



THE SOUNDS OF MY LIFE

Jo Truman

In our previous issue JO TRUMAN shared her experiences as a performer and singer during the exciting and turbulent years of the late twentieth century in Holland, East and West Germany, the UK, Lithuania, Russia, Switzerland, Denmark, the Czech Republic and even two months in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in France.

After nine years travelling and living abroad, settling down to life in Australia was not altogether smooth sailing, and opportunities to return to Europe on a number of unusual projects were eagerly accepted.

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Sound Bytes

Back home, study for a BA (Communications) at the University of Technology Sydney to further my studies in writing and sound was interrupted by a variety of projects.

One of these was 'Voices Unvoiced' - a project with poet/improvising voice artist Amanda Stewart. This group explored the multifarious capacities of the human voice and the exploration and performance of extended vocal techniques, vocal improvisation, phonetics, phonemes and morphemes. Amanda's poetry and performed interpretation of it and my own skills as a singer with a wide range of extended vocal techniques provided a rich tapestry of sounds and vocalese to work with.

We were, so to speak, an experimental improvising acapella duo. We performed at the Deutsch American Institute in Heidelberg, the 'Erlebnis Australien' festival in Bonn (with Caterina de Re) and in Berlin, and the Agosto Foundation.

Other projects were 'The Song of a Continuing Movement' - a performance by Rajeesh Mehta (trumpet) and myself (voice) for an installation by Barbara van Loon of a field of 99 bright red cement mixers outside Utrecht, and 'Antipodear' with Anna Lindblom @ Klang Raum in Stuttgart in 1996.

Poetry and Family Dynamics

Back in Australia I wrote a cathartic suite of poems with narratives on family life which I presented to Robyn Ravlich, then an executive producer of 'The Listening Room'. Robyn then commissioned me to create an audio arts radio feature with this material.

The result was 'The House in the Sky' a 60-minute work based on the suite of poetry and prose inspired by interpersonal dynamics in a family - an exploration of the taboo. This work was a way of making sense of my family background, and a foray into what would become my future interest in the manifestations and nature of trauma and intergenerational trauma.

This work explored the dark underbelly and deeper motivation and dynamics in relationships. It pushed the boundaries of the taboo and brought the dark and repressed into the light, giving voice to the silenced. Jung once said that 'the encounter with the shadow is the 'apprentice-piece' in the individual's development.'

In the presentation of the poems I worked with Trevor Brown (sax and flutes), Thierry Fossemalle (acoustic and electric bass) and Julian Knowles who treated some of my vocal samples electronically. I then worked with these as

compositional material with my texts, narrated by Linda Cropper and Diana Smith. Thierry, Trevor and I formed an improvising trio which responded to the content of selected poems in real time. Jazz/blues pianist Bobby Gebhardt also recorded two of my father Peter Truman's unpublished compositions for piano and voice, 'The House in the Sky' and 'I love the Memory'.

Story Telling on the Radio

I love the concept and practice of 'extended listening', made possible through horspiel (translated literally as 'hear/speak') and feel it is important in this era of sound bytes and short concentration spans. It allows the gradual unfolding of narrative, and stimulates the imagination, enabling visualisation through text, sounds, story telling and soundscape.

In its earlier form horspiel was limited to story telling and even in its contemporary form it is falling out of favour as a different culture of listening has developed with the digital revolution.

The nineties were a very active time for radiophonic commissions. As well as the commissions referred to in my previous article, 'Cell Songs', 'Transparent Messenger' (ABC) and "sdreamings" (WDR Koln), my other commissioned works were 'The Mirrored Cry' (an exploration of vocal mimicry), 'The Listening Room' (ABC Classic FM) and 'Deprem'.

'Deprem'

In 1999 Turkey experienced a catastrophic earthquake, known as the Izmit earthquake of magnitude 7.6 in the

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A Turkish friend in Sydney was concerned about his family since communications were down and he had not heard from them. I, like many, was shocked by the scale of the disaster and, still inclined to restlessness, impulsivity and with a sense of adventure, offered to detour to Turkey to try to seek them out.

We devised a collaborative scheme for a cross cultural radiophonic project and approached Tony McGregor, a producer at Radio Eye, Radio National, to see if he would be interested in commissioning the idea.

Through various contacts I arrived in Istanbul and made contact with Guven Incirlioglu, Hakan Topal and Simge Goksoy, artists working on alternative methods of documenting the disaster. I travelled with the team by car through devastated areas of Duzce, Golcuk, Kocaeli, Yalova, Kartal and up to the Marmara Sea, armed with my portable DAT recorder, recording sounds as found from market bazaars, the noise of demolition and rebuilding, fantastic Turkish music, the wild sounds of crowds celebrating the defeat of Ireland in the European Cup and a large group of schoolchildren singing the Turkish National anthem.

I also recorded the thoughts of survivors and gathered diverse views and stories from stall holders, office workers, a city planner, a seismologist, student volunteers, a biologist and others. I discovered not just the aftermath of an earthquake but a complex scenario involving politics, the military, corruption in the building industry and the incredible spirit and resilience of the people.

There were harrowing and heroic stories and a curious combination of scientific rationalism and religious fatalism thrown into the mix of accounts by people coming to terms with their own survival while their neighbours had perished.

I worked with the group for three weeks and spent the remaining three weeks freelancing, giving a talk about my work to students at Ankara University and attempting rescue work with student volunteers following the aftershock earthquake which hit Duzce in November.

It was one of the most amazing, rich and perilous journeys of my life – not least the experience of driving on Turkish roads - making me keenly aware of the impermanence of all things and the fragility of life.

On my return I set about editing my recordings and writing a script - a kind of travelogue of my journey - at the request of executive producer Tony MacGregor. I was living in a small studio flat in Glebe at the time, backing onto a carpark. I was listening to some of the wonderful music I had collected on my trip one day, when I heard a knock

on my window. I peered through the venetian blinds and a small Turkish man asked, 'Are you Turkish?'

I told him about my journey and, suddenly, in a beautiful voice, he broke into a heart-wrenching song about the earthquakes, which he had written in response to the disaster. We commissioned him to record his song for the program which both introduced and concluded the one-hour long radio work 'Depress', which was broadcast on the first anniversary of the quake on Radio Eye, ABC RN. Guven Incirlioglu and Hakan Topal (two of the team I had travelled with through Turkey for this project) some years later were selected to represent Turkey for the Venice Biennale.

Where do I belong?

It took a while to settle down after living a nomadic lifestyle for many years. This was partly due to an inner restlessness and a sense of never quite belonging or fitting in. During the initial period of adjustment back in Australia and completing my BA I found that concentrating on my visual art practice was a good way to focus on the 'now' and quell the feelings of inner turbulence.

Drawing and painting is a practice that evokes a rare sense of stillness for me. I moved to Dangar Island on the Hawkesbury River for five years which helped me reconnect with the bush and the Australian landscape. I have always been fascinated with plants and their forms and took classes in Botanical Illustration at the Sydney Botanic Gardens and became engrossed in this practice.

For me, there has always seemed to be a tussle of identities between visual arts, music and writing. It still exists to some degree but now I see this partly in response to the social expectation of specialisation. I've come to identify connections between these practices and as I've previously said, for me there are synaesthetic overlaps where I 'see' musical shapes and forms which is similar to the way I 'feel' the shapes and forms in the process of drawing. I also 'see' the form of music and sound works emerge in my mind's eye - like an inner score unfolding. Writing helps me map, consolidate and contextualise my experiences in a narrative framework.

In 2003 I commenced a Masters of Music in Composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. I created a portfolio of acoustic and electronic works over this time under the supervision of composer Bill Motzing.

The works were:

• **'Flying by Moonlight'** - based on a letter to my grandfather from one of two survivors of the wartime downing of a Lancaster bomber over Denmark which his son was flying during a midnight full moon expedition, and which unsurprisingly he did not survive. This was sung and narrated by Rob Maxwell-Jones.

• **'Solitudes'** - for voice, didjeridu and electronics, based on a poem, 'The Solitudes of Nature', written by my great-great-great grandfather, William MacGillivray, renowned Scottish 19th century natural history illustrator, ornithologist, author

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"THE LOBSTER SONGS"



The Water Babies: A page from the 77-page storyboard and young participants..

and poet, and one of the first ecologists.

• **'Reclaiming a Name'** - a notated work for piano, voice, clarinet and viola, based on my poem about the life and fate of my great aunt Unity.

• **'The Gap'** - based on my poem about my grandmother's still mysterious death.

'Extreme Throats'

My MMus thesis topic was 'Extreme Throats: Extended vocal techniques in contemporary music of the 20th and 21st centuries' (available in the Sydney Conservatorium of Music Library). This research describes the exploration of my ongoing fascination with the human voice and all its capacities.

In the 20th century developments by performers and composers involving the extending of the sphere of instrumental techniques included many singers who have regarded their own voices as instruments. Either singers have been inspired by the exploratory and innovative developments by instrumentalists, or composers have been motivated by adventurous and inventive singers

to challenge institutionalised paradigms of vocal use, sometimes creating new notation to accommodate new vocal techniques.

My research included the influence of non-Western music and singing on the work of Western composers (e.g. Stockhausen and his work 'Stimmung' – written for Harmonic Singing (a traditional Mongolian name Khoomie' also known as 'throat' or 'overtone' singing), and exploration of the traumatic connection with the voice by Antonin Artaud and Alfred Wolfshon, who suffered PTSD following his work as a stretcher bearer in WWI, and who claimed to cure himself by the vocalisation of extreme sounds, describing the process as a combination of catharsis and exorcism.

A follower of Wolfshon's methods, a singer called Roy Hart, later established the Roy Hart Theatre. These methods were of great interest to me in my development as a singer. Other chapters of my thesis were devoted to performance poetry and extended vocal techniques and the work of Joan La Barbara and Meredith Monk.



During that period I was fortunate to receive a research grant from Sydney University which took me to New York where I interviewed singers Meredith Monk and Joan La Barbara on their work with extended vocal techniques and participated in Phil Niblock's 'Experimental Intermedia' performance series at 'The Loft' in Brooklyn NY.

I graduated from my MMus with a High Distinction. My written and recorded research became the basis for a mini-series of five 15-minute programs I wrote and co-produced with producer Stephen Adams for 'The Voice' week on ABC Classic FM entitled 'Extreme Throats'.

Sound and Vision - Rhythms in Nature

In 2005 I participated in a 12-week 'Sound and Vision' residency at the Banff Centre in Alberta. I worked on a sound work using recordings I made whilst at the centre. It tracks my experiences there, sonically referring to the aspects of the local environment such as the Trans-Pacific train weaving through the valley (with the singer Benny Nemerovsky Ramsay participating in a 'duet' with its tri-tone whistle), the 'naming' of indigenous places (a reference to the colonialism which all but wiped out the First Nations culture, leaving just names remaining), and the sounds of birds (achieved through my own vocal mimicry and electronic treatment of these sounds).

The poems of local indigenous artists are also read and create a narrative and structural backbone for the work. This work discretely explores the intersection of tourism and indigenous mythologies in this region of the Rockies. It concludes 'In beauty, my Mother, for her I return', a portent for what was about to transpire. It was later broadcast on ABC Classic FM.:

At this time I also went on drawing expeditions of the stunning Rocky Mountains with the intent of working with the sketches and the rhythmic forms of the mountains as a basis for graphic musical scores. I staged performance for Sousaphone, trombone, didjeridu and voice in one of the resonant stairwells of the Banff Centre on the theme of 'seismic shifts' as the Banff centre is sited on an area of three shifting continental plates.

The notion of a seismic shift also foretold an upcoming seismic shift in my personal life. My residency was shortened when my mother was hospitalised with emphysema, a visit from which she never returned. The night I heard that news there was a rare display of stunning luminescent dancing green and white Northern Lights (Aurora) above the Centre, which I felt was a portent of what was to come.

After my mother's passing, I moved to the Blue Mountains where I continue to live. Here, during the celebrations of 150 years of the Mountains crossing by Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth I contemplated the changes to the Mountains from pre-colonial times until now. I imagined the perceptions and experiences of the indigenous people

who preceded us, to those of the first explorers and the contemporary attitudes of those who live here today and journey across the Mountains via the ever-expanding highway that snakes across the escarpment ridge from Emu Plains to Lithgow and Bathurst - the track of the early explorers.

I sent my ideas to the Producer of Audio Acoustica Kunst, WDR Koln, Marcus Heuger, and was commissioned to make a 60-minute radiophonic work entitled 'Bridge to Otherness'. This work reflected my thinking about the radical changes to perceptions, experience, relationship and connection to 'the bush' due to the speed with which we now move through this environment by car and train, and how this can affect not only our experience of the environment but also our attitudes, sense of connection and responsibility to this unique World Heritage region.

For this work I interviewed Gundungurra elders Aunty Sharon Brown and Uncle Graeme Cooper, local ecologists, anthropologists, historians and even a project manager of the local highway 'upgrade', getting some understanding of the often conflicting mythologies of indigenous lore and colonial ideas of 'progress' and territorial entitlement.

I recorded the natural sounds of the bush surrounding my home, including the spectacular sounds of local lyre birds, as well as industrial sounds of trains and highway. For the most part humans have a great ability to adapt to an ever-changing society and changing technologies, but how desensitised do we become from things of importance in the process? I think the recognition that human societies have become dangerously alienated from our natural environment, and that we are now paying the price, is growing.

The 60-minute work, 'Bridge to Otherness' was realised in Soundheaven Studios, Wentworth Falls, Blue Mountains, with the patient technical expertise of John Stuart.

Recording projects

CD Recording projects which have included my contribution as a singer and instrumentalist have included: "sdreamings"

Selected tracks from 'sdreamings':

'Singing in Tongues'

'River Run'

'Keening Song'

'Songs from a Prison Diary'

'Voiceprint'

Electroacoustic composition by Mark Zadro about the voice, identity, voice recognition, embodiment and disembodiment (as mezzo soprano and extended vocalist);

'Arrows in Time' (with the Rajesh Mehta collective);

'Improvised Music from Solitudes';

'Traversing the Void' - a Kammer opera

In 2010 I met the Icelandic composer Hildigunnur Runarsdottir and her partner in a chance meeting at

a choir festival in Glenbrook, in the Blue Mountains, where her work, a children's choral piece with an ancient Latin text called Carmen Fratrum Arvalium was being performed. We conversed about our work and exchanged recordings and, when she returned home we worked ideas for a collaboration across the ocean, to write a Kammer opera, with the ultimate aim of my performing the work as a singer and librettist.

I wrote the libretto (see below) inspired by the idea of a cockatoo traversing the urban grid overlaid on the wilderness country, and the consequent alienation and anxiety, and fire which could allude both to bushfire and volcanic activity of Iceland.

'Traversing the Void' was shortlisted to represent Iceland for the upcoming World Music Days, a significant global festival dedicated to New Music.

MONA FOMA

In 2012 I received a commission from Brian Ritchie, music curator of MONA FOMA in Hobart to create two works for their 2013 Summer Festival. I selected two Blue Mountains musicians to collaborate with me on the project: Lennie Marks (guitar) and Daniel Grinvalds (electronic sound treatments).

After two months working on a structured improvisation 'Dream Slash Nightmare' was performed at Princess Wharf before an audience of 900.

This 30-minute work mapped the extremities of the human voice drawing on jazz scat, bel canto and microtonal extended vocal techniques.

I worked with looping to create textured sound fabrics resembling flocks of birds, and improvised on the keyboards, whilst Daniel did live sampling on stage, and Lennie Marks played evocative guitar riffs as part of the trio's musical conversation.

The second commissioned work was 'Elements' for the 'Morning Meditation' series at the wonderful cupola in Saint Mary's Cathedral, Hobart. I had chosen the theme of 'Earth, Fire, Air, Water', directing the group in rehearsal time to create the 4-part piece, with Daniel's young daughter and my piano student, Alia, accompanying on violin. A climax of the piece was clanging Tibetan bowls in the 'Fire' sequence signifying the recent catastrophic bushfires in Tasmania. This piece brought some in the audience to tears.

Following this performance I conducted a vocal workshop for over 100 participants in the domed room at the Bahai Temple in Hobart.

Residencies

Wollombi Artists Residency: Following MONA FOMA I returned to NSW to undertake a project as Artist in Residence, an initiative for the Wollombi Arts Council in the Old Fire Shed in Wollombi, Hunter Valley, for six weeks.

REFLECTIONS

*In oil slicked water
The reflection of my face
Bends slides and mutates -
As I plunge and grasp
It fragments into a million shards*

*Suspended in a web
Of hairline fractures-
I struggle as they enmesh
me further in a stifling cocoon
preventing touch
With the world beyond
- I have difficulty in breathing.*

*I am set in resin,
no voice can penetrate within or without.*

A glacial shift.

*The body, ineffectual,
Weaves a dream-body
That passes through walls
yet prefers flight to gravity.*

*I walk through the crowd
eyes avert my glances.
Not existing until
I spin the air
Into warm gyrating waves
seeping beneath their skins.
Now their eyes follow,
hollow, curious.*

*A conflict forms,
Before I was only
Seen when absent,
Heard when voiceless.
Touched upon failing.*

*The fleeting caress of their eyes,
Do not reach the little voice
Hidden deeply within
the recess of an inner cave.
They walk on, further distracted.*

*A flash ignites
oil impregnated leaves-
A brilliant shearing light -*

*A binding of positive and negative/
sky and earth.*

*Or sparks of careless
human intervention
carbon intention
fuelling a transformative force -
orange red tongues
licking, devouring,
raging atomic balls, leaping
air gorging, forging
furnace trails fly
through smoke laden skies
devouring the crude suburban grid
vaporising colonial intention
The levelling power of ash*

*She sighs - witness to
black sprouting green
cyclical regeneration -
each renewal slower than the last
Traversing transcendent skies
Her diminishing serrated cries
Consumed by a blood red horizon*

It was a difficult period due to massive flooding in the region which at times marooned me at my place of residence, cutting me off from my studio. Nevertheless the work completed during this time included a series of drawings and paintings and an audio work created from on site recordings of natural sounds of the area.

The last few years have seen various projects. For a period I lived part of the week at an historic homestead, Richlands Homestead, Taralga, and taught piano to students at Taralga Public School as a tutor for Goulburn Regional Conservatorium and their outreach program.

During this time, commuting between Taralga and the Blue Mountains it was impossible to ignore the amount of roadkill on these roads. I began working on a series of drawings as a reflection on the notion of the ambivalent attitude of our relationship to our natural environment. On the one hand we celebrate and romanticise nature, but on the other hand we are destructive, uncaring and indifferent.

I began to collect 'specimens' from the roadside to draw and paint as a statement of this duality. The resulting works



Right: Fox and below: Magpie Descending: Roadkill Series



capture the beauty of the animals and birds but also allude to the distortion and wounding through injury inflicted on them, thus encapsulating the paradox.

I have been interested in paradoxes inherent in idealism for many years, and my work has often addressed this duality - the construction and destruction of myth, the fine line between utopias and dystopias, the repressed and dark underbelly which can underpin idealism, the creative and destructive impulses that dwell within us all, the light and the dark - two sides of the coin.

A more recent radiophonic commission was from 'Frequency Oz' for two short works of 6 minutes each, to be broadcast on 'Soundproof' Radio National:

"A Brief History of Scars: Relocating Self" referenced my stay at Richlands Homestead and comprised my voice and piano improvisations and recorded on site sounds. The microtonal vocal techniques signify the birdsong in the area.

'A Brief History of Scars' (1 & 2) commissioned by Frequency Oz, broadcast by ABC RN.

'The Water Babies' & Tomanelli Inc.

In the last two years I have produced and performed in a children's opera, 'The Water Babies' by the Australian composer Freddie Hill, performed with a cast of professional and semi-professional adult and child performers and musicians. There have to date been a performance at the Seymour Centre and also

after a 3-month workshop and rehearsal period, two performances at Kindlehill Steiner School, Wentworth Falls, Blue Mountains.

Hill's original compositions for adult and child voice and eight piece chamber orchestra, and libretto, were inspired by the iconic Victorian children's story of the same title, by Charles Kingsley.

For the purposes of the production and promotion of the opera we have established "Tomanelli Inc.", an umbrella organisation to create and promote the opera, with a view to performing other new musical works in the future.

For this project I illustrated a 77-page storyboard to assist the children visually with the opera's narrative.

'This Is A Voice' - Powerhouse Museum

In January this year I was invited to participate in 'Voicings', an aspect of the 'This Is A Voice' festival at the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, Sydney, by Producer David Greenhalg.

This involved presenting seven 15-minute (one for each day of the week) performance demonstrations of the wide-ranging capacities and applications of the human voice, within the area of installations at the museum.

For this presentation I created graphic scores which served as a visual guide for a series of improvisations demonstrating a wide arrange of vocal techniques – from scat, bel canto, microtonal and extended. Again there was an intersection of the visual and auditory, with the scores



a visual guide for interpretations of vocal sonicities looking at pitch, volume, texture, volume, density and intensity.

Definition of Sonicity: When energy is transmitted from one point to another; which may be over a considerable distance, by means of impressed variations of pressure or tension producing longitudinal vibrations in solid, liquid or gaseous columns. The energy is transmitted by periodic changes of pressure and volume in the longitudinal direction and may be described as wave transmission of power.

Current projects

I have been playing and performing with my new group 'The Fragile ids', comprising a flexible membership, to date including John Shand (percussion), Tim Cunningham (guitar) and Freddie Hill (trumpet).

In preparation

Two days of performance at MONA in 'The Void' in Hobart for their jazz weekend, 18-19 August, with 'The Fragile Ids' - this line-up to include Freddie Hill (trumpet) and Brad Madigan (guitar).

An exhibition of my drawings and paintings at Gallery One88, Katoomba, 28 August - 3 September.

I continue to teach drawing, painting, voice and piano from my home studio in Wentworth Falls.

This year I commenced a Doctorate of Creative Arts at Western Sydney University. My creative project will be a mixed media song cycle for voice, piano, electronics and instrumental ensemble and animation based on themes of my ongoing interest in trauma and intergenerational trauma.

Such is the life of an independent artist. One must be one's own self starter. Sometimes it is difficult to disentangle the myriad of diverse threads of creative thought and practice and weave them into a meaningful tapestry. Sometimes one feels isolated and alone, but then there is nothing else I would rather be doing in this life.

Jo Truman

www.soundcloud.com/ju_truman

Opposite page:

Lavender and Gumleaves, watercolour

This page::

Botanical illustration, Magnolias, watercolour

Wollombi Artist's Residency: 'For Crying

Out Loud', pen, brush and ink

