

**ETHEREAL: A YUIN WOMAN'S CULTURAL  
KNOWLEDGE IN CLASSICAL MUSIC**

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of requirements for the degree of  
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Date: 25 November 2022

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## Abstract

I operate in an evolving space that is accepting Indigenous voices in the Classical music context. We / I am part of evolving this space.

At the core of what I do is Culture. It informs what I do. Music is an extension of my culture. Culture is music, is dance, is art. They are not separate things.

Country is everything. Connection to country is important for us. I keep in touch with my country by visiting it and my family. Spending time on Country and observing. Country speaks if you take time to listen. I listened to the winds on the headland, and these gave me an idea for a piece. The ebb and flow of the water, and just slowing down and becoming attuned to nature. I spent time talking to my family. I always pick up gems of knowledge from them.

This knowledge of fresh/salt water and the relationship that encompasses them informs my work, i.e. *mara*/fish—saltwater bream and blackhead, and fresh water bass. The idea of two-way learning, Black/white—we both learn from each other. Collaboration is a part of how I work. A two-way process between participants.

My work will be described in relation to Indigenous philosophy and belief systems, and how Aboriginal composition and my processes of incorporating Culture into my work counters the ongoing effects of colonisation by refusing to conform to accepted mainstream settler views, and by being active in the classical compositional space.

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## CHAPTER 1. Introduction

*We travel through the land and through the water, we see it, sing it,*

*feel it come into being with us*

This quote comes from the book *Song Spirals* by the Gay'wu group of women from North Eastern Arnhem Land, as shared by one of the sisters. *BAWAYWUYIDU MIYAMARA DHULWULWUYIDURU* is the start of the chant Milkarri, sung only by women. They write: 'we come from our place and we make our place and we are our place. That is what we mean by Country'.<sup>1</sup> The Yolngu women use the term 'songspirals' rather than the more commonly used 'songlines', to show how the songs are a way of connecting with Country: 'Songspirals are the essence of people in this land...We sing to the land, sing about the land. We are that land. It sings to us.'<sup>2</sup>

This research project is a story of my own journey in music to connect Country and the knowledge that belongs to Yuin women's culture to the space of Western Classical Art Music. I am asking:

How can a Yuin woman's cultural knowledge be expressed in the Classical music context?

How do Aboriginal composers work within the Classical music realm and how can that lead to innovations in notation?

What is a literature review for this work within an Aboriginal context?

How does collaboration function in relation to Aboriginal cultural protocols?

### 1.1 Musical Background

I grew up having music played around me. My earliest musical memory is listening to country and western music that my parents played on the radio. Music has been a given

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<sup>1</sup> Gay'wu Group of Women, *Song Spirals: Sharing women's wisdom of Country through songlines* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Gay'wu Group of Women, *Song Spirals*, xvi.

in my life from my early years. I was fortunate enough to be taught by some of the best like John Speight (*vale*) and Don Burrows (*vale*). I trained as a jazz saxophonist in the nineteen eighties at the Sydney Conservatorium. I did not finish the course, but the training was essential to my understanding of Western music theory, which helped me down the road. I could name any chord because of the way I was taught and the jazz theory I used and because of my ear. I taught myself piano, as I had to know what I was improvising over chordally and I feel most Aboriginal musicians have good ears. Like the old adage, once you know jazz you can play most styles of music.

Whilst studying jazz I got to know the music of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and his swing music, Ornette Coleman's free atonal experimentalism, Billie Holiday's voice and Jan Garbarek's post-fusion improvisations over a recording of 'Arctic Winds' on the Vandriere Album (1997). I learned to read a concert pitch Real Book because I was too cheap to buy a Real Book of jazz standards in Bb for tenor saxophone. I had to learn modes, I did not see the reason, but I learnt them by rote. I loved the idea of freedom within music gained from this time. I still use this idea in my music and rely on that feeling to this day in my composing.

When I finished at the Conservatorium I got a job teaching music at the Eora Centre in Redfern. This was a great opportunity to meet other Aboriginal musicians. I met a singer called Sharon at Eora and she introduced me to Bart Willoughby and Murray Cook who were forming a band called Mixed Relations. Bart was an amazing musician and had been in the seminal reggae band No Fixed Address. They were the first all-Aboriginal band to come onto the scene in the late seventies. Then what I call the first wave of Aboriginal bands and musicians came through: Warumpi Band, Pigram Brothers and others. I was in Sydney at a very active time in the Aboriginal arts movement. I was lucky enough to be exposed to and play and perform with people such as Kev Carmody and the Warumpi Band. Those ten years with Mixed Relations (1984-1994) gave me a solid grounding in Aboriginal culture, travelling and playing in everything from urban venues to regional and remote communities. This taught me more about cultural protocols and how to work within different community settings. I loved going to places like the Laura Festival in far North Queensland with artists including Kev and Paul Kelly and also hanging with the remote bands at the Darwin Music Festival. I remember going to the Dolphin Pub in Darwin—all the bands from the festival were there and we just jammed. Great times! The

band travelled overseas to Native American communities and played at festivals and went to the Pacific Islands. This was great because we got to see how other First Nations peoples were living and how, even though they were impacted by colonisation, they still had their culture and cultural practices.

One highlight for me was on Nouméa, the capital city of New Caledonia where the local chief and his bamboo pipe band travelled down and gave us an official welcome. They were in traditional costumes and the bamboo pipes were large, some bigger than the players themselves. We had a traditional dancer and a didgeridoo player with us and it was a beautiful cultural exchange. Their culture was strong and they were so proud to share it with us. They were the ‘We Ce Ca’ group of traditional Kanak song and dance in Nouméa.

I learnt a hell of a lot culturally travelling with the band, stuff that I still use to this day. Simple things like when we were travelling in the bus and as usual the boys were not using deodorant, but this was to protect us from bad spirits—with the smell scent, they could not capture us. Like keeping your hair in a tight bun so no one could use your hair to capture you. I have seen amazing things, spiritual and other. These things are of another realm. All these experiences inform my music. One thing I noticed during my travels was that the people who had the least materially were the most generous.

Touring also showed me the similarities to the situation in Australia. For example in Noumea, the Kanaks make up approximately 4% of the population but make up to 20% of the prison population. We played gigs for NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) and also went to the jails and played for inmates as they are still part of our community and I understood how systemic racism has contributed to so many Indigenous people being in jail.

## **1.2 Journey into Western Classical or Art Music**

In 2019 Chris Sainsbury spoke to me about a course he was starting at the Australian National University (ANU) called ‘Ngarra-Burria’, looking at mentoring Aboriginal composers and asked me to be a participant. I said yes but didn’t really consider myself a composer, coming from a background as a performing musician. I went along and did

the course. It was great, there was a mixture of blackfella musicians from around Australia, from Dobby a young rapper through to Elizabeth Sheppard who was a more traditional western classical musician. I liked that there was such a great mixture of peoples and cultures represented in the group. It was nice to be in a group that shared a base of collective culture and place. We all ended up writing music about our own country and culture, using different styles of music but from a shared base of Culture. I felt it was a culturally safe space and was supported. It was the first group of the course and I enjoyed the experience. It was important for me to have a blackfella running the course, i.e. Chris Sainsbury (Dharug man). He understood the cultural nuances and differences and the basics of working with Aboriginal people.

### **1.3 Music, Culture and Country**



**Figure 1: Gulaga, Yuin country, photo © Brenda Gifford**

The idea for this research came to me awhile ago when I was looking up at the mountain, seeing it shrouded in mist. I was thinking about how I could capture that, the intangible ethereal quality of mist. I wondered about how mist related to our culture and stories. I did not know at the time that this directly related to a creation story from my country and would become part of my studies in the future.

I am

Brenda Gifford

*Wingmurrampungoo* totem (White bellied sea eagle)

Wreck Bay (community)

Wodi Wodi (my mother's side)

Yuin (my father's side)

I follow in the footsteps of my ancestors.

Those who have gone before me have paved the way for me to do my music.

On my mother's side I am related to Agnes and Jimmy Johnston and my great grandfather and great grandmother were King Mickey Johnston 1 of the Illawarra and Queen Rosie of the Wodi Wodi community. King Mickey and his family lived in Kangaroo Valley which was Queen Rosie's traditional lands. My father's family is from the Wallaga Lake community and is of equally strong and proud lineage.

My country is Yuin country. It is beautiful, coastal and abundant. The sea is at the core of country. It guides me and inspires me in my music.

My Uncle George Brown senior was a respected Elder from Wreck Bay community and shared the stories of Culture with us. He fought for our land rights and was an important member of the community.

To sum up, all of the experiences I describe have shaped my current views and creative ideas. This lived experience has informed my current music and composition practice. I do not create in a vacuum.

## **CHAPTER 2. Indigenous Methodology: Understanding and building spaces for Indigenous culture in Classical Art Music**

I have chosen the following selection of texts and quotations from very diverse sources: from academic publications to music magazines, conference presentations to compositions, and I have also included an image of a work by Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley. In this way, my literature review reflects the Aboriginal context in which I work and come from. I needed to hunt out and highlight a range of sources and it contains personal stories as well as more traditional academic references to highlight elements of what is still an evolving increase of First Nation agency and inclusion.

In his 2020 presentation *Research is Ceremony: Researching within an Indigenous Paradigm*, Shawn Wilson (Opaskwyak Cree from Canada) talks about what it means to be an Indigenous researcher.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson outlines how Indigenous people have been researching for thousands of years, or else we would not have survived in the harsh environments we live in. We have had to engage with both mainstream society and our Indigenous society. This is what I bring to research methodologies and music. My culture. To bridge both sides.

Wilson describes culture as an iceberg. There are visible parts of culture, and the underpinning of culture is the bulk of the iceberg, not seen. Visible culture and underlying philosophies.

I see research as a ceremony because it helps to build stronger relationships. Reality is relationships. Space ‘between things’ in relationships is sacred.

Writing is a major form of communication for sharing cultural meaning, but it is part of white privilege, i.e. anyone that has a different world view must explain it (with the assumption being that everyone thinks the same way you do and uses the same language). We must adapt to other ways of thinking and communication but we do not share the same beliefs about knowledge and how we gain knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXKuaNt6ST0&t=1s>

My research is a bridge to my culture. Western society does not see things as having spirit. In Indigenous culture everything has spirit: the land, animals and plants, even knowledge has spirit. Spirituality is this understanding. It is a way of being in the world that recognises that spirituality is the core of the iceberg, underwater and unseen, whereas religion is on the top of the iceberg.

## **2.1 Compositions**

I have included the following compositions as significant examples of how Indigenous composers are breaking new ground in the classical music industry.

### ***Eumeralla* (2019) a war requiem for peace by Deborah Cheetham AO**

*Eumeralla* is a large-scale work for soloists, choirs and orchestra, sung in the language of the Gunditjmara people. The work is Australia's first resistance-war commemoration for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal performers.

On-country premiere October 14, 2019, Port Fairy Spring Festival.

Deborah Cheetham AO, Yorta Yorta woman, soprano, composer and educator has been a leader and pioneer in the Australian arts landscape for more than 25 years.

This work is important because it is one of the first times a piece has been written by an Aboriginal composer about the subject of frontier wars conducted against Aboriginal people since colonisation. Deborah captures the essence of the subject. Because it is sung in language and is a large orchestral work, this magnifies the significance of the piece. It is important to have this type of music represented in the classical music canon. It reaches middle class white audiences and it helps break down white privilege.

### ***Jaara Nyilamum* (2019) by Dr Lou Bennett AM**

Commissioned as part of 'Quartet & Country', a commissioning project by Port Fairy Spring Music Festival and its 2016-2019 Artistic Director, Ian Grandage, Ukaria and the Australian String Quartet. Performed by the Australian String Quartet and Dr Lou Bennett.

Yorta Yorta Dja Dja Wurrung woman Lou Bennett was a member of the well-known women's trio Tiddas for ten years, and a member of the Black Arm Band. In this work, she wrote a piece for string quartet and voice about one of her ancestors. She is interested in exploring the classical music space and how the performers connect bodily to their instruments.

It is important to have voices like Lou's represented because she focuses on Aboriginal language to highlight our culture and does it very well. Her singing voice is exceptional and grounding. Her work in the space is distinctive and I like the way she is calling to the ancestors through her music.

***Impressions from the Dreamtime, a suite for solo guitar (1980) by Richard Charlton***

It is important to include in this review a composition that touches on the idea of misappropriation of Aboriginal culture. I have used this example of music by non-Indigenous composer Richard Charlton because the piece comes from a position of good intent but shows the work that needs to be done in the space. One way of addressing the issue could be composers undertaking basic Aboriginal cultural studies.

In his book *Ngarra-Burria: New Music and the search for an Australian sound*, Chris Sainsbury reviews different compositions by non-Indigenous Australian composers that exemplify their creator's use of Indigenous references or Indigenous posturing. He talks about how the term 'the Dreaming' has different contexts for Aboriginal people around Australia and could be offensive to specific groups. Also about how many composers use Indigenous themes without actually engaging with Indigenous people.

Charlton's piece is a five-movement suite for solo guitar. According to the composer, it is based on Dreamtime legends of the Australian Aborigines. The composer's program note says 'The musical language is my own and it was not my intention to mimic in any way, any aspect of their rich culture; rather I have simply used these stories as a starting point for my own fantasies.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sainsbury, *Ngarra-Burria: New Music and the search for an Australian sound* (Sydney: Platform Papers, May 2019), 28.

‘The movements include: I. The legend of fire, II. Frog dreaming, III. Kondole and the corroboree, IV. The black swan, V. Finale: The dancers are changed into animals. It’s an early work by the composer, and although couched in respectful tone, the appropriateness of the title and meaning could still be ambivalent.’<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Writings

**Dylan Robinson. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020.**

An example of Aboriginal agency in action is the book *Hungry Listening* by Stó:lō (Skwah) writer Dylan Robinson. He is reimagining how we understand and write about the Indigenous listening experience.

I attended an online lecture held as part of the MSA conference: Symposium on Indigenous Arts and Cultures in the Academy (2020) given by Dylan Robinson, author of *Hungry Listening*. Robinson spoke about how he went to a museum where there were Native American figurines on display. He talked to them in language, as though they were not held captive in a prism, and activated a cultural exchange with them, welcoming them home and giving breath to them through language. This opened me up to thinking differently. To talk to family in language gives life to kin, connects to ancestors, and we can talk to an object like it is a family member and through language breathe life into it.

This touches on an idea I am still working on which is using our Aboriginal spirituality to breathe in our culture. The cyclic nature of breath and nature, intertwined. The very idea of what is music. Is the sound of wind, which to me is an extension of Country, music? Yes, is the answer.

Robinson ‘demands a reorientation toward the act of reading as a way of listening. Indigenous relationships to the life of song are here sustained in writing that finds resonance in the intersubjective experience between listener, sound, and space.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sainsbury, *Ngarra-Burria*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> See publisher’s citation <https://www.dylanrobinson.ca/hungry-listening/>

Robinson ‘demonstrates what it means at the practical, ethical, and political levels to write relationally with other living beings, including music, sound, belongings, languages, lands, ancestors, and readers. In method and content, *Hungry Listening* is a challenge to settler colonial sensory and political orders as well as a powerful affirmation of Indigenous thought, practice, and art.’<sup>7</sup>

I found Robinsons ideas aligned with my ideas and thoughts on the relationships between culture, spiritual and material world, from a First Nations viewpoint.

There are signs of increasing inclusion in the classical music and orchestra space in Australia, as major orchestras are inviting Aboriginal composers to compose for them and including Acknowledgements of Country in Aboriginal languages. These are being used throughout their seasons. One example is the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra who worked with Deborah Cheetham in 2021-2022 to deliver a series of concerts with her as First Nations Creative Chair.

**Nick Miller. ‘History made as Indigenous conductor takes to the stage.’ *The Age*, 8 February 2022.**

On the 9 February 2022, Noongar man Aaron Wyatt was the first Aboriginal person to conduct a State orchestra, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO). Milestones like these are important because they set a precedent and plant a seed for other Aboriginal people. For young people, once they see that this is possible, it becomes something that they can aspire to. This is also about representation and equity.

Wyatt conducted *Long Time Living Here*, a musical Acknowledgement of Country by MSO First Nations creative chair and composer Deborah Cheetham. Cheetham worked on the idea with MSO’s managing director Sophie Galaise and director of programming John Nolan. Cheetham said: ‘Orchestras should feel like home to First Nations people, because it’s about community and striving towards something together that you could not do individually – and that’s what Indigenous existence is.’ Galaise said the orchestra was

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<sup>7</sup> Piatote, “Review of *Hungry Listening*”, see <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/hungry-listening>

committed to ‘develop First Nations voices and bring cultural diversity and learning to the heart of the MSO, and to the broader community.’<sup>8</sup>

**Rita Pyrillis. ‘Native Sounds’. *Symphony Magazine*, Spring 2021.**

The trend to include Indigenous composers in the classical music sphere is highlighted in this article, which talks about a collaboration between the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Red Sky Performance. Red Sky is a Native American company led by Sandra Laronde. She asks the important question:

‘How can relationships between orchestras and Indigenous cultures exist in an equitable way? How do we as Indigenous people ensure that our aesthetic doesn’t get lost in the process?’

One answer is provided by Oglala Lakota composer Suzanne Kite, who says:

‘It’s not good enough to have Native artists out in front but with someone else in control behind the scenes....You have to give Indigenous artists the reins and then trust them.’

Pyrillis quotes Toronto Symphony Orchestra CEO Matthew Loden: ‘Orchestras can be very hierarchical places. We are trying to take a page from Indigenous learning, which is more collaborative.’<sup>9</sup>

A key figure who is leading efforts to decolonise contemporary classical music is African American composer, scholar and performer, Prof. George Lewis.

**George Lewis. ‘New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps’. 2020.**

‘There is no reason why major music institutions that tout themselves as international should continue to present all-white programs.’<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Miller, “History made as Indigenous conductor takes to the stage” (*The Age*, 8 February 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Pyrillis, “Native Sounds”, *Symphony Magazine* (Spring 2021), 35. see <https://americanorchestras.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Native-Sounds.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, “New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps”, *Outernational* (2020) <https://www.van-outernational.com/lewis-en/>

These are Lewis's eight steps to decolonize contemporary music:

- 1) Move beyond kinship. Invest in new populations.
- 2) Give up on meritocracy.
- 3) Diversify school music programs.
- 4) Encourage ensembles to commission.
- 5) Make decolonization an explicitly foregrounded part of cultural policy.
- 6) Internationalize music curation decisions.
- 7) Encourage media discussions of new music decolonization.
- 8) Change of consciousness.

I found this article to be informative and reasonable, particularly the ideas of 'encouraging ensembles to commission' and 'making decolonization an explicitly foregrounded part of cultural policy.' These ideas are important as they reach to the core of the process of making change. This type of thinking and programming could open up a new era of inclusion and diversity within the arts.

**Chris Sainsbury. 'Ngarra-Burria: New Music and the search for an Australian sound'. *Platform Papers* 59, May 2019.**

Chris Sainsbury, Dharug man, composer and composition lecturer at the Australian National University argues that cultural agency lies with the composers and their Indigenous mentors in guiding compositional decisions. He calls for a rethinking of working with Aboriginal composers and communities, based on respect, and a new collaboration to begin between First Peoples composers and the new music sector, in which the former 'can be recognised as creators and performers of a real Australian sound that echoes back to the dawn of history.'<sup>11</sup>

This article puts in print some ideas I had thought about and saw as a way forward for Aboriginal composers in Australia, such as developing long term (two way) relationships with Aboriginal communities and composers, not 'fly in and fly out'. It recognises Aboriginal culture as the oldest living culture in the world and not as folklore.

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<sup>11</sup> See information on Ngarra-Burria website, <https://www.moogahlin.org/ngarra-burria-2019>

Historically, classical music used folk stories and songs as inspiration for music. Charles Ives was an American composer who used folk songs as inspiration for his compositions. He included hymns, traditional songs and popular tunes from fairgrounds in his work. His Symphony No 2 was known for its musical quotations of folk themes. That is an example of the context for European composers who have adopted the idea that Aboriginal music is folklore that can be quoted to express national identity.

I liked Sainsbury's recommendations as a way forward, including the need to:

'Recognise that success is not dictated by those in places of entitlement' and 'remembering that when engaging with Indigenous peoples that cultural agency sits with them'.<sup>12</sup>

These two recommendations are important because they underline how to work successfully with Aboriginal communities and composers.

I was an inaugural member of the Ngarra-Burria First Peoples Composers Project initiated by Chris Sainsbury in 2015. As a participant in the program, this was culturally important, because it enabled me to share my ideas in a culturally safe space with other First Nations composers. Having Chris Sainsbury mentor me was essential in my development as a composer because we came from a shared space of Culture.

**Online interview with Murrawarri rapper Dobby, *Shorthand Social/Real Talk*, no date.**

Dobby says: 'I'm rapping in Murrawarri language, which is one of the tribes in Brewarrina, alongside Ngemba, Barkindji, Wiradjuri, Wailwan, etcetera. I'm saying "Pitara yaan muruwariki", which means "Murrawarri is good, sweet talk". So, I'm aiming to do that through rap music, you know.'<sup>13</sup>

I have worked with Dobby and he was a fellow participant in the Ngarra-Burria Program with me. He is a killer drummer. It is important to have young voices being heard and part of the conversation in the art music space. His work is giving voice to the concerns

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<sup>12</sup> Sainsbury, *Ngarra-Burria*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Dobby, *Shorthand Social/Real Talk*, (no date). See <https://social.shorthand.com/RealTalkTheBook/n295BFB1px/dobby.html>

of the Aboriginal community and our youth. His music is highlighting to the mainstream the role and importance of language and culture through his music. He is one of this generation's black political influencers.

**Colin Tatz. *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide*. New York, Verso, 2003.**

Colin Tatz's description of genocide in this book resonated with my understanding of our history and the attempts to silence us and our culture including our music and language. In Chapter 4 he quotes the Webster's definition of genocide as 'The use of deliberate systematic measures (as killing, bodily or mental injury, unliveable conditions, prevention of births) calculated to bring about the extermination of a racial, political or cultural group or to destroy the language, religion or culture of a group.'<sup>14</sup>

I believe this is an element of what happened to Aboriginal people in Australia, and this knowledge informs my work as a First Nations composer. My first-hand experience of playing songs such as 'We Have Survived' by Bart Willoughby similarly inform my music. I am the sum of my experiences. This history is integral to my creative practice and is manifest in my music.

### **2.3 Whose voices do we hear?**

**Chris Gibson. 'Decolonizing the Production of Geographical Knowledges? Reflections on Research with Indigenous Musicians'. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 88, no. 3, 2006.**

I found Gibson's article on self-determination and representation in music for Aboriginal peoples and their music interesting. It touches on one of the basic tenets that I follow, that in our music we should hold control of all aspects of music to empower us and achieve self-determination.

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<sup>14</sup> Tatz, *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide* (New York: Verso, 2003), 7.

Langton (1993, p. 27) has put it “that Aboriginal people will make ‘better’ representations of [Aboriginal people], simply because being Aboriginal gives ‘greater’ understanding”. *Indigenous control.*<sup>15</sup>

I found this quote to be truthful and spot on in that it is a step towards self determination, agency in action.

**Liza Lim. ‘Why Artistic Research matters: Beyond the eco-logical and towards the eco-sensitive’. Conference keynote, Society for Artistic Research 2021.**

Lim says: ‘This talk is my attempt to grapple with epistemological challenges around ecological concepts of sovereignty as an all-encompassing encultured form of knowing and being—an all-at-once-everywhere-everywhen-everything. In Indigenous cultures, the arts are centred as knowledge, as law, as repository of ecological encyclopaedias.’<sup>16</sup>

I found Lim’s presentation and her thoughts about ‘an all-encompassing encultured form of knowing and being’ similar to my own ideas around culture, taking a wholistic approach. They are not separate entities. Lim is talking about ecological listening and that is the kind of listening that I do. When I’m on country I am listening to the natural sounds around me. Everything from the rustle of dry leaves under my feet, to the different bird calls, their patterns, tone and pitch, the repeating roll of the ocean on a warm day, to the sounds that are no longer there, eg. Fairy Wrens and importantly the silences or absence of human voices. Nature has its own language and you have to be attuned to it and willing to be still and listen. Everything is connected in Culture.

**Aaron Corn. ‘Treaty Now: Popular Music and the Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Contemporary Australia.’ *Popular Music and Humans Rights, Volume 11: World Music*, edited by Ian Peddie. Ashgate, 2012.**

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<sup>15</sup> Gibson, “Decolonizing the Production of Geographical Knowledges?”, *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* (88, no. 3, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Lim, Keynote for SAR, See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1614960/1614943>

Corn writes: ‘In *We Have Survived... No Fixed Address*, led by singer/drummer Bart Willoughby, recounted the long histories of state oppression suffered by Indigenous Australians...Australia’s prosperity had come at the terrible expense of systematic injustices against Indigenous people.’ In June 1992 ‘the High Court had ruled to overturn the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, the legal fiction that Australia had been unoccupied at the time of British settlement in 1788’.<sup>17</sup>

This article touches on the issue of systematic racism Aboriginal people continue to face. It also references Paul Keating’s speech, which was one of the first by an Australian Prime Minister to publicly acknowledge the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* and its ongoing negative impact on Aboriginal people.

Bart Willoughby sings: ‘We have survived the white man’s world and the hurt and the torment of it all ... and you can’t change that.’ This song is at the basis of what I do as a composer/ musician. Through my music I am making a statement that we are here, we have survived and are on the way to thriving as a people and as a community. It hits the colonisers / mainstream in the face with a statement that is defiant and staunch.

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<sup>17</sup> Corn, “Treaty Now”, *Popular Music and Humans Rights*, Volume 11 (Ashgate, 2012).

**Fiona Foley, Hedonistic Honky Haters (2004)**



**Figure 2: Fiona Foley, Hedonistic Honky Haters (2004), image QUT Art Museum, Brisbane**

I find this image by Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley confronting and clever. It is part of a photographic series called 'Bring It On'. HHH stands for Hedonistic Honky Haters, an Afro-American group that Fiona photographed when she was in New York in 2004.

'This series adopts the conventions of ethnographic studio portraiture, with the HHH members posed against a white backdrop, staring blankly toward the camera. Foley, however, has inverted this genre by dressing her subjects in black hoods that mimic those worn by the Ku Klux Klan.'<sup>18</sup>

To me it takes the idea of racism, specifically White supremacy, and turns it upside down. I have included this because the ongoing effects of institutional racism have far-reaching effects to this day. This is part of my background and informs my music. Fiona has used

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<sup>18</sup> Monash Gallery of Art website: <https://www.mga.org.au/exhibition/view/exhibition/125>

the image to look at racism effectively. In the same vein as Bart's music it is defiant and beautiful in its own way. They address the issue of racism through their music and art.

I get my strength and inspiration for compositional ideas from other Aboriginal artists such as Fiona Foley. I love that that she reclaimed the language and worked with well-known Aboriginal musicians Teila Watson and Joe Gala to produce music to accompany the exhibition in 2020 called *Who Are These Strangers and Where Are They Going?* The soundscape recreated one of the earliest known Aboriginal songs from the arrival of Captain Cook in Australia and tells the story of his encounter with the Badtjala people.

## **2.4 Summary: We Have Survived**

One part of the answer to my research on what it means for Yuin women's cultural knowledge to be expressed in the classical music context is to acknowledge that 'we have survived' and I am in this space moving forward.

Despite the history of government-sanctioned assimilation policies and genocide we are still here. Despite the history of frontier wars, we are still here living and practising our culture. I always think of my friend Kev Carmody's words from his song 'Thou Shalt Not Steal' (1989) where he says: 'a racist's contradiction that is understood by none, mostly their left hand holds a bible, right hand holds a gun.' The gun symbolically represents a threat of physical harm, removal from family or the stopping of rations. Despite the ongoing war of assimilation and attempted religious conversion, i.e. they stopped us from singing our songs, learning and speaking our language, we / I am still here.

The next step beyond survival will be a combination of cultural change, leadership, political leadership, and goodwill from all Australians. A change in opinion and action. Our 40,000 plus years Aboriginal culture is alive and well—it encompasses the past, present and future.

## CHAPTER 3. Research: Country and Culture



**Figure 3: Brenda Gifford, *Country*, Wreck Bay NSW 2020**

### 3.1 Country

Country is at the core of what I do. Connection to country is vital for us. It contains our stories and songs. I keep in touch with my country by visiting it. Spending time with family and observing. I recently spent time on country and just sat there and listened to it.

Cultural knowledge is something I was born with and I have been learning and studying this my whole life. There are people in my community who can read country like the back of their hand. Their knowledge of country is deep and amazing. I refer to them because they are the knowledge holders. They can tell me where the fresh water sources are, where the best fishing is in any given season.

I attended a Water Serpent Workshop with Mooghalin Arts at Bundanon Arts Centre (Wodi Wodi and Yuin country on the South Coast of NSW) in 2020. Penny Couchie from Nipissing First Nation in Canada told us the creation story of the water serpent, and we shared our stories from our country.

The ideas discussed in these workshops have helped to inform my study, i.e. First Nations peoples' cultural protocols and how First Nations people communicate with each other in a culturally safe environment. There is a process of consultation with what can be spoken about country and is related to women's business. Deborah Cheetham is an important First Nations composer working in this space.

As part of the workshop we gathered local material from country around the studio to create a soundscape background for our stories of country to be told. This was an important workshop for me to attend because it enabled us to practice our culture in a mutually respectful environment and exchange Indigenous knowledge and learn about other First Nations Indigenous knowledge and protocols. There were obvious similarities between our cultures, such as that we all used versions of our languages in our compositions. This showed the importance of language to us as a group and as individual composers. Sainsbury reports on how Rhyann Clapham (Dobby) wrote a piece in the language of the Murrawarri people of Brewarrina (the language of Rhyann's people). '*Pitara Yaan Muru-wariki* means 'Murrawarri is good, sweet talk.' He says: 'This is [the title of my piece] and the goal of my composition.' The work represents both the strength of Indigenous language and the journey of acquiring this knowledge. In *Pitara Yaan Muru-wariki* Rhyann used four words that were assigned to the four instruments. These were: *Thirra* (meaning song) for flute; *Pintanj* (tongue) for clarinet; *Paliputharran* (lungs) for cello and, lastly, *Milkakari* ('someone with no ears'/a non-listener) which was assigned to the vibraphone.'<sup>19</sup>

Troy Russell wrote a piece titled *Nuoorilma* (2019) which means apple tree (in Gamillaroi language). Troy's piece was beautiful, tonal and used gorgeous chords. My piece was titled *Miriwa* (2019) meaning sky in the Dhurga language of my mob. The

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<sup>19</sup> Sainsbury, *Ngarra-Burria*, 51.

piece included Dhurga language first, then the English version of the lyrics. This was important to me to give breath to our language.

### **3.2 Culture**

When I heard Yolgnu musicians, the Wilfred Brothers, sing with the Australian Art Orchestra (AAO) it was amazing—here was a 40,000-year old culture and Yolngu language being performed with a jazz orchestra and the combination of the two was formidable. Daniel plays *yidaki* (didgeridu) and David sings with *bilma* (clapsticks). At the core of the music was Yolngu *manikay* (songs) and the Wilfred Brothers performing Culture. This got me thinking about how Aboriginal culture is represented in music. It is important for me to be exposed to these art forms as an Aboriginal composer and be informed about what is happening in our music/culture and how it can be represented. Their music showed their close connection to their country yet it is also open to new forms of collaboration with jazz and improvising musicians. I have collaborated with the AAO in recent projects including ‘The Meeting Point Series’ at the Malthouse Theatre in February 2022 and another collaboration with AAO and Melbourne Jazz Festival in November 2022. I was the 2022 First Nations Artist-in- Residence for the AAO and Melbourne Jazz Festival. I find this type of collaboration liberating, in that jazz musicians can musically run with an idea and make something completely new. I feel improvisation is a form of musical freedom because you can do whatever you want musically as long as you all have agreed entry and return points. I will be using stories from Country on this project.

### **3.3 Observing Indigenous cultural protocols**

I adhere to the following cultural protocols which are a combination of established requirements and my own initiatives:

- Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights
- Respect
- Self determination
- Communication, consultation and free prior informed consent
- Interpretation
- Cultural integrity and authenticity

- Secrecy
- Copyright and Attribution

Protocols and paying attention to how people have access to cultural materials is important for institutions to address so that the cultural owners of the ICIP (Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property), have access to their culture whether that be in the form of a music recording, film or artwork etc.

The Australia Council Indigenous Protocols (ACIP) are a good starting point because they outline how to work effectively and affectively with Aboriginal communities and composers. The following basic four out of the ten ACIP principles are essential to working with Aboriginal people.

### **Principles for respecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property<sup>20</sup>**

Principle 1. Respect. The rights of Indigenous people and communities to own, protect, maintain, control and benefit from their cultural heritage should be respected.

Principle 2. Self-determination. Indigenous people have the right to self-determination and to be empowered in decisions that affect their arts and cultural affairs.

Principle 3. Communication, consultation and consent. Indigenous people have the right to be consulted and give their free prior informed consent for the use of their cultural heritage.

Principle 4. Interpretation. Indigenous people have the right to be recognised and represented as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultural heritage.

If cultural protocols are not followed it can have far-reaching effects for communities and individuals. I know a case where a traditional person did not follow cultural protocol and looked at something that was culturally restricted. This got back to the Elders and the person was taken out and speared in the leg. The punishment was not to kill, but to let the person know that there are consequences when not obeying the law. I am keeping the

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<sup>20</sup> Australia Council for the Arts, *Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts* (Sydney: Australia Council, 2019), 26.

person and community's identities concealed as this the right thing to do for me. Following these protocols can help avoid such cases. There is a whole layer of Aboriginal knowledge, cultural and spiritual practise that is active and needs to be taken into account when working with traditional Aboriginal communities.

### **3.4 Processes of cultural checking-in when I compose**

I wrote a composition for the Canberra Music Festival in 2018 called *Gambambarawaraga* scored for voice, flute, violin, double bass, piano and drums. It was played by the Canberra International Festival ensemble. The title means 'seasons' in the Dhurgha language of my mob. I worked with my cousin Wendy as a cultural guide and for help with language.

This was my thinking behind the piece:

I'm standing at the headland/ cliff at Wreck Bay, facing the sea, the cemetery to my right, Summer Cloud Bay to my left. In winter I feel the bite of the cold wind in my bones, in spring I feel a light breeze caress my skin, in summer I feel the heat from below rise up and hit me.

The piece is divided into five parts that show the seasons and the connection to Country as a cosmic cycle.

#### **Moon - *gadhu***

the moon connects to the different seasons represented in this piece. eg. high moon, low tide, good fishing.

#### **Footprints - *bardju***

represents my journey/ footprints as a Yuin woman and represents our own individual journeys. But it also represents our collective footprints and the need to tread lightly on the Earth and treat her with respect.

#### **Winter - *dhugawar***

standing on the headland of the cliff at Wreck Bay in Winter, with a strong wind hitting me and below the waves hitting the rocks relentlessly and loudly. (I represent this in the piece with 8 bars in a triplet feel.)

**Spring** - *gambambara*

by whispering the word gambambara we invoke the spirits of Spring.

**Summer** - *galaa*

a tribute to beautiful Summer, a light breezy song praising her.

This example shows how I use culture as the basis of my composition process.

Collaboration is a big part of how I work. A two-way process between participants.

Early in 2021 I wrote a composition titled: *Djinggi / Star* (in my Dhurga language) for Southern Cross Ensemble and attended workshops with the ensemble and violinist/composer Eric Avery. This was part of a program for the Bangalow Festival called 'Maps and Journeys' about First Nations' astronomy, looking at the Seven Sisters story and the Pleiades star cluster. My piece was a musical response to the idea of the Pleiades star cluster and stars that Aboriginal people have used to find their way since the beginning of time, eternally. This ties in with the idea of songlines and song spirals that I have touched on earlier in this thesis.

In my work, the strings played a floating melody mimicking star movement and then the horn played an improvised melody line. The tone of the instrument and the melody line were transformative, taking the initial idea on a journey. Later in the piece the didgeridoo grounded the last section at the end with repeated rhythms. The didgeridoo to me represents connection to earth and country. I used some information from Robert Fuller's thesis, *The Astronomy and Songline connections of the saltwater Aboriginal peoples of the New South Wales*. Fuller is a non-indigenous academic who worked with well-known elder Percy Mumbler (deceased) to test his ideas. Fuller writes about south coast culture and songlines. I cross-referenced the relevant sections with my Elders and community first, as per cultural protocols. Here he is quoting from some of the Yuin participants in his study:

'While there is not a cultural story connected to this Sea songline, it is pretty clear that the songline (whale and dolphin) just runs along Yuin Country. P2 said that the dolphin story ran from Eden to Jervis Bay and that Yuin fishermen would sing up dolphins by slapping the water. This method of calling dolphins was reported in many Saltwater communities along the NSW coast, and the use of dolphins to herd fish onto the beach or

into traps appears to be almost ubiquitous. P2 also said that when fishing with dolphins, fishermen would call up koorah koo-rie (west wind) to flatten the waves.’<sup>21</sup>

In another article, Robert Fuller and Leslie Bursill talk about the Pleiades star cluster and the Black Duck Songline. They describe the Pleiades as:

‘one of the most important elements of Aboriginal cosmologies across Australia, and features in songlines and oral traditions, as well as being a resource calendar identifier. Aboriginal songlines are a unique development of Aboriginal culture that celebrate the travels of the Creator Ancestors as they shaped the landscape. The identification of the Black Duck Songline and its possible connection to the Pleiades is an example of the potential reawakening of other long-distance songlines in Australia and their connection to the cosmology of their communities.’<sup>22</sup>

### **3.5 My Compositions, Country and Culture**

I bring together composition, Country and Culture through strong observation of protocols.

An example of protocols in action is how during the ‘Bundoola’ project I contacted my cousin at Wreck Bay to ask about using the story of Bundoola for my work for Ensemble Dutala. Even though the story is in the public realm, the piece relates to one of our creation stories and I needed to check that it was okay to use in the context of a live performance. As it turns out it was all good, but I had to follow due cultural process and check. This is an example of Aboriginal cultural agency in action and of me following cultural protocol.

I will describe some examples of the role that protocols play in my process including in the four main works of my composition portfolio that were part of the Sydney Conservatorium’s Composing Women program: *Birds* (2020, later revised in 2023) for the project *Wagan* for the Sydney Dance Company; *Mayab/ Mist* (2021) for the

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<sup>21</sup> Fuller, *The Astronomy and Songline connections of the saltwater Aboriginal peoples of the New South Wales* (Unpublished PhD thesis, UNSW), 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller and Bursill, “Linking the Pleiades”, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (Volume 32, Issue 2, 2021), 116.

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra; *Minga Bagan/ Mother Earth* (2021) for Sydney Chamber Choir, and *Bundoola* (2021) for Ensemble Dutala. These last three works are part of my overall concept of 'Ethereal'. The other works I discuss were written earlier. They are part of my overall development as a composer but are not included in the Masters portfolio. Those works include *Gambabawaraga* (2018) and *Djinggi / Star* (2021).

### **3.5.1 *Birds/Wagan* (2020)**

In 2020, I was involved in working with the choreographer Joel Bray and the Sydney Dance Company to create a big 30-minute work, *Wagan* which means 'Crow' in Wiradjuri. I made a score called *Birds* which was recorded by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Fellows conducted by Roger Benedict. This score was then further developed into a dance track where I worked with composer/arranger Tristan Coelho on adding electronics and other instrumental sounds to the track.

The work was an exploration of a personal memory by Joel Bray:

"He was on (his country) Wiradjuri country and watching some finches 'dance' with each other in and around a leafless tree as the dawn sun rose behind them." As told to me by Joel. The work explored the flight of birds and also the experience of those birds being caged and domesticated, as a kind of metaphor for the experience of First Nations mob from all over this continent.

The brief I was given was for a work in four movements:

A: Dawn, the first birdcall - starting sparse and building as we hear the different birds

B: The birds in full flight - joyful and playful

C: The caged birds – minor key and mournful

D: A return to optimism, the hope of a new day

Clapsticks used as percussion; instruments echoing the sound of birds;  
time signatures changing.

I loved Joel's idea for the project. Recalling his memories from a specific time in his life and his use of culture, I learnt a lot from this process. Joel was very certain on what he wanted, and I prepared several versions to get to a place we were both happy with. My supervisor's feedback in this project was important because she gave me suggestions and options to help me move forward. It was nice to work with a fellow First Nations artist, throwing around ideas of culture and the many forms it takes, i.e. dance, song, painting etc. Furthermore, we talked about working within a classical space and how the musicians are very welcoming and open to our ideas. This setting is very different, but an interesting and welcoming space.

I scored the work for string quartet and percussion. I was looking to make a work that had both strong rhythmic elements which the dancers could follow with percussion adding details of colour.

I wrote a section that mimicked bird calls, and the strings played their own versions of bird calls, followed by a section that featured percussion with crotales and clapsticks. The work begins with bird sounds which were improvised by the string players in the recording session. I loved the way the string players experimented openly with their interpretation of bird sounds. These sounds were then layered into the recording marking the sections and added resonance to the final recording used for the performance. I wrote a syncopated rhythm section that gave breath to the piece. I used a 5/4 time signature section with a flowing melody line that allowed the dancers to work fluidly with the music. The 5/4 time signature section (bar 183) helped to create movement and interest in the piece. I liked the way dancers count differently to the composer, eg. whether it's a 4/4 or 5/4 time signature, dancers don't count the beats but think in terms of movement sections or phrases.

The score provided in my portfolio was recorded by musicians of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Fellows conducted by Roger Benedict. This recording was then further edited by Tristan Coelho to add resonance, using lower register octave digital sounds. The process of developing the piece included several group meetings with Joel Bray and members of the Sydney Dance Company, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Fellows and Tristan Coelho.

The recorded percussion sounds created texture and a feeling of calm, from water sounds to clapstick sounds, they sounded like nature to me. I used repeating phrases and different rhythms to create texture in the piece. The crotales worked effectively in cutting through the texture and emphasising the different phrases that were then picked up by the dancers. The work was premiered on 26 Nov 2020 at Carriageworks as part of the Sydney Dance Company's New Breed Program. Joel was happy with the whole project and particularly the music and we both enjoyed the experience of working together as First Nations artists.

### **3.5.2 *Mayab/Mist* (2021)**

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

As part of the Composing Women Program I wrote a piece titled *Mayab/Mist* for the Tasmanian Symphony. The two-part process included the workshop with the orchestra online in 2020, and then the live performance in Tasmania with the orchestra in 2021.

I scored the work for 2 flutes, oboe, cor anglais, clarinet in Bb, bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, 2 horns, trumpet in Bb, trombone, bass trombone, tuba, clapsticks, harp and strings.

*Mayab/Mist* is the first in a series of works collected under the title 'Ethereal', reflecting on Aboriginal knowledge of country and water. It relates to creation stories from my country. My work is grounded in my custodianship of Yuin culture and country. I share my culture through my music.

The subjects and titles of my compositions include the four principal forms of water expressed in Dhurga language: *Garal/Fog*, *Bana/ Rain*, *Mayab/Mist* and *Ngadjung/ Water*. (Fog became part of the piece *Birds* for Joel Bray/Sydney Dance Company).

*Mayab/Mist* is something airy, delicate and other-worldly that has the power to transform.

I could look at the manuscript in small view and almost see it as a dot painting and that informed me going forward and developing my piece.

The bass clarinet at the opening represents calling to the mist to show itself at the beginning of the piece. In the program notes for the piece I used a photo of a mountain that is important culturally to my community and then I spoke to my cousin and she said

I should not name it publicly because of the cultural importance of the mountain itself. I was following our Indigenous cultural protocols. I work with my cousin as one of my sounding boards/ cultural consultants to check I am following our cultural practice. This is Aboriginal agency in action, and me practising my culture.

I needed to review the piece. After doing more work on it with both Liza Lim and Paul Stanhope the piece started taking a shape and form I was happy with. I learnt how to extend my music phrases and line of sight/sound to include the whole orchestra. The workshop with TSO in 2021 was great and to get a quality recording at the end of the project was wonderful. I never thought I would have an opportunity to write for an orchestra and I was very pleased with the outcome. I will review the piece further to broaden the sound.

### **3.5.3 *Minga Bagan/ Mother Earth (2021)***

Sydney Chamber Choir (with additional percussion ad lib)

I wrote *Minga Bagan* ('Mother Earth' in Dhurga language), for The Sydney Chamber Choir. They commissioned the work to use as their Acknowledgement of Country for their 2021 season and beyond and it was premiered as part of their Cycles program for the Sydney Festival in 2021. The work is an acknowledgment of mother earth and our shared role in caring for our environment. Deborah Cheetham had also written an Acknowledgement of Country in 2019 for the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra called 'Long time living here', which is performed before every concert by the orchestra.

*Minga Bagan* is a significant piece in that it represents reconciliation in music form and the coming together of two cultures in celebration through music. This piece provided a platform for Acknowledgement of Country to become an everyday part of concert convention. This piece represented a change from our allies (from the mainstream music sector) to incorporate First Nations culture into their programs and cannon of contemporary Australian composers' works as an act of reconciliation in music form.

*Minga Bagan/ Mother Earth* is a celebration of Earth. We only have one Earth. The idea was that all of us have a role to play in looking after her. From the ranger who looks after

country as part of his cultural practice, to everyone who recycles. I am a Yuin First Nations Contemporary Classical Composer. My Culture is the basis of my arts practice.

I wrote this piece with the idea in mind that we all have a role to play in taking care of water and nature. The two essential things we need to survive are water and air. The issue of cotton farmers taking water and not allowing the rivers in Western NSW to run freely was worrying me. There are Aboriginal communities in Western NSW that rely on the river running to sustain their cultural practices. I combined words in the Dhurga language from my mob, *Djamaga Ngadjung* (Good Water) with the phrase “take care of mother earth” to help express this idea. I then used beautiful flowing major harmonies to express water movement. I used notation such as legato and slurs to create movement and flow.

Giving voice to my language in music is essential to me—through using language in composition I am connecting to my culture and ancestors.

#### **3.5.4 Bundoola (2021)**

Deborah Cheetham from Short Black Opera asked me to write a piece for the Ensemble Dutala<sup>23</sup>, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Chamber Ensemble in 2021.

I wrote a musical response to the traditional South Coast story of Bundoola from my unique heritage. It is rooted in my DNA and my world view, which is in contrast to a Western view and practice. My Uncle George Brown Senior told the Creation story of Bundoola, he is the author, and his daughter told me this story, handed down to her from her father. Working with the Dutala Ensemble was important to me because they are the next generation of Aboriginal musicians in the classical field, able to tell our stories through classical music. It was great to have an opportunity to learn with Deborah Cheetham, Aaron Wyatt and the ensemble and to see the work take shape.

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<sup>23</sup> Ensemble Dutala ‘is Australia’s first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander chamber ensemble. Currently consisting of 9 professional ATSI musicians from Perth, Sydney, Moree, Mildura and Melbourne. Ensemble Dutala is Short Black Opera’s exciting new project that came from the One Day In January project. Meetings between artists are held online and in Melbourne in the days leading up to January 26th. Led by conductor and violist Aaron Wyatt (Noongar).’ See information on the Short Black Opera website: <https://www.shortblackopera.org.au/ensemble-dutala> [accessed 4 April 2023].



**Figure 4: Rehearsals for *Bundoola* with Dutala Ensemble, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Chamber Ensemble, established by Deborah Cheetham**

## **CHAPTER 4. Song Spirals: towards an Indigenous music notation**

My music does not conform to European Western Art Music systems in that it comes from my understanding of Culture (Yuin, First Nations people's culture). The Western music construct that is wrapped around the Story is only part of my musical response, but not the core of my music.

When explaining my approach to writing music, I use the analogy that my Western written music manuscript is a cultural response and representation of my culture.

I understand the notation as not just instructions for musicians to play sounds but as something larger. The notation itself could be interpreted as a dot painting, rather like my version of a graphic score. Again, this is not just representation of music but I'm trying to show a fuller connection to Country in the visual dots and lines of the music. This opens up new thinking for me about the possibilities of an Indigenous music notation: how can musical graphics express Culture? How can symbols, notations and embedded sound work to develop an Indigenous transformation of Western musical notations? This could challenge views of what a score is and what representations of music can be.

I will discuss some Indigenous contributions to developing music notation systems and describe my own first experiments with where this thinking is taking me.

### **4.1 Aaron Wyatt's contributions to the Decibel ScorePlayer App**

The Decibel ScorePlayer Application (App) is an application for reading non-standard notation on an iPad. It has been developed in Perth by members of the Decibel ensemble, including Noongar musician and programmer Aaron Wyatt with the composers of the group, Cat Hope, Lindsay Vickery and Stuart James. In an extended collaborative process, 'the group developed a system for reading scrolling scores that was prototyped in MaxMSP. With the assistance of programmer (and Decibel viola player) Aaron Wyatt, these systems evolved into an iOS App, the Decibel ScorePlayer App for the Apple

iPad.’<sup>24</sup> The App makes it possible to represent scores that use non-traditional notation, such as graphic notation, images and colours in a digital format. The App helps the musicians to translate the images into musical language and to coordinate a group in performance.

From an Indigenous point of view, the Decibel ScorePlayer App could open up another way of music composition and telling our stories. The fact that Noongar composer and viola player Aaron Wyatt was involved in the making of this app is important because he not only brought his technical and music knowledge, but also his cultural background to the project.

I’m excited by the way this could open up writing music to those of us who are not trained in the Western system of music notation. For example, an Indigenous painting could be reproduced as a piece of music. It provides a different way of thinking about music, using colours and shapes, where each colour or symbol might be represented by a different instrumental part. For Indigenous composers and performers, there are all sorts of possibilities in this approach to notation.

## **4.2 Raven Chacon’s *The Journey of the Horizontal People* (2016)**

Raven Chacon is a Navajo composer and part of the Indigenous art collective Postcommodity. His string quartet *The Journey of the Horizontal People* was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet in 2016.

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<sup>24</sup> Cat Hope & Lindsay Vickery, “The Decibel ScorePlayer”, *Proceedings of TENOR 2015* (Université Paris-Sorbonne/IRCAM, 28-30 May 2015), 60.

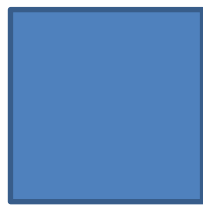


Raven Chacon brings his cultural sensibilities to his music. For instance, in the performance instructions in the score, he says: ‘It is preferred that the quartet playing this work contains a female player. This player will be the guide when all others are lost. If there is more than one woman in the quartet the eldest one will guide. If there is not a female player in the quartet the eldest man will guide, or the man who most identifies as a woman.’<sup>25</sup> To see and hear this Indigenous relational care reflected in chamber music is distinctive. The Kronos Quartet take into account the cultural background and apply specified techniques to achieve the composer’s stated musical outcomes and sonics.

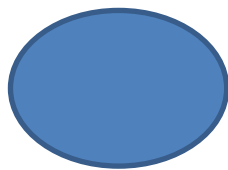
Raven Chacon’s piece *The Journey of the Horizontal People*, where First Nations culture meets classical chamber music, is a unique piece of art. This is an example of what can happen where high-level artistry meets culture (First Nations) and a new outcome is produced, collaboration at its best. This type of composition gives me something to aspire to as a First Nations composer and is a good point of reference for future musical ideas.

### 4.3 Ethereal

My music does not conform to Australian settler culture and identity, because of the way the system tends to silo art from the wider society. Music and dance are not seen as part of the whole culture. They do not have a relationship to Country. Everything is kept in a separate box: there is ‘entertainment’, or ‘high art’, or ‘experimentation’ etc. My music is wholistic, where everything is related: music, song, dance, art and culture. It does not conform to the box.



My music is represented by the following image:



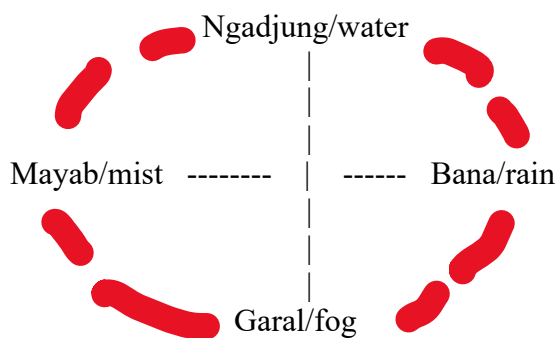
<sup>25</sup> Raven Chacon, *The Journey of the Horizontal People*, score performance notes, 2016.

My music is cyclic in nature and wrapped around the Story. But this is only part of my musical response and not the core of my music. At the core of my music is Culture which means Country which means that nothing is separated from anything else.

When explaining my approach to writing music, I use the analogy that my western written music manuscript is a cultural response and representation of my culture. The score itself with its notations could be interpreted as a painting, (my version of a graphic score). This could challenge views of what music is and its relationship to notation.

My diagram of Country understood as phases of water (Rain, Sky, Mist, Good Water) is a Song Spiral. It is cyclic in form.

#### 4.4 ETHEREAL, from diagram to notation



**Figure 6: Diagram of ‘Ethereal’**

This is how it relates to my compositions:

Water / *Ngadjung* / part of *Minga Bagan, Mother Earth* / Sydney Chamber Choir

Mist / *Mayab* / mist over / to become obscure / Creation story / Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

Fog / *Garal* / watching birds dance through the early morning fog / Sydney Dance Company and Joel Bray. Fog became part of the dance piece *Birds* based on Joel Bray’s feedback

Rain / *Bana* / *Bundoola* is the rain spirit / Dutala Ensemble with Deborah Cheetham

‘We travel through the land and through the water, we see it, sing it, feel it come into being with us.’<sup>26</sup>

This quote from BAWAYWUYDU MIYAMARA RRAWULWULWUYDURU

outlines the idea of a Songspiral and its meaning. My diagram of Country understood as phases of water (Rain, Sky, Mist, Good Water) is a Songspiral in that it is a part of singing Country and the element of water, which is an extension of Country. My compositions are an extension of singing country in a written music form, but the basis of this music comes from my connection to Country and Culture.

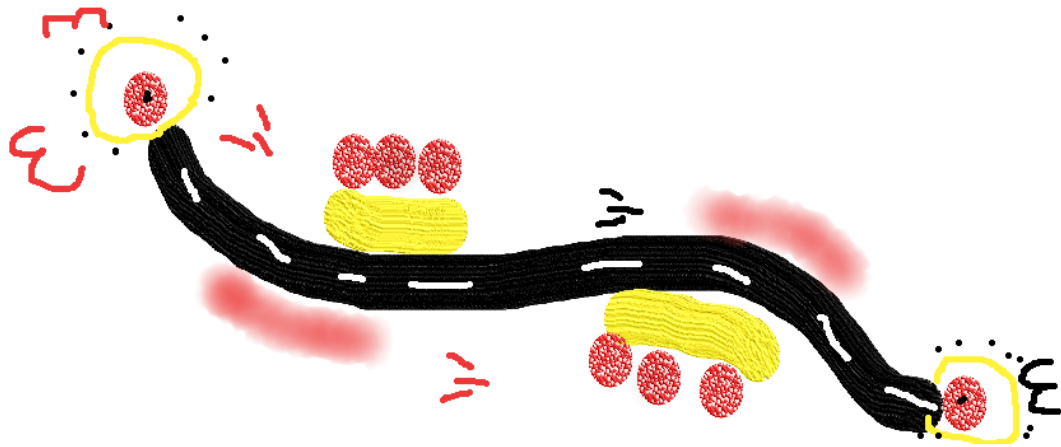
#### **4.5 My Cultural version of Bardju**

*Bardju* (2019) is part of the *Gambabawaraga* suite. The idea for my cultural version of *Bardju* (footprints) came about from me trying to show a wholistic/multi-dimensional version of Culture. Culture is music, is dance, is art. Additionally I was influenced by a painting by Judy Watson, an Aboriginal artist, about Aboriginal massacre sites, where she took a map of Australia, then imposed a map of Aboriginal languages on top, then superimposed on top of that a map of Aboriginal massacre sites in Australia. I am looking at creating an integrated media version of this in the future to express a wholistic idea of Culture. Story, sound and image are all interconnected. The manuscript is one component of the story.

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<sup>26</sup> Gay’wu, *Song Spirals*, xxiii.

*Bardju / Footprints (2019)*



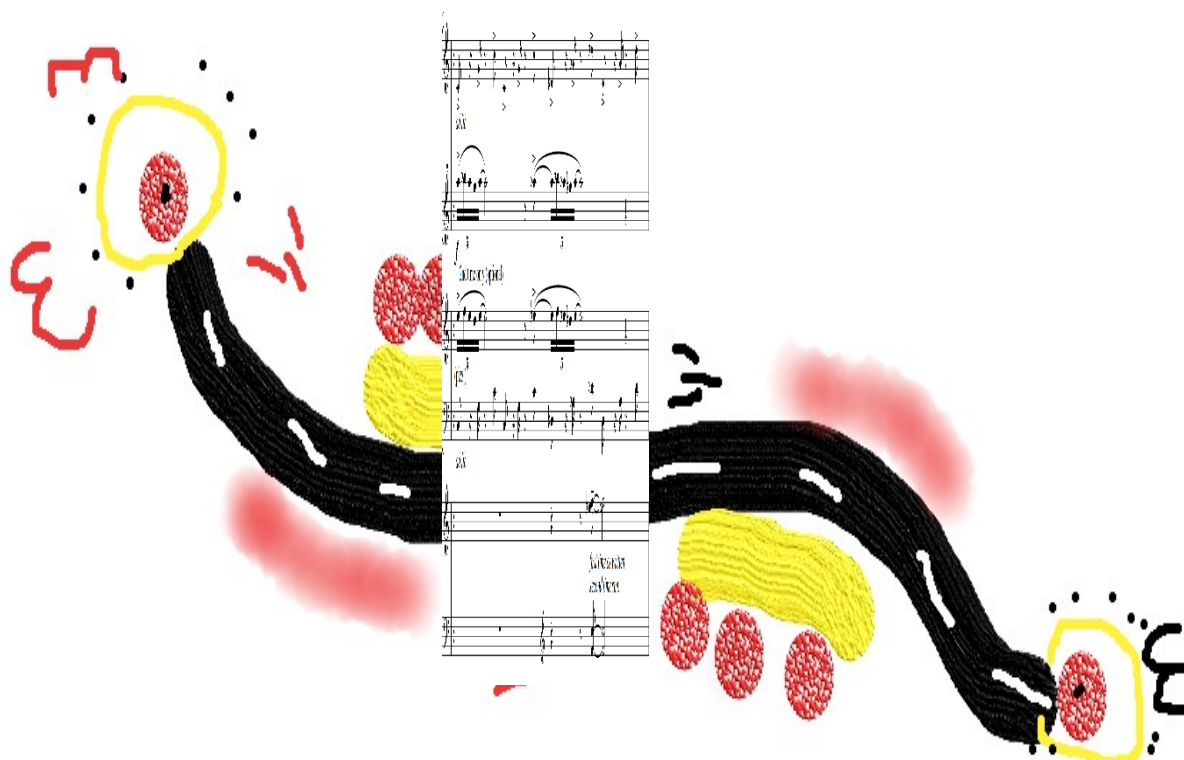
**Figure 7: My visual representation of Bardju/ Footprints, a composition I wrote in 2019 for Ensemble Offspring. It shows the tracks/pathway, footprints and journey on country. The piece Bardju was about each of us taking care of country and treading lightly on her. (I am not a painter). (copyright Brenda Gifford)**

I have developed this image into a graphic score that can also contain manuscript music notation (see figure below) as well as including audio elements:

listen at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-V3h\\_7T79s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-V3h_7T79s)

**Figure 8: Manuscript excerpt of *Bardju***

The three elements could be layered as seen in the following example where the performance would be shaped by the graphics of the painting as well as the music stave notation. Clicking on the music notation would take you to the audio.



**Figure 9: *Bardju*: Speculative combination of painting, music notation and audio**

## CHAPTER 5. Conclusion

Ali Cobby Eckermann, award-winning Yankunytjatjara poet, says: ‘Songspirals are Life. These are cultural words from wise women. As an Aboriginal woman this is profound to learn.’<sup>27</sup>

‘Songspirals are sung by Aboriginal people to awaken Country, to make and remake the life-giving connections between people and place.’<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, my background has shaped my current views and creative ideas. This lived experience has informed my music and composition practice. I do not create in a vacuum. I would not be here writing this without my history. My way of understanding what I do and my way of analysing it is through relationships: it is not abstract but grounded in Country and Culture. It is grounded in language and in story; it is grounded in right relations between people and land. That means that I follow cultural protocols in how I work and also how I discuss my work.

It is essential that we have different versions of our culture, from the songs of the Wilfred Brothers in their work with the Australian Art Orchestra through to new operatic and orchestral works by Deborah Cheetham and everything in between. For Raven Chacon’s collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, in his artist’s statement he describes the title of his piece *The Journey of the Horizontal People* as a future Creation Story. The work is grounded in First Nations culture which imagines new futures for Classical music. This future includes culture that is by Aboriginal artists and controlled by Aboriginal people. Collaboration is a vital part of the equation for Aboriginal culture to be represented in music. It must be done in a respectful way where all parties are benefiting from the process.

Shawn Wilson’s (Opaskwyak Cree from Canada) work in the research area has helped clarify my thoughts on my work as an Indigenous researcher and allowed me to incorporate my Culture into my research project. I discussed how ‘writing is a major form

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<sup>27</sup> Eckermann, <https://bawakacollective.com/songspirals/>

<sup>28</sup> See [https://www.foe.org.au/songspirals\\_sharing\\_womens\\_wisdom\\_of\\_country\\_through\\_songlines](https://www.foe.org.au/songspirals_sharing_womens_wisdom_of_country_through_songlines)

of communication/ sharing cultural meaning’, but that it is also part of white privilege. Whilst Indigenous people can adapt to other ways of thinking and communication we do not necessarily share the same beliefs about knowledge and how we gain knowledge. This realisation should be the basis for change and of decolonisation within the academic space (the academy). This is what I can bring to research methodologies and music: my Culture to bridge both sides. My research is a bridge between two cultures.

I am part of a wave of composers bringing Indigenous approaches to the space of Western classical music. Our presence is changing what the music sounds like and who is playing and conducting the music and leading the musical institutions. It is even changing what the musical notation looks like.

An example of a new approach to musical notation is my idea for my cultural version of *Bardju* which is significant because it is a new representation of culture as a wholistic custom. Culture is music, is dance, is art and I want to show that in how my music is represented as marks on paper, as audio and as live performance. All these things are not separate entities.

As I said, the Decibel ScorePlayer App that was developed by Cat Hope and other musicians of Decibel Ensemble with Aaron Wyatt, Noongar musician offers to Indigenous composers another avenue to express their culture, especially for those of us who are not trained in the Western system of notation. The Indigenous population in Australia is young and the take up of this type of app by our youth would be beneficial. In my own case, I recently used for the first time a graphic score for my work *Moriyawa* (2023) for the Melbourne Jazz Festival, with the Australian Art Orchestra.

Going forward on this musical journey I am developing new directions in the project *Moriyawa* (whale) with the Australian Art Orchestra incorporating technology, language and improvised sound worlds, based on the migration of whales up the east coast of Australia and stories from Country. This project is collaborative and I hope to do more of this in the future. I like working with improvising musicians as they have an openness to trying different approaches to music. There is more open space there for combining traditional notated scores and graphic scores though I am also working on a piece for Flinders String Quartet which emphasises Western notation. I would like to do more of this as well. I find the challenges of working with these structures enjoyable.

Working on *Wagan* with Joel Bray gave me an understanding of collaborative processes with First Nations artists from different cultures. We are not one homogenous people. We have within our nations unique culture and practices.

Overall, there is movement for change in the contemporary Classical Art Music space and support structures are being put in place. There is a wave of Aboriginal composers taking on the call and producing music on their own terms. Programs are incorporating Aboriginal composers in their concert seasons. There is still a long way to go in the more traditional classical organisations, but there is a path being built for our voices to be heard, recognised and welcomed into the fold. This will work in parallel with change in the wider community and how it embraces Aboriginal people and culture. I feel optimistic going forward as a Yuin woman composer and pleased that my music and my fellow cohorts are being incorporated into the contemporary Art Music space.

As my Uncle George Brown senior said, 'we come from the land, we do not own it'. And so it is.

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## Compositions

Bennett, Lou. *Jaara Nyilamum*, for string quartet and voice.

Commissioned by Australian String Quartet, 2020.

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Chacon, Raven & Du Yun. *Sweet Land*, opera produced by 'The Industry', LA, G.

Schirmer, 2020. Video retrieved 10 May 2020:

<https://records.theindustryla.org/album/sweet-land>

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Cheetham, Deborah. *Eumeralla, a war requiem for peace*.

Large scale work for soloists, choirs and orchestra. Sung in the language of the Gunditjmara people. 2019. Video retrieved 10 May 2020:

<https://watch.mso.live/detail/video/6210820952001/eumeralla:-a-war-requiem-for-peace>

## APPENDIX A: COMPOSITION PORTFOLIO

### **Project**

#### **1. *Birds***

**Score for dance project *Wagan*  
(crow in Wiradjuri)**

**for string quintet, percussion**

**Duration: 20 minutes**

**[note: the piano part that appears in  
the score was used as reference in the  
production of the Sydney Dance  
Company track].**

2020, rev 2023

#### **2. *Mayab/ Mist***

**for orchestra**

**Duration: 12 minutes**

2021

#### **3. *Minga Bagan/ Mother Earth***

**for choir (SATB) with additional  
percussion (ad lib)**

Commissioned as a musical  
'Acknowledgement of Country'  
for use in Sydney Chamber Choir's  
concerts in 2021 and onwards

### **Outcomes**

Workshop & recording with  
Sydney Symphony Orchestra Fellows  
conductor, Roger Benedict, Sept 2020

Production of final dance score with  
additional electronics by Tristan Coelho

*Wagan*

Sydney Dance Company with  
choreographer Joel Bray  
New Breed Season of performances  
26 Nov – 12 Dec 2020  
Carriageworks, Sydney

Part 1: Workshop

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra  
conducted by Simon Reade  
17 November 2020

Part 2: Concert

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra  
conducted by Simon Reade  
13, 14 July 2021  
Studio, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra,  
Hobart

Concerts

Sydney Chamber Choir  
conducted by Paul Stanhope

21 Jan 2021, Seymour Centre (Sydney  
Festival)

13 March 2021, City Recital Hall  
(recording is from this performance)

**Duration: 7-8 minutes**

2021

4 May 2021, City Recital Hall

25 June 2022, The Neilson, ACO

**4. *Bundoola***

**for string quartet & voice**

**(spoken & sung)**

**Duration: 10 minutes**

**(no recording available of workshop)**

2021

Workshop performance

Dutala Ensemble with soprano,

Deborah Cheetham

Monash University, Jan 2022