

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by
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2008 fellow

To undertake a period of compositional study through collegial contact with Estonian composer Erkki-Sven Tüür. To attend new music festivals in Germany and Estonia. To investigate current trends in contemporary composition and performance in Finland and the UK.

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Signed

James Ledger

2 June 2009

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Introduction

I travelled to London, Berlin, Helsinki and Estonia on my Churchill Fellowship. The fellowship included meeting with other composers, conductors, publishers and music-administrators and many concerts of new contemporary classical music.

I spent a large amount of time with the Estonian composer Erkki-Sven Tüür, and I cannot thank him and his wife Anne enough for the generosity of their time, spirit and sharing of ideas.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for what was an extremely profound experience. The trip answered many questions and, importantly, raised many more.

Executive summary

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Highlights of places and people met

London, UK: meeting with Sally Cavender, Head of Promotions, Faber Music, meeting with Paul Daniel - conductor

Berlin, Germany: Talking with Sir Simon Rattle, Chief Conductor, Berlin Philharmonic.

Hiiumaa, Estonia: Time spent with Erkki-Sven Tüür, composer.

Helsinki, Finland: the Finnish Music Information Centre

Tallinn, Estonia: meeting with Olari Elts - conductor

Highlights amongst the sheer amount of new contemporary classical music I heard would include:

John Adams' opera "Doctor Atomic", The Coliseum, London

George Crumb's "Makrokosmos" in a converted turn-of-the-century water pumping station, Berlin

Gyorgy Kurtag's "What is the Word" in the Chamber Music Hall of the Philharmonie, Berlin

A recital of cello & piano music, Old Town Hall, Tallinn.

Major lessons

The importance of time contemplating, careful consideration and planning a piece before a single note is even written.

The importance of having one's own compositional voice, rather than technical proficiency, although the latter clearly influences one's voice, was something that came from all the concerts I attended.

Dissemination and implementation in Australia

I have a series of commissioned works that come directly after my fellowship. These pieces will no doubt be shaped and informed from ALL of the experiences I had on the fellowship, including the massive amount of new music that I discovered. One of the more tangible qualities is to allow my own music space to breathe, and to contemplate the best artistic decisions possible. Any new direction my music takes will be passed on to the wider community through public concerts, broadcasts and through my role as composition lecturer.

Programme — people and organisations visited

10 – 17 March 2009 London, UK

Meeting: Paul Daniel – conductor

Attended memorial service for Richard Hickox at St. Paul's Cathedral

Meeting: Sally Cavender – Head of Promotions, Faber Music Publishers

Concert: "Music of Today" featuring music of Oliver Knussen

Met: Julian Anderson - composer.

Concert – Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Eka-Pekka Salonen.

Meeting: Bill Connor - composer

Meeting: Emma Welton – Head of British Music Information Centre

Opera – "Doctor Atomic" by John Adams, ENO, London Coliseum

20 – 30 March Berlin, Germany

Attended MaerzMusik Festival in various venues around the capital including the Jewish Museum, Haus der Berliner Festspiele, Radialsystem V and both the large hall and chamber hall of the Philharmonie.

Details as follows:

Concert: Portrait 1 - Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble / music by Dmitri Kourliandski, Alexei Sioumak, Valery Voronov

Concert: Kairos Quartet / music by Feldman, Grosskopf, Kourliandski, Johnston & Terterian

Concert: Portrait 2 - Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble / music by Kourliandski, Safranov, Filanovski

Concert: Eurasische Schwellen / composers from Russia, Armenia, Central Asia

Concert: George Crumb at 80 Makrokosmos

Public Forum: American Avant-garde Revisited with Alvin Lucier, Steve Reich, Michael Nyman

Concert: Steve Reich - Drumming

Concert: Ensemble Contrechamps / music by Kurtág, Kourliandski, Bedrossian, Furrer

Installation: Martin Riches 24 Piece Percussion Installation

Installation: Robert Ashley Music with Roots in the Aether TV-opera, installation with 7 monitors and headphones

Concert: Experimental Composition in Schools

Concert: Eighth Blackbird / music by Reich, Lang, Gordon & Wolfe

Concert: Quatuor Bozzini / music by Tenney, Wolff, Zimmermann & Cage

Concert: SWR Sinfonieorchester / music by Berio & Andre

In addition to the MaerzMusik festival:

Attended Berlin Philharmonic rehearsal of Wagner "Siegfried"

Met: Sir Simon Rattle – chief conductor, Berlin Philharmonic

Concert: Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale" Berlin Philharmonic Chamber Players.

31 – 6 April Hiiumaa, Estonia

Spent time with Erkki-Sven Tüür, listening to and studying his music. Discussions on his thoughts and writing processes.

Time in a remote cottage allowed for time to contemplate my next commission, in context of what I had seen and heard so far on the fellowship.

7 – 10 April Helsinki, Finland

Finnish Music Information Centre – exploring contemporary Finnish music.

Meeting: Veli-Mati Puumala – composer/lecturer Sibelius Academy of Music

Meeting: Lawrence Foster – conductor

Concert – Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Finlandia Hall / music by Christian Lindberg, Rossini & Enescu

11 – 24 April Tallinn, Estonia

Concert – Estonian National Opera Orchestra & Chorus Mahler: Symphony No 2, Met with Arvo Volmer - conductor

Attended Estonian Music Days (EMD) Festival. Held in various venues around Tallinn including, the Estonian National Opera, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Old Town Hall, Tallinn Methodist Church. Festival description as follows:
Event: EMD Launch – a ceremony that saw the placing of a usb drive containing modern Estonian music into the concrete foundation of a new building for future generations to discover

Concert: Ensemble U / music by Tulve & Aints

Concert: Collegium Novum Zürich / music by Caflisch, Grisey, Gubler & Lill

Video Concert: Films made to extant Estonian Music, Part, Krigul, Siib, Lill

Concert: Unbeknownst pages of Estonian Music History

Concert: Composers Recital The Music of Erkki-Sven Tüür

Concert: Organ Recital, music by Estonian & Finnish composers

Concert: Music by students of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre

Concert: Laureates of the Heino Eller Music Award

Concert: Recital Piano & Cello / music by Tulve, Tüür & Schnittke

Meeting: Olari Elts - conductor

Main Body

I have for a long time, been very keen to explore the music of the Baltic countries, particularly Estonia. The impetus for this came from a CD of Baltic music that I stumbled upon some years ago. Although a small country with a population around the 1.3 million mark, music from this country is reaching an international audience due to the likes of composers Arvo Pärt and Erkki-Sven Tüür. I had the opportunity to meet the latter on his visit to Australia in 2007. Spending time with Erkki-Sven in Estonia formed the central part of the fellowship. He offered incredibly open and honest thoughts about his compositional process and it was whilst staying on the island of Hiiumaa where Erkki-Sven lives, that I had one of those 'light-bulb' moments. As obvious as it sounds, an artwork needs a gestation period – a period of contemplation and planning before the actual writing begins. In our modern lives, little time is afforded to time to just think, and I came to the conclusion, at least in my case, that I need to factor in 'thinking time' when it comes to accepting commissions. This isn't necessarily as simple as it sounds!

Erkki-Sven was writing his seventh symphony whilst I was there and showed me the work in progress. His writing is incredibly honest and he has a truly unique way of blending colours in the orchestra.

Through Erkki-Sven, I met several other leading Estonian composers and musicians, including the composers Helene Tulve, Ulo Krigul and conductor Olari Elts

I was very interested to see what new classical music was coming out of Berlin. My perception was that Berlin was very much the bastion of high modernism. It seems that while this is probably still the case, it happily embraces all styles of contemporary classical music. The time in Berlin and the MaerzMusik festival was incredibly illuminating. The festival showcased an incredibly diverse range of music, from young Russian composers right through to American establishment composers such as Steve Reich. The MaerzMusik festival showed me that nowadays, there isn't a war between the disparate styles of modernism and minimalism but they can sit happily side by side one another in the same festival – although not the same concert. The other interesting thing for me was that all of these concerts were either sold-out or extremely packed houses. It didn't matter who was on the bill, it seemed that Kurtag put as many "bums on the seats" as Reich. The demographic of these audiences was extreme also. In Australia, new music concerts seem to appeal only to younger people, but there was an incredibly diverse age range at all of these concerts. And these concerts were enthusiastically received – sometimes composers were getting three, four or in once case five curtain calls. This was a revelation for me.

The music festival in Tallinn was not on the same scale as the MaerzMusik in Berlin, but no less illuminating. Organised by the rather military sounding Estonian Composers Union, the concerts were diverse in nature and in the venues in which they took place. The Old Town of Tallinn is truly a unique and fascinating place and it provided a wonderful setting for the festival. One concert in particular, was memorable for the astonishing performance given by the duo of Siver Ainomäe (cello) and Marrit Gerretz-Traksmann (piano) in the charming 600 year old, Old Town Hall.

I visited two Music Information Centres on my fellowship, the first was the British Music Information Centre, who were in the midst of merging with other music organisations in the UK, and as such all the music was currently in storage and unavailable for perusal. The other was the Finnish Music Information Centre in Helsinki. I spent hours here immersing myself in new Finnish classical music. They had a listening room all set up for me and I found that my listening took me in a host of unexpected directions. I discovered some relatively obscure music that I would not have otherwise encountered, had I not been there.

I also went to several galleries and exhibits during my fellowship, highlights include the Le Corbusier exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London and the KUMU art museum in Tallinn. I mention these as art and architecture play such a strong role in both planning and inspiration for my own compositions.

Conclusions

The time spent on the fellowship and the exposure to so much new music has had a profound influence on me. I sense that it will see a marked change in my compositional style, but this will clearly remain to be seen. That said, I am extremely keen to start my next commission.

I have returned to Australia with a new and potentially valuable 'road to follow' A real immersion in the music of another country would be a timely exercise, but I have purchased a lot of CDs and scores from Finland and Estonia in particular and I have a lot of listening to look forward to.

I discovered so many new composers whose music I have a real empathy with. Additionally, I feel all the discussions I had with other composers were particularly enlightening. There is a sense of camaraderie between the composers in Tallinn – and the sheer number of them belie Tallinn's modest population of 400,000.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to have this experience. Everything was positive, the only negative was not being able to attend a public talk given by Erkki-Sven Tüür as it was in Estonian!

I am currently composer in residence with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, and I am able to write works that will be performed in a large concert hall and then broadcast on national radio. I have already given two 'pre-concert talks' at the Perth Concert Hall, discussing my fellowship.

Recommendations

We currently live in an age where, due to the current technology, music from any era from any part of the world can be heard at the click of a mouse button. It is therefore perhaps incredibly difficult to establish a unique voice, and harder still for any such unique voice to be heard. Having said this, it is still incredibly important and fulfilling to “go to the source” eg: to hear Estonian musicians playing Erkki-Sven Tüür’s music in Tallinn, or to see a German ensemble playing music by Beat Furrer in Berlin.

It was fulfilling also to discuss and share ideas with other composers. I will certainly be introducing some of the music I discovered on the fellowship to my students and fellow composers. I will be giving talks specifically on what is happening in the new music scene in Berlin and Tallinn in the coming months at the University of Western Australia and the Symphony Australia Composers’ School in Hobart.

As mentioned, I am extremely keen to write my next piece for the orchestra and the ones that follow, as my head is full of ideas that came from the journey. I am deeply grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for this privilege and for the opportunities that were afforded by the fellowship.