INSIDE THE MUSICIAN
Richard Vella
From composing to action

Richard Vella and Cara

1. Introduction

When I was asked to write a piece for *Inside the Musician*, I interpreted the request to write about my world view as a composer. To write about one's world view in 2000 words was a daunting challenge as world views involve belief systems, ethics, values, and experiences. My world view starts primarily from being a composer. Everything I have done, or do, is informed by my sense of self as a composer.

I have selected some activities that speak to various aspects of my world view which I consider significant. Some of these activities no longer exist, others have evolved to become something else. However, one activity that has not changed is my need to compose.

Composing defines my identity. This identity consists of two intermeshed influences: i) the love of forms, vocabularies, and structures; and ii) the use of experimental music processes such as chance, indeterminism, and post-minimal techniques. Aspects of these influences can be heard in my recently released orchestral work *Colours of Memory* (2019).

However, things are not as neat as that. Music making for me is fundamentally sensory.[1] It is from this starting point that representations about form and ideas emanate. The philosopher Susan Langer (1985-1995) aptly sums up the inner meaningfulness that music evokes (i.e., feeling, motion and emotion), and its ability to relate to the world beyond language. Music's significance, she writes, "is that of a symbol, a highly articulated, sensuous object, which … can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey" (Langer 1953, p 53).

Communicating this significance necessitates *action* through some type of representation such as notation, texts, or codification though gestures or procedures. This action, in my work, has involved writing, talking and theorising about music; and creating new contexts. One approach involves the use of analogy where something explains something else. Such a conceptual leap requires something outside of logic but demands a rigorous logic for plausibility.[2] However, analogy is not always the starting point. Put simply, sometimes my composing involves an analogy looking for content, or content looking for an analogy.

This approach is grounded in hermeneutics: the interpretation of texts, its processes and systems. The words 'text', and 'texture' from music, have the same root: i.e. *texere* weaving together. As well as being something written, a text can also be a performance, recording, film, or installation. My work *Music, Being, and the Spaces Between* (2005-2023) demonstrates my approach to hermeneutics using analogy and other rhetorical devices such as irony.

The following examples demonstrate my necessity for *action* as mentioned above. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls this the "hermeneutics of action" (Ricoeur 2007). The actions discussed here involve the creation of new contexts in education, performance, or publishing. All exemplify engagement with my external world from a composer's perspective. Spanning the last 30 years, their common themes concern collaboration, analogical thinking, context creation, or the promotion of diverse perspectives. Each activity is preceded with a composition from that time.

2. Macquarie University interdisciplinary music program (1992-1996)

Convergence No. 1
Performed by the Sydney Alpha Ensemble
(dur: 7 min 7 secs)

> *Both [art and science] value ... creativity. Both propose to introduce change, innovation, or improvement over what exists. Both use abstract models to understand the world. Both aspire to create works that have universal relevance.*
> *(Wilson, 2002, p 18)*

In 1991 I approached Professor Di Yerbury, Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University, to establish, what I believe to be the first time in Australia, tertiary music study within a school of science. I chose the School of Mathematics, Physics, Computing and Electronics to explore intersections between science, music, creativity and problem solving. Although Wilson's above quote was written ten years later, it speaks to my initiative.

The program adopted an interdisciplinary approach so that new career and research paths could be created. I felt that future careers could benefit from an interdisciplinary approach where the creative arts, in this case music, informs problem solving and modelling new outcomes. According to Mary Hesse (1924-2016), in her seminal book, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Hesse 1966), a model, along with analogy and metaphor, is a process towards discovery. This underpinned my approach at Macquarie University. This exciting work not only attracted science students, but also, students and researchers from other disciplines including linguistics, education, philosophy, mass media and psychology.[3]

I was originally viewed with much suspicion from the scientists. Many thought I was going to take away their funding. When asked why I was in a science school, I responded: "because you are just as creative as I am". This always worked because at the heart of the Macquarie project

was the relationship between model, analogy, creative thinking and the various symbolic representations and communication of ideas. As well as textualization, both the sciences and creative arts use visualisation, sonification, spatialisation and physicalisation to experience and communicate information and knowledge.

After leaving the university in 1996, the program was transferred to Media and Communications resulting with the discontinuation of interdisciplinary connections with the sciences. However, it did lay the foundations for a music degree at Macquarie University.

3. Calculated Risks Opera Productions (1990-2002)

Tango
Performed by Peter Jenkin (clarinet) & Daniel Herscovitch (piano)
(dur: 2 min 24 sec)

I formed Calculated Risks Opera Productions to explore the many roles of music in performance including hybridised genres, music theatre, and new approaches to the operatic form.[4] Through my professional experiences in theatre and film, I wanted to show alternative uses of music other than conventional approaches such as emotional or dramatic underscoring, and signposting (for example: the use of a crescendo to signify an end of a scene). Fundamental to all the productions was the question "what is the difference between a music performance in a concert format as opposed to a theatrical format"? In other words, what impact does experiencing a performance in a space have on the understanding of the music? The ethos of Calculated Risks was that music in a space is inherently theatrical.[5]

Important areas underpinning performances in new opera and music theatre were:
- interdisciplinary artistic collaboration
- researching new modes of repertoire presentation
- investigations into the use of space and location
- the work's relationship to the audience's expectation and engagement.
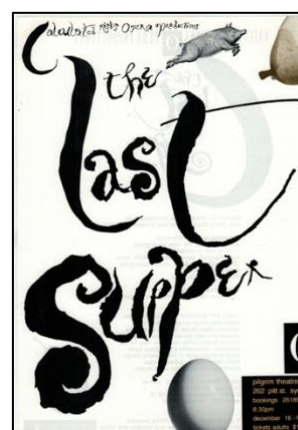- combining new modes of delivery with traditional modes of delivery.

The posters below refer to all premiere productions, with follow up tours (listed by city) in subsequent years. Links to sample videos can be accessed for *The Last Supper* (1992-1995); Bodysongs (1998); and Tales of Love, version 2 (2002)
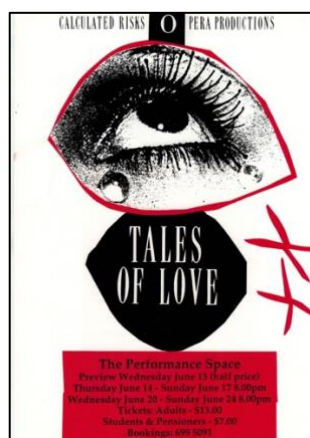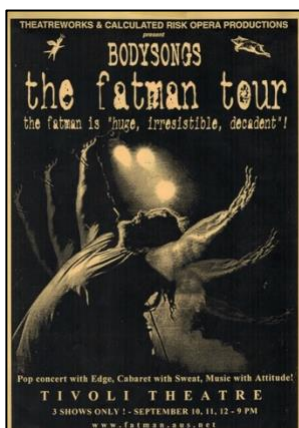

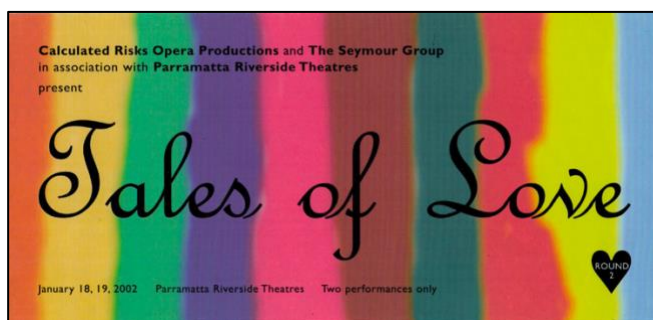Tales of Love 1990 - 1992
Sydney Perth
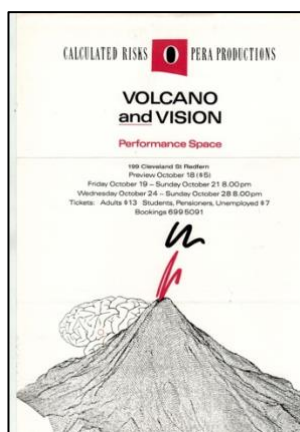
Volcano & Vision 1990
Sydney

The Last Supper 1992-1995
Sydney-Melbourne-Hobart-Osaka, Japan

Bodysongs 1998
Melbourne Brisbane

Tales of Love (Version 2) 2002
Sydney

Each production's theatricalization was totally collaborative. Collaboration is often confused with cooperation. The path towards true collaboration is humorously summed up by Sjölander (born 1940) below where the real beginning occurs when there is listening, dialogue, risk taking, and the development of a shared language and common goals.

10 stages towards collaboration[6]
1. Singing the old songs
2. They on the other sides are all idiots
3. Retreating into abstraction
4. Definition sickness
5. Fruitful discussion
6. The glass bead game
7. Great failure
8. What is happening to me?
9. Getting to know the enemy
10. The real beginning

(Sverre Sjölander, 1985)

After operating for twelve years Calculated Risks ceased activities in 2002.

4. Music Publishing

Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra
Performed by Simone de Haan (soloist) with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
(dur: 21 min)

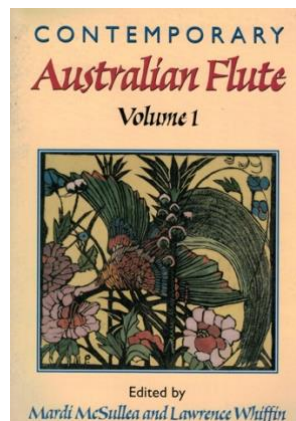Another example of my world view leading to action is music publishing. Rainer Linz and I co-founded New Music Articles (NMA) in 1982. Building on previous publications such as The new music newspaper and the New Music Magazine, its approach was dedicated to documenting new music and new ideas about music nationally.[7]

Once I relocated to Sydney, Rainer took total charge of NMA. In the late 1980s publisher Katharine Brisbane asked me to implement a music publishing program with Currency Press (1989 – 2001). I was responsible for the commissioning of titles on music research, biography, cultural history, pedagogy and performance.
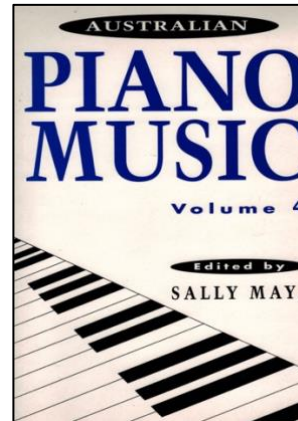
Important was employing musicians to edit instrumental anthologies based on Australian compositions. This was similar to the approach used by Hungarian publishers in the first half of last century.[8] My intention was to provide new Australian repertoire for instrumentalists, and create a publishing ecosystem which engaged with music communities be they scholars, vocalists, instrumentalists, teachers, writers and composers.[9]
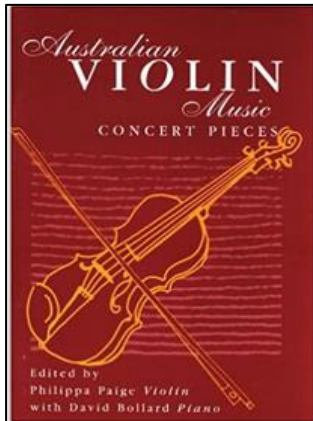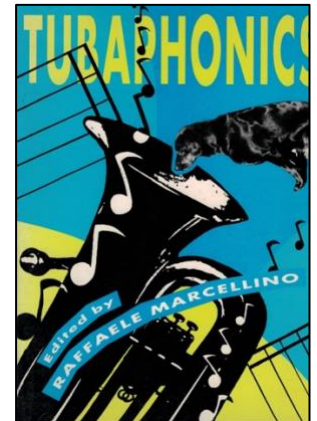

| Australian Violin Music
Phillipa Paige (ed)
with David Bollard | Contemporary Australian Flute.
Mardie McSullea &
Laurie Whiffin (eds) | Australian Piano Music.
Sally Mays (ed). | Tubaphonics
Raffaele Marcellino (ed) |

Unfortunately, this utopian initiative was discontinued for a number of reasons, the main ones being: endless problems with distribution (the digital music publishing environment was still in its infancy); Australia's small population and little appetite for Australian print music; unsuccessful attempts in being listed in the AMEB and HSC syllabi.

5. Curriculum renewal, University of Newcastle Conservatorium of Music (2007 – 2013)

Water/Va Pensiero
Performed by The Ten Tenors
(dur: 4 min 8 sec)

> *Recontextualising rules were said to constitute specific pedagogic discourses ...Pedagogic discourse itself rests on the rules which create specialised communications through which pedagogic subjects are selected and created.*
> *(Basil Bernstein 2000, p 31)*

From late 2007 to 2013, I was Head of School, Creative Arts, at the University of Newcastle[10]. Simultaneous to the Head of School role, I was professorial chair of music at the Newcastle Conservatorium of Music. This involved revising the music curriculum to be financially viable and relevant to the various demographics living in the Hunter region, NSW.

Within three years of study, there is only so much content one can teach in a degree. The changes I implemented were based on:
- Diversity
- Collaboration
- Syncretism

The challenge was to implement a program that addressed a diverse student population. While there was a healthy number of classically trained students, most students came from a contemporary popular music background: guitarists, singers, and to a lesser degree, keyboard players. Bernstein's above quote refers to the creation of new rules and pedagogies to enable curriculum change. This was achieved through the promotion of students' creativity, student/teacher collaborations, and having technological facility.[11] Improvisations and composition were used for repertoire creation and problem solving.[12]

Music is a multivalent system. This enables the possibility for syncretism where values not only sit alongside one another but also mix to create new values. Syncretism and collaboration provided the basis for the degree's ethos. Students from different styles and genres continually negotiated values either explicitly in class or implicitly through cultural immersion and collaboration.

Due to restructuring, the curriculum I implemented was changed after my role as Head of School ended. However, some of the basic principles are still in place.

6. Summary and Afterword

The examples I have discussed result from my world view as a composer. This not only refers to the creation of structures (be they compositions or new contexts), but also to many processes and strategies that involve people interactions or problem solving.

I also feel the examples that I have chosen, allude to some key issues that never seem to go away: the problem of living in a large country with a small population, a one size fits all higher education system; funding models driven by neoliberalism, the limited amount of arts funding to adequately support the immensity and diversity of artistic practice, and the need for better documentation and awareness of Australia's rich history of music makers.

My brief and somewhat undercooked discussion on hermeneutics does not fully reflect its importance. The flip side of interpreting a text is the need to understand that text. Being a composer has necessitated Paul Ricoeur's *hermeneutics of action*[13] in the real world. These actions are underpinned by the need to communicate understanding which, in my case, are then translated into the areas of publishing, teaching, writing or in performance contexts.

To conclude, the following work *Conflict* (2023) for chamber ensemble, represents many of the ideas discussed in this essay. Belonging to the previously mentioned work *Music, Being, and the Spaces Between,* 'Conflict' is a hermeneutic excursion into concepts of conflict in which musical textures oscillate between agonistic and antagonistic approaches to conflict. In agonistic conflict, unity is achieved through opposition (for example, the contest of ideas, sporting teams, even contrapuntal thinking in music). Antagonistic conflict is defined by disunity, enmity, and negation. Of the two, a discursive agonistic approach is far better.[14]

REFERENCES
Bernstein, Basil (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, Rowman & Littlefield, revised edition.
Hesse, Mary (1966) *Models and Analogies in Science,* Notre Dame.
Langer, Susan (1953) *Feeling and Form*. Charles Scribner's Sons New York, p 53.
Ricoeur, Paul (2007) *From Text to Action, essays in hermeneutics*. Northwestern University Press.

Sjölander Sverre, (1985). 'Long-term and short-term interdisciplinary work: Difficulties, pitfalls, and built-in failures'. In, L. Levin & I. Lind (Eds.), Interdisciplinarity revisited (pp. 85-101). Stockholm: OECD, SNBUC, Linköping University.

Wilson, Stephen (2003), *Information Arts*. MIT Press, p 3.

ENDNOTES

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) has written extensively about the sensory relationship between one's subjectivity and the external world. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith (trans.), New York: Humanities Press, p. 475

[2] Analogical logic has played an important role in many of my PhD supervisions of creative practice which have involved the use of modelling and theory building.

[3] For more information see the following Australian Music Centre publication: Richard Vella (1994) 'Music at Macquarie University'. *Sounds Australian*, Vol.43

[4] The book *Arias: recent Australian music theatre* by John Jenkins and Rainer Linz (1997) Redhouse Editions devotes a chapter to the work of Calculated Risks Opera Productions. See chapter 3.

[5] In a much earlier article, I discuss the relationship to music theatre and space: 'Music/Theatre as a theatre of ideas', NMA8. https://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/repr/Music_theatre.html

[6] The original heading for this list has been adapted from '10 stages towards interdisciplinarity' to '10 stages towards collaboration' as interdisciplinarity and collaboration have much in common.

[7] Warren Burt's article 'Australian music in the seventies' provides an overview to the period. https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/guides/1970s

[8] Two examples are: Sally Mays, *Australian Piano Music, Vols 1 – 5* which was modelled on Bartok's 'Mikrokosmos for piano'; and Phillip Paige's *Australian Violin Music, concert pieces*, a compilation for the year 12 violin syllabus.

[9] See here for a full list of all publications I instigated or oversaw with Currency Press.

[10] The school was originally called Drama Fine Art & Music (2005-2010). With school staff consensus it was changed to Creative Arts (2011-2017) to encourage an interdisciplinary culture. After a brief renaming to Creative Industries (2018-2021), largely in response to a Neoliberal funding climate, the school now no longer exists.

[11] The following two public presentations discuss these curriculum innovations in more detail. Linked to the *Public Presentations* tab are: 'The 21st Century Conservatorium' (2007); and 'The conservatorium and the music industry'(2016).

[12] I asked staff to co-write articles about Improvisation and Collaboration. Two examples are: i) Vella, R., English, H. (2015). 'Embedding Creative and Critical Thinking in Performance Studies' – The Challenge. In, Lebler, D., Carey, G., Harrison, S. (eds) *Assessment in Music Education: from Policy to Practice*. Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education, vol 16. Springer; and ii) Richard Vella, Linda Walsh, Nathan Scott, Tracy Redhead (2013). 'Collaborative Music Making at the University of Newcastle Conservatorium of Music' XIX National ASME Conference, Canberra 2013

[13] A *hermeneutics of action* is referred to in the Introduction of this essay.

[14] Agonism and collaboration have much in common especially in the arts. The following PhD thesis provides an in-depth discussion on various understandings of the word collaboration in arts practice: Minski, K. (2020) *Collaboration in experimental art: case studies in co-creation, transdisciplinarity and art-science practice at Ars Electronica Futurelab*. University of Newcastle Research Higher Degree Thesis.
https://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/uon:37468?view=null&f0=sm_subject%3A%22transdisciplinarity%22&sort=sort_ss_title+asc