

Looking at the meaning and future of folk music – in the context of ethnic, traditional or world music – including the view of folk music as both a ‘revivalist’ expression of the past and a contemporary expression of the present – as well as its influence on other genres of music and its relevance in the presentation of contemporary arts festivals and education.

Apart from its brief as the presenter of one of the longest running folk festivals in Australia (the National folk festival was established in Victoria in 1967 and settled in Canberra in 1992) the National Folk Festival includes cross curricula aspects of general education and the benefits of the folk or oral tradition as an important element in music education.

The organisation is currently working on an online guide to the musical instruments of the world and their respective traditions - around aspects of folk or ethnic music - and the connections with the educational curricula areas of music, geography, history and anthropology. In addition to the musical instrument modules, the site currently being developed includes traditional folk tunes of the world in various formats, as well as manuscript versions.

It basically underlines the value of the oral approach to music education - and the scope for benefits to other curricula areas using the engagement potential of music for young people as a means of assisting retention of information through reference to cross cultural connections and origins – and how they form part of world history, geography and anthropology.

Apart from the cross-curricula aspects and benefits of educating young people about folk music and culture, the practical musical education implications that could inform the music curriculum include the ability for students to absorb music more easily by adhering to the right-brained approach of **Suzuki** - which is also in line with the oral approach of folk music:

i.e. Not requiring the simultaneous ability to read music in tandem with initial motor skill development attempts at holding and playing a musical instrument and imitating the sound of a tune.

Another important aspect of the folk or oral tradition is the effect on the brain (or resting place of the music) of learning music orally. Perhaps it is also that the music does not only reside in the brain, but also in the feelings and the spirit if it has initially been absorbed orally - and memorized as a sound and resultant emotional or spiritual effect rather than as a set of intervals, notes and alphabetical chord changes or data on a page or computer screen.

As a folk musician who has learned repertoire both ways – by learning a tune from the score and by being shown by another musician, I have absolutely no doubt that the latter is the more effective means. More effective not only in terms of how much easier it is to memorize the piece, but also because the music seemingly enters and remains in another and quite different part of one’s being.

Informed access to the folk music ‘canon’ from diverse cultures also provides a rich source of melody that I believe could form a **broader and more fruitful part of the current range of national tutorials**, although I realise that original composition and publication in this area is a very well established commercial market.

To turn to the National Folk Festival, the organisation has been working in conjunction with Kids Media who specialise in online designs and 3d installations for school age students. They have established broad access to schools via the **'For Teachers For Students' (FTFS)** network and website that is currently housing our first instrument module - which will also be linked to the new NFF educational website that is currently under development.

The module can be viewed online now at www.forteachersforstudents.com.au/NFF –

The aim is to eventually develop them for all the main folk instruments - ordered according to the Hornbostel and Sachs classifications for ethnic instruments.

These form a virtual counterpart to any future educational workshops that the National Folk Festival presents – whether as part of workshops at its main annual festival event or as part of additional forums for music making and education.

Eventually, students can be engaged via workshops and then access the online modules to assist with school assignments or further study of an instrument on their own.

Our prototype instrument program is based on the violin or fiddle, and includes such things as a musical world map, pinpointing geographical areas with their historical cultural styles of instrumental music traditions and accompanying social customs. It also includes an expandable 3D violin that can literally be entered and exploded, rotated and explored – with explanations of the structure and function of its component parts.

The modules will also contain anthropological cultural information to give students an introduction to the musical and social customs of different races. The educational aim is for example that a student through engaging with a simple and colourful instrument such as a Zimbabwean Mbira or Thumb piano, may be more likely to remember where Zimbabwe is on the world map through a fascination with its music and the traditional spiritual customs of its people.

And as mentioned the modules will also contain mp3 recordings of traditional tunes from around the world in various formats, together with downloadable sheet music in pdf format, or utilising good music freeware such as Muscores which is easy to manipulate and write music in, as well as converting it to a range of useful formats.

We also include in our tune presentations the music notation format ABC – which is very useful and adaptable. Developed by computer scriptwriter Chris Walshaw in the 80's, it was a way he developed to notate traditional tunes before he could read music. For many people, approaching notation from this angle, like guitar tablature, is more palatable to them than learning to read a musical staff.

It may well also be useful for children as it has an alphabetical and simple algebraic basis, although I am not necessarily advocating it as an alternative to manuscript in curricula education.

ABC does however demystify the principle of note values and provides a means of recording a simple tune algebraically. The other useful thing is that it enables instant conversion from or to ABC with other file types such as pdf's of manuscript, xml files, and wav or midi files that play the music. The Easy ABC program also has a much more conducive piano midi playback than many music programs!

Links to details for using the ABC program and its necessary software for both windows and mac, as well as access to the selected tunes in ABC and a range of other formats will be included on the National Folk Festival Educational website.

To turn to folk and ethnic music itself, and what it has to offer, I would like to briefly explore the notion of folk music as existing – rather than as a creation of man.

Ross Daly is an Irishman who visited Crete thirty years ago and technically never left. He is a world-renowned exponent of the Cretan Lyra, a spike fiddle of Byzantine origin, as well as a broad range of Middle and Near Eastern stringed instruments.

He has created an internationally popular music school on Crete and performs around the world at various times. He wrote an article called About Music, which is well worth reading (I have copies if anyone would like to read it – please come and ask me) – it is worth reading by anyone interested in music from any point of view – especially in terms of the notion of 'composition'.

The article includes such premises as:

- Music exists everywhere in our world but, for the most part, we unfortunately don't hear it.
- To put it concisely, we imagine that it is the events of our lives that give birth to music.
- There exists another dimension to music that exists prior to our feelings, experiences or indeed any of our relationships with anything whatsoever.
- This music does not belong to any given civilization, every sound of it simultaneously contains and transcends all of the civilisations of all peoples, of all places, of all times.
- We must see the necessity of resigning from our "positions" as artists, creators, indeed as individuals, giving way to a re-defining and a re-discovery of ourselves

Whilst it is generally recognised that some form of training and practical experience are both useful in being able to produce music whether classically written or improvisationally composed, Ross Daly points to the existence of music as being something that is essentially not any man's creation, nor even the creation of mankind as a whole, rather it is a gift to mankind.

This points the way towards the existence of music that is naturally present and occasionally accessible and possible to develop. I believe the inspiration to produce good folk or ethnic music to be as natural an occurrence as any other inspiration in the same way as Michelangelo was said to have chipped away to 'reveal' the figure – or Mozart or Haydn 'taking dictation'. The essential ingredient in the approach seems to be a preparedness to "follow" the guidance that may result from concerted effort if one is able to engage with it, and allow it to show you what is consequent.

The accessibility to music of this kind I believe presents a challenge to us in music making both in terms of formal education and for our approach to music generally.

When I speak of folk music, I don't mean in the seemingly accepted 'revivalist' sense of folk music as a demonstration of social history and custom, although that has its value for many people – and this is I think where folk music exists as a revivalist movement;

What I am promulgating here is the value of the oral approach to music in the sense of folk or ethnic music being the province of human beings – and of all people rather than simply those who are educated in a certain way. In my view, this is where folk or ethnic music exists as a genre.

I am speaking of folk music as the birthright of everyone to express themselves in the present moment in their natural modality, in the same way as the birds do – it is more to do with expressing one's consciousness of the present moment (informed by a hereditary modal tradition and personal experience) than a wish to recreate a canon of music evocative of rural or urban cultural custom that existed 2-300 years ago. Young guys playing electric guitars in a garage band is very folk in a kind of way, its what kind of influences and the resultant style that determine how we categorise it – but it is essentially 'folk' in an oral impromptu sense.

As the renowned Sacred music specialist Kim Kunio said on Radio National a week or two ago, it is precarious practicing what have until recently been microcosms of culture and sacred music – which when held up for all to see transparently can be in danger of suddenly being opaque.

He went on to say clearly how his practice only ever follows careful study, respect and dedication to a given tradition – and is not in any way a new age aberration.

The music that Ross Day refers to is similarly I believe only accessible and fully understandable following some sort of dedication and traditional practice, but is nonetheless present as a reality – or a kind of potential if we are able to attune ourselves to it.

I am not advocating that we all become folk musicians, as more formal academic education in music is essential from a range of disciplinary perspectives, all I am saying is that I believe there is a natural point of cultural and expressive departure, that although connected to our cultural background, is more to do with our ongoing state of being and how we lead our lives – and which can inform all of our music making and especially our view of music education.

Obviously there are many disciplines and demands in classical music that are necessary for the more serious vocational performing musician, but I am speaking here of the correlations at the elementary level that provide good and easy access for early education and can also lead a student to serious classical study or study of a given ethnic tradition if that is their particular vocation.

Folk Music and Education

Leading child educational psychologists seem to be in agreement that children have what is referred to as a fine mesh of understanding and knowledge capacity or potential that is present from the beginning and is potentially damaged by enforced templates of education.

This view of culture as being the natural birthright of everyone as a means of unique personal expression (whether as a specific arts practitioner per se or not) is something that I feel needs to be considered as part of our brief as festival event organisers or more formal music and cultural educators.

As festival event organisers we aim to address this by providing opportunities for people to participate at a festival, rather than to simply watch leading performers.

This can be in the form of more formal workshops with the guidance of established practitioners – or informal music sessions. For many years the National Folk Festival hasn't had an official Green Room due to its wish to provide maximum opportunity for festivalgoers to rub shoulders with the main stage musicians.

And on the lighter side, apart from the myriad of other delights taking place at the National Folk Festival, the atmosphere in the now famous Session Bar in the late, or I should say, early hours, is a unique experience - in itself worth buying a season ticket for!

Apart from its delightfully informal musicality, it is an education in that it allows people of all ages, cultural backgrounds and dress codes to rub shoulders – literally – and share in informal music making and merriment.

One of the most important things I have experienced and I know other musicians have too is to find some sort of access point to a genre (usually by hearing a musician or group that you love) that can eventually lead to a fine tuning or a more in depth study of a given tradition that eventually provides a more universal vantage point from which to view music and your particular place in it. World music has in many ways done this of folk or ethnic music.

The current considerable gravitation of young people towards folk music in the UK is a good example of how, following discovery of say Armenian Duduk playing or the vocals of the Pygmies of the Cameroon rainforest, young people are becoming aware that their own mid seventeenth century English folk music in the Playford collection, described by Vaughan Williams as “symphonies in miniature”, is as exotic as anything else in the world and no doubt extremely exotic to a musician from another diverse culture.

Having found our access point or encouraged our children to find their access point, the next challenge is where do we go from here and what is the purpose of this music making? It is one thing to go and see and appreciate our heroes and those that have influenced us in some way, but it is also important to realise that we all have a unique gift that can be further cultivated and that is completely our own.

There is always that slight sinking feeling or anti-climax after the reverie of seeing a hero or witnessing a story. It's the old Renaissance trick of the climactic ending that somehow leaves you rather disorientated as you emerge into the light of day, and unless you have a plan of your own, can leave you somewhat bereft.

Whilst we all have our heroes and influences, as musicians, I think one of the greatest challenges we face is to be able to focus on the uniquely personal expressive nature of our own style rather than on any sense of comparison with accepted standards of proficiency, or the need to succeed in a technical sense.

The encouragement of technique hopefully only ever serves our ability to adequately express ourselves.

Apart from our online music educational modules, other educational initiatives include an ongoing collaboration with St Francis Xavier College, who for the past few years have become involved in the National Folk Festival, with students assisting with such things as production and documentation, in turn providing students with valuable real world experience. This activity will be extended in 2012, as SFX have secured a grant for \$30,000 to film musicians at the festival and produce subsequent DVD's as a service to artists and to the festival.

Another ongoing collaboration that the festival is very proud of is our annual selection of a national 'folk fellow' in conjunction with the National Library, providing an opportunity for the selected artist to conduct research at the library with full access to archival collections and the NLA recording studio, as well as a headline opportunity to perform at the festival.

In 2012 the National Folk Festival will also present the first Canberra Fiddle Festival and Canberra Songwriting Festival – two weekend events in July and November to provide a forum for young up and coming fiddle players in all genres and for songwriters to be able to rub shoulders with some established musicians and exchange inspirational ideas and approaches.

Finally I'd like to say that, as presenters of a long established folk festival, I believe programs should be presented in the perspective of how they relate to other cultural avenues and genres of music otherwise they are in danger of becoming disconnected and static.

Folk or ethnic art (or primitive art – in the non-elementary sense that Picasso referred to it) informs modernity in the sense that it is timeless and symbolic – and so its practice should always have an element of something contemporary – or a consciousness of the present even when it has reference to events in history.

I believe if we manage to do this properly we will remain connected to young people and the directions they are moving in, otherwise our traditions will die with us.