

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

‘The Music is Dancing Free’: An Interview with Felicity Wilcox

Kath Nelligan

Felicity Wilcox (or Felicity Fox as she is known for her film work) is a Sydney-based composer working in film and concert music. Her commissions include film-music scores for documentaries, feature films, television series and short dramas. She has received a number of nominations for APRA and AFI awards, and was appointed the assistant music director and composer for the opening ceremony of the 2000 Paralympics. Her concert works have been performed by the Sydney Symphony Fellows, Halcyon Ensemble and Kammerklang Vox. She recently completed a PhD in composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music composing three works that explore concert music in a multi-media setting.



KN: You have quite an extensive resume as a composer. This includes a number of film-music scores as well as performances of concert music. How did your career in music composition begin?

FW: The first film I did was in 1986 and I have been composing for film consistently ever since. My mother is a documentary film maker and she asked me if I would like to do the music for one of the films she was working on. I went away and did a few sketches. She and the editor thought they were fine, so that was pretty much my first job. I was also doing an Arts degree at Sydney University at the time. One of my subjects was in music composition, and I had tutorials with Peter Sculthorpe, Eric Gross and Peter Platt. I didn't finish the degree, but it certainly set a precedent for my career in composition. I wanted as many commissions as I

could I get, so I decided to really focus on composing and getting television work. I worked fairly consistently from 1986 to 1999. In 2000, I felt it was time to learn more about my craft as a composer. I wanted to deepen what I was doing; I wanted to learn everything there is to know, so I decided to return to tertiary study. I enrolled in an undergraduate music degree at the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney. Although I continued doing commissions for film, this is when I began writing concert style works.

KN: You've written the music for a number of films by Shark Island Productions. Their work often addresses confronting social issues, such as *Wallboy*, the story of a young boy who is forced into sex work, and *The Oasis*, a documentary commenting on Sydney's troubled and disadvantaged youth. Were these just like any other works, or do you feel strongly about music and art and their capacity for social commentary?

FW: I do. I think that is why I have ended up doing a lot of documentary work and have done well in this genre. I am quite political—not in a direct way—but I have very strong beliefs, and I come from a family that is very politically aware. So it matters to me, what I am spending my time on, and who I am working with; these are aspects of my work that are important. I find by working on documentaries that focus on social or welfare issues, you get to work with people who are really passionate about what they are doing. It is easy to get involved in the subject matter, and you can commit a bit more of yourself to it. I really love working with Shark Island because they are a great team of people, but they are also very socially committed. Sally Fryer, the editor, is the person who got me involved with Shark Island. We had already worked together on a number of projects. What often happens is that you develop an ongoing relationship with editors and directors, and this can lead to more commissions. If you work well together, and they get to know you, your style, and what it is that you do well, you can form long-term relationships with people in the industry and this enables future collaborations.

KN: You are currently completing a PhD in composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Did you abandon your film music pursuits in order to take up this new path?

FW: I was quite busy composing for film during my undergraduate degree, and I continue to compose for film while completing my doctorate. But in the last few years my doctorate has intensified, so I haven't been doing as much film work. I was lucky enough to receive a scholarship to complete my doctorate, so this has helped financially and has allowed me to be selective about when I work. But when the doctorate finishes I'll certainly pursue more film work. Although I would like to leave room for pursuing my own multi-media concert work that has come out of this doctorate.

KN: Who did you study with while completing your doctoral research and how much have they influenced your approach to composition?

FW: For the first year of my doctorate my supervisor was Mary Finsterer, and then it was Damien Ricketson for the remaining three and a half years. Finsterer's influence has brought out the more visceral and earthy aspects of my composition. I admire the beauty and fragility of Ricketson's writing and I think his influence has encouraged me to bring this out in my own composition. Perhaps the greatest thing Ricketson has passed onto me is to fully own whatever I am trying to do with the music, to be bold and to push a gesture to its extreme.

KN: Can you tell us more about your doctoral work? What are you investigating in your research?

FW: The focus of my research is concert music in a multi-media setting. I am not looking at all multi-media; sound and film is such a large field. I am specifically interested in concert music, such as chamber music, orchestral music or solo pieces. I have written a large-scale work for string orchestra, singers, percussion and electronics. I also have another one for electronics, viola da gamba, saxophone, and spoken word, and I have a smaller piece for chamber ensemble. All of these works are accompanied by images. So they are chamber works in the traditional sense, or electro-acoustic works, and they have images working with them. It is a challenging area because the concert hall is such a sacred setting. Multi-media is more likely to appear either at a rock concert, or in an electronic music setting, but not so much in the concert hall. It's kind of like the last frontier.

KN: What are the challenges of marrying multi-media and concert music given that they do not traditionally appear together?

FW: There are no challenges creatively; the main challenge lies in getting the work performed because it's outside of the box. It's quite difficult getting a work for chamber ensemble plus surround sound and image commissioned. I'd like to have the works performed, but I am also interested in connecting with the people who are already doing this kind of work, like Richard Tognetti and the ACO (Australian Chamber Orchestra). He does this type of hybrid concert work probably once a year, or once every couple of years. It would be great if I could find out more about the way he works. There are people starting to do it, but it's a tough one to get staged. That is the main challenge. Creatively the work is heaven. I love it! It is so free in comparison to writing music for film. In my doctoral work I accompany the music with images rather than the music supporting the visual medium. There are many people re-writing scores for silent film at the moment—it's a silent film revival—but even this musical interpretation of film is not as free as the work I do. With silent film you are still working with a film that is a separate entity, something that has already been done, it has already been created before the music. What I do differently, and others like me, is to create the music first; then I accompany the music with images. That way, the images follow the music, and not the other way around. This is what really distinguishes my work from film music or silent film, or any similar marriage of image and music. My work always begins with a pencil and manuscript paper. It always begins with the score, and until the score is done, or at least quite thoroughly drafted, I haven't put any images to it; so I don't start with a locked-down image. Really it is a reversal of what happens in film. In film I normally get an advanced assembly, or a fine cut of the images, and it's locked down, so you have to put your music to it. Aspects of the music, like rhythm, pacing and phrasing are all locked in and dictated, and what the film composer is doing is following the phrasing of the visual medium. Whereas with my concert work, I am setting up the rhythms, paces, phrases, the shapes and structural elements; these aspects of the music are set before the image, so they are not dictated by the visual medium.

KN: You explain on your website (www.felicityfox.com.au) that these works overturn the traditional sound/image relationship, and you have just described how you achieve this. You also say that composing art music has allowed you to explore territory that you would

not normally have the freedom to explore in film music. Is this new territory the inversion of the sound/image relationship?

FW: It's partly the inversion of the sound/image relationship, but it is also the greater abstraction that I can explore through my art music. Film isn't usually abstract; it's a narrative medium. It is a medium for story-telling, and with television it is often about facts. It's tightly scripted and it's about concepts, narration and information. Certainly this medium appeals to me in one sense. I have already spoken about how I am inspired by documentary work because the information presented is grounded in reality, but the other side of exploring new territory is through working with images that are completely abstract; there is no narrative, no A to B, no story line, apart from the musical structure.

KN: So by exploring new territory, have you found that you adopt a new approach to composition?

FW: That's a good question. The one thing a film composer learns pretty quickly is not to clutter the available space. If you don't learn it, then the director will soon tell you 'that's too busy' or 'that's too loud,' or 'can you take away three layers,' and what eventuates is music that functions as a support for the image. It's music that is more often textural, and the focus becomes timbre and texture rather than melody, or anything else that grabs attention. Concert music, on the other hand, is designed to take all your attention and to be very engaging. So in writing concert music that is designed to work with images, I employ the whole breadth of my technical skills as an art music composer. I focus on creating music that is textural and subtle, as well as attention grabbing, so I bring the two skills together. I should point out that the image isn't always present in my works. There are sections without images, and the audience watches the ensemble do their thing. In these sections, I tend to let the music be more foreground and more driving. Then I get to a place where I pull the music back. I want it to become more sensual. I want to foreground the physical properties of the music, like timbre for example, rather than the harmony and the melody. In those sections the image fits really well because I am aiming for a more abstract and sensory experience. So I am drawing on all the knowledge I have of composing and I bring together two different compositional approaches: one approach foregrounds harmony and melody, and the other foregrounds texture and timbre. So, yes, I would say that I am composing differently.

KN: You mentioned that formal study encouraged you to expand beyond film-music composition to write more concert-style works, which is clearly a shift in genre. But what about your approach to composition? Have either your supervisors or your doctoral work pushed your compositional approach in directions or places you weren't expecting to go?

FW: Not really. I think I had a clearer idea than many other students I speak to about what I wanted from the PhD. The proposal I wrote at the outset was fairly close to what I ended up doing. Many people completely reframe content and direction through the course of the degree. I had spent twenty years doing industry-based composition before starting the PhD, and with my doctorate, I wanted to do everything I couldn't do in commercial work! The idea to invert the music-image relationship was the whole point. Of course my teachers imparted great tips based on their experience and knowledge and taught me a discipline and new techniques that

I will continue to draw on for the rest of my career, both in the film composition I do and in the concert works I compose. However, the direction and underpinning ideas for all of my folio works were very much my own and a direct result of the maturity I brought to the study as an established artist. So, yes, they pushed me in that they taught me technique and rigor, but not really in places I wasn't expecting to go.

KN: Do you use technological devices when composing your music?

FW: The acoustic instruments I compose for with pencil and paper, and when I have a solid draft, I use Finale as a notation program. Most of my work has an electronic component so I use technology quite often when composing. Two of my works explore the idea of capturing live performance and processing it in real time, and I do this using loop pedals and delays. Another work showcases an electronic instrument that I created using sample-based material. Michael Askill from Synergy Percussion allowed me to sample his Himalayan singing bowl collection. I sampled forty bowls, and these became the sound tones for the instrument. I treated the samples with equalisation and effects, and I re-tuned them to Just Intonation. The samples are triggered either with a keyboard or percussion controller and diffused in surround sound. So it's a virtual instrument that becomes part of the ensemble. The rest of the percussion ranges from bells, cymbals, gongs, tams, a vibraphone, bowed crotales. I deliberately chose percussive instruments with a resonant sound to compliment the electronic instrument, and although the electronics inhabit a different acoustic space by being diffused in surround sound, the overall sound world of the piece is well integrated. The singing bowls are the original sound source and the EQ and effects really heighten the samples. I also put the bowl-tone samples through a plug-in designed by Michael Norris; he calls it a 'spectral processor.' I'm not familiar with the technicalities of how it works specifically, but I have played with the plug-in a lot, creating sounds that are really removed from the original sound source. These are completely electronic textures, but they've all been derived from the samples of the singing bowls.

KN: So you've really manipulated the timbre of the bowl sounds. Does it resemble the original sound at all?

FW: Not when I apply the spectral processing, but the electronic instrument still sounds like the original bowl tones. The tuning is different from the original, but the timbre is very much the same. Once the samples are put through the spectral processor, the original sound source is unrecognisable. So electronics are featured throughout much of my work, and technology is utilised at different levels and extremes to achieve these sounds. Even with my film work I do electro-acoustic scores, so I am often working with both electronic and acoustic components. I like mixing the two.

KN: In relation to art music composition, and particularly in relation to the use of technology to compose music, many would argue that women are under-represented in this field. What are your thoughts on this? Do you agree?

FW: For sure! I think it's definitely an issue. There are some incredible women doing this line of work, but we are under-represented. I think technology is still a male domain. I am not entirely sure why, because I have been working with technology since the late 1980s, and

things have changed since then. In the late '80s I would walk into a studio and it would be a novelty because I am a woman!! Whereas I don't think that is the case anymore; twenty-five years later things have moved on to some extent, but technology still seems to exclude women, and I am not sure why. Maybe it's because it's developed, researched, and largely used, by men. Some women are brilliant with technology but they are rare. More often you see men working with highly complex programs, like Max MSP and other high-end level technology. I think a good approach would be to engage in more collaborative works where composers with different strengths can come together on a project. I would personally love to see an institution like IRCAM in Australia. They offer residencies where a programmer is assigned to work with a composer. The programmer isn't seen as a drone; they are viewed as a fully fledged creative person in their own right. What the residencies at this institution encourage is creative collaboration between those who don't have technical minds to feed into people that do, and vice versa. I would love to see our institutions setting up those kinds of partnerships, because that is exactly the type of thing that would benefit women. It would open up the doors to more women, myself included. If I want to take this hybrid music to the next level, I have to get into seriously complex technology, like Max MSP and Jitter. There is no reason why I can't do this, but it's just not my strength.

KN: What are you working on at the moment?

FW: I am two months away from my doctoral submission. As you called I was knee-deep in microtones and hemidemisemiquavers!! I am still working on my viola da gamba and saxophone piece that is part of my doctoral work. I have some teaching work lined up for next year. I'll be teaching a course called Composing Music for Images at the Sydney Conservatorium. It's a new subject that hasn't been taught at the Conservatorium so I am excited about developing it. I also want to re-engage with my film work once the doctorate is done.

KN: What do you plan to do in this subject?

FW: This is exciting for the Sydney Conservatorium as it is the first course offered to composition students in film music. As the Con composition students are already very skilled in their craft, I won't be teaching them how to write music but will focus rather on how to adapt their compositional approach to work with images. I will be keeping it fairly practical to give students the greatest possible taste of what is actually involved in this area, covering a variety of screen media including games, television (documentary and drama), film, and multimedia art. The lectures will also examine some of the theory relating to film sound. The students will be required to produce a complete score within a certain genre. They will also learn about administrative and legal aspects of composing for film, such as dealing with clients, contracts, intellectual property and managing budgets.

KN: Speaking of practical work, are you planning to perform your doctorate work once you submit?

FW: I am certainly putting some feelers out! I really feel that these doctoral works should be performed. I owe it to myself and to my collaborators: the visual designers and the performers who have contributed to the recordings and have consulted with me throughout

the development of these works. All of them have worked for free, so I also owe it to them. I am really excited to have the projects performed because I think it's beautiful work. It's definitely something I would like to do and is an avenue I will pursue once I submit.

KN: I would love to hear performances of your work. I think your approach of inverting the sound/image relationship is unique and it would be interesting to hear how this new way of composing with multi-media transpires in a performance context.

FW: There is a great quote by Walter Murch on the sound/image relationship. In explaining that there is no fixed relationship between sound and image, that they are separate entities, he writes 'the shadow is in fact dancing free.' That is pretty much how I think of the music in my hybrid concert work compared to the music in my film work; this time 'the music is dancing free.'