Phil Treloar Feeling to Thought

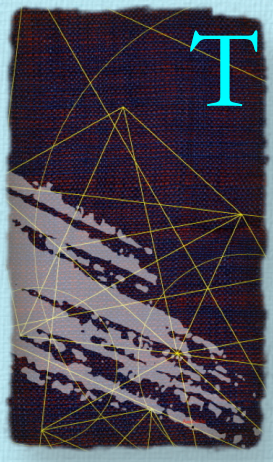
Of Other Narratives

tracings in the ground of
Collective Autonomy
people–practice–theory–history

Volume 4. Part 2.

A Hymn to the Creator of All

Omnificent creator of all
By his wisdom created the heavens;
His mercy endureth for eternity
And to Him belongs forgiveness[1]



The late-1970s early '80 were pretty turbulent years in my private life. The marriage I'd shared and from which we'd been blessed with two sons, Wynton and Teo, had fallen apart and I was struggling in no small measure with guilt over the separation from my sons. This is a story experienced by many. How one comes to terms with this is never an easy road and, often, no matter how difficult it is and no matter how hard one tries to resolve the guilt, difficulties inevitably pile up, one on top of the other. This was certainly my experience and whatever the solutions, none came without immense soul searching and relentless, astringent, self-analysis. It took years. There's no escape. There's just the confrontation with one's self and with one's morality.

During these times, perhaps ironically, my creative impetus was on the increase and the means for expressing, fairly abundant. It seemed that the previous ten years of apprenticeship in creative music-making was coming to a close, giving rise to the dawn of a new day. And although the inner conflict raged, creative clarity was forthcoming. This seemed to balance out the guilt. At least to some extent anyway. I don't say justify. That's of another psychological order altogether and a game I've never been able to play.

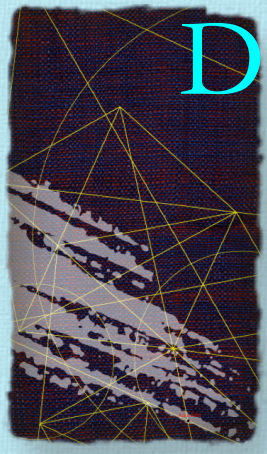
I'd had the great fortune of discovering my creative predilections when quite young and, importantly, happy. As the years have rolled on I've realized with increasing depth the significance of this and, fundamentally, it, the creative act, is for me an index of celebration. This doesn't imply laughter and the 'good time' syndrome more akin to 'entertainment'. In creative engagement celebration is embedded. At least for me it is. And the search is synonymous with it.

Just prior to my departure for New York in 1980, I'd been playing as a 'sideman' in bands led by Bernie McGann,[2] Bruce Cale,[3] Roger Frampton,[4] and Mark Simmonds.[5] This represents a remarkable range of expressive modes and musical endeavor. NYC proved to be the right place for me at the right time in my development. And the time I spent there with master musician, Billy Hart,[6] crucial. I returned to Sydney and with me, the ever-

present struggle with guilt and self-analysis. But one significant element in this complex mix had changed. A personal paradigm shift had been occasioned. I was now utterly clear about the direction my creative endeavor was to take and just as clear about how this would manifest. I was committed, for better or for worse, to the certainty of my own cultural background and no longer dependent upon nor for that matter, interested in, imported models. Although resolution to my parenting issues was still far from home, I'd found solid foundation in the acceptance of my Cornish heritage on Australian soil; not just a perspective but a reality absolutely innate to my being. I felt then, as I do now, that there is a purity and nourishing power in this and, if I was to pursue creative action at all, it was entirely up to me to paint pictures in accord with it.

My time with Bill Hart was, in a word, enriching. Within thirty minutes of our first get-together Billy looked at me and asked, straight out, "What do you want from me?" Though taken aback by the directness and boldness of his question, I didn't flinch but rather, answered him just as directly: "I want to know how you *feel* about your music … the music of Africa America."[7] We were standing, facing each other and looking each other deeply in the eye. He then told me to turn around with my back towards him, put my arms across my chest so that both hands were gripping the opposite shoulder, and make my body rigid. This I did. He then told me to fall over, backwards. This I also did. He caught me just before I hit the floor. Still rigid, he set me upright, turned me around, and with a huge, warm smile, gave me a strong hug. Gently pushing me away he asked, "How did you know I'd catch you?" "Because I've listened to you play." I replied.

Due to Billy's initiative it took us about two minutes to establish genuine trust. This was no game. Nor was it some bent sort of school-yard macho bullshit. It was utterly direct, improvised, and totally revealing. No time to think. To be sure, hesitation would have told a clear story. Though a vastly different story it would have been. Our relationship would continue along the line drawn by this remarkable experience. An experience that inspired us both, I think. We both had clarity, we both gained immediate confidence in each other, and, occupying the ground between us, unquestioning faith and trust. Is this not essential to music-making? During the ensuing months I was to discover with increasing depth how Billy felt about his music and through this I was left with no doubt whatsoever as to how I felt about mine. Our communication served like a mirror. The similarities were significant. Far from being a 'profession', our respective musics share stories and express feelings and thoughts regarding our cultural heritage. To be true to this is to speak with a clear and open heart and thus, to embrace with commitment, the human condition …more precisely, our respective human conditions. We each have our own point of view, person to person, culture to culture. In my view, the greatest contribution one can make in creative engagement is to celebrate the differences through thought and with feeling rather than emasculate them by reducing them to a common denominator. Thought and feeling bear the capacity to bring about understanding, recognition, and acknowledgement, thus leading to respect. And these elements embrace, each with a tremendous power distinctive of its character, a human essence incalculable in its potential to circumvent hostile confrontation yet do so such that the positive and generative found in engagement might be maintained and accessed.



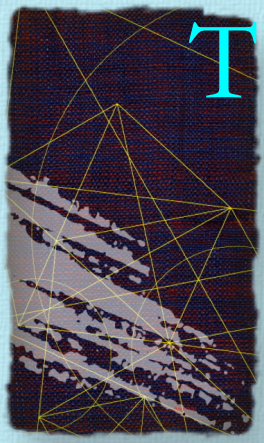
During the early-'70s I'd taken to making regular trips to Kangaroo Valley to camp, think, contemplate, and consolidate, sometimes in the company of my two young sons, most often by myself; sometimes overnight, more often for two or three days. It was on one of these excursions that one night while laying on the ground looking into the incalculable universe beyond, a melody entered my orbit and straight away I recognized it as a sign, though for precisely what was far from obvious. It *was* a visitation and I didn't doubt it. But back then I'd not really considered such matters much at all.

Having had no 'formal' music education up until this point[8] it was with a struggle that I managed to write this melody out. It was a little strange, actually, as it didn't really resemble the sorts of jazz-like melodies that had been so much a part of my music-apprenticeship and furthermore I recognized it as a spiritual awakening. It was slow moving and comprised of, mainly, stepwise intervals. But it also had some leaps greater than an octave, presenting a line more akin to two people in conversation; a dialogic exchange. And although essentially modal in disposition it introduced momentary key changes. In the overall scheme of things there is nothing particularly unusual about any of this. What was unusual though was that I immediately envisaged it being sung into my tam-tam and this with contact microphones attached, running the signal from the tam-tam through some analogue processing devices I'd been experimenting with for, by then, a number of years.

I returned home with great excitement and began the process of learning to sing this melody into the face of the 'bugged' tam-tam in such a way that the resonances caused by my voice would make their way through the tam-tam and into the processing devices which I'd manipulate along the way. Setting these processes in motion gave rise to somewhat unpredictable sonic results. With a filter being swept by a voltage-control sawtooth wave and an analogue time modulator being modulated with a square wave, both out of sync, sometimes all the low frequencies would disappear from the audio spectrum while at others, all the highs would disappear.[9] Then there'd be combinations of these with specific pitches jumping out of nowhere, while at other times a blend of frequencies so complex and microtonal that it would seem like the surrounding atmosphere was dancing with myriad beats. In my mind this sound-world was absolutely true to its place of origin and this I considered to be the cosmos; the night sky; the universe I'd been looking into and I *felt*, visited by.

This melody I named *A Hymn to the Creator of All* and it became the first movement in a much larger piece I called *See Is*. Though performed several times by Expansions,[10] *See Is* was never actually completed. There was very good reason for this. Simply put, I was not up to the task. And in recognition of this fact, I applied for a place in the composition school at NSW State Conservatorium of Music and from which, in 1988, I graduated as a composition major.

Entry into the composition course was quite a shock as I'd never been quite so aware just how little I knew about things in general and music in particular. I can't say it was easy and I can't say it was all enjoyable. But then, I wasn't there for ease and certainly, by then, I'd come to terms with what it means to engage creative pursuit … while enjoyment might be at times a bi-product, it is certainly not its raison d'être.



These digressions have a purpose. It was during these years as a composition student that, more consciously, I came to appreciate matters of musical structure and in this my own propensities came to the fore.[11] Towards the end of the course, 1987, and with much encouragement from Graham Hair,[12] I set to work on *See Is* as a piece for orchestra and choir, neither of which I'd written for previously. I was to write two movements of *See Is* in one semester. In the event there was little time to ponder the possibilities. Diving headlong into the *Hymn*, still the first movement of the piece, I made a number of pragmatic choices. Among these was the decision to write the *Hymn* for choir accompanied only by electronics and this to be no more than a constant drone in juxtaposition with the voices. I'd decided that the voices would be rendered as three choral groups, each in the standard S, A, T, B format.[13] The central group was to realize a tonal concept while the two choral groups flanking the central body were to be rendered modally. The central group was to be larger, with more voices per part than the outer groups. So, in this environment, the central group functioned something like a filter in relation to the two flanking groups.

Where the original *Hymn* was wordless, the new setting was to use biblical text. A friend at the time,[14] devoted to Christ and who was profoundly familiar with the Bible, helped me find text that might suite the original melody and the profound experience of its coming into being. This done, I decided to fragment the text, rendering elements of it in the two flanking choral groups while different text was to be assigned to the central body. (See Example 1 for these characteristics.)

On the score the music is set at ♩ = 48. The basses in the central choir first enter at m. 12 intoning the words, "creator of all". Immediately upon finishing these three words at m. 19 they are repeated, this time with the tenors added at m. 20. And in fact, these are the only words the central choir utter throughout. The altos enter at m. 28 and finally the sopranos at m. 36 – the central point in the piece – thus preparing an ascent to the apotheosis. (See Example 1 for these measures of ascent.)

Looking at the text (see the epigraph) it becomes immediately apparent that the diversity of vowels and consonants therein offer a wide timbral spectrum. By drawing out or sustaining these speech sounds, complex mixtures of overtones are brought into play. For example, the extended phonetic sounds, \ē\, \ā\, and \ȯr\, of 'creator', the \o\ of 'of' and the \ȯ\ of 'all' in the central choir, function as a filtering device in relation to the two flanking choirs. And with the constantly shifting speech sounds in the two flanking choirs playing on this filtering device, much sonic movement is created without it deriving from intentionally rendered 'rhythmic' scoring; the activity is a result of the sound itself. (See in particular, Example 3.) The sonic foundation of this choral setting recalls the experience of the original voice and tam-tam version. And though a vastly different emotional ethos results – due in no small

measure to the performance difficulties involved – the play of sonic phenomena, free of overt, up-front 'rhythmic propulsion', results in an etherial beauty consistent with and reflective of the "Work's" initial inspiration.

Looking just a little more closely at the score and its realization we find this play of phonetic sounds and the complex sonic world it creates works towards the apotheosis where, momentarily, the sonic world becomes less complex and relationships clearer and more defined. (Example 2, m. 43) The entry of the middle choir's sopranos at m. 36 (approx. 5' 16" on the recording) sets into motion in the two flanking choirs several repeats of the two words, "endureth" and "eternity". (Example 1.) These repeats run concurrent with the middle choir's repeating of the words, "of all", at m. 39 (5' 37"). They then converge at the downbeat of m. 43 (6' 06") with the \th\ of "endureth" and the \tē\ of "eternity" in the flanking choirs leaving the \ȯ\ of 'all' in the middle choir in high relief. So, at this point we have the convergence of these three words alluding to omnificence, set into high relief through the \ȯ\ of 'all' at the apotheosis and, by implication, recalling the very opening which drones on the \äm\of "omnificent" (the first word of the text) and connects us with the sanskrit, Oṃ – the universal source – which has been intoned as a mantra on the Indian Sub-Continent and beyond since time immemorial. And for Buddhists, it is a symbol of spiritual knowledge and especially of emptiness (śūnyatā).

A perfunctory glance might, I suppose, beckon an extended exegesis of the pitch domain. Certainly, the aural result would indicate so. However, my thinking on this was, at the time of composition, really quite simple. The primary decisive factor was that I sought to share the inspiration of the piece as much with the choral setting as was the case with the original version for voice, tam-tam, and electronics. How to achieve this was not something I labored over. It came to me without hesitation and in the event took but a couple of weeks to write out.

The very nature of the original melody – modal with a strong tonal center, intervals of perfect 5th, perfect 4th, and stepwise melodic patterns within these – gravitated of its own accord towards being set in its original form but at different pitch levels throughout the two flanking choirs. The material of the middle choir, though entirely new, embraces the original melody. The choice of pitch levels, too, was guided by the hand of its own volition, as can be heard from the opening where the basses of one flanking choir pave the way for entry of the sopranos in the other. In maintaing melodic integrity – e.g., the interval of a tritone at one pitch level would be maintained as such at another – accidentals led the way into other tonal domains. By selectively adding to this, melodic inversion, and in the doing maintaining intervalic integrity, further accidentals were introduced. So by now a rich palette of intervalic colour was being mapped onto the score. All these colours seemed to flow from my brush almost without it being held. And with the pitch domain taking care of itself, so to speak, the crucial decisions, it seemed to me at the time, concerned the text. This is where the greatest compositional energy was spent …achieving in the text domain the flow of phonetic sounds consistent with that of the pitch.

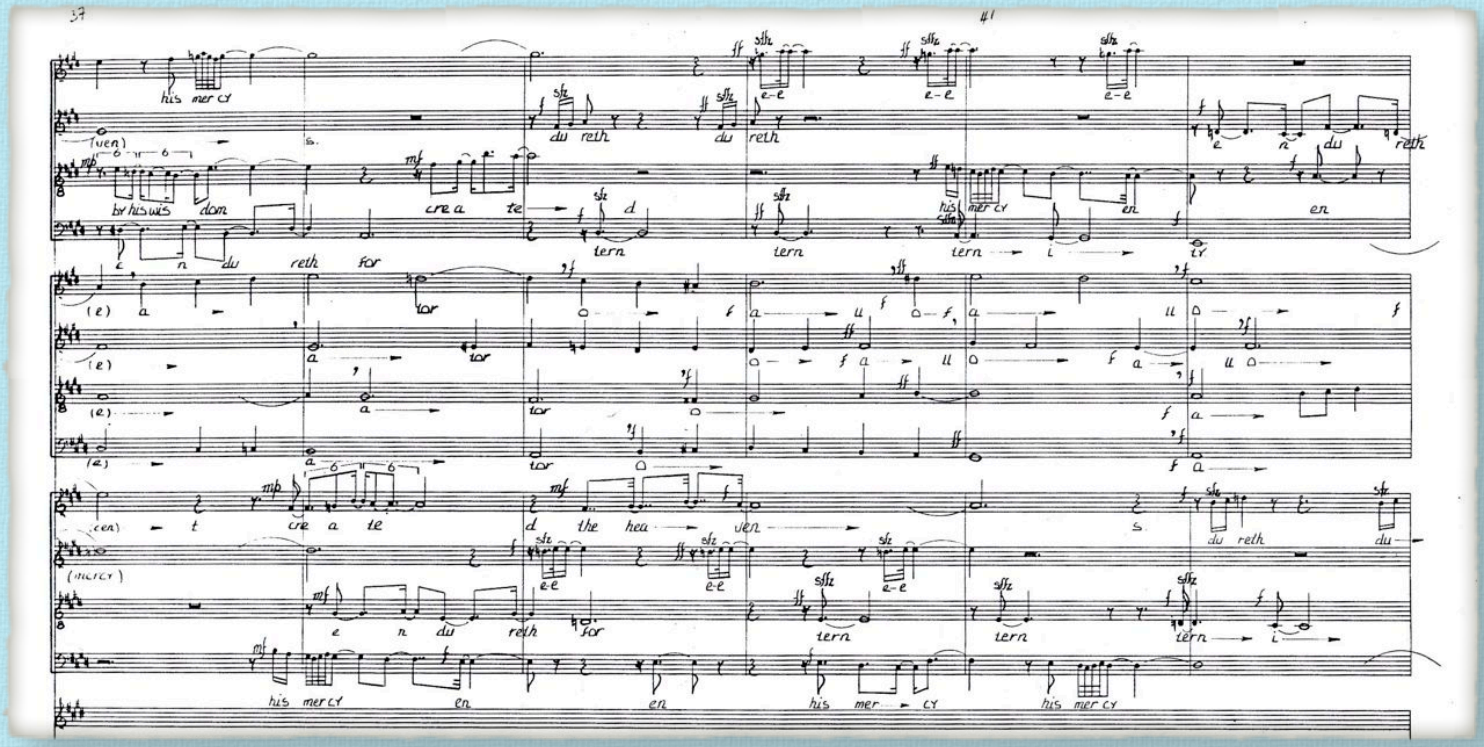
Electronics were not included in the rendering at hand. Under the circumstances, a decision from which the performance benefitted, I think. The performance space, though not embracing an acoustic character like that of a cathedral, is, nonetheless, spacious and reverberative enough so as to enable sonic integration, an element fundamental to the "Work's" concept, as is evident from a glance at the score. The constant overlapping of parts, though themselves fragmentary, rendered in this relatively reverberative acoustic enables them to connect as one while bringing out the richness of colour mapped onto the score through the play between speech sounds and these in relation to the various levels of pitch complexity touched on above.

At the time John McCaughey made the decision to direct the ASTRA Choir through a performance of *A Hymn to the Creator of All* I was quite unwell. As a result there was next to no discussion between us concerning the piece. John's musicality and intelligence is legion. And in situations like this anyway, I think the performing musician is better off left to him- or herself; to bring to the performed "Work" something that might never have entered the composition's orbit otherwise. This, certainly, is so in the case of this particular performance of *A Hymn to the Creator of All*. While McCaughey and I never did get to discuss ASTRA's rendering it is pretty clear to me that the rehearsal process brought about the necessity for certain decisions that made an impact, not only on the composition qua performance but crucially, on the composition qua composition. Whatever the time spent in face-to-face rehearsal, I suspect that McCaughey, in the privacy of his own imagination, spent a larger slice of time figuring his way through the composition so that, in performance, light might be shed in the most beneficial of places. For this, my gratitude is boundless. The choir members, too, must have contributed substantial time and energy. Another matter for which I'm truly grateful.

Example 1. *A Hymn to the Creator of All* – mm. 37 ~ 42 (5' 23" ~ 6' 05")

NOTE: Lead-up to the Apotheosis

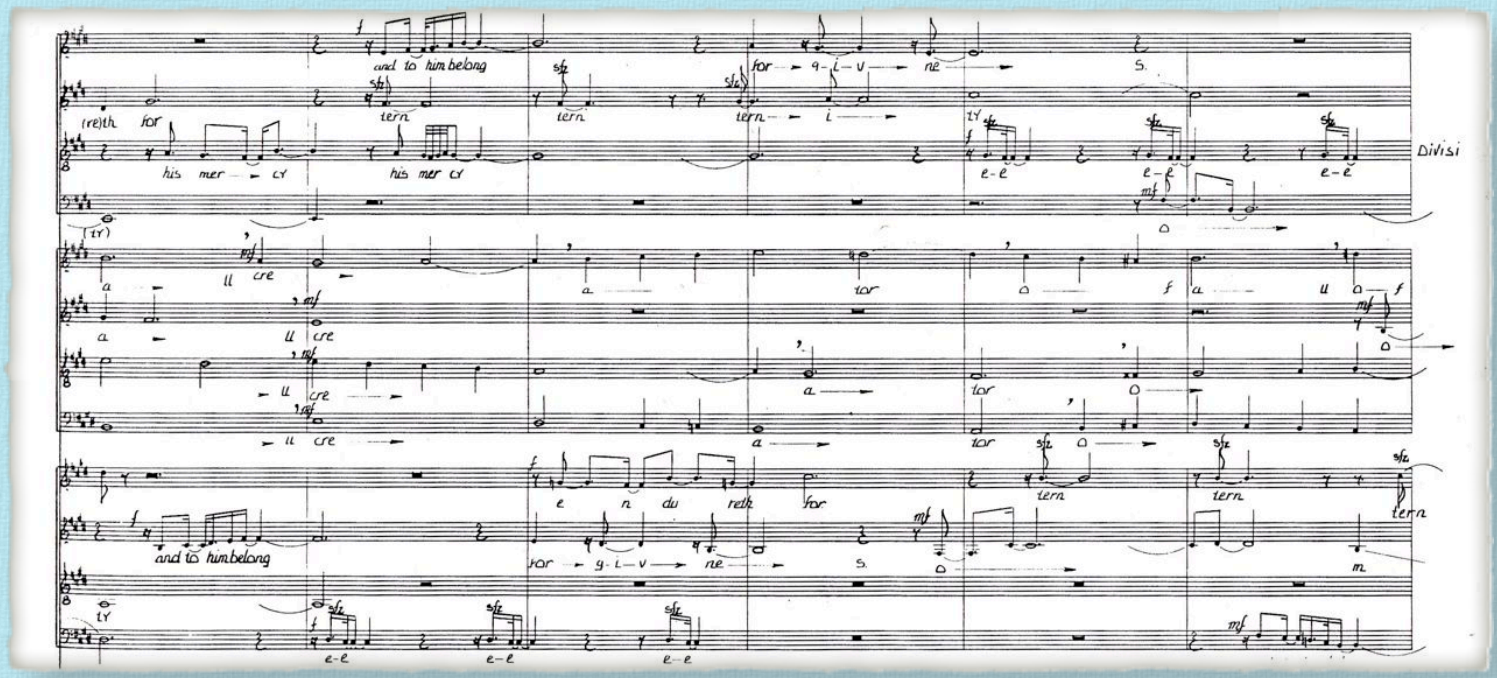
I. The voice-leading in the central choral group in relation to
II. the voice disposition and fragmentary phrasing and in the two flanking groups.
III. The text setting and voice leading in these measures contributing to the rise to the apotheosis at the downbeat of m. 43 (see Example 2).
IV. The sharing of the word, "eternity", between the flanking choirs with the words "endureth" and "eternity" culminating in the apotheosis.



Example 2. *A Hymn to the Creator of All* – mm. 43 ~ 48 (6' 06" ~ 6' 51")

NOTE: The Apotheosis

I. The predominance of tonal center at m. 43 where, at the apotheosis, the tenors of the middle choir rise to the fore.
II. The apotheosis created through concentration and focus, and distinct from the general texture of dispersion.
III. The absence of sopranos in the two flanking choirs at the apotheosis.
IV. At the apotheosis a concentration of the word "all" in the middle choir.

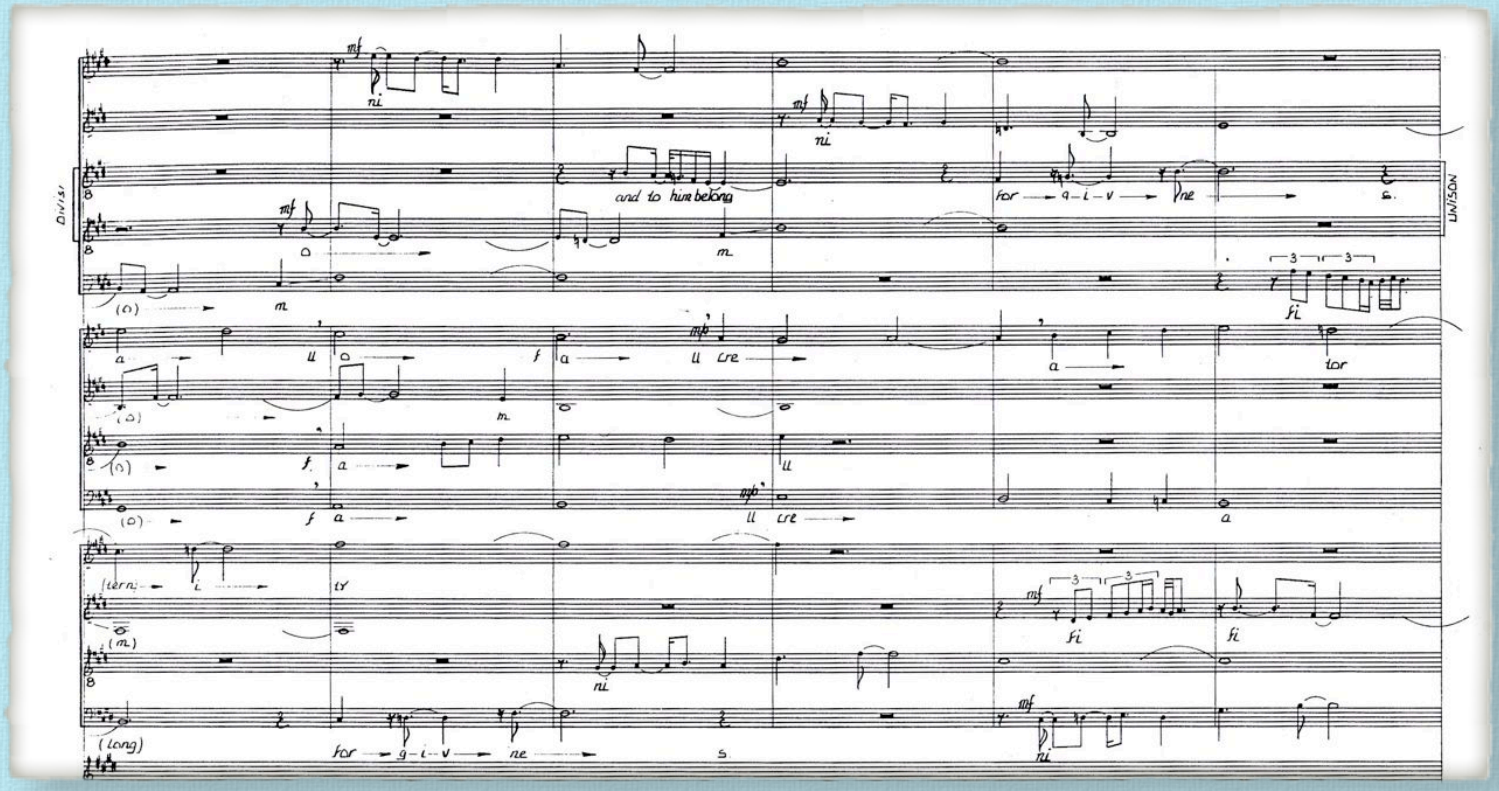


Example 3. *A Hymn to the Creator of All* – mm. 49 ~ 54 (6' 52" ~ 7' 40")

NOTE:

I. Now, well into the descent, extended speech sounds predominate, opening up greater space to the natural play of sonic phenomena and the frequencies and overtones deriving from them.

II. A more pronounced sense of the etherial nature intrinsic to the "Work" and its initial inspiration.



ENDNOTES

[1] The text, as presented in this compact form, I thank ASTRA Choir's director, John McCaughey, for. He included it in the program for the performance at North Melbourne Town Hall, May 18, 1991.

[2] Bernie McGann: an alto saxophonist, a unique voice, a unique musician, and jazz to the core. I shared musical space with Bernie in various bands (circa 1975 ~ 80). Significantly, he was featured on the recording of my composition Primal Communication - version 1 (recorded by the ABC, 1976).

[3] Bruce Cale: an outstanding bassist whose approach to compositional structure as a vehicle for improvisation and expression was/is an inspiration. Recordings include, in addition to Bruce and myself, the late Roger Frampton and Dale Barlow. *Bruce Cale Quartet Live - Adelaide Festival 1980* (Tall Poppies TP175), and *Bruce Cale Quartet, the Sydney Concert, ON FIRE.* (Tall Poppies TP203).

[4] Roger Frampton: an extraordinary musical talent, pianist, saxophonist, composer, Roger would, arguably, be my most provocative musical collaborator. Our creative relationship spanned some twenty years, beginning circa 1971. Roger, prior to his untimely passing in 2000, contributed enormously to Australian music, particularly jazz and improvisation. He can be heard on many recordings in solo contexts as well with some outstanding musicians. In addition to the two recordings mentioned above with Bruce Cale, Roger and I recorded a double album together with Jack Thorncraft (bass) and Howie Smith (saxophones) entitled *Jazz Co/Op*, released on Philips in 1974 (vinyl, 6641 225)

[5] Mark Simmonds: saxophonist and conceptualist, has made an enormous impact on the Australian jazz/improvisation milieu. Recordings of him are, unfortunately, too few. But his double CD, *FIRE* (Birdland BL 002) is testimony to the power of his playing and of his writing. Mark and I spent extensive time together between 1979 and 1991. See for example: *Of Other Narratives* vol. 2 and vol. 3 (Feeling to Thought FT-009 and FT-010).

[6] Billy Hart's history in jazz is almost synonymous with jazz history itself. He's played with everybody! I first heard him on an album with Pharoah Sanders, *Izipho Zam* (Strata-East SES-19733). Shortly thereafter on those Herbie Hancock albums, *Mwandishi* (Warner Bros. WS-1898), *Crossings* (Warner Bros. K46164), and *Sextant* (Columbia C 32212). Then, in 1980, I met him in Adelaide. He was there playing the Festival with the Chicagoan saxophonist, Chico Freeman, whom I'd had the fortune to play with a couple of years earlier in Sydney. It was a fortuitous meeting, as things turned out.

[7] What my question meant and what Billy understood from it was that I wanted him to make me privy to *his* feelings about the music he'd devoted his life to. This didn't imply the 'feel' of the music. Though certainly not disconnected, that's another matter. *That* matter I'd already resolved and was well on the way to coming to terms with. I.e., cultural reality; facts of time, place, and environment, etc. For me, by then, of primary importance was the creative act, *itself.* Not my ability to emulate or to speak an adopted language, albeit that I'd been deeply inspired by it. I wasn't interested it speaking, come what may. I was interested in telling stories about life *as I knew it*, in toto.

[8] In the late 1960s I'd begun some classes in AMEB theory but discontinued these. Then in the early '70s I'd had a few private lessons in jazz harmony. As these required that I have a degree of skill at the keyboard I discontinued these, too. So other than this limited exposure to music in any formal sense, I was quite uneducated. From around the late '60s I had begun trying to write out ideas for pieces from which to improvise and although this was always hard work it instilled in me a feeling of confidence. I felt that if I had a clear musical idea, then I could find a way to write it out. This became a personal axiom quite early on and regarding music composition has remained with me as a fundamental point of departure. A corollary to this is that no two compositions I embark upon employ the same compositional method; every composition requires, by dint, its own processes of coming into being and this is determined through the clarity of the initial idea.

[9] None of this was unusual to me. I'd been experimenting with my tam-tam (91 cms in diameter) since circa 1971 and from 1975 had begun using contact microphones, processing devices, and amplification. By 1977 I'd owned and explored extensively a three-oscillator synthesizer, integrating this with various analogue modules – filters and the like as well as voltage-control processes – so that by the time the *Hymn* visited me I was familiar with electronics to the point where I could imagine clearly the results of modular interaction. In this sense I could compose sound-worlds in my head with accuracy.

[10] Expansions was a performance initiative I'd formed upon my return from NYC for the express purpose of playing original material. Musicians, though not always together, included: Roger Frampton, Steve Elphick, Lloyd Swanton, Dale Barlow, Tony Hobbs, Mike Bukovsky Carlinhos Goncalves, and James Easton. Due solely to time constraints I terminated Expansions when I entered the B.Mus. course at NSW State Con. of Mus.

[11] From earliest childhood I was fascinated that things work in a certain way and insatiable curious as to how and why that was the case. My curiosity got me into more strife than I care to remember!

[12] Graham Hair, my principle composition teacher, can be blamed, if indeed blame is appropriate, for the sea change that was to occur in my own creative ken during these years. He was a strict task master and fastidious while being equally fair-minded and encouraging. Never laying down the 'rules of art' he'd suggest possible routes to take to achieve results he perceived as those we, his students, were looking for. But more than this, he was inspiring. Though an academic in the true sense of the word he was also a practitioner. We'd go to his classes during the day and, as he was a member of the contemporary music ensemble, Flederman, there'd be several evening concerts each year, usually in The Studio, Sydney Opera House, where his latest compositions and those of other composers, would be given their premiere performance. In these, Graham would always perform, either as pianist or conductor, and sometimes both. Graham was more interested in doing than he was in talking. And though my own form of doing, and what I do, is vastly different to his, Graham set a benchmark that, gratefully, I took onboard.

[13] Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass.

[14] Mike Horton: an exceptional musician who played saxophone, I'd come to know well while working with him in a cabaret band. A few years later Mike, I think, went to England where he pursued his religious beliefs and worked in musical settings that expressed his religious commitments. For me, as I'm sure many others, too, Mike was a continual source of inspiration and positive energy. He exuded all that is beneficial in religious dedication, regardless of sectarian division.