

*Reparations – An Exploration of Musical
Narratives in an Australian Context*

MM-CPGJ Culminating Experience Reflection Paper

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Abstract

This project entailed the composition, recording and production of 8 pieces of music centred around addressing social issues in my home country of Australia through the use of musical narratives. These issues included Australia's mistreatment of Indigenous Australians and inaction in combating environmental degradation and climate change. Throughout my research in these two areas, the intersectionality of these issues became more clear to me as I delved deeper into the history behind their manifestation in Australia. Throughout my research and composition process, I drew inspiration from a wide range of Australian artistic works including music, literature, photography and visual art, with the goal of creating an interconnected body of work that served the ultimate purpose of inspiring positive social change with regards to systemic racism and environmental degradation in Australia, as well as contributing to the global fight against these forces.

Notes on Each Composition

1. Australiana [Part One]

This piece serves as the opening piece of this suite of music, establishing setting and context for the narratives that are to come. In this piece I aimed to capture the aesthetic of the Australian landscape through sound, drawing inspiration from many different sources. Through my study of Australian literature and visual art, I began to see the common theme amongst many different writers/artists of the Australian landscape possessing a harsh beauty – jagged shapes against rich colourful backdrops or beautiful feats of nature being born out of an arid, unforgiving climate.

Author Robert Hughes writes “The Australian bush, baked tawny and bronze by the summer heat, its ground surface mantled in a crackling skin of dry gum leaves, grasses and fallen strips of eucalyptus

bark, was like a stretched drum, a delicate resonator that informed every animal of each approach. (...) Monotonous at first sight but rippling with nuance to the acclimatised eye.”¹ The harsh beauty that I described earlier can be seen in Hughes’ use of seemingly contradicting adjectives: “crackling” and “dry” against “delicate” and “nuance(d).”

I attempted to capture the essence of this harsh beauty by creating something that sounded natural and beautiful, yet filled with dissonance and harshness. To convey this idea of natural beauty I used symmetrical voicings that expand and contract in contrary motion with one another, playing off the idea that a lot of symmetry exists in nature, as well as wanting the piece to sound like it was “breathing.” These structures become quite dissonant at certain points to touch on the arid qualities of much of the Australian landscape, along with double bass extended technique interjections between phrases adding an element of surrealism to the overall picture of the piece.

2. Adani

This piece was inspired by my research into the recent construction of the Carmichael Mine in Queensland, Australia by the multinational energy conglomerate called the Adani Group. This mine is proposed to be one of the biggest coal mining projects in world history, which aims to excavate enough coal to consequently release 4.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the earth’s atmosphere, as well as draining significant groundwater from the surrounding region, making it much more vulnerable to uncontrollable bushfires. In this piece, I wanted to contrast the natural world with the mechanical world, eventuating in their violent collision at the end of the piece. To do this, I composed the piece in two distinct sections – firstly, a ballad to represent the natural world, and secondly a disjointed backbeat section to represent the mine itself. In the first section, I used unstable sounding harmonic clusters to represent the beauty and fragility of the natural world. In the second section, I wrote jagged, intervallic melodies against arhythmic piano and bass patterns to create a sense of unease, as well as the use of eight-note repetition in the piano to create a machine-like quality. In the final section, these two ideas collide with the imposition of the ballad theme over the top of the

¹ Hughes, R. (1986) *The Fatal Shore*

backbeat section, concluding with an explosive drum solo to represent the chaos and destruction that will come as a result of the construction of this mine.

It is also worth noting that with the immense destruction of the natural world in Australia, Indigenous Australian culture is also impacted significantly by these actions. Indigenous peoples, whose culture dates back over 50,000 years, possess deep spiritual ties to land and country, and the process of commodification of their land for commercial means began in 1788 with British colonisation in Australia. This mine truly serves as a modern day reflection of colonialism that began the decimation of Indigenous peoples and culture by predominantly white Australians.

“The [Indigenous Australians] carried their conception of sacred, of mythic time and ancestral origins with them as they walked. These were embodied in the landscape; every hill and valley, every animal and tree had its place in a systematic but unwritten whole. Take away this territory and they were deprived, not of ‘property,’ but of their embodied history, their locus of myth, their ‘dreaming.’ To deprive the Aborigines of their territory, therefore, was to condemn them to a spiritual death – a destruction of their past, their future and their opportunities for transcendence.”²

This quote is taken from Robert Hughes’ 1986 book *The Fatal Shore*, which recounts in incredible detail the colonial history of Australia. Although this quote is in reference to the actions of British colonists in the late 18th century, this quote continues to ring eerily true in the modern age.

3. This May Be Goodbye

I composed this piece while back home in Australia in the midst of the 2019-2020 bushfires. These fires caused the destruction of over 3500 homes, mostly in rural Australia, as well as the death of over one billion animals in affected regions. I wrote this piece shortly after a friend of mine (who lives in a region that was affected by these fires) sent a message out to a group of my friends saying that she

² Hughes, R. (1986) *The Fatal Shore*

was in a pretty dire situation, and that if she didn't make it she wanted to say goodbye. This piece was written while reflecting on how she must have felt in that moment.

The opening of this piece begins with stark minimalism – just single melody and bass notes, responding to one another almost like clockwork. I composed in this way to create a sense of calm, but also a feeling of impending danger. This continues until the arrival of dense cluster chords, representing the fires themselves. Initially, these chords come in at low intensity, but on their second repetition they come back with much more force. I did this to represent how bushfires like the ones that occurred at this time can flare up almost out of nowhere and cause enormous damage. The conclusion of this piece ends on a moment of release from the tension that continues for most of the piece, symbolising that after fires like this inevitably comes a period of regrowth.

4. Pain to Progress

This is the most recently composed piece of this project, and while it isn't related directly to the ethos of my project, its ideas tie in with my project quite closely. This piece was written during the height of the period of protest after the murder of George Floyd in June, 2020. At the time, I was reflecting on the history of America that led up to this horrible event. This piece was inspired by the fact that despite having to endure so much injustice throughout the history of the country, Black Americans have continued to show their undying perseverance, strength and resolve time and time again. In the realm of my experience, this is shown so clearly throughout the jazz tradition, a tradition and a music that speaks to me more than any other art form. I decided to write this piece as a dedication to my black brothers and sisters to show my immense respect and admiration for their continued display of strength, beauty and compassion in spite of the blatant racial injustice that continues to run rampant in America and abroad. In order to pay tribute to my friends as well as the great black artists of the past and present, I felt the best way to do this was to compose a blues. Wynton Marsalis, an idol of mine for many years, stated in late 2020 that “we play the blues, which means no matter how bad things get, we remain optimistic, while still mindful of problems.”³ My interpretation of this quote is that the

³ Marsalis, W. (2020) A Dedication to the Clause of Democracy

blues is a tradition of turning pain into progress through sound, hence the title of this piece. This piece is a contemporary take on the blues form, with the structure revealing itself most clearly in the improvised section in the middle of the piece. Subtle harmonic shifts occur constantly throughout this composition, symbolising that the narratives that uphold racial injustice need to be constantly challenged and shifted in order for widespread change to occur.

5. Meaningful Decision

This piece, as well as the one that follows it, is inspired by the ongoing fight for governments around the world to take meaningful action to slow the effects of climate change. The Australian government has neglected to join this movement in a holistic way for decades, approving the construction of enormous mining and oil projects around the country for the benefit of the billionaire class, as well as grossly unsustainable economic growth. On a broader societal level, Australia is plagued by the overwhelming presence of the Murdoch press (best known for owning Fox News in the United States), which is in control of over 70% of mass media outlets in Australia, and is notorious for inserting their climate change denial rhetoric, both blatantly and covertly, into their many publications. These many factors result in a nation deeply divided in thought and values with regards to environmental action, where a collective “truth” can seem more like a paradox than a reality. I attempted to symbolise this complexity in this piece by splitting the ensemble into two sections that play rhythmically independent from one another. Melodies leap and swell over an asymmetrical rhythmic ostinato, giving the piece a sense of ambiguity, capturing the ambiguous nature of the idea of collective truth in the modern age.

6. Meaningful Action

In this piece, unlike in Meaningful Decision, the ensemble comes together to play the same composition. Throughout this piece, I use the idea of melodic direction to represent meaningful action being taken to slow the effects of climate change. Initially, the piece consists mostly of descending motifs to represent that sometimes pushing for this action can feel pointless and yielding of very little results. In the solo section however, the saxophone solo breaks through the piano solo with a string of

rising motifs, which sets up the climax of the piece shortly after. This climax represents the fact that with a constant push, coupled with the power of collective action, meaningful change can and will occur, as it has done time and time again throughout history.

I always find myself returning to this quote by James Baldwin when I feel like humanity is facing a seemingly impossible task: “And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. [...] I know what I'm asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand – and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general.”⁴

7. Reparations

This piece was inspired by the ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart,’⁵ a document created by Indigenous cultural leaders in May, 2017. This document advocates for Indigenous recognition in the Australian constitution as well as a cultural shift to empower Indigenous peoples through a movement of mass truth-telling about Australia’s past and present, which remains largely untaught in Australia’s public and private school systems. This document perfectly articulates the social struggle of Indigenous peoples in modern Australia, and proposes that in order to begin the process of Indigenous peoples “walk[ing] in two worlds,”⁶ the truth must be told about Indigenous sovereignty, which has never ceded, as well as Australia’s shameful colonial history which resulted in the death of an estimated 70% of the Indigenous population between the years of 1788 and 1900.

In composing this piece, I aimed to create an underscore to the words of this document. I wanted to capture the same feeling that the words of this document do, which are heartfelt, deeply honest, dignified and powerful. I did this by composing a repeating harmonic structure with a hopeful, lyrical melody singing out throughout the development of the piece. As this composition develops and cycles multiple times, voices join throughout, building to a climax at the end of the piece. This joining of voices symbolises the movement that this document represents gaining momentum and power over

⁴ Baldwin, J. (1963) *The Fire Next Time*

⁵ Various Authors. (2017) *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*

⁶ Various Authors. (2017) *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*

time. Sadly, this proposal of Indigenous recognition in the Australian constitution was rejected after the Uluru Statement's conception in 2017, but the movement behind this document is far from over.

8. Australiana [Part Two]

Similarly to Australiana [Part One], this piece is written to represent the Australian landscape through sound. After writing part one, I started thinking about expanding the idea of the Australian landscape being harsh but beautiful. This led me to the idea of the Australian landscape being arid, dry and desertous at its center, yet lush and fertile at its coasts. In this piece [Part Two], contrary to [Part One] which was looking at the Australian bush, I turned my attention to the beauty of the Australian coastline, which presents some of the most incredible displays of the natural world on the planet. I represented this through using the same symmetrical structures as in [Part One], but instead using them to create lush open sounds with little to no dissonance, with swells in dynamics and tempo used to represent the dynamism of coastal landscapes. Overall, this suite of music begins and ends with depictions of the natural world to represent that it existed long before the reign of humans as the dominant species on this planet, and will continue to live on, no matter what the distant and not-so-distant future may hold.

Results

Overall, I feel that I have realised this project to be more than what I set out for it to be, mainly due to the fact that the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to take charge of each part of the creation of this music: composition, recording and production. Because of this, I was able to oversee every detail of this project and align it with my creative vision and broader philosophy behind this project.

Plan of Action

It's safe to say that with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my original plan of action for this project had to be completely rethought and revised to make use of the limited resources that I had available to me. At first, the news that we would not have full ensemble studio time (as we initially planned) was hugely disheartening, but in the end this turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened to push me out of my comfort zone and explore a whole new realm of music making (production, mixing and mastering) that I had never dived into before.

Process

My process in creating this project began with composition. I looked at the narratives I was trying to convey and boiled them down to their simplest elements. In 'Australiana [Part One]' I was trying to convey "harsh," "beauty" and "breath," whereas in 'Adani' I was trying to convey "fragility" and "destruction." I then looked at how I could use compositional devices to capture these elements, and in certain cases blend these elements with each other to convey intersectionality. After each piece was composed, I notated them in Sibelius and exported the MIDI data into ProTools, where I mapped out how long I wanted each section to be and created MIDI mock-ups to send to the musicians to record over the top of. After this, I sent parts to each musician, recording each piece top-down (with lead voices first), with piano comping being added last. After these tracks were built in this way, I recorded the bass and drum tracks together at Ugly Duck Studio with the help of Daniel Babai. After the tracks were all done, I mixed and mastered the tracks myself.

Next Steps

I plan to make this project the beginning of a large body of work that serves a social purpose. I plan to perform this music all around Australia and talk about each composition in a similar way to how I presented them in my CE presentation. I also plan to make this project part of a larger mission to

advocate for the value of music to Australian government bodies and funding agencies, which have been in steady decline over the past decade. I hope to expand on the ideas I started in this project and continue my work of exploring the Australian cultural and physical landscape through music, as well as collaborating with Indigenous musicians, visual artists and dancers. Additionally, I hope to turn the ‘Australiana’ pieces that I have written into a collection full orchestral works, travelling to remote regions of Australia myself to try and capture the great diversity of the Australian landscape, of which I have only seen a tiny fraction.

Contribution to the Discipline or Profession

I believe that in this work, I have contributed an original work to the profession that touches on the issues I have explored in a direct and tangible manner. Musically, I feel I have created a balanced project that explores many different aesthetics and draws inspiration from many different musical and non-musical traditions, showcasing my voice as both a composer and instrumentalist. I feel I have created a work that achieves my goal of creating a flowing musical narrative from start-to-finish.

Impact on the Student Completing the Work

I felt that in creating this work for a greater purpose than that of the entertainment of others or the advancement of my career, this music was realised with a depth that I wouldn’t have been able to attain otherwise. Additionally, the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to dive into the areas of production, mixing and mastering in a way that I did not foresee, but resulted in me having greater control over my artistic output and overall aesthetic of my work. I feel proud of this project both in how the music sounds, as well as my ability to articulate my vision to others. The BGJI has ultimately empowered me as an artist to trust my vision and instincts, and to create music not only from a place of fleeting inspiration, but from a place of discipline that is emboldened by a recognition of the power that music has in society both socially and spiritually. I am incredibly grateful for all of

my teachers and peers that I was able to work with and learn from so closely during my BGJI experience, and feel that I have made many friends for life in doing so.

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