

All bells that ends well

By James Henry

When asked to compose a piece for the Federation bells representative of my Aboriginality, I thought I should do so from a perspective I knew more about than most, but which people could also relate to. So I decided to compose a piece inspired by traditional and contemporary Aboriginal music, as growing up around Aboriginal music and working at 3KND (Melbourne's Koorie Radio) has given me an appreciation of the timeless songs in the Aboriginal community across the country.

These songs though not played in the mainstream have made their way into Aboriginal ears and hearts via Aboriginal community radio, concerts and played on tape players in long car rides. They unite and empower us and possibly could go on to be mainstream hits if it weren't for the barriers both black and white. Despite their universal appeal across Aboriginal Australia, most non indigenous Australians have not heard of many of these great songs.

It's a unique opportunity to have the bells as a medium to compose for in many ways, especially as the audience has the opportunity to be surrounded by the bells, and to have it mapped out in a permanent formation allows for a different dimension to be utilised in the composition. I wanted to make use of these as features in the composition by treating the map of the bells as a map of Australia to represent the impact of colonisation. Although not obvious to the listener that this is my objective, the effect is quite interesting, not too dissimilar to a Mexican wave. More obvious is my use of the lowest note bells and a constant drone similar to a didgeridoo's role in many genres of music.

The 2nd phase of the composition begins with a solitary bell in the centre of the map, which is then joined by bells playing the same notes on the fringes of the map, which then gain momentum to be able to continue melodies and have all the bells playing in harmony. This is representative of the re-establishment of Aboriginal communities in new centres and linking up via a common voice to strengthen culture and identity. One these melodies have established themselves the piece then takes a new turn which a slightly Asian feel using a pentatonic scale to then become an explosion of harmonic and rhythmic sound in quite a positive way representative of the potential of multicultural harmony and as opposed to the arrhythmic dissonance of the first interruption to the melodic soundscapes.

Writing for the bells was a welcome challenge and became easier once I was more familiar with the intervals of the bells and hearing how it comes across live. I really like the idea of my piece being played on a regular basis on such a medium and contributing to the artscape of Melbourne. I look forward to audience reaction to the concepts and curiosity as to where they originated.

James Henry