

The Genesis of John Antill's *Corroboree*

Rachel Campbell

John Antill's *Corroboree* has occupied a signal position in Australian music historiography. James Murdoch maintained in 1972 that 'contemporary Australian music dates from *Corroboree*' and that the work 'acceptably represented Australian music both here and abroad for twenty years.'¹ For Roger Covell, *Corroboree*'s premiere was the moment of the first wide awareness of Australian musical modernism, 'that music truly belonging to the twentieth century was being written in Australia.'² Andrew McCredie agreed, noting that Antill 'has had to bear the distinction and notoriety of being hailed as the creator of Australian music' and that the work's significance was to introduce 'an orchestral and rhythmic language which was as novel and new for Australian orchestras as for local audiences.'³ The themes of achievement of progressive modernism and nationally distinctive musical character have loomed large in the understanding of Antill's piece. The idea that *Corroboree* heralded the compositional generation of the 1960s and marked a breach with prior inferior music is implicit in some of this

¹ James Murdoch, *Australia's Contemporary Composers* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1972), 11.

² Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2016), 155.

³ Andrew D. McCredie, *Musical Composition in Australia* (Canberra: Advisory Board, Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers, 1969), 10.

commentary. Such an understanding of the dominance of the 1960s has itself been challenged by Joel Crotty and others.⁴ However, *Corroboree's* importance still tends to be noted in surveys of Australian music, if mostly for its impact and prominence. Crotty said that it was 'hailed as a success by the critics and public alike at its premiere'⁵ and that 'Antill became for a time the musical voice of Australia.'⁶ David Symons similarly acknowledged its 'enormous impact on Australian audiences' and proposed that it was 'arguably the most famous piece of Australian orchestral music of the first half of the twentieth century.'⁷

If this discussion reiterates *Corroboree's* importance to most historians of Australian classical music, it is notable that there are still conflicting accounts and gaps in knowledge concerning how, when and for what purpose the work was written. Some texts, such as Beth Dean and Victor Carell's biography of Antill, *A Gentle Genius*, relied on a combination of documentary evidence and Antill's much later memories.⁸ Other accounts, such as Symons's monograph, *Before and after Corroboree: The Music of John Antill*, provided important information and insights, yet as a study of the whole of Antill's oeuvre, it could not cover all aspects of *Corroboree's* creation in detail.⁹ Vincent Plush's 'A Timeline of *Corroboree*' contributed new information from Antill's diaries and brief observations of the sketches, and Crotty's 'Choreographic Music in Australia, 1913–1964' provided context as well as a discussion of the programmatic and balletic content of the work evident in Antill's score markings and other notes.¹⁰

To address some of the existing gaps, this article undertakes a more focused examination and analysis of documentary evidence from Antill's diaries, broadcasts, sketches for *Corroboree*, notes that he made in the course of researching the piece, and contemporary newspaper and magazine reports, especially those for which he was interviewed. Of particular interest here is prioritisation of contemporary documentary evidence in situations where Antill's memory recounting events years in the past was either varied or seems to have been inaccurate. Additionally, the aim is to analyse and compare this set of sources—including a much wider selection of press articles than have previously been cited—for multiple versions of stories, memories and some of Antill's own early interpretations of the work, allowing some previous claims about *Corroboree* to be challenged and others buttressed.

This process has resulted in the identification of books and articles on Australian Aboriginal music that Antill consulted and an assessment of their influence on the piece's irregular rhythmic patterns. Sketch study has revealed that, unless there are compositional sketches that have not survived, the initial musical sketches were in fairly similar form to

⁴ Joel Crotty, 'Heritage Australia: Interpreting Australian Music History: A Question of Time, Place, and Attitudes,' *Sounds Australian* 41 (1994): 6–7.

⁵ Joel Crotty, 'Ballet and Dance Music,' in *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. Warren Bebbington (Melbourne/New York: OUP, 1997), 43.

⁶ Joel Crotty, 'Corroboree (2),' in *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. Warren Bebbington (Melbourne/New York: OUP, 1997), 154.

⁷ David Symons, 'Composition in Australia (1): From European Settlement to 1961,' in *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. Warren Bebbington (Melbourne/New York: OUP, 1997), 140.

⁸ Beth Dean and Victor Carell, *Gentle Genius: A Life of John Antill* (Sydney: Akron Press, 1987).

⁹ David Symons, *Before and after Corroboree: The Music of John Antill* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

¹⁰ Vincent Plush, 'A Timeline of Corroboree,' *Encounters: Essays, Images, Interviews*, ed. Jocelyn Wolfe (South Brisbane: Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, 2005), 26–30; Joel Crotty 'Choreographic Music in Australia, 1913–1964: From Foreign Reliance to an Independent Australian Stance' (PhD thesis, Monash University, 1999), 243–65.

much of the final music and included only a small number of ideas subsequently discarded, such as a snake dance in 9/8 and choir incantations. Early draft inscriptions on the sketches have confirmed that Antill's initial intention was to write a piece for children, and this is supported by multiple slightly later interviews. Comparative musical analysis of *Corroboree* with a previous 'corroboree' dance number that Antill had written in 1931–1932 suggests that the 'Lace Lizard' section of *Corroboree's* final movement may have been based on the opening of the earlier number. In many other respects, Antill's two 'corroborees' are very different. In terms of dating, Antill's avowed inspiration for *Corroboree*—the witnessing of a tourist corroboree at La Perouse, Sydney—has been redated later than previously thought, to between 1919 and 1921. Lastly, his diaries demonstrate that, although he gave *Corroboree's* dates of composition as 1936–1944, the majority of his work on the piece took place between May 1943 and May 1944.

These revisions and confirmations concerning *Corroboree's* compositional history are diverse and particular. They are significant because, in addition to the piece's importance in Australian classical music history, the work's performances as a ballet in 1950, 1951 and 1954 were among the most prominent iterations of a mid-century trend in settler-Australian culture to appropriate and represent Aboriginal culture, often as a symbol of the Australian nation.¹¹ Nicholas Thomas has dated the wide emergence of this trend to the late 1930s and the 1940s, whereas Anna Haebich discussed its prominence in the 1950s and early 1960s.¹² The dating of Antill's work on *Corroboree*—its specifics and his intentions in relation to it—can lead to firmer understandings of this period in settler Australians' fascination with Aboriginality and the appropriation of Aboriginal cultural forms. *Corroboree's* compositional history is also significant with regard to its influence on the work of Australia's best-known composer of national music: Peter Sculthorpe.¹³

A Corroboree at La Perouse

Almost every time that he spoke about *Corroboree*, Antill told the story of a youthful visit to La Perouse, usually saying that he had seen Aboriginal people perform a corroboree for tourists, after which he returned home and notated some of the music. The memory of that visit and its impetus for the work was certainly in his mind around the time that he composed *Corroboree*, as the title pages of both the original manuscript and an earlier draft carry the annotation, 'evolved from melodies and rhythms written in my early youth after an interesting visit to La Perouse, Sydney.'¹⁴

Antill's memories of exactly when the La Perouse encounter happened seem to have been much murkier. Most standard accounts, including those of Symons and Plush, have dated it to around 1912 or 1913, when Antill was about nine years old, in accordance with what Antill

¹¹ Adrian Franklin, 'Aboriginalia: Souvenir Wares and the "Aboriginalization" of Australian Identity,' *Tourist Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 201; Rachel Campbell, "'The Whole Work is Full of Primitive Rhythms': The Folk-Primitivist Origins of Peter Sculthorpe's National Music,' *Musicology Australia* 91, no. 1 (2019): 36–7.

¹² Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art, Colonial Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 119–20; Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008), 302–3.

¹³ Campbell, "The Whole Work is Full of Primitive Rhythms," 36–57.

¹⁴ There are two original illustrated manuscripts, one in Papers of John Antill, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), MS 437/8a/1, Folder MSR and the other in State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 7072 (Safe 1/249). The drafts are held in Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/Folio Item 2, Folio Box 1.

told James Murdoch in 1972.¹⁵ Dean and Carell give his age as seven, implying 1911, which seems a precocious age to have been notating Aboriginal music.¹⁶

It is much more likely that the visit to La Perouse took place in Antill's late teens. Examination of the numerous interviews that he gave from 1946 onwards shows that, in the few years after *Corroboree's* premiere, he most commonly said that the visit happened when he was between sixteen and twenty-one. Antill clearly had a hard time dating it precisely, as there is so much variation in his accounts and his initial memory was vague; as noted above, the manuscript carried the more general 'in my early youth.' However, sometimes he was able to associate it with other events in his life. In a typescript, most likely from 1946, he says that he 'play[ed] violin in a Vaudeville show when 16' and that 'about this time I acquired the melodies and rhythms used later in *Corroboree*.'¹⁷

The earliest precise dating in any of the newspaper accounts was published on the day of *Corroboree's* premiere, 18 August 1946, and reported that Antill had visited La Perouse when seventeen.¹⁸ *Smith's Weekly*, the *Melbourne Herald* and *Adelaide's News* all gave his age as sixteen in August and September 1946. Antill told *The Daily Telegraph* in October that 'the material on which *Corroboree* is based was written when he was still at school'; he likely attended school until he was fifteen, leaving in 1919 or early 1920.¹⁹ Around 1950, he began to give his age as between twelve and fourteen at the time of the visit to La Perouse, and in 1951, especially when he was presenting the work to children, he started saying that he was ten or eleven, perhaps as a way of making the story easier for them to relate to.²⁰ In summary, it is likely that the accounts from around 1946 were more accurate, as they were closer to recalled events, involved associations such as participating in a vaudeville performance and were most consistently stating his age as sixteen and seventeen. This means that the most likely date for the visit is between 1919 and 1921.

The Glittering Mask

Given that Antill so often identified the visit to La Perouse as the inspiration behind *Corroboree's* composition, it may seem surprising that, in the intervening period, he actually composed another 'corroboree.' This was a dance number for a light opera called *The Glittering Mask* (1931–1932),²¹ which Antill seems to have not mentioned in connection with *Corroboree*. The inclusion of a corroboree in *The Glittering Mask* may have been the idea of the librettist, but Antill's musical response is of interest here. Most of the music bears little relationship with the later *Corroboree*, except for the presence of ostinato-based sections emphasising texture, passages of musical language signifying alterity and bass line material from the opening that may have

¹⁵ Murdoch, *Australia's Contemporary Composers*, 11; Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 48; Plush, 'A Timeline of Corroboree,' 26.

¹⁶ Dean and Carell, *Gentle Genius*, 15.

¹⁷ Antill, 'Early History,' Papers, NLA, MS 437/5/2. For dating see Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 12.

¹⁸ 'An Abo's Camp Was His Inspiration,' *Sun*, 18 Aug. 1946, 4.

¹⁹ 'John Antill: A Treasure Was Almost Lost,' *Smith's Weekly*, 31 Aug. 1946, 17; Donald Weaver, 'Radio Log,' *Herald*, 11 Sep. 1946; 'Gift Music-Stick,' *News*, 26 Oct. 1946, 4; 'Fund to Send Aust. Composer to London,' *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Oct. 1946, 5; Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 2.

²⁰ For instance, 'On Stage and Screen,' *Herald*, 5 Oct. 1950, 23; 'John Antill and Australian Ballet,' *Tempo* 3, no. 18 (1950): 22; 'Corroboree at 10 Inspired His Ballet,' *Courier-Mail*, 9 Oct. 1951, 3.

²¹ Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 21–3.

been a basis for the opening of *Corroboree's* last movement. The setting is colonial Australia, and bushrangers are featured, one of whom has an Indigenous girlfriend. *The Glittering Mask* has never been performed and exists only as a manuscript piano and vocal score.

The composition of *The Glittering Mask* bears an indirect connection with another famous staged non-Indigenous corroboree: the dance number in the 1933 and 1934 performances of Varney Monk's highly successful 'musical play,' *Collits' Inn*.²² Both pieces were written for entry into a competition arranged by the Opportune Club of Sydney for the 'best composition, embracing Comic Opera, Light Opera, Musical Comedy or Revue,' as yet unperformed; it was further specified that 'it will be counted in favour of entrants if the work has an atmosphere typical of either Australia or New Zealand.'²³ The competition was initiated by Sydney singing teacher Natalie Rosenwax, the founder of the club who also put forward the prize money. While Antill's efforts—in addition to *The Glittering Mask*, he entered another light opera, *Here's Luck*—did not gain him a prize, the text of the winning entry had been written by the poet who was also the author of Antill's two libretti: Margery Browne. This was *The Island of Palms*, composed by Arnold Mote and first performed in 1935.²⁴

Collits' Inn obtained the second prize. Its staging in Sydney at the end of 1932 was billed as 'Australia's First Historical Musical Play,' and it was picked up the following year for a prominent professional production by F.W. Thring in Melbourne, which then came to Sydney's Tivoli Theatre in 1934 for a two-month run.²⁵ Monk's songs were considered attractive, well-known singers were engaged, and the Thring corroboree was widely regarded as spectacular; no doubt the twelve-foot headdresses mentioned by *The Bulletin* contributed to that impression.²⁶

While *Collits' Inn* cannot have been any influence on Antill's decision to include a corroboree dance number in *The Glittering Mask*, this common element in the two light operas, both written at the same time for the same competition, points to the influence of certain traditions or contexts. The former seems relevant here, as multiple operas and musicals have included dance numbers embodying local colour or representing cultures exotic to their audiences. This makes it unsurprising that, in selected passages, Antill attributed alterity to his Aboriginal subjects through the use of common markers of exoticism, such as whole tone runs, prominent tritones and parallel major triads progressing chromatically.²⁷ The number is in five sections, with the names for the middle three ('Skeleton Dance,' 'Dance of Cockatoos' and 'Dance Rainbow Trout') appearing on Antill's score (see Table 1). Although the idea of a rainbow trout dance does not find its way into the 1944 *Corroboree*, there is a later 'Dance of Cockatoos' with different music. The 'Skeleton Dance' in 3/8 is closer to Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* (1874) in 3/4 than to the Disney *Silly Symphony* (1929) in 4/4; like both, it includes a xylophone. This perhaps reflects the long history of crossover between European musical representations of

²² In the 1932 amateur staging this music was performed as an off-stage corroboree and is labelled 'Aboriginal chant' in the 1990 Currency Press publication; see John West, 'Introduction,' in Varney Monk and T. Stuart Gurr, *Collits' Inn: A Romantic Australian Operetta*, ed. John West (Sydney: Currency Press, 1990), xii and Varney Monk and T. Stuart Gurr, *Collits' Inn: A Romantic Australian Operetta*, ed. John West (Sydney: Currency Press, 1990), 57.

²³ Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 23.

²⁴ West, 'Introduction,' vii.

²⁵ West, 'Introduction,' x–xi, xiii.

²⁶ 'Sundry Shows,' *Bulletin* 54, no. 2811, 27 Dec. 1933, 19.

²⁷ Ralph Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 2009), 51–2.

the supernatural and of 'exotic' cultures. Some of the other music, especially the rainbow trout section, is in a chromatic late-Romantic musical language.

Table 1. Form of *The Glittering Mask*, Act 2, Scene 1, 'Corroboree'

Bars	Section	Metre	Form: key
1–23	Introduction	4/4	3 x 8 bars on B-flat major, B major then C major
24–85	Skeleton Dance	3/8	Ternary: C-sharp major, E major, C-sharp major
86–125	Dance of Cockatoos	3/8	Ternary: F minor, A-flat major
126–174	Dance Rainbow Trout	3/4	A-flat major, F minor, chromatic
175–203	Finale	4/4	Ends E major

Elements of the opening passage may have formed a basis for the opening of the final movement of the ballet, a section that Antill designated 'Lace Lizard.' At the very least, the rising sequence of bass-register tritones that he composed in *The Glittering Mask* in 1931–32 likely remained in his mind in the late 1930s, when he began work on the ballet. The opening passage of the earlier 'corroboree' is texturalist and harmonically static, creating an almost *Klangfläche* effect using six-against-eight and six-against-four beat subdivisions, cymbals, a wind machine and the indication 'smoke and flame ad. lib.'²⁸ A simplification of its bass line is shown in Example 1; each bar represents a six-bar passage, which is then repeated up a semitone and, after that, up another semitone.

Example 1. Antill, *The Glittering Mask*, 'Corroboree,' bass line, bb. 1–6, 8–13, 15–19



A tritone bass line beginning on E and B flat also appears in the 'Lace Lizard' music but in 6/8 with vastly different upper parts. As in *The Glittering Mask*, this is repeated four times, before both pitches and the upper parts move up now by a tone instead of a semitone. The resulting music is played twice, before proceeding up by another tone and then back down a tone, to F sharp and C, for two more iterations. The passage as quoted in Example 2 appears also in the first extant sketches of that movement.²⁹

Example 2. Antill, *Corroboree*, 'Lace Lizard,' bass line and harmonies, bb. 25–43

The image shows a piano arrangement in 6/8 time. The bass line consists of three measures, each representing a six-bar passage. The notes are: E2, G2, A2, B-flat2, C2, D2. The harmonies are: E2, G2, A2, B-flat2, C2, D2.

²⁸ Antill, *The Glittering Mask*, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8b/Folio 8, Folio Box 21.

²⁹ Antill, *Corroboree* drafts, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/Folio Item 2, Folio Box 1.

Dating *Corroboree's* Composition

Antill usually told interviewers that *Corroboree* took eight years to compose and that he worked on it between 1936 and 1944; most discussions of the work give this time frame. Plush noted that, in the 1937 diary, Antill referred to the work as an 'orchestral ballet.'³⁰ I could not find references to *Corroboree* by name in the diaries from 1936 to 1942, although Antill did not always mention the name of the piece that he was working on, frequently writing simply that he 'composed.'

The diaries do demonstrate that substantial bursts of compositional activity on *Corroboree* took place in 1943 and 1944, especially between May 1943 and May 1944, and entries confirm that it was completed in 1944. Selected entries mentioning the piece are shown in Table 2.³¹

Table 2. Antill, selected diary entries with references to *Corroboree*

31/5/1943	Composed all day. Corroboree.
26/6/1943	Home all day composed Corroboree.*
17/2/1944	Completed drafts of "Cobboree" [sic] this afternoon.
28/4/1944	Completed parts of Corroboree.
3/5/1944	Finished score of Corroboree. Night off.
5/5/1944	Completed phrasing of Corroboree.
9/5/1944	Copied all day. Corroboree to book binders.
26/5/1944	Score Corroboree back from book binders.†
19/1/1945	My second score of Corroboree.
8/2/1945	Score back from the binders.

* Antill initially spelt the word corroboree with two lower-case Bs, following its spelling in the early anthropological literature: for example, in works by Spencer.

† The first completed score is the one in the State Library of New South Wales, as it contains corrections and additions. The illustrated and bound manuscript score in the National Library is the second score mentioned in the diaries in early 1945. See also footnote 11.

There are many entries earlier in May 1943 and throughout 1944 that are testament to intensive compositional work without naming a specific piece. It is likely that much of this involved *Corroboree*, as Symons has otherwise only dated a couple of operatic fragments and a song to this period.³² In some months, such as October 1943, Antill mentions composing only occasionally between his other commitments, whereas, from February to May 1944, he was spending large portions of most days and nights at work. For example, his diary entry for Monday, 28 February 1944, reads, 'Composed this morning. Burwood this afternoon Market St tonight. Composed to 1am. Bed 1:15am.'³³

³⁰ Plush, 'A Timeline of Corroboree,' 26.

³¹ Antill, Papers, NLA, MS 437/4/4, Box 6.

³² Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 193, 197.

³³ Antill, Papers, NLA, MS 437/4/4.

Twenty Years of Study and Research

Beginning at the time of *Corroboree's* premiere, 18 August 1946, Antill often said that he spent 'more than twenty years of study and research' towards the piece.³⁴ One of the more detailed accounts is his own in the 1946 typescript, 'Corroboree: A Ballet Suite for Orchestra.'³⁵ He wrote that:

it took well over twenty years of study and research, visiting libraries, collecting volumes, and seeking information from all sources (which are unfortunately too few) before deciding the form and procedure upon which the work finally emerged.³⁶

Smith's Weekly reported that 'he studied native life and customs night after night at the Mitchell Library.'³⁷ Much later, Antill said that he visited museums and talked with anthropologists when travelling for the ABC.³⁸ In 1972, James Murdoch reported that Antill had gathered recordings and Edison cylinders, although Antill's daughter, Jill, did not remember him later owning a collection of Aboriginal music recordings.³⁹

The figure 'more than twenty years' implies that, because Antill likely witnessed the corroboree between 1919 and 1921 and finished *Corroboree* in 1944, he read and studied sources about Aboriginal culture and music through this whole period and that seeing the corroboree instilled this interest. Because the corroboree in *The Glittering Mask* makes none of the attempts at ethnological authenticity evident in *Corroboree*, such as the use of central Australian totemic figures described by anthropologists, most of this research probably took place in the latter part of the twenty years, around *Corroboree's* composition.

Some of Antill's research for *Corroboree* is extant, and it is possible to draw some conclusions about how it influenced aspects of Antill's music and ideas for the work. It is important to distinguish between material dating from before 1946 as opposed to other notes in Antill's papers about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal music dating later: that is, after the period of research at issue here.⁴⁰ It is probable that the material discussed in the following dates from prior to *Corroboree's* completion in 1944, as notes were made on scraps of paper also containing draft prefaces, lists of movements and draft illustrations for the work.

Importantly, this implies that, while Antill was researching Indigenous Australian culture and music, he was simultaneously developing ideas for the work. Not only were many of the personae and settings of the ballet developed out of the reading described below, Antill also made notes that included notation of melodies and rhythms from various anthropological books, and opinions and findings from books about Aboriginal music and culture.

Some of the most interesting notes about music are on an untitled pink/orange-coloured piece of paper, on which Antill also drafted a preface.⁴¹ It dates from early in *Corroboree's*

³⁴ 'An Abo's Camp Was His Inspiration.'

³⁵ Antill, 'Corroboree: A Ballet Suite for Orchestra,' 1946, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/9 Box 14, 2. This can be dated to Aug. or Sep. 1946, as sections of it appeared in an article in the *ABC Weekly* in late Sep. 1946, and it was in these months that Antill was still using the double B in the work's name; see 'Antill's Corroboree Was Fruit of 20 Years Work,' *ABC Weekly*, 21 Sept. 1946, 9.

³⁶ Antill, 'Corroboree,' 2.

³⁷ 'John Antill: A Treasure Was Almost Lost,' 17.

³⁸ Dean and Carell, *A Gentle Genius*, 85.

³⁹ Murdoch, *Australia's Contemporary Composers*, 11; Vincent Plush, personal communication, 2019.

⁴⁰ For example, those in Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/9-11, such as 'The Music of the Australian Aborigine.'

⁴¹ Antill, untitled, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/11.

composition, as it includes a list of 'totems,' such as 'Cockatoo' and 'Medicine Man,' the contents of which differ from the main draft musical material: for example, 'Alligator.' On the other side of the paper, Antill notated two Indigenous melodies, 'Kurburu's song' and 'Corroboree song.' Comparison with Graeme Skinner and Jim Wafer's 'A Checklist of Colonial Era Musical Transcriptions of Australian Indigenous Songs' establishes that these were published in several sources, but only one source, A.W. Howitt's *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, also contains some of the other notes that Antill made on the page: specifically, the word 'Gurildras.'⁴² The musical examples and descriptions of Indigenous music described in the following came from a passage that Howitt quoted from an 1887 article by G.W. Torrance.⁴³

The notes that Antill made from Torrance's text quoted in Howitt's book may in part have contributed to Antill's development of some of the rhythmic characteristics of *Corroboree*. He wrote: 'Rhythm strong and irregular—double and triple suddenly and often changes being sometimes introduced by Rit. and a sliding of one sound into another.'⁴⁴

There are no *ritardandos* introducing changes of time signature in the final score, but the idea of strong and irregular rhythms—including the time signatures 5/4 and 7/8, changing time signatures and strongly-articulated syncopations—and movement between groupings of twos and threes may explain some of the features of the work that led commentators to compare it to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

Antill notated the melodies 'Koorinda Brae' and the 'Turtle Song' ('Ah! Wy-a-boo-ka') on another sheet of paper also containing an early list of *Corroboree*'s movements.⁴⁵ These two melodies and the annotation 'Wellington Valley Tribe' beside the 'Turtle Song' indicate that Antill consulted Isaac Nathan's *The Southern Euphrosyne* of 1848.⁴⁶ The presence of four notated melodies in these notes is evidence that Antill was actively seeking to learn about Aboriginal music in order to write *Corroboree*.

In addition to these mostly musical sources, Antill consulted *The Arunta* by Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* by Spencer and *The Passing of the Aborigines* by Daisy Bates.⁴⁷ The first two texts were the most important; the only extant evidence of the latter is two pages of notes about music that Antill copied from chapter thirteen. Given that Bates's book was published in 1938, after Antill said that he began work on *Corroboree*, the period of research for the work definitely continued after 1938.

In their books, Spencer and Gillen collected, photographed and published materials that

⁴² Graeme Skinner and Jim Wafer, 'A Checklist of Colonial Era Musical Transcriptions of Australian Indigenous Songs,' *Australharmony*, <http://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/checklist-indigenous-music-1.php>; A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

⁴³ G.W. Torrance, 'Music of the Australian Aborigines,' *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 16 (1887): 337.

⁴⁴ The original text from Howitt is: 'Much of the character depends upon the rhythm, which, while very strongly marked, is also most irregular, changing suddenly, and alternating frequently between double and triple; the changes, moreover, being sometimes introduced by a slackening. Of the time, and a curious sliding of one sound into another, not unlike the slow tuning of a violin string'; see Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, 419.

⁴⁵ Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/11.

⁴⁶ Isaac Nathan, *The Southern Euphrosyne, and Australian Miscellany: Containing Oriental Moral Tales, Original Anecdote, Poetry and Music* (Sydney: Whittaker, 1848).

⁴⁷ Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: Macmillan, 1927); Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1928); Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines: A Lifetime Spent among the Natives of Australia* (London: John Murray, 1938).

would usually only be revealed to senior, initiated Indigenous men.⁴⁸ Antill reproduced some of these photographs, including ones of ceremonial objects, as drawings in his own hand in the front matter of *Corroboree's* manuscripts, thereby further circulating the images. Other illustrations through the front matter are also apparently based on shield decorations, costumes and ceremonies from Spencer and Gillen's book. It is clear that, for the Indigenous cultural owners, the viewing of photographs and drawings of these objects by non-Indigenous people—likely including costume and body decoration—is extremely problematic. After information received from the Central Land Council of the Northern Territory, the National Library of Australia has restricted viewing of Antill's drawings.⁴⁹ The State Library of New South Wales, on the basis of other information from an Indigenous advisor, has not restricted them, the rationale being that they are a non-Indigenous person's interpretation of restricted material.⁵⁰

It is material to this discussion that, following an extensive process of consultation with cultural owners, Spencer's photographs of this and similar restricted material are not able to be viewed on Museum Victoria's 'Spencer & Gillen' website.⁵¹ A further point relating to the ethical issue of Antill's reproduction of such objects was made by Indigenous composer and author Christopher Sainsbury in relation to other music. Sainsbury implied that permission has rarely been sought for the appropriation of Aboriginal words, symbols and music throughout settler history. In many Aboriginal cultures, permission from owners and custodians is frequently considered necessary.⁵² This lack of concern for the wishes of Aboriginal custodians evident in the actions of Spencer, Gillen and Antill was widespread through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Secrecy protocols were frequently ignored by eminent anthropologists, filmmakers, journalists and others who had contact with or studied the lives and cultures of Aboriginal people.⁵³

The high degree of influence that Spencer and Gillen's anthropological writings had on Antill is demonstrated by his reproduction of a five-paragraph extract from *The Arunta* in the preface of his *Corroboree* manuscript. Its subject is the 'great amount of form and ceremony attendant on any event which [Aboriginal people] regard as of importance' and a concomitant 'very strict code of etiquette.'⁵⁴ A second, longer extract on the manuscript is a description of a fire ceremony from Spencer's *Wanderings in Wild Australia*.⁵⁵ The final movement of *Corroboree* is the 'Procession of Totems and Closing Fire Ceremony,' and it is in his 'Fire Ceremony' that Antill composes the climactic music of the work, with *ffff* tutti sections of dissonant ostinatos and chords accompanied by the bullroarer. The last of Spencer's phrases quoted by Antill is also the culmination of Spencer's passage: 'sparks falling in all directions & a mass of howling,

⁴⁸ Museum Victoria, 'About the Spencer & Gillen Website,' *Spencer & Gillen: A Journey Through Aboriginal Australia*, <http://spencerandgillen.net/about>.

⁴⁹ Personal communication, Manuscripts and Special Collections, NLA, 2018 and 2019.

⁵⁰ Personal communication, Manuscripts, State Library of New South Wales, 2018.

⁵¹ Museum Victoria, 'About the Spencer & Gillen Website.'

⁵² Christopher Sainsbury, 'Ngarra-Burria: New Music and the Search for an Australian Sound,' *Platform Papers* 59 (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2019), 26, 28–9.

⁵³ See discussions in Murray Garde, 'The Forbidden Gaze: The 1948 Wubarr Ceremony Performed for the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land,' in *Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, ed. Martin Thomas and Margo Neale (Canberra: ANU Press, 2011).

⁵⁴ Spencer and Gillen, *The Arunta*, 505–6, in Antill, *Corroboree*, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/1, Folder MSR. Antill noted that the source was chapter 24 of volume 2

⁵⁵ Antill selected various paragraphs from Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 447–54.

dancing men, with their bodies grotesquely bedaubed, formed a scene that was little short of fiendish.⁵⁶ The exoticised drama and intensity described here, coupled with the self-control and deliberation of the earlier passage, were evidently qualities that were important for Antill, and he implicitly invited readers to understand his music in relation to them.

Antill developed aspects of *Corroboree* in imaginative response to the anthropological literature that he was reading. The structuring of the work as a succession of interpretations and actions of Aboriginal totemic figures accords with the dominance of totems in Spencer and Gillen's books.⁵⁷ The totems that Antill selected to appear in *Corroboree*—conceptualised as a 'play-about' corroboree performance, in which Aboriginal people of multiple different totems dance in succession (see Table 3)—are almost all from Spencer and Gillen.⁵⁸

Table 3. Movements of Antill's *Corroboree* (Sydney: Boosey and Hawkes, 1956), 3

I	Welcome Ceremony: Witchetty Grub Totem Assisted by the Emu Totem
II	Dance to the Evening Star: The Thippa Thippa and Bellbird people
III	A Rain Dance: By the Frog Totem Assisted by the Fish Men
IV	The Spirit of the Wind: Demonstrated by the Snake Totem
V	Homage to the Rising Sun: Kangaroo Men
VI	Morning Star Dance: Hakea Flower Totem
VII	Procession of Totems and Closing Fire Ceremony: In Which Representatives of the Lace Lizard, Cockatoo, Honey Ant, Wild Cat and Small Fly Totems Participate. Much Usage of Boomerang, Spear and Fire Stick

Antill wrote another list (see Antill, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/11) that looks like totems that he considered using, and additional totems from Spencer and Gillen's work on central Australia appear in this, apparently ultimately rejected (see Table 4).⁵⁹

Table 4. Antill, *Corroboree*, provisional list of totems. The crossings-out are Antill's.

Cocatoo [<i>sic</i>]	Witchetty grub
Sugar Honey ant	Small fly
Plum tree	Wild cat
Grass seed	Emu
Eagle Hawk	Kangaroo
Fish	Frog
Lace Lizzard [<i>sic</i>]	Carpent snake
Opossum	Hakea flower
Bell bird	

⁵⁶ Antill, *Corroboree*, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/1, Folder MSR.

⁵⁷ Museum Victoria, 'Totems,' *Spencer & Gillen: A Journey Through Aboriginal Australia*, <http://spencerandgillen.net/totems>.

⁵⁸ Museum Victoria, 'Totems.'

⁵⁹ Totems that do not appear on the list on the Museum Victoria can be matched to Spencer and Gillen, *The Arunta*.

Early Versions

There are other proposed arrangements of movements among Antill's sketch material. At one point, he was attempting to match totemic figures to ceremonies for various purposes, with notes reading 'Frog totem—rain dance; Ant—fire ceremony; Lizzard—Sun; Snake; Emu; Kangaroo—hunting.'⁶⁰ He also proposed a theme-and-variations structure shown in Table 5. Most of these sketches include movement titles that are not too far removed from the final components of the piece, although there is no matching musical sketch material in variation form. Therefore, unless a large amount of draft material has not survived, it seems that the music did not go through multiple stages of drafts with pronounced transformations; rather, a majority of aspects of the final score are present in the extant draft material.

Table 5. Antill, *Corroboree*, early theme-and-variations structure, untitled scrap of paper containing draft preface and proposed list of movements, Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/11.

1. Welcome Ceremony	Theme
2. The Rain Maker	Variation I
3. Fire Ceremony	Variation II
4. The Medicine Man	Variation III
5. The Devil Dancer	Variation IV

The major exception is one of the movements among *Corroboree*'s drafts, the 'Snake Dance.' This is a largely incomplete booklet—the eighth of eleven extant booklets—with bars and instruments drawn up but with only some parts and melodies filled in. Its most prominent features are oboe and bassoon melodies in 9/8, which contain augmented seconds, hinting perhaps that Antill was thinking of representations of snake charming.

Other particularly notable differences between the drafts and the final version are, first, the note to include 'choir incantations' where the string tremolo comes in the first movement in bar 57.⁶¹ Second, the prominent bassoon figure imitating a didgeridoo in the first movement is absent (e.g., bar 30). Third, there are hardly any extant sketches for the final 'Fire Ceremony,' and the corresponding section in the drafts is much shorter and missing most of the texture. Last, the distinctive opening bass drum rhythm in Example 3 appears as undotted quavers in the sketches. It is further evident in the original manuscript that the dots, semiquaver stems and accents are later additions in a different pen and that Antill changed his mind about the rhythm before copying out the second manuscript.⁶²

Example 3. Antill, *Corroboree*, opening bass drum rhythm



Children's Concert Piece

From about 1947, Antill publicly recalled that *Corroboree* had initially been conceived as an orchestral piece for children. In several accounts, he identified the impetus as the orchestral

⁶⁰ Untitled scrap of paper containing drawings and list of totems, Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/11.

⁶¹ Antill, *Corroboree* drafts, second booklet, 3.

⁶² Antill, *Corroboree*, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 7072 (Safe 1/249), 1–2.

children's concerts conducted by Bernard Heinze, in many of which he was involved with either the Mastersinger's Male Quartet or as ABC balance officer.⁶³ As *People* recounted in 1950, 'there was a feeling something new was needed. A call went out for original work.'⁶⁴ Several later newspaper reports indicate that, in response to the children's concerts, Antill remembered the music that he had notated after visiting La Perouse and decided to use this as the basis for a work.⁶⁵ A typescript from about 1949, likely authored by Antill, said that he had decided to write something

suitable for performance at the orchestral concerts for school children ... a suite of music built around the dance ceremonies of the aborigines and incorporating a number of rhythms and melodies which he had heard as a child during a corroboree performance at La Perouse.⁶⁶

These accounts are confirmed by extant evidence from the main draft of *Corroboree*, in the form of an early version of an inscription pencilled onto its title page. Like the inscription on the final manuscript, this begins with the sentence discussed above: 'evolved from melodies and rhythms.' The manner in which it continues makes it clear that the work was intended for children and also that Antill was hoping that it would help to instil an interest in Aboriginal culture in what he must have presumed to be a non-Indigenous audience:

Therefore I dedicate this work to the Children of Australia. Trusting that they will appreciate the true place
These true Australians
[Yet?] they may be encouraged to study further and appreciate the lives and
[adventures?] of these true Australians.⁶⁷

Importantly, the list of movements in this draft front matter is almost exactly the same as the final order of movements of the ballet, excepting some small changes of wording.⁶⁸ It seems that Antill's intention to write a work for children persisted through quite a large proportion of the compositional process, and the musical characteristics discussed in the following seem to support this. One article from 1947 implied that, after working for a while on the children's piece, it occurred to Antill that the work itself become a ballet, 'because aboriginal culture is so bound up with dancing'; another article, from 1949, says, 'it soon became evident that the subject had very great possibilities and it was continually extended.'⁶⁹

Corroboree's early iteration as a children's orchestral suite may explain a feature that has not received much critical attention: the naivety of some of the musically illustrative aspects of the work. Antill provided a highly specific 'Choreography Outline' for the ballet in the preface

⁶³ See 'World Famous Composer to visit Dubbo,' *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 16 September 1950, 2. Antill's diaries from at least 1935 mention involvement in the Children's Concerts. These include entries from 24 Jul. 1935, 29 Sep. 1936, 24 Sep. 1942 and 4 Dec. 1942; see Papers of John Antill, National Library of Australia, MS 437/4/2, 3, and 4.

⁶⁴ 'The Black Music of John Antill,' *People*, 5 July 1950, 38.

⁶⁵ 'The Black Music of John Antill,' 38; 'Music Triumph "An Accident,"' *News*, 10 Feb. 1947, 3.

⁶⁶ "'Corroboree': Ballet Suite by John Antill', two-page typescript, Papers of John Antill, National Library of Australia, MS 437/8a/1. This typescript likely dates from 1949, because the last-mentioned performance of *Corroboree* is the Edinburgh Festival of that year.

⁶⁷ Antill, *Corroboree* drafts, first booklet, 3.

⁶⁸ Antill, *Corroboree* drafts, first booklet, 3.

⁶⁹ Lorraine Timewell, 'Corroboree,' *Everybody's Weekly*, 4 Jan. 1947, 9; Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/16, Box 26.

to the manuscript score and further indicated in some of his writings and broadcasts that he attached particular meanings to many of the melodies, gestures and sections of *Corroboree*.⁷⁰ Additionally, some of these are pencilled onto the draft manuscript; of particular note in this latter respect is ‘fangs of serpent’ written above the first of the recurring piccolo flourishes: c’’, d’’, e’’, and f’’. This musical gesture is retained in the published version throughout the ‘Spirit of the Wind’ movement.⁷¹ Other gestures include some in the third movement of the piece: ‘A Rain Dance.’ Antill indicated in the ‘Choreography Outline’ that a repeating rhythmic pattern in 3/8 consisting of articulations on beats three and one is a ‘characteristic hop and croak’ and that the low-pitched bassoon and contrabassoon melody from bar 73 is ‘Grandfather Frog.’ The alternating bars of 6/8 and 1/8 at the beginning of the last movement have the 1/8 bar designated as the lizard ‘shake[s] the head.’⁷² Some of these musical gestures are well suited to balletic movement, while others seem mostly to retain the child-appropriate character of the work’s original genre. To some extent, there is an as yet unexplored tension between the reception of *Corroboree* in Australian music history as a modernist achievement and marker of cultural maturity on the one hand and some of its more playful and naïve characteristics on the other.

Aboriginal Melodies and Rhythms

Antill’s statements concerning the relationship of his *Corroboree* music with the Aboriginal music that he heard at La Perouse exhibit ambiguity and contradiction when taken together. In the initial formulation on both the draft and manuscript title pages, he said that *Corroboree* had ‘evolved’ from the La Perouse sources, implying transformation from an initial form or forms. In the second part of the manuscript inscription, ‘melodies and rhythms written in my early youth after an interesting visit to La Perouse,’ Antill seems almost to imply that the encounter inspired him to write original music.⁷³

Another, earlier draft of a preface or dedication seems to suggest similarly. This draft dates from very early in the composition of *Corroboree*, on the untitled pink/orange piece of paper referred to previously:

To portray in western musical language the secret rites of the corroboree would be sacrilege to our native aborigines. ~~Therefore I do not pretend that even the rhythm is a true claim authentic~~ ... the tunes and rhythms have no claim to authenticity. The subjects nevertheless preserve ~~claim a place~~ are authentic—to preserve the spirit rather than the letter ... (I only know that I [enjoyed?] the writing of them) theme with variation upon an aboriginal subject in the form of a corroboree

In my early youth I composed a setting for a corroboree—therefore if I take one of these crude “melodies” as a basis upon [which?] to work say that I received it in a dream and so proceed⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Joel Crotty has outlined many of Antill’s statements along these lines in his ‘Choreographic Music in Australia,’ 243–65.

⁷¹ Antill, *Corroboree* drafts, third booklet, 97.

⁷² Antill, *Corroboree*, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/1, Folder MSR.

⁷³ Antill, *Corroboree*, Papers, NLA, MS 437/8a/1, Folder MSR.

⁷⁴ Question marks inside square brackets indicate my guesses at indecipherable text; see Papers of John Antill, NLA, MS 437/8a/11.

The setting referred to in the last sentence cannot be *The Glittering Mask*, because none of its melodies appear in the final *Corroboree*. It therefore seems that Antill composed some music as a reaction to seeing the corroboree at La Perouse, shortly afterwards. As the draft inscription just quoted indicates, Antill felt that what he wrote would 'preserve the spirit rather than the letter' of the Aboriginal music that he had heard. Where he says that 'the subjects ... are authentic,' he is probably referring to the totems that he had researched in Spencer and Gillen's books.

However, the majority of Antill's recorded descriptions of the day at La Perouse clearly indicate that, after returning home, he notated what he could remember of the Indigenous rhythms and melodies. For instance, the first newspaper report regarding *Corroboree*, published four days before the suite's premiere, said that 'he memorised them, and wrote them down when he returned home, little dreaming he would ever make use of them.'⁷⁵

The manuscript page or pages on which Antill wrote after returning home are almost certainly not extant; no researcher has ever claimed to have found them, and there are no manuscript fragments among Antill's papers that seem plausible. The music in *Corroboree* has usually been interpreted as not containing quotation from any Aboriginal musical material at all.⁷⁶ However, at least twice Antill has said the piece made use of specific Aboriginal melodies. This is notably a tiny number of instances out of all the times in which he was interviewed or spoke publicly about the work; nonetheless, he was quite definite. One instance was in an interview with *The Australian Women's Weekly* when he was seventy. The reporter wrote of the La Perouse encounter: 'He even jotted down snippets of what he heard. "Three particular notes"—he sang something that sounded like da-da-da—"ended up in the finale of *Corroboree*."⁷⁷

An earlier statement came in a broadcast to school children dating from the mid-to-late 1950s, and, in the extant script, he gives an 'Aboriginal tune' that he says is used in the work. The passage reads:

The fourth movement of the Corroboree suite depicts the procession of the totems and the closing fire ceremony. In the music I've tried to make you feel the rising tension as these terrifying dances begin. Here's an example of how the orchestra builds up the tension, and I'd like you to notice a three-note aboriginal tune, this one.⁷⁸

The short motif is notated, and Antill indicates that he will play it on the piano. Then, the script continues: 'The orchestra takes that three note tune and gradually builds it up in excitement.'⁷⁹

The motif is written in letter names ('Eb Db F Twice') and then notated on a staff, although it is difficult to tell whether the staff reads 'Ed Dd Eb F' or 'Eb Db F F.' Considering that Antill writes 'F Twice,' it seems more likely that the third pitch is F, as in the first bar of Example 4.

⁷⁵ 'Sydney Man's Ballet Suite Praised by Goossens,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Aug. 1946, 3.

⁷⁶ For example, see Symons, *Before and After Corroboree: The Music of John Antill* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 53.

⁷⁷ Valerie Carr, 'A Composer Looks Back: Sounds of Music that Echo Still for John Antill,' *Australian Women's Weekly*, 17 July 1974, 46.

⁷⁸ The script says that it dates 'a few years' after he wrote *Outback Overture* (1954); see John Antill, 'Discovering Music,' Papers, NLA, MS 437/7/2, 4.

⁷⁹ Antill, 'Discovering Music,' Papers, NLA, MS 437/7/2, 4.

Example 4. 'Aboriginal tune'⁸⁰

I have not been able to find this first motif directly stated at all in *Corroboree*. There are melodies and harmonic progressions throughout the piece that involve three whole tones permuted from the E-flat-D-flat-F order and transposed. However, most of these are in such indirect relationships with what Antill quoted in the radio script that they do not fit his statement that 'the orchestra take[s] that three note tune and builds it up.'⁸¹

This raises the question of the other melodic motif that Antill jotted down on the radio script, shown as the second bar of Example 4. It was not referred to at all in the text of the script and looks to have been written later, perhaps as an addition or replacement for the first tune. The motif is not evident in *Corroboree's* last movement either. It is close to the 'Uplifting of Totems' melody, which substitutes a tritone for the initial downward perfect fourth and may therefore be a transposed transformation of Antill's 'Aboriginal tune.' 'Uplifting of Totems,' however, does not appear in the drafts of the work and must have been added at a later stage of composition. It is also a variant on a motif from the first movement associated with the Medicine Man; this motif appears in bar 29 and consists of the notes B, F and E flat. These aspects make it somewhat less likely that its origin is an Aboriginal melody from La Perouse that Antill transcribed. Nevertheless, while the presence of any Indigenous Australian melodies in *Corroboree* seems likely to remain elusive, it is important to record Antill's statements and their contradictory character.

An Australian Atmosphere

A major aspect of *Corroboree's* reception was the idea that it was nationally characteristic and distinctive. From the very first mention in the press, it was described as a 'typically Australian work.'⁸² *The Bulletin* called it 'racy of the soil.'⁸³ Antill and others later attributed his purpose in writing the work to the desire to develop national art; as Dean and Carell wrote, 'he was to pour into this all the feeling that he had for Australia.'⁸⁴ This seems to be a retrospective conclusion in the light of the reception of the work. Other commentators have made contextual arguments based on slightly later developments in Australian literature.⁸⁵

In one of Antill's later memories, he recalled that when he decided to write a piece for the children's concerts, he 'had long considered it a pity that ... at the children's concerts all the music was European in influence. He wanted to make all young Australians realise that music was part of their lives and of themselves.'⁸⁶ This partly accords with the draft title page inscription quoted above, in which he hoped to make children more aware of Aboriginal culture

⁸⁰ Antill, 'Discovering Music,' Papers, NLA, MS 437/7/2, 4.

⁸¹ Antill, 'Discovering Music,' Papers, NLA, MS 437/7/2, 4.

⁸² 'Sydney Man's Ballet Suite Praised by Goossens,' 3.

⁸³ 'Sundry Shows,' *Bulletin*, 21 Aug. 1946, 24.

⁸⁴ Dean and Carell, *Gentle Genius*, 76.

⁸⁵ See Symons' discussion of especially the Jindyworobak movement in Symons, *Before and after Corroboree*, 44-7.

⁸⁶ Timewell, 'Corroboree,' 9.

but does not express the exact same idea. However, the competition for which he composed *A Glittering Mask* specified that an Australian atmosphere would be considered favourably, and the colonial Australian setting and presence of a corroboree dance number were presumably part of how Antill understood such a concept.

The idea of achieving Australian artistic character through engagement with or appropriation of Aboriginal culture had been revisited on and off since the 1880s,⁸⁷ but there was a particular event that Antill attended in 1936—presumably just before or around the time he began the composition of *Corroboree*—in which this was specifically advocated in music. His diary for 7 May 1936 records that he spent the evening at a 'conversazione' for the twenty-first anniversary of the NSW State Conservatorium of Music.⁸⁸ The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the following speech had been given:

The Acting-Premier (Mr. Bruxner) said that musicians should be encouraged in their compositions to give a close expression to environment and national life.

"I hope someone will be able to perpetuate the original music of the aboriginals, as Alfred Hill has done that of the Maoris. Our bushland has been put on canvas. Why not into music?"⁸⁹

Henry Tate had advocated similarly in Melbourne from 1923, after hearing A.E. Floyd play recordings of Aboriginal music in a lecture in May the previous year,⁹⁰ but notably, Antill's connection with the Sydney event is a direct one.

Antill's own comments in the period several years after *Corroboree*'s composition do reveal a preoccupation with national character. Two weeks after the work was performed in London in October 1946, he made a speech that was broadcast on radio back in Australia. In this speech, Antill stated that he chose the 'medium' of 'our Aborigines ... (with apologies) in an attempt to capture an Australian Atmosphere,'⁹¹ reiterating the phrase used by the 1932 competition in which he had entered *The Glittering Mask*. He further wrote in 1946 that:

whilst in agreement with those who say that there is no Australian school of musical thought, there is a mine of rich material available and as yet unearched in our own native melodies and rhythms to base a most original and fascinating idiom which ultimately would give a distinctive Australian flavour, thus making our music at least individual.⁹²

This was evidently insufficiently emphatic for Dorothy Ford, the editor of *Australian Musical News*, as a couple of months later she changed the passage to read:

As I became more mature I became more sceptical about the people who said there was no Australian school of thought, musical or otherwise, and that our country had nothing of its own to use as a cultural idiom. I personally believe that there is a mine of rich material available⁹³

⁸⁷ Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art, Colonial Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 12, 85–86; Symons, *Before and After Corroboree*, 44–7.

⁸⁸ Antill, Papers, NLA, MS 437/4/3.

⁸⁹ 'Coming-of-Age: Conservatorium Party; Australian National Music,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1936, 17.

⁹⁰ 'Aboriginal Music: Its Artistic Possibilities,' *Argus*, 30 Jun. 1923, 7.

⁹¹ 'Guest of Honor,' ABC Interstate stations, 3 Nov. 1946, 7:15 p.m., Papers of John Antill, National Library of Australia, MS 437/7/1, Box 13.

⁹² Antill, 'Corroboree: A Ballet Suite for Orchestra.'

⁹³ John Antill, 'Why I Wrote "Corroboree",' *Australian Musical News* 37 (1946): 20–1.

Conclusion

This examination of a range of sources has established new information and added some elements to the existing compositional history of *Corroboree*. Antill likely attended the corroboree at La Perouse in his late teens rather than as a child. Around ten years after that, he used passages of exoticising musical language in a representation of a corroboree functioning as a dance number for a light opera, *The Glittering Mask*, designed for a competition specifying works with ‘an Australian atmosphere.’ The tritones in the rising bass line of the opening of that piece may also have been the basis of the opening of *Corroboree*’s last movement.

Most writers agree that *Corroboree* was composed between 1936 and 1944, but Antill’s diaries show that the most intensive work took place between May 1943 and May 1944. Its first performance was conducted by Antill at an ABC Departmental seminar on 22 October 1945. Antill researched anthropological and musical texts as part of the compositional process, and the design of the work as a representation of Aboriginal ceremony structured around various totemic figures is likely based on Spencer and Gillen’s comparable emphasis on totems in their interpretation of central Australian Aboriginal cultures. Other specific texts Antill consulted include those by Howitt, Bates and Nathan.

Torrance’s discussion of rhythm in Aboriginal music quoted in Howitt’s book *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* may have been a source for some of *Corroboree*’s irregular metres, changing metres and syncopation, as evident in the notes that Antill made about ‘rhythms strong and irregular—double and triple suddenly.’ The work’s relationship with specific Aboriginal music is more elusive, with contradictory statements by Antill as to whether he quoted or transformed versions of Aboriginal melodies.

Only one scholarly source so far has included the information that, fairly early in *Corroboree*’s genesis, Antill conceived it as a suite for children, a purpose that explains some of the work’s more naïve aspects. The extant sketches and drafts indicate that it was still intended for children by the time the final sequence of movements was in place. Antill’s sketches also demonstrate that he had various ideas for different movement schema through the process of the composition, but from the drafts that survived, other than the ‘Snake Dance,’ much of *Corroboree* seems to have been composed fairly readily and, for the most part, without major transformations into the final version.

About the Author

Rachel Campbell is a Lecturer in Musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney. Her research is focused on Australian music in the context of Australian cultural history.