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PROFILE: ANDREW FORD

Andrew Ford, photo by Jim Rolon

The composer Andrew Ford was born in Liverpool in 1957 and educated at Lancaster University, where he studied with Edward Cowie and John Buller. For four years he was Fellow in Music at the University of Bradford; in 1983 he moved to Australia, initially to join the School of Creative Arts at Wollongong University. He has composed nearly two hundred musical works in most genres, with numerous song cycles, six string quartets, concertos for orchestra, piano, cello, viola and electric guitar, a symphony, and the opera *Rembrandt's Wife*. He has been composer in residence for the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Australian National Academy of Music, and in 2018 was H.C. Coombs Creative Arts Fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra.

His ten books include *Composer to Composer* (a book of interviews with the likes of Cage, Gubaidulina, Boulez, Birtwistle and Saariaho) and *Illegal Harmonies* (a survey of music in the twentieth century), as well as studies of sound in film, musical 'primitivism' and the songs of Van Morrison. A memoir, *The Memory of Music*, was published in 2017. *The Song Remains the Same*, written with his wife, Anni Heino, appeared at the end of 2019. For the past twenty-five years, Ford has presented The Music Show each weekend on ABC Radio National.

You're active as a composer, writer and broadcaster. How do you manage the balance between all this activity?

I do one thing at a time. I'm quite good at compartmentalising my life. I'm more a composer than anything else and when I'm at home in the New South Wales Southern Highlands (midway between Sydney and Canberra) that's generally what I'm doing. My radio work occupies two days a week and for that I take the train to Sydney. Writing words – articles and sometimes books – is squeezed in between everything else, though when a book deadline is bearing down on me I clear the time to meet it. But I write and broadcast *as a composer*: my imagining of music, and my experience of mapping it out and inventing – ideally, discovering – the details, provides the background to everything else I do.

For many years you've been the host of The Music Show, a programme on ABC radio that includes all sorts of different music. How easy is to keep your listeners with you as you move from jazz to traditional musics to classical music?

And the rest! Country music, the blues, rock, hip-hop, mediaeval chant, film scores, show tunes, Karnatic ragas, Chinese opera: I always say we have something for everyone to hate. But The Music Show is a chat show (our network, Radio National, is like BBC Radio 4 or NPR

in the United States) – it's just that the guests are musicians, and the topic of our conversations is music. A listener might find a conversation about music they don't like to be as interesting as one about their favourite composer.

Does the breadth of musical interest that is such a feature of The Music Show feed into your own music?

That's hard to say. My musical tastes have always been broad. My childhood, in 1960s Liverpool, was full of pop music: my dad had records of Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra; my mum classical music such as the *Pastoral* symphony of Beethoven, Dvorak's *New World* symphony and Smetana's *Vltava*; and my older cousins were interested in traditional music, and so I heard a lot of that too. I'm sure it's all there, somewhere in my musical make up – in fact folk music is often on the surface. I was about 15 when I discovered Stockhausen and Berio and Boulez. As we get older, I think we tend to be less influenced by what we hear. Or maybe one is just set in one's ways. I try not to be that. I'm always looking to do things I haven't done before, to scare myself. Recently, I've composed a mass with organ (writing for organ being the scary bit), an electric guitar concerto, a piece for the National Carillon in Canberra and settings of Adrian Henri, Brian Patten and Roger McGough for improvising jazz musicians. When you're on unfamiliar ground, you can't fall back on things you've done before; you must use your imagination. And because you're wrestling with a new genre or form or instrument, you are less self-conscious – which, for me is always the goal. Let the music take over.

There is one sense in which my radio work has directly affected my own music, namely a series of pieces that involve recorded interview. The most ambitious of these is an orchestral piece, *Blitz* (2011), in which the voices of four elderly Liverpudlians (including my parents) relate their childhood memories of the bombing of Liverpool by the Luftwaffe in 1940 and 1941, and three German voices speak of the Allied bombing of Hamburg and Berlin. Their voices emerge from the orchestra and form a kind of counterpoint to it. For example, about five minutes in there is a duet between a trombone and my mother.

Your new book is about songs. The song form flourishes in so many musical traditions but perhaps less so in contemporary classical music. Is this a problem?

For whom? I suspect that as categories such as 'contemporary classical music' become less important more songs are being written. There have always been vocal works, of course, though to what extent they are songs is a moot point. If you take Elliott Carter's late outpouring of vocal music, those pieces do look a lot like song cycles, and one of Carter's songs, 'O Breath' from *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*, is in the book. But you're right to speak of 'song form': that's what Anni Heino and I set out to write about and it's in the title, borrowed from Led Zeppelin, *The Song Remains the Same*. We looked at pop hits and German lieder, jazz standards and hymns: in the words of the subtitle, the book features '800 years of love songs, laments and lullabies'. So there are songs by Hildegard of Bingen and Purcell, Brahms and Mahler, but also Billy Strayhorn and Noël Coward, Carole King, Lennon–McCartney and Ray Davies, Bob Marley, Amy Winehouse and Sia. Songs share

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characteristics. A song must be singable, and in some way memorable – physically memorable, because we carry songs around in our lives in the way that few of us can carry round an opera or a whole symphony.

We live in an era in which contemporary classical music (not a term I like but we seem to be stuck with it) has become more geographically localised. Is there something specific about new Australian music?

You're begging the question, Christopher. I don't agree that it's become more localised. At least, not entirely. There is, after all, the internet allowing anyone, anywhere to stream practically anything. But I do think that this has made live performance – the real thing – more important, and that must always be local. I see among the younger generations of Australian musicians a greater openness to all sorts of music, including the modernism that many in the generation before them dismissed. But I imagine that's also universal. I hope so.

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