

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by

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2006 Churchill Fellow

To study jazz and country violin techniques in the United States with industry leaders who have developed their style from the basis of a classical technique.

The following excerpt is taken from the book, *Jazz Violin*, written by Matt Glaser and Stephan Grappelli, (Oak Publications, 1981).

Yehudi Menuhin:

"...I long for this other freedom, but am committed to one way of life, my way. The nearest I can get to the others (improvisers) is to know painters - Grappelli and people like him who give me at least a little bit of that quality which of course used to be a part of Western music...any harpsichord player who reads from a figured bass has to improvise, any jazz player has to improvise and I am trying to see that the children at my school get something of that."

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Signed

Dated

Jo Lack

April 5, 2007

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of improvising has long caused many classically trained violinists to shake in their polished black shoes, leading to protestations and promises of practicing Paganini over having to pluck lines from thin air. I both sympathise with this response and find it disturbing. Musicians in almost every other genre of music are asked at some stage of their development to create original ideas on their instruments. The tradition of soloists penning their own cadenzas has all but been lost from modern performance and string players are rarely asked nowadays to create melodies from figured bass lines. What this means is that many string players have lost a very important skill and one that was once thought essential to musical development - the ability to instantly make stuff up! I believe that improvising is a skill and a joy that should be fostered in up-and-coming string players. It requires an absolute theoretical and practical understanding of the instrument and opens the doors to a plethora of playing opportunities not possible with strictly classical training.

The concept of string players improvising in modern contexts is not a new one. Almost every violinist has heard of Stephan Grappelli's gypsy brilliance. Preceding and following Stephan is a long list of players who have stretched the violin's expressive and technical capabilities as improvisers. Until recently, these players were anomalies - the odd folk or classical violinist who strayed from the path to play in bands or groups - nowadays, in the U.S.A especially, string players are demanding that they be taught improvisation skills.

I believe it is important that Australian string players be given the same opportunities their North American counterparts are given to develop their improvisation skills. The prominence of the Suzuki Method and its philosophy of teaching young children music 'by ear', has created an excellent environment for modern day string players to learn how to improvise. The study I undertook in the United States opened my eyes to the excellent improvisation guides available to string players and

teachers and I am very grateful to the Churchill Trust for giving me the opportunity to study with experts in the field of violin improvisation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the Churchill Trust for providing me with the opportunity to study and develop my abilities as an improvising violinist and teacher. The assistance of the Trust has lead me to a whole new world of understanding, allowed me to develop ties with amazing musicians and institutions and has rekindled my enthusiasm for the violin and music making in general.

I would also like to thank the wonderful tutors and mentors I studied with who went above and beyond the call of duty to make sure I got as much out of my time in the United States as possible. Thank you David Campbell, Tim Lorsch and Matt Glaser.

Thank you to my fellow Churchill recipient, Ian Henderson for putting me in touch with Australian Composer, Leah Curtis in Los Angeles.

Lastly, thank you to the many musicians I played with whilst travelling, especially those who organised playing and recording sessions - Leah Curtis, Megan Lynch, The Cantrells and Joe Walsh.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description

To study jazz and country violin techniques in the United States with industry leaders who have developed their style from the basis of a classical technique.

My study was based in three North American cities - Los Angeles, Nashville and Boston. I chose my tutors based on recordings and transcriptions they had been involved in that had impacted my concept of how the violin could be played. Through observation of my tutors, players and the American Music Industry in general, I was able to formulate new ideas both on how to approach the violin as an improvising instrument and how to impart this knowledge to my students.

Highlights

- Observing Grammy nominated arranger, David Campbell conduct a recording session of a small string ensemble for the latest album by Grammy Award Winning Band, Maroon 5
- Recording violin parts for Leah Curtis, Fullbright Recipient and Composer in Residence at USC Thornton School Of Music in the Spielberg Sound Scoring Studio
- Attending the International Bluegrass Music Association Conference in Nashville
- Taking private country and bluegrass violin lessons with Tim Lorsch in Nashville
- Taking private jazz violin lessons with Matt Glaser in Boston
- Attending workshops at Berklee College of Music, Boston
- Playing with groups in L.A, Nashville and Boston
- Discussing improvisation and string improvisation pedagogy with attendees at the IBMA conference in Nashville and with Matt Glaser in Boston
- Creating professional ties with musicians and institutions in the United States

Conclusion

I believe that learning to improvise is an important tool for modern string players - both for their own fulfilment and to meet the current demands of the contemporary music world. Classical musicians are excellent candidates for improvisation, due to their generally high level of technical proficiency and excellent knowledge of music theory. In the past, a fear of playing without music has hampered the enjoyment and career possibilities of many string players. I believe that if improvisation is encouraged from an early age in string players with the already existing teaching resources, these fears could be dispelled and players could truly be free to traverse with ease across musical genres. It is my aim as a performer and teacher to develop my skills to such a level that I may be able to share the experiences I gained through the Churchill Fellowship with my students, colleagues and fellow musicians. I plan to do this by recording an album which reflects the skills I developed whilst studying on the Churchill Fellowship, to implement a summer camp program that allows string players to develop their improvising skills and to maintain close ties with the Berklee College of Music.

David Campbell, Grammy Nominated Composer and Arranger
Leah Curtis, Fullbright Fellow, Composer in Residence USC

My study began in Los Angeles with David Campbell. David is a string arranger for popular music and film who has been nominated for several Grammy Awards. I observed his work as a conductor in a recording session for Grammy Award winning band, Maroon 5. Observing David's work as a conductor and string arranger in a professional setting gave me access to a very private world that is usually only shared by the performers, conductors and recording engineers booked for the session. To be able to sit in on and observe the standard of playing, writing and conducting present during the session gave me insights into the requirements necessary to work as a session musician in Los Angeles.

Whilst in L.A, I also met up with Leah Curtis, an Australian film composer, Fullbright Recipient and Composer in Residence at USC. Leah was very kindly introduced to me by my fellow 2006 Churchill Recipient, Ian Henderson before my study began. This connection turned out to be invaluable, as it gave me hands-on-experience in the L.A recording scene. Leah asked me to record the violin parts for an original score she had composed to be recorded at Spielberg Sound Scoring Studio. This was a fantastic experience that revealed to me recording practices in the United States and the required skills necessary to work as a session violinist in the United States.



OUTCOMES

- Experience playing a professional session in Spielberg Sound Studio
- Observed professional recording session
- Dialogued with David Campbell on recording techniques and the role of strings in popular music

- Met string players involved in the session and learned about the Los Angeles Music Industry

NASHVILLE

Tim Lorsch

International Bluegrass Music Festival

Concerts by Stuart Duncan, Darol Anger

In Nashville, I studied country and bluegrass violin privately with Tim Lorsch. Tim is a highly respected and sought after session violinist in Nashville. He has performed on over 1000 albums as a violinist/fiddler and strings arranger. I learnt many technical and musical devices to develop my improvisational style in my sessions with Tim. By coincidence, I was in Nashville at the same time that the International Bluegrass Music Festival was running. Attendance at this festival gave me access to many of the industries best players and pedagogues. I was able to join in on playing sessions and to dialogue with many players on how they developed their styles and how they teach improvising to their students.



OUTCOMES

- Developed abilities as a bluegrass and country violinist
- Created professional ties with string improvising pedagogues in Nashville
- Attended the International Bluegrass Music Association conference
- Developed my bluegrass technique by playing with bluegrass and country groups in Nashville
- Attended concerts by Stuart Duncan, The Cantrels, Michael Cleveland and Darol Anger

BOSTON

Matt Glaser - Berklee College Of Music
String Workshop - Berklee College Of Music
Old Time Music Jam, Bluegrass Fiddle Jam

Berklee College of Music and study with Matt Glaser were definite highlights of my Churchill Fellowship travel. Matt is at the forefront of jazz violin performance and pedagogy in the world. He co-founded the Berklee College of Music in Boston and has written many instructional books on how to improvise. As well as taking private lessons with Matt, I was able to discuss his teaching philosophy and procedure on how to lead classical players towards becoming improvisers. I was able to join in playing with several different musical groups, due to Matt's connection with Berklee College. Actually playing with these groups and community 'jam sessions' accelerated my learning and gave me immediate hands-on experience with the styles I was learning.



OUTCOMES

- Developed abilities as a jazz violinist
- Created ties with string improvising pedagogues at Berklee College
- Discussed pedagogical ideas with Matt Glaser on how to guide classical players towards improvisation
- Played with old time and jazz music groups
- Attended string playing workshops at Berklee College of Music

MAIN BODY

I have been fascinated with the use of strings in popular music for many years. The Turtle Island String Quartet and its recordings (U.S.A, jazz string quartet) lead me on a journey to develop my abilities as a violinist and improviser. The expressive qualities of these recordings coupled with the extreme technical virtuosity of the Turtle Island musicians lead me to believe that the bar had truly been raised for classical players. To be classically proficient was no longer enough for me as a performer or as an educator. On graduating from the Queensland Conservatorium, I set about developing my skills as an improviser by playing in diverse groups and contexts. I

co-funded many concerts and two independently released albums that combined the use of string instruments with more contemporary compositional forms and instrumentation. The Churchill Fellowship I received allowed me to study with Music Industry Leaders in the United States who imparted very valuable knowledge on string improvising and string improvisation pedagogy.

The United States has an obvious musical heritage and is able to claim a number of musical forms as its own - jazz, blues and bluegrass. The violin has been used in these forms for many years and I believe that this history coupled with the fact that prominent classical string players have begun to record in these idioms (Joshua Bell, Yo Yo Ma), has led to a revolution in the way string players expect to be trained in the United States. Teaching improvisation to classical players has become an important part of a holistic musical education, generated mostly by the desire of the players to be able to improvise and also by the demands of the modern music industry. Based on my many conversations with young American music graduates, I have come to realise that musicians exiting institutions nowadays expect to be able to play in any context from the symphony to bluegrass jams. Fiddle camps are held in the United States each holiday season to allow classical players to cram-learn styles and give them experience playing in groups with fellow students, the aim of this being that attendees become proficient improvisers, band members and band leaders.

By studying with violinists who developed their style from a classical technique, I was able to connect with the technical aspects of their playing and teaching quickly, leaving room for me to focus purely on the new form of playing at hand. I learned excellent procedures on how to introduce basic improvising into my own practice regime. Namely, learning to arpeggiate the harmony to tunes, playing diatonically occurring seventh chords in twelve keys, experimenting with rhythm and placement and developing stylistically relevant melodies. The idea that simply attempting to improvise on the violin was a style in its own right was disintegrated for me. I discovered the huge tradition of improvising violinists in the United States; in bluegrass, country and jazz and the need for current players to study these transcriptions and recordings before developing their own style. The deep understanding these players had of harmony and their ability to dance across it - playing within the chordal bounds and then totally decimating them, has led to my continued interest in jazz harmony and developing my abilities within it.

CONCLUSIONS

- Improvisation is an essential part of a musician's development. I believe it is very important that Australian string players be exposed to improvisation through teaching materials, camps and on-going playing with other improvisers.
- Knowledge of the history of violin and string instrument improvisation is essential to the development of a unique style and sound on the violin. Study of the many transcriptions and recordings available makes this possible when coupled with regular practice of improvising exercises.
- String improvisation programs in the United States are advanced and have been accelerated by the use of violins in popular groups that are instantly accessible to the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States has excellent institutions dedicated to the development of improvisational abilities in its classical music students. Improvisation has become a necessary part of the curriculum in many prestigious institutions throughout the country. I believe it is important for Australian music institutions to observe these trends and consider taking on the challenge of providing a broader range of skills to their students, as opposed to purely classical training.
- I believe that regular workshops in improvisation at established music institutions could assist students in becoming more fully equipped to work in the current professional music industry. I also believe that recording experience where students are required to play under pressure situations - IE being close miked, wearing headphones, playing to a click track, understanding the role of strings in the contemporary music scene could be very useful for string players wishing to work outside of the classical context.
- I recommend that improvisation camps be held (either in studios by private teachers, independently - as in the United States or attached to major music institutions) to allow players of all ages and levels access to improvisation techniques.
- I recommend that a National String Improvisation Competition be set up to inspire young string players to achieve their potential as improvisers.

LONG TERM GOALS

- To create an improvisation syllabus for string players that combines audio and notated examples, allowing players the chance to learn the basic theory behind improvisation and leading them towards developing their own unique style/voice as string improvisers.
- To encourage the establishment of an improvisation school in Australia, similar to the Berklee College of Music in Boston and to maintain ties with this institution.
- To encourage Australian Music Institutions to purchase improvisation guides for campus libraries so that students may self direct their improvising abilities.
- To develop links between Australian music institutions and the Berklee College of Music, so that educators may share knowledge and experience.
- To set up fiddle camps, beginning at the St Cecilia School Of Music in the style of those run in the United States where string players have intensive improvisation training and performance opportunities during school/university break times.