

## COMPOSER INTERVIEW

# Collaboration in Creation: An Interview with Nigel Westlake

*Jillian Graham*

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My interest in interviewing Nigel Westlake came about for a number of reasons: he has enjoyed significant success both as a performer and a composer, his entrée into the world of composition came about in an unusual way, and he seems equally at home composing film or 'commercial' music and concert music. Further inspiration for the interview was provided when I was present at the premiere of his *Piano Concerto* written for Michael Kieran Harvey and first performed with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in Melbourne in November 2000. My questions focussed mainly on his general approach to composition, the transition from performer to composer, differences between the composition of commercial and concert music, and the involvement of his family in his career. The interview was conducted 'in writing' through an exchange of emails.

**You studied clarinet with your father. Was there a significant amount of family pressure to be a good musician?**

I was about ten when I first started learning the clarinet from Don. I was pretty lazy at first and he didn't expect too much. After a while I began going to more and more concerts. Don was a featured soloist with the SSO on many occasions and I have vivid memories of his performances of the Copland, Nielsen, Mozart and Weber concertos. This is what inspired me to work hard at the clarinet and eventually to think in terms of a career in music. Don discouraged me at first, but I think he was probably just testing my commitment to the idea. Coming to the realisation that I had little aptitude or inclination for anything else, I left school in year ten to pursue my clarinet career. Don agreed with my decision on the understanding that I work hard under his supervision. He was my guide and mentor throughout this period and there was a lot of pressure to practise intensively, with the goal of procuring a steady orchestral job.

**Was the transition from being a professional clarinettist to being a successful composer a comfortable one for you?**

The composing thing crept up on me over a long period of time. I never thought I'd be doing it to the exclusion of all else, and ultimately this was a decision brought about by circumstance. My composing commitments began to demand more and more of my attention. I got to the stage where I was no longer interested in practising the clarinet after writing music all day. Unfortunately, I don't play too well if I'm not in practice, so I'd rather not play at all, and consequently haven't played for a few years now. In terms of the bigger picture, composition feels a bit like an expansion of my playing career—a natural evolution. Perhaps it's just casting a wider net, musically speaking.

**One of your biographies says that as a composer you were largely self-taught. Is this a correct statement?**

Largely, but not entirely. Although I arrived at my working methods independently of outside influences, I have had some guidance from a number of composers whose work I admire, namely Richard Meale and Richard Mills. I also did my initial film music studies with William Motzing and spent a brief period with Theo Leovendie in Holland alongside my bass clarinet studies with Harry Sparnaay.

**Are there composers you feel you have been *influenced* by?**

Richard Gill, although not a composer, is one of my musical heroes. He introduced me to many great works by other composers and was an inspiration, particularly in my formative years; but it was Frank Zappa and 'The Mothers of Invention' who initially kicked off my interest in composition. I used to think that if this bloke Frank was able to get away with such musical ratbagery and even make a living from it, then maybe there'd be a place for me to try some of my own noodles. I formed a band and we transcribed some of Zappa's recordings and also wrote some original pieces. Of course, once you start experimenting, it opens your ears up to everything and I soon found myself listening to music in a completely different way.

It's inevitable that one will be influenced by the people whose work one admires (and there are hundreds!), but to develop a clear, individual voice remains a primary aim, each new piece being another step further towards this goal.

**The words 'individual voice' bring to mind the concept of the perceived need for complete originality. How 'complete' do you think this originality in composition needs to be, and how important in your own work is it to strive for your perception of originality?**

Originality and clarity are the qualities I most admire in composition; however, if the truth be known, all my work is probably derived in one way or another from music I've been inspired by. Whilst originality remains a focus, the best I can hope for is to be absorbed by the compositional process and be able to ask myself at the end of the day 'where did that come from?'

**I notice a review from the *Sydney Morning Herald* once referred to your music as being 'at the cutting edge of post-minimalism,' and one from the *Australian* said 'This is music that exposes the nonsense of pigeonholing into categories.' Do you prefer not to be categorised, or could you 'categorise' any of your own music?**

It's good to be at the 'cutting edge' of something I suppose (is 'post-minimalism' when a minimalist gets bored with being minimal?), but I prefer not to be categorised and agree that pigeonholing is a nonsense.

*Omphalo Centric Lecture* has been categorised as minimalist, but I don't think of it in that way. At the time it was written, I had been listening to African *balafo*n music, long before I had even heard of the minimalist school. I have never aspired to produce work that could be categorised—I'll leave that to the critics.

**Is there a conscious attempt to achieve an 'Australian style' in your music?**

People have said to me that they hear the sounds of the Australian landscape in my work, but there is no conscious attempt by me to sound 'Australian'—I'm simply finding ways of putting notes together in a manner that is somehow aesthetically pleasing. The music is not attempting to express anything other than itself. Having said that, I would probably be producing a very different sound if I were living elsewhere.

**Do you think a distinctively Australian sound exists?**

In terms of notated composition, there are several established composers who have managed to embrace some intangible qualities that I would consider Australian. Two that come immediately to mind are Peter Sculthorpe and Ross Edwards. Not only do they have an instantly recognisable trademark sound, but it is one that is difficult to imagine emanating from anywhere else in the world. At a time when there are thousands of composers all vying for attention, and in a country where non-commercial creative pursuit is largely absent from the nation's psyche, that is a great achievement.

**The statement you just made about the nation's psyche is quite a strong one. To what extent do you feel restricted in your work by this cultural climate? Would your creative life be better-nourished somewhere overseas?**

I'm not sure the infrastructure exists in any country to support adequately non-commercial contemporary concert music. After all, what percentage of a given population has the slightest interest in the work of the 'arthouse' composer community? So much energy has been spent on turning audience alienation into an art form that composers have only themselves to blame. Even though my concert work has received committed support from a number of prominent musical institutions, it would be impossible for me to continue working as a full-time composer if I didn't pursue my own commercial agenda in the form of film music. This functional use of my work also helps me to clarify my position in the community as one that has some relevance, and that allows me the freedom to indulge my interests in concert music.

**Although you acknowledge the necessity of having your 'own commercial agenda,' you seem also to have had a desire to write film music. Given that you studied at the Australian Film and Television School in 1982, relatively early in your career, do you have a preference for composing either functional or concert music?**

I don't have a preference either way. Even though each strand of composition places a very different set of expectations on the composer, I generally gain a great deal of satisfaction from working in both areas. In contrast to the isolation of composing concert music, film can be a much more collaborative process, and working closely with a good film director can be a

fascinating experience. They might push your work into areas you wouldn't normally consider. It can also be gratifying to see your work exploited in such a functional manner. I always hope to emerge from a film with some new skills, and try to utilise the experience to try new ideas wherever possible.

**Do you have a personal 'creative process' you consciously follow or naturally find yourself following when composing a piece of music?**

The creative process is in some ways a mystery to me. I might embark on a new work armed with two basic concepts, the germ of an idea and an overview of the shape and form of the final work. By constantly asking myself what needs to occur to my basic idea in order for it to germinate and for it to be transformed into the finished work, I subject it to a series of rigorous processes and refinements.

One of the techniques I employ to kick-start the creative process when commencing a new piece is to imagine the performers I am writing for, poised ready to perform. Then if I listen really carefully (to my imagination) I can actually hear the piece I am about to write—or at least bits of it. Being familiar with the musical strengths of the musicians for whom you are writing is a key factor in this strange and esoteric process. Ideas evolve from focusing on the musical identities and trademark sounds of the players; phrases and textures somehow become permeated with their personalities.

**This aim of yours, articulated above and elsewhere, described by you as to 'try to explore ideas that (you) imagine will work with the musical chemistry of the performers,' was certainly evident in the piano concerto you composed for Michael Kieran Harvey. Does this mean that most of your commissions are for individuals or groups that you are familiar with or, in a case where they are not so familiar, that you make a conscious effort to 'get to know' the performers and their playing prior to writing the music?**

I find it really important and somehow crucial to the compositional process to know for whom I am writing, on both a musical and a personal level. This concept may become a little esoteric in the case of a very large ensemble or orchestra, but most of my work has been commissioned by or for musicians whom I have either played with at some time or happen to know quite well. If not, I will make sure I am familiar with their playing, and then it's a matter of finding out what sort of piece might be useful in the context of their existing repertoire, and what the expectations of their audiences are. In the case of the piano concerto, it was my response to Michael's passion for and commitment to challenging, new music. Consequently, it's a fairly muscular work, highly virtuosic and with a powerful rhythmic impetuosity. By contrast, most of the music I've written for John Williams is a response to the lyricism and warmth of his playing, which is in keeping with his stylistic preference and also his audience's expectations.

**How important to you is a clear structure in your music, as a framework for you, and as a means of holding the listener's attention?**

I am only just beginning to realise the importance of structure. After all, a good idea is meaningless without it. As your initial ideas develop and evolve, the structure will reveal itself. I am always conscious of looking for it right from the start. If the structure is functioning well as a framework, then hopefully it will hold the listener's attention.

**Does it then follow that the listener needs to be able to describe or 'name' that structure, or that an underlying but not necessarily immediately discernible structure contributes to making the listener more aware of what the music is?**

Good structure imbues a work with an inherent logic. It needn't be immediately discernible to the listener, but perhaps perceived by the listener on a subconscious level as an experience that is in some way aesthetically appealing.

**Many of your works have quite evocative names, including *Omphalo Centric Lecture*, *Our Mum was a Waterfall* and *Tall Tales*. What comes first, the title or the notes?**

The notes almost always come first. The title comes when you sit back and look at what you've created.

**You also do some conducting. Is this an important, enjoyable part of your musical career?**

I like to conduct my film recording sessions whenever possible. It can be a fairly terrifying experience initially and although I'm no great conductor, I know what I want. For me, the conductor/performer relationship works best when there is a mutual respect between the two. My experience as an orchestral player has made me conscious of the fact that orchestral musicians are very intolerant of authoritarian egomaniacs. As a conductor, I believe I am creating the music in partnership with the performers and their interpretation is a crucial part of the final work. The last score I conducted was for the Imax film *Solarmax* which has opened recently in Europe and the US. The orchestra comprised many players from the SSO and the cream of the freelance scene in Sydney. When listening again to the takes from those sessions, I am always moved by the generosity and warmth that the players brought to their interpretation of the music.

**It appears that your partner Jan has provided a lot of support for your career in general, and more specifically by being a leading light in the development of your own music publishing business, Rimshot Music. What do you see as the benefits or pitfalls of such a personal and professional partnership?**

We started as friends, and the professional side of our relationship evolved over a long period of time. I see this as being a crucial factor in our survival as a partnership. She has always been extraordinarily supportive of my work in a positive and also a critical sense. Her practical nature means that when she sees an area that needs some attention, she'll just step in and do it herself—whether it's managing a band (her initiation into the music business was managing one of my first bands the 'Magic Puddin'), negotiating contracts, fixing a film session and more recently, music publishing. The reproduction and distribution of my concert works was initially in the hands of the Australian Music Centre. Jan suggested it might be in our interests to take control of the catalogue, and with the blessing of the AMC we set up Rimshot Music. It never ceases to amaze me how much music we send out each week. Orders come from all over the world and it's a couple of days' work each week to keep it under control.

In a sense we are control freaks and both aspire towards the same goals. Having clearly-delineated functions within the structure of our working relationship helps to hold things together. Inevitably, our work is always spilling over into our family life, but this a relatively minor concession to the fact that we are able to make it all function somehow.

**As a husband and father, how have you managed to find the time and 'brainspace' for your creative endeavours?**

By having the most supportive, understanding, tolerant and generous family you could ever wish for.

**Do you have specific aims for the style/s of music you would like to write in the future?**

I would like to pursue my interests in solo, chamber, symphonic, percussion and film music. As I mentioned earlier, developing a 'voice' is important. What the exact nature of the voice is I'm not sure, and I don't care to pigeonhole it, but it's something that evolves over a long period of time.

**You have had many commissions from a wide variety of sources. Was there a point at which you realised you could call yourself a successful composer?**

When I was forced to leave my position as clarinetist with the Australia Ensemble in 1992 due to the backlog of composition work, I decided to take the composing thing a bit more seriously. I've been writing full-time since then and, although it's been marked by ups and downs, I feel blessed that I've managed to support my family by doing something that I have a passion for. I feel my best work is a long way off yet.

*The interviewer acknowledges with thanks the contribution of Tony Loquet, who facilitated the initial introduction to Nigel Westlake.*