identity. At the same time that it looks backwards, however, to find and assemble the past, it looks forward to imagine – and imaginatively create – the audience of people who will use it. Those researchers will discover elements from the past that inform the present. At the same time, however, the archive can serve a contemporary purpose in providing information

about the new music community in Western Australia which will provide a counterpoint for other new music communities in other Australian contexts and, beyond Australia, in the wider world.

One of the results of Western Australian new music not travelling much beyond the state is that there is a comparative paucity of Western Australian new music product housed in musical archives, accessible to audiences and researchers. Musical archives tend to reflect the experience and artistic culture of the population centres of the eastern states. This is the primary reason why the WANMA project was funded: to create a repository of WA's new music and make it more accessible to people who might wish to use it. Hope's perception is that "what the archive is attempting to do is [to] bring together all different aspects of that moment in time," – the moment of the performance. "The photographer who took the photos, the filmmaker who videoed it, the reviewer in the paper, the guy who wrote the preview, [...] the publisher, bring all those things together as a community of practice" (Hope 2015).

It is the ephemeral nature of new music that creates the gap that WANMA seeks to fill. Hope's view is that Western Australia is "a culturally rich environment, [a] society that engages with its contemporary practice which in itself is also, you know, [you] could argue, that that's not really happening [elsewhere] in Australia particularly [...] That's what I want to remember into the future" (Hope 2015). At the same time that it's culturally rich, the new music community is quite small and tight knit. Cat Hope and Tos Mahoney, effectively the current curators of the archive, "perhaps, know most people so we have a relationship, which is how this project came about". But WANMA is "not just about the work, it's actually about the people – so we're building it so that they can contribute, they can make corrections to their own entries, they can suggest entries, they can interact with the archive – on a [...] number of different levels":

I don't know if what's happening in Perth from 1970 to however long this project goes for is important in an international cultural perspective, or if it's important to understanding West Australian society and the way artists relate to each other, or whether what's happening in Perth is as important as anywhere else in Australia? I don't know. But by putting it there [in the archive] there's an opportunity that we can find out. Not now, maybe: in the future. And surely so much scholarship is built on someone back then keeping stuff? And I guess I'm just doing that in a way afforded by the tools available to me. And I'm trying to make these tools as stable and long-lasting as I possibly can despite infrastructure – huge infrastructures changing and reshaping and collapsing and rebuilding. I just feel [...] I'm trying to make something that will survive all those challenges. I don't know if I can but, you know, I can try. If you don't try nothing happens. (Hope 2015).

The changing media of music recording, which has been in a constant state of flux since at least 1970 causes its own challenges. "Media discs, VHS, DV tape, CD, cassette, online delivery, there's all these different media and I guess I'm concerned that some of them aren't going to be accessible" (Hope 2015). The willingness of new music to embrace these experimental media is part of the challenge of the archive. "One of the roles of the archive is to preserve that media – well not the media itself but the material that's on it. But you know already some of the materials that we've got, you know, they're

damaged so there's big chunks missing." Part of this challenge is inherent in new music's use of new media:

it doesn't wait to see it succeed and then use it, like a lot of you know consumable art [... new] music is a quick adopter and one of the risks with quick adoption is that you don't wait, you know, like, the Berlin Philharmonic won't put it out on the latest technology, they'll wait until that's succeeded and then they'll put it out, so a lot of new music falls down that gap, on unstable [technology] that was never really adopted fully. Software's a really great example. So software gets upgraded all the time. A lot of composers work with electronic music, classical 'new music' scenario. They'll be using a program and then the program doesn't exist in three years' time, it's been replaced by a new version, which then got bought out by someone else who killed it. So you've got this very vulnerable material that you may not be able to recreate the piece in its entirety although I hope that that's one of the results [of the archive]. But actually, these other materials can often give the information – even photographs of someone working at a computer where you can see the, you know, the operating system written on there. That might be the only record you have of that operating system being the one that is used for that recording so they all – they can feed into each other in a way that perhaps other kinds of art and music don't. (Hope 2015)

Hope sees both strengths and weaknesses in being a musician curating an archive. "My role as a musician gives a certain perspective to this project" she says, "I'm concerned that that limits the potential for [the] archive, but then actually, throughout the project, I've realised that actually it adds a certain value to it". The value added is less that of the musician and more that, as a musician, she is part of the new music community: "I think I've got access to things – people and ideas, that maybe I wouldn't have otherwise [...] So, I'm at an advantage." (Hope 2015)

This makes the specific WANMA archive quite different from many other models of archive. Conventional archives might represent the gift of a collection from a private donor "so that doesn't have any real cultural context, it's just a collection of materials that this person happened to have. There are other things like PARADISEC which are to do with endangered cultures." Hope thinks that WANMA is the only archive that is so "so specific to a place and a time and that's meant there's been a lot of difficult decisions" around the definition of what constitutes 'Western Australian', as discussed previously. But, if she's right, WANMA may not only serve its function as a repository of Western Australian new music, it may also operate as a model for future, community-based, interactive, archives.

Who will use the archive?

Hope admits that she cannot be sure what the archive will be used for. She is guided by what is useful now, partly because the archive has a contemporary life and partly because WANMA's work makes clear the omissions in everyday archival practice: "I can see what components are important and what components get left out." One such oversight is that "standard bibliographic or cataloguing mechanisms" do not include information about the software used in the creation of music. They "don't really have a

spot in the catalogue [for software] as part of a piece". Given the many uncertainties around who will be the archive's future users, the curators are attempting to "offer the maximum amount of information for someone who in the future might want to understand something about music culture in Perth in this window of time." (Hope 2015)

The user's temporal and spatial context will be a major determinant of what they gain from accessing the archive: "I would say the emphasis [for users] outside of Australia would be on discovery, on finding new things, whereas the emphasis inside would be on a process of reminding or building, rather than discovery [...] more like extending knowledge, rather than finding out brand new things" (Hope 2015).

Another challenge about who will use the archive lies in the archive's future development. It is the curators' great wish that the Western Australian new music community will adopt the archive and add to it, creating it as much in the community's image as in the curators'. Hope's desire is to "work on the community now [so that] we can set something in place that can be carried on beyond the scope of the build, if you know what I mean." In this, there is a clear awareness of the finite resources committed to the WANMA research – the fact that the time and money will soon run out. Her aim is to ensure that the community engagement survives "beyond the life of the – so-called life of the – project, which is the building of the port." She hopes that:

it will go on [in] some kind of – in perpetuity. So that's the focus for me [...] looking forward to the future. I don't really know how people are going to study music in a hundred years, I don't even know if online repositories will be around in a hundred years but it's an effort to collate, to collect material in one place in a way that makes it available beyond that place. For whatever reasons, I can't imagine right now. (Hope 2015)

Yet the archive has already shed unexpected light on aspects of the community. For example, it changes all the time, as do the spaces and places where new music is made and enjoyed. "Different places bring different properties to the music, but also tell us about the place of music in the community at that time". Hope uses the example of PICA, the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. "That's changed from a kind of more workshop environment to a real visual arts display environment. It used to have a lot of new music and improvised music events there and was really more like a place where people would come together and try stuff out". These days, says Hope, PICA operates on "more like a museum model." Club Zoo is another example of a (pop up) venue which has changed over time. It's "one of the kind of new music events [that] has changed quite a lot over time, and it started as a kind of like where you go to experiment with stuff. Now it's more like a visiting artists' and established West Australian artists' showcase." Noting also the Sounds Out Back festival "where literally the music was being performed in the bush", Hope notes that "there's a lot of different places and I think that that's something great about [the archive], it's brought such a diverse range of places of experience together."

Like all archives, WANMA is dreamed of as having relevance into the future, and constructed with the needs of those future users in mind. At the same time, however, it is providing information in the here and now, and making tacit knowledge explicit. It might be that, with significant effort, a collection of the

new music community could have established a chronology of places in which Club Zho had operated. WANMA makes such information visible.

Discussion and conclusion

WANMA offers its creators and users new ways of interacting with the new music community in Perth, and in the broader Western Australia more generally. It interrogates what it is to be a West Australian music-maker, what it is to belong to the new music community in Western Australia, and what it means to be constructing an archive for the future – and the present. These activities necessarily take Tos Mahoney, as the Artistic Director and CEO of Tura New Music, and Cat Hope, as his co-curator and as a musician in her own right, away from their artistic practice. Instead of creating art, the archive makes them focus on its conservation. There are compensations, according to Hope. Further, this is for her, the most recent of a range of compromises and trade-offs in priorities. The first was when she decided to no longer be a ‘freewheeling artist’ and instead became an academic.

[The] academic institution provides: equipment; the ability to keep up-to-date with things that you wouldn’t ever be able to afford to otherwise; access to information and supports for different things. These are all things that I never had as an – independent artist and I kind of thought, well, part of the deal of being in that role is to share some of that with people like I was [like I used to be] and I see this as part of that. I’ve also understood a lot more about my own work through doing this and some of the dangers or implications of the media that I work with and how, you know, I could better future proof some of my materials, maybe. If – I guess you’ve probably worked out that it’s part of my [motivation ...]. I’m interested in preserving things for the future, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing a project like this, so I’ve learnt about that. But yes, it has come at a cost to my own practice but it’s one that I’m quite happy to wear because I get other benefits like stability, that a lot of my colleagues that aren’t in academia don’t have. So it’s kind of like part of that deal. [...] I’m happy to use that situation to benefit – well, it’s benefiting me directly because it’s preserving my own materials as well. (Hope 2015)

WANMA came into public, official, existence with the launch of the internet portal on 20 May 2015, for public consultation. That “is the starting point, this material’s just a starting point, it’s not the end.” Hope notes the power of interrelationships: “components of a piece of music can be shaped by the [other] ones that I use, you know, like computer software”. But the final shape is a long way from being decided. “I, yeah, emphasise this as a start. And a model is a useful technique for a start, for a place to start the process.” In the meantime, WANMA serves as an interesting means of interrogating what it is to believe that the ephemeral experience is important, and the lengths required to collect it, archive it, and make it accessible.

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