

## Signifying cities: Barry Conyngham and the musical construction of an Australian urban soundscape

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Barry Conyngham confesses to have decided early on in his career to become a composer who dealt with city topics and themes.<sup>1</sup> Other composers, his teacher Peter Sculthorpe among them, had dealt with the outback and the countryside; being “a city dweller”, he decided to focus on what he knew best. This approach can be observed in his first orchestral work, *Crisis: Thoughts in a city* (1968), for string orchestra with multiple soloists, commissioned by the Australian Youth Orchestra,<sup>2</sup> and provides a connecting thread that can be traced through works such as *Dwellings* (1982), “The cities” in the ballet *Vast* (1987), and *Decades* (1993).

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication to the author, 2011. See also Barry Conyngham, ‘Music with an Australian Accent?’, *Australian Society* February (1989): 35–36; Patricia Shaw, ‘The Development of a National Identity in Australian Contemporary Music’ (Honours, The University of Melbourne, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Plush, ‘Notes on Crisis: Thoughts in a City’ (Mimeo, 2020). I am indebted to Dr Plush for sharing his unpublished notes with me.

When one considers the substantial presence of the outback in white Australia's construction of identity, Conyngham's decision strikes as a profoundly anti-essentialist gesture, an act of resistance even, against such a deeply ingrained cultural trope. Signifying a city, or even the idea of cities, however, is not an easy task.

At this point it may be useful to make a brief detour and reflect on how art music can represent or communicate ideas of place. The different modes of music signification constitute a complex (and thorny) field, which cannot be explored here; suffice it to say that one of the ways in which music produces meaning is through its representational and referential ability, i.e., its capacity to refer to elements outside of itself.

Musical signs conform to the Peircean triad of iconic, indexical or symbolic. Iconic signs imitate or resemble what they

represent, indexical signs produce meaning by association, while symbolic signs are arbitrary.<sup>3</sup> The imitation of the cuckoo in a symphony is iconic of real cuckoos, but (at least in the Northern hemisphere) is also indexical of May and Spring. The connection between the major mode with joy or happiness, on the other hand, seems to be arbitrary. The relationship between music and what is being evoked by it—between signifier and signified—is not a fact of nature, an essence. Rather, it is a cultural convention, socially and historically constructed through innumerable pacts between composers and audiences. Over the centuries, art music has amassed a large vocabulary (a thesaurus, as Leonard Ratner called it) through which non-musical ideas are summoned in Western imagination.<sup>4</sup> Consider

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (Chur [Switzerland]: Harwood Academic, 1992), 197; Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 26 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard G Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980).

for example, how art music composers have aimed, throughout history, to evoke natural landscapes. Notable in this regard is the presence of ideas about the countryside in the music of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist composers: tundras, pampas, prairies, the outback, often entangled with idealised views of pre-modern ways of life.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a full repertoire of representational practices exists to conjure up ideas such as vast expanses, the pastoral, water, etc., which composers (consciously or unconsciously) can draw upon.<sup>6</sup> The musical representation of cities, on the other hand, does not have such a widely-shared topical collection.

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<sup>5</sup> Melanie Plesch, 'From "Abandoned Huts" to "Maps of the Pampas": The Topos of the Huella and the Representation of Landscape in Argentine Art Music', in *Studies on a Global History of Music*, Reinhard Strohm (Ed). (Routledge, 2018), 345–79.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Neil Lerner, 'Copland's Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood', *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2001): 477–515 and ; Melanie Plesch, 'Topic Theory and the Rhetorical Efficacy of Musical Nationalisms: The Argentine Case', in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Music Semiotics in Memory of Raymond Monelle*,

Back in the sixteenth century, Clément Janequin aimed to render the soundscape of the streets of Paris in his *Voulez ouyr les cris de Paris*, as did Orlando Gibbons in the seventeenth century with his *The Cryes of London*. Both use iconicity, their polyphony interweaving the calls of street vendors advertising their goods and services. Closer to our times, composers who have thematised the idea of cities include the North American Aaron Copland (1900-1990) and, closer to this author, the Argentine Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992), whose music is inextricably linked to the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>7</sup>

The kaleidoscopic nature of the contrasting motifs in the opening of Copland's *Music for a Great City* betrays its origins as a film score (*Something Wild*, 1961), and "Subway Jam" (last

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ed. Nearchos Panos (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2013), 328–37, <http://sites.ace.ed.ac.uk/edmusemiotics/proceedings/>.

movement of the same work) still suggests an iconic representation of reality.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, as with the cuckoo and Spring, we begin to glimpse an indexical relationship between these musical gestures and broader concepts associated with urban life. Similarly, Piazzolla used both iconic and indexical elements in his renditions of the city. In *Buenos Aires Zero Hour*, noises, buzzes, rattles and walking basses mimic a lonely walk at midnight in a city that never sleeps, while a number of clearly recognisable tango gestures further cement the reference by exploiting the well-known association of the genre with the city.

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<sup>7</sup> Omar Corrado, 'Significar una ciudad: Astor Piazzolla y Buenos Aires', *Revista del Instituto Superior de Música* 1, no. 9 (2002): 52–61, <https://doi.org/10.14409/ism.v1i9.544>.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Lerner, 'Copland, Aaron', Grove Music Online, n.d., accessed 7 September 2020; Rebecca Cweibel, 'Coplandia, or the Ideological American Sound' (Master's thesis, University of Washington, 2014).

From *Crisis* onwards Conyngham's construction of the cityscape avoided the easy solution that iconicity could have provided. Rather than mimicking the sounds and noises of the hustle and bustle, his musical renditions of the city appear more conceptual, representing musically ideas that we associate with the modern metropolis. He exploits the allusive nature and symbolic capacity of sparse chords, melodic figures, metres and textures, strident timbres, and flickering chordal changes to suggest rather than quote a number of elements that we associate with modern cities: dynamism, skylines, crowds, modernity itself, the loneliness of the individual in a crowd, and the eerie yet pulsating quietude of a large city at night.

Through his city-inspired works, Conyngham has constructed an expressive vocabulary to signify his ideas about cities, the urban soundscapes and the internal, psychological landscape of city

dwellers. This vocabulary comprises a number of musical figures and gestures; in music-rhetorical terms, these are *topoi* or topics of discourse.<sup>9</sup> The presence of the city emerges in his works, now vertiginous and urgent, now uncanny and solitary. To the best of my (limited) knowledge, he is the originator of an idiosyncratic collection of musical *topoi* that did not yet exist, and which may well come to signify the Australian city experience.

A thorough understanding of Conyngham's expressive world, his "referential poetics", to use Malena Kuss's words,<sup>10</sup> would require a deep delving into these *topoi*, not only to define their musical signifiers but also to unveil their meaningful connections with the imagery they summon.

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<sup>9</sup> Ratner, *Classic Music*, 9; Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze Di Figaro and Don Giovanni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

I am writing this tribute in the times of Covid-19, without access to books and scores. Thus, I cannot offer the detailed topical analysis I would have liked, but I do hope that this brief reflection might inspire others to do so in future.

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<sup>10</sup> Malena Kuss, 'La Poética Referencial de Astor Piazzolla |', *Revista Del Instituto Superior de Música* 1, no. 9 (2005): 11–28.