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Introduction: Musical and linguistic perspectives on Aboriginal song

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In the period from 1984 to the present, numerous collections of essays dedicated entirely or partly to Aboriginal song and dance have appeared.¹ Each of these represented a response to particular stimuli: three—*Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, *The Politics of Dance* and *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance*—grew out of conferences; two—*Problems and Solutions* and *The Essence of Singing and the Substance of Song*—were Festschriften (for Alice Moyle and Catherine Ellis respectively); and two more—*Power-laden Aboriginal Song* and *The Politics of Dance*—were, like the present volume, special issues of a journal.

Much of the work presented in the present volume, *Studies in Aboriginal Song: A Special Issue of Australian Aboriginal Studies*, results from research projects that focus on endangered language and music and involves either collaborative work between linguists and musicologist or work by scholars with training in both disciplines. The first essay in the volume, 'Iwaidja *Jurtbirrk* songs: bringing language and music together,' for example, is the result of collaboration between musicologist Linda Barwick and linguists Nick Evans and Bruce Birch, carried out as part of the project *Yiwarruj, yinyman, radbihi lda mali: Iwaidja and other endangered languages of the Cobourge Peninsula (Australia) in their cultural context*, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation's Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS) programme. The papers by Allan Marett ('Simplifying musical practice in order to enhance local identity: the case of rhythmic modes in the Walakandha *wangga* (Wadeye, Northern Territory)') and Lysbeth Ford ('"Too long, that *wangga*": analysing *wangga* texts over time') also represent the fruits of a longstanding collaboration between a musicologist (Marett) and a linguist (Ford). Like Michael Walsh's 'Australian Aboriginal song language: so many questions, so little to work with,' the papers arise from the Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project, *Preserving Australia's endangered heritages: Murrinhpatha song at Wadeye*. Two other papers have come out of another endangered language project, *Classical song traditions of contemporary western Arnhem Land in their multilingual context*, funded by the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme Major Project Grant and led by Linda Barwick: these are Murray Garde's '*Morrdjjanjno ngan-marnbom* story *nakka* "Songs that turn me into a story teller": the *morrdjjanjno* of western Arnhem Land' and Isabel O'Keeffe's 'Sung and spoken: analysis of two different versions of a Kun-barlang love song.' Aaron Corn and Neparrŋa Gumbula's research reported in '*Budutthun ratja wiyinmirri*: formal flexibility in the Yolŋu *manikay* tradition and the challenge of recording a complete repertoire' was conducted as part of the work of the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, and an ARC-funded Discovery Project *When the waters will be one*. Myfany Turpin, whose paper, 'The

poetics of Central Australian song,' represents the work of a scholar with both linguistic and musicological expertise, is currently a postdoctoral fellow funded by another Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme Major Project Grant, the *Arandic songs project*. The only paper not formally associated with an endangered language or music program is Sally Treloyn's 'Flesh with country: juxtaposition and minimal contrast in the construction and melodic treatment of *jadmi* song texts,' but even in this case, that language of the songs belongs to a critically endangered Australian language, Ngarinyin.ⁱⁱ

How is it that issues of cultural endangerment have taken centre stage in the work of so many scholars, and why have collaborations between musicologists and linguists become so pervasive? After all, as Michael Walsh points out elsewhere in this volume, in her introduction to *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, Clunies Ross implied a certain lack of attention to Aboriginal song on the part of linguists, 'Only within the last decade have linguists begun to pay much attention to the subject [of Aboriginal song]' (Clunies Ross 1987). Twenty years later, as Barwick et al point out in their paper in this volume, there is a long history of collaboration between linguists and musicologist, and more recently, young scholars trained in both disciplines are beginning to emerge. Walsh's paper in this volume addresses in detail recent linguistic work in this field.

Let us now consider each of the papers in this volume in a little more detail. Focusing on a single corpus of songs (from the previously undocumented *Jurtbirrk* genre of public didjeridu-accompanied love-songs, in the Iwaidja language of northwestern Arnhem Land), the paper by Barwick, Birch and Evans brings to bear multiple analytical perspectives: rhetorical, musicological, phonological and grammatical. The musicological analysis highlights the ways in which musical structures support the textual poetics, and correlates certain musicological features (rhythmic and melodic modes) with particular composers and performers. Phonological analysis considers the alignment of stick beating with syllable onset, and also specifies the nature of changes in vowel quality and intonation in sung versus spoken forms of Iwaidja, while the grammatical and semantic analysis shows how the use of language in love-songs can add significantly to understanding of the expressive possibilities of Iwaidja.

Murray Garde's paper deals with a highly significant and highly endangered genre of songs from Western Arnhem Land. This previously undocumented song genre, *morrdjjanjno*, is of great interest not only for the ways in which it reveals the close relationship between local environment, history and cosmology in Western Arnhem Land, but also for its links with other genres of song, both within its own cultural domain (for example, public *kun-borrk* dance-songs and the restricted songs of the now defunct Ubarr ceremony), and outside it (for example, 'increase' songs of Central Australia). Through detailed engagement with a range of song-texts and their commentaries, Garde discusses the ways in which specialist vocabulary participates within an ecology of knowledge associated with the people and landscape of Western Arnhem Land. In his examination of *morrdjjanjno* song texts, Garde makes a number of important observations on the use of special song language and everyday forms, and the ways in which songs in specialist registers can be translated into everyday language by knowledgeable informants. The issue of esoteric song language and its relationship to everyday forms has long fascinated scholars of Aboriginal song, and this issue is addressed in a number of papers in this volume.

The contribution of Isabel O'Keeffe (née Bickerdike) also addresses themes that have been a long-time preoccupation of scholars of Aboriginal song, and that emerge in other papers in this collection: the first of these concerns the way that we make sense of the archival record in the light of current performance practice, and the second concerns the relationship between sung and spoken versions of a song. O'Keeffe analyses in detail one didjeridu-accompanied love-song in Kun-barlang language recorded in sung and spoken versions by Bilinyarra (brother of the original composer, Balir-balir) for Alice Moyle in Oenpelli (Kunbarlanja) in 1962. O'Keeffe's analysis reveals interpolations of vocable text at structurally significant points in the spoken text, and remarkable consistency in content and form in

contemporary versions of the song performed by Bruce and Barndanj Nabegeyo, sons of Bilinyarra, recorded at Kunbarlanja in 2005 and 2006.

Allan Maret's article addresses the contemporary relevance of another didjeridu-accompanied repertory recorded by Alice Moyle in the 1960s, the *wangga* songs of Mendheyangal composer Jimmy Muluk. Through a mixture of detailed musical analysis and oral history, Maret shows how the complex system of rhythmic modes employed by Muluk was adopted and then transformed by Marri Tjevin composers and singers in the creation and elaboration of the Walakandha *wangga* repertory at Wadeye. A major focus of this paper is the way in which musicians respond to social pressures—in this case, the need of a somewhat disparate group to project a strong unified identity—and the ways in which this affected the evolution of the song style over several decades.

Lys Ford also considers Muluk's *wangga* songs, here from the perspective of the song texts and how their condensed and elliptical form and content relate to more discursive spoken explanations and stories associated with the songs. As comparative material she considers a Marri Tjevin *wangga* song recently composed by Philip Mullumbuk, suggesting that its expansive through-composed form is stylistically outside the conventions of other *wangga* texts, and thus less likely to be adopted for ceremonial use.

Sally Treloyn's article engages with the repertory of contemporary Ngarinyin/Miwa *junba* composer Nyalgodi Scotty Martin. Through analysis of particular examples of textual construction, dance practice and melodic setting, Treloyn shows how an aesthetic of juxtaposition functions in this repertory to assert and articulate relationships between people and country. Like Maret, she is concerned to show how specific musical processes relate to and reflect broader social and cosmological aspects of culture, and like a number of the younger, broadly trained scholars in this volume, Treloyn deploys a range of disciplinary perspectives (linguistic and anthropological as well as musicological) in her work.

Drawing on her training in both linguistic and musicological concepts and techniques, Turpin's fine-grained analysis of one Central Australian repertory, Kaytetye women's *awelye akwelye*, succeeds in spelling out the metrical processes and guiding principles underlying the transformation of Kaytetye text words into rhythmic text, which is in turn set to melody. The paper is underpinned by the author's longstanding relationships with Kaytetye women, their language and their musical practices as well as her tools of the trade as a highly skilled musicologist and linguist.

Corn and Gumbula describe the process of recording a Gupapuyngu manikay series under the direction of the owners and performers of the tradition for the explicit purpose of preserving it for future generations. They outline the reasons behind their decision to 'record the *luku* (footprint, step, root): the full sequence of songs, subject by subject across its five named *bilma* modes, without any dance accompaniment or predetermined ceremonial functions' and then go on to identify gaps in the resultant record. They also discuss the difficulties of transcribing the complex heterophonic textures produced by three or four voices and outline and critique the solution proposed by Gumbula, namely 'not to translate the lyrics as they had been recorded' but to have Gumbula recite the text from memory word by word, and then translated them, noting that this resulted in a faithful translation of the complete series as it was remembered by a seasoned singer. By reflecting on how best to record cultural heritage for future generations, this paper represents current struggles to refine our methods in order to respond appropriately to Indigenous concerns about the future of their traditions.

Michael Walsh's essay arises from a longstanding linguistic interest in the typologies of song language in Australia. In his own words, it seeks to

... recall the state of the art twenty years ago, then review what has been learnt about Australian Aboriginal song language over the last twenty years and to suggest some ideas for best practice in the documentation and analysis of Australian Aboriginal song language.'

Largely written prior to the assembly of the various papers in this collection, it raises questions about themes that appear throughout the volume: the use of esoteric and non-standard lexical items in songs, and the complex relationship that both standard and non-standard lexical items have to exegeses of song texts; language loss and its effects on song traditions; phonological and morphosyntactic differences between song language and everyday language; the revelation of ‘hidden’ or particularly semantically rich language in song; the acquisition and transmission of songs and how these are affected by broader socio-cultural factors; the relationship of the archival record to the living tradition; the problem of stability and variability in song text. Other questions he raises— ‘Are there examples of non-Aboriginal languages other than English appearing in song traditions?’; ‘How do women’s songs differ from men’s and to what extent do they express women’s knowledge?’; ‘How widespread are children’s songs and how do they interact with adults’ songs?’; ‘Are songs in settled Australia the same and/or different from those in other parts of Australia?’; ‘How can song traditions assist in Native Title and other such cases?’—are not addressed in the volume and remain areas for future research.

It can be seen that in addition to the themes of interdisciplinarity and endangerment identified at the beginning of this essay, a number of other themes emerge. Several papers (O’Keefe, Garde and Ford) examine the relationship between sung and spoken forms: in the case of O’Keefe the focus is on spoken and written forms of the same song text; in Garde’s case it is on the spoken exegesis of songs given by one of the last remaining singers of a dying tradition, and in Ford’s case, it is on the stories associated with particular songs. Several papers, and in particular those by Barwick et al, O’Keefe and Garde also deal with the question of song texts whose lexicon lies outside that of normal speech.

Several papers draw archival record and relate this to present day practice. O’Keefe, Marett and Ford’s papers use recordings made in the 1960s and 1970s to make a variety of points about the relationship between spoken and sung forms or the evolution of musical style, while the project described in Corn and Gumbula’s paper arose as a response to perceived lacunae in the recorded record of Gupapuyngu *manikay*. Several papers, in particular Barwick et al and Marett, present evidence of a more complex practice in earlier times, evidence that suggests that in addition to wholesale loss, traditions may also be being simplified in response to the pressures of modernity. But there is also a vivid sense in many of the papers that Aboriginal song traditions today are a vital part of contemporary life, that these are not living museum pieces as some of our politicians would have us believe, but rather active and potent responses to the exigencies of everyday life—indeed they are one of the primary mechanisms by which Aboriginal people respond to and adapt to change.

Faced as we are with the ongoing and escalating loss of so many of Australia’s Indigenous languages and performance traditions, there is some evidence that studies of Aboriginal song are increasing. There is a growing number of articles being published in journals,ⁱⁱⁱ a number of major survey articles have appeared in recent years,^{iv} well documented CDs are appearing at a regular rate,^v an annual symposium on Aboriginal song has been established, and four new monographs on Aboriginal music have been published in the past three years.^{vi} And yet too little is being done too late by too few. In musicology in particular, the discipline has failed to adequately respond to the cultural tragedy that is unfolding before our eyes as the manifold traditions of Australia’s Indigenous heritage disappear. Major initiatives like the various endangered language programs and the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia are invigorating our response and attempting to find solutions that will empower Indigenous people in their struggle to maintain their traditions in the face of the enormous forces arrayed against them. But so much remains to be done, not least in training young people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with the disciplinary and practical skill to meet this challenge.

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Notes

ⁱ These include *Problems and Solutions: Occasional Essays in Musicology presented to Alice M. Moyle* (Kassler & Stubington 1984); *Songs of Aboriginal Australia* (Clunies Ross, et al. 1987); *Power-laden Aboriginal Songs: who should control the research?* (Ellis 1992); *The Essence of Singing and the Substance of Song: Recent Responses to the Aboriginal Performing Arts and Other Essays in Honour of Catherine Ellis* (Barwick, et al. 1995); *The Politics of Dance*, a Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (Henry, et al. 2000); *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, song and dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land* (Magowan & Neuenfeldt 2005).

ⁱⁱ Based on recent census data, Ngarinyin is classified as 'no longer fully spoken' (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) & Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ Such as *Musicology Australia* (2005-6 volume), which contained articles on Aboriginal song by Barwick, Ford and Garde (Barwick 2005-2006, Ford 2005-2006, Garde 2005-2006).

^{iv} See the articles on Australian Aboriginal song in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition (Sadie & Tyrell 2001), the *Encyclopedia of World Music (Oceania volume)* (Kaepler & Love 1998), the *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (Scott-Maxwell & Whiteoak 2003) and the *Oxford companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (Neale & Kleinert 2000).

^v Well-documented CDs of traditional music that have appeared in the last five years include *Jadmi Junba* (Barwick, *et al.* 2003), *Awelye Akwelye* (Turpin & Ross 2004), *Jurtbirrk* (Barwick, *et al.* 2005); and *Wurrurrumi Kun-borrk* (Garde & Djimarr 2007).

^{vi} *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts* (Marett 2005), *Melodies of Mourning* (Magowan 2007), *Disturbances and Dislocations: Understanding teaching and learning experiences in Indigenous Australian women's music and dance* (Mackinlay 2007) and *Singing the Land: The Power of Performance in Aboriginal Life* (Stubington 2007) (some of which are reviewed in this volume).