INTERVIEW WITH ROBYN HOLMES 2016 ASRA AWARD RECIPIENT: SOUND IS MY PASSION

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In 2016, Australian academic and musicologist Robyn Holmes received the Australasian Sound Recordings Association ASRA Award for excellence in the documentation and the dissemination of Australian music. Robyn talks to ASRA Board Member, Melinda Barrie, about her long and varied career in the field of music performance, teaching, and online distribution of Australia's sound culture. She recalls her diverse interest in sound from the classical to new music, and how she has never forgotten her first day of teaching when an audio cassette - which was relatively new technology at the time - unravelled itself and she had to revert to using vinyl records. However, it was not long after this early experience that Robyn recognised the potential of audio recordings and the power of collections in teaching and learning. It is these early interactions with analogue sound media which can be credited with stimulating her lifelong passion and advocacy for Australia's recorded sound heritage.

Melinda Barrie (MB): How did you get your start in the industry and what are your career interests?

Robyn Holmes (RH): I started my career as a performer and musicologist. I was a pianist and training as a singer with Professor David Galliver at the University of Adelaide. However, I think he quickly realised that I had more to bring to music by being a conductor than as a virtuosic diva, so he threw me the baton and so began my career in conducting. So from that moment on in terms of performance I focussed on conducting singers and choirs. In terms of my career I ended up doing honours in musicology and began teaching at the University in the following year. I guess you could call me a music academic who was teaching music history and theory.

During my early days at the university in the late 1960s, I was primarily immersed in the world of classical music and at the same time I was also surrounded by some important pioneers in electronic music in Australia. Firstly by Peter Tahourdin who came from Britain to Adelaide to set up the first electronic music studio in Australia. Later when Tahourdin took up a post at the University of Melbourne in 1974, he was replaced by Tristram Cary, also British. I worked closely with Cary during my honours year and although I was not a student of electronic music, I was keen and very interested in what they were doing. At the time Cary premiered a big electronic sound work where Don Dunstan was the narrator. Cary later became an important pioneering figure in Australian electronic music.

MB: You were introduced to many musical influences during your formative years at the University of Adelaide.

RH: From the early days of my career I was involved with professional music organisations like the Australian Society for Music Education, the Musicological Society of Australia, the Australian Society for Music Education, the Musicological Society of Australia and of course later, the International Association of Music Librarians (IAML) Australia and then the Australasian Sound Recordings Association (ASRA). So in the beginning at university, I was engaged with organisations that really networked me to those really important people, such as Don Banks, who contributed to the historic development of music in Australia. I felt like I was really exposed to some really interesting people and ideas about sound.

We were constantly performing new music and commissioning new music, so we were sort of constantly engaged with what was going on - particularly through the Adelaide Festival. One year Benjamin Britten came to the festival. I remember well his performance in this darkened space surrounded by these enormous speakers, which blasted out sound to every corner of the auditorium. It was an extraordinary experience.

Sound was a part of the world in which I lived. It was as simple as that.

MB: Can you talk about your early experience of teaching music?

RH: You have to keep in mind when I started teaching my first class was on the history of music. At this time the audio cassette had revolutionised the classroom—you could actually put samples together quickly in your home studio. Using vinyl records in the learning environment had become redundant, almost… For my first class I had a beautifully prepared sample set ready for the students to listen to—unfortunately for me this new technology failed and the machine promptly 'chewed' up my cassette. It was a most horrendous experience for my first tutorial that I will never forget.

So I learnt from that experience and ended up playing from old vinyl records for my classes, which defeated the purpose of adapting to the new audio cassette technology. Just as well the University had a vast vinyl record collection. I recall walking along the aisles in the vast repository and saying to the music librarian 'How will I ever know this music?' and he said, 'Don't worry, you have your whole life ahead of you'. So I took heart from that and got on with the business of learning through teaching. I was at the University of Adelaide until 1989/1990.

My life was full of musical riches while in Adelaide. I worked with various choral societies using an eclectic and diverse repertoire. At this time I was involved in research projects such as a collaborative music project with the State Opera of South Australia to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the opera from 1836 to the present. It was a big project that involved a team of volunteers who worked with old fashioned cards and indexes. It was the pre-TROVE era.

MB: The effort involved in using indexes and cards to find individuals connected to the opera from 1836 onwards would have been both challenging and rewarding.

RH: It was very, very challenging and the thing about this project was that we were collecting as we were documenting. So, as we were doing the work, we were actually building an archive which eventually went to the performing arts museum and performing arts collection at the Festival Centre.

It is at this point I should tell the story of the 'two Robyn Smiths'. My name at the time when I began my career was Robyn Smith pre-marriage, until I changed my name at twenty-one when I got married. But the other Robyn Smith was exactly five years ahead of me at school. We have a bit of a Robyn Smith club privately, and that Robyn Smith went on to become Robyn Archer. Our paths continued to cross via opera- Robyn performed in those first New Opera shows during the 1970s in South Australia. New Opera was the first of the professional state companies that was set up by former South Australian Premier and Minister for the Arts Don Dunstan. Anyway, the upshot of all of this was I worked in Adelaide professionally for 15 years in music. I then got the job as Head of Department of Literature and Materials of Music at the Canberra School of Music in 1990, which had just amalgamated

with the Australian National University (ANU). It was through this position that I became a graduate convenor and I set up research programs and became an academic subdean. My main focus was to develop the curriculum and advance the educational and research profile of the school.

MB: So it was your work with the State Opera project that inspired your advocacy for Australia's musical heritage and primary sources.

RH: Yes it was the State Opera project that helped me understand the power of original material. It was through this project that I learnt about building an archive and this experience enabled me to learn on the job with no specific training in the area. So, when I came to ANU I discovered these fantastic institutions, which included the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA). It was my proximity to our national collecting institutions which presented me with the opportunity to work collaboratively with them, and produce research programs for ANU that were unique to Canberra.

The school had an important role to play in the development of Australian music in bringing performers and composers together. During my time at the school, the Director John Painter initiated a large Bicentennial project to produce an Anthology of Australian Music on disc. This body of recorded sound still stands testament to the school's guiding principles to support the interaction between composition and musicology across a number of genres. Many will remember this box set. Later, I co-ordinated a collaboration between the NFSA, the Australian Music Centre (AMC) and ANU, using Australian Research Council (ARC) money to produce subsequent series of anthologies, forty-two discs in total.

MB: This project heralded a huge step forward in the recognition of Australian music.

RH: Yes it absolutely did. The anthology was a big sweeping project which brought together researchers, performers and composers to bring out discs of Australian music; and it was a pioneering project because it was the first time the school of music – in fact, many people from the music scene and music academy, had actually got research council funding for their projects, so that was really, really important. It really inspired collaboration.

Jeff Brownrigg, at NFSA, and I started working together. We started a teaching program about archival research methodology using the National Library and National Film and Sound Archive collections. So we built that into all of our honours and graduate programs which we were developing at the same time. I became the Dean of the graduate program in Music and Electronic Arts. So we had a kind of a terrific network of people and collaborators that we could gather together. So anyway, as a result of that, I started to put together an even bigger collaboration that was called the National Network Facility for Research in Australian Music (NFRAM). The partners were ANU who was the lead organisation, NLA, AMC, NFSA, Monash University and La Trobe University. So, we put together this six partner collaboration and got the largest grant ever at that time in music or the humanities for conducting a research program to develop an infrastructure and build that network. I really started to understand the power of big data, technology, and archives and the new possibilities for access to researchers. One of the realisations that came out of all this work for me was how little Australian music was promoted in this country and how fragmented the resources were across Australia.

MB: What are your thoughts on what the drivers of change were that pushed the idea of a network for music forward?

RH: My generation learnt music from scores and we were taught a whole set of skills to read scores, to hear music from scores, and to make music from scores. That was kind of the art that you had. But increasingly that method is giving way to the practice of using the oral world as the primary means of learning.

MB: Interesting shift from text to sound based learning.

RH: Yes. As a classically trained musician I had not understood just how influential the popular music industry was, and the impact the developing recording technologies could have on teaching and learning. This shift from score to sound really gained momentum during the 1960s. So, my interest turned to looking at ways in which we could build the relationship between context and link the score and sound together. It was this idea that we were experimenting with in constructing the national network facility.

By the end of the 1990s, the NLA approached me and asked me to come and lead their national reference group to consider what needed to be done for music within the big collecting institutions, both national and state, in order to improve access. I led this reference group and we targeted people from around Australia to represent the different sectors which included the libraries, archives and music organisations and brought them all together for a 'think tank'. The reference group developed the Australian bibliographic network which later became Libraries Australia.

MB: Did this project have an impact on collecting and cataloguing?

RH: As a result of this national reference project the NLA moved away from big collecting during the 1990s to put more resource into its cataloguing. This change of direction was based on the realisation about the size of the backlog and that few of their wonderful collections were controlled or accessible. By the end of the 1990s, after years of cataloguing, the library started to look outwards again and think about how to get better exposure for their collections. The library recognised the need for leadership in this area so created the new role of music curator. I successfully secured the position so left ANU and took up my new post at NLA and started on building the collections, which included the acquisition of Peter Sculthorpe, Don Banks and Keith Humble. I also brought my previous experience in 'big picture' management to the role and focussed my efforts on building the library's strategic relationships with its industry partners and stakeholders and promote the collections to a wider audience. It was at this moment that I was introduced to oral history and the sound preservation staff. So suddenly my interest widened from just classical music.

Up until my appointment at NLA I had spent much of my time in music schools learning to make very high level evaluative judgments about music. Whereas when I joined the library, I became more focused on thinking about significance into the future, about the power of music to express culture in the broadest sense and what would still be important in one hundred years. So I really shifted my thinking about music itself by coming to the library.

A project I was involved in at NLA was looking at the question of library infrastructure, which at that time was KINETICA, a bibliographic network that later became Libraries Australia in 2005. In 2001 to 2002 we got permission to start building a pilot online discovery service called Music Australia. It was developed by NLA in partnership with NFSA, AMC, and later with state libraries and the university sector. Its aim was to provide a network

which connected audio recordings, pictures, scores, multimedia and artists websites via a single interface. It included a broad range of genres from the historical to the experimental and soundscapes. During the 2000s NLA hosted both Music Australia and Picture Australia.

MB: You were talking about a broad range of contributors to this project including musicians, composers and artists. Could you explain what their responsibilities were in terms of data creation?

RH: Yes. We provided information on our website specifically for creators to use and help them develop and organise their data to make it interoperable and compliant with our data schema. We designed the system so that when their data was ready for upload we could pick it up from a range of sources.

A big breakthrough moment for Music Australia was the successful integration of score and audio data schemas. Later the library decided to bring all its services together including Picture Australia and Music Australia under a single system which went on to become TROVE. The TROVE model was based on the successful multi format schematic model used by Music Australia, with the exception of access to digitised newspapers. TROVE has gone on to become a powerful and popular tool for research. Its search and refine functionality is excellent. An example of its searching capacity was a search I conducted on Peter Tahourdin's Ragas for a launch I did for his collection in Melbourne.

MB: What do you think the future holds for the preservation of sound and sound itself and Australian music?

RH: Recent developments and improvements in audio technology and its availability has meant that music has become ubiquitous and can be heard everywhere. However, what we have sacrificed to some extent by making it so readily available is the quality of sound. Once upon a time we listened to it live or at home on our hi-fi systems – listening used to be more of an experience. Now we are now living in a world of the low-grade MP3 format and compressed formats that are not at the level you need to get into the deep nuances of the music. The quality of sound on television is poor in relation to the brilliance of the picture. I think there is an imbalance of attention on the visual aspects of movies, gaming, and entertainment, and sound comes a poor second.

Sound is such a vibrant part of the way we experience the world, I just hope the great advantages and facility that we get from the digital is matched by the quality of the actual product.

Sound, and sound quality, is a bit of a life's mission for me. It is my passion!

On behalf of ASRA, many thanks go to Robyn Holmes for her enduring vision and contribution to Australia's sound and audio heritage.

References

Holmes, R. & Ayres, M-L, 2005. "Australia's Music Online in Time." In *National Library of Australia News,* May 2005, pp. 3–7.

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