

CATHERINE ELLIS 1935-1996

On 30 May 1996, Australian musicology lost one of its most prominent and original scholars when, just a few days after her 61st birthday, Catherine Ellis died in Adelaide where she had moved after her retirement in 1995 from the Chair of Music at the University of New England. Ellis was perhaps best known for her ground breaking research on Australian Aboriginal music, but she touched the lives of those in many other fields, including music education, music therapy and Aboriginal studies, through her teaching, broadcasting, performances, and participation in conferences and committees.

Ellis was one of the three pioneers of Aboriginal music research who began work in the mid-to-late 1950s (the others were Trevor Jones and Alice Moyle). After completing her B.Mus. from the University of Melbourne in 1956 (specialising in piano and bassoon), she first worked on Aboriginal music at the University of Adelaide, where she was research assistant to Professor T.G.H. Strehlow in 1957-58. She then undertook her Ph.D. at the University of Glasgow where in 1961 she completed her thesis "Aboriginal Music Making: A Study of Central Australian Music," based on transcription and analysis of material from Strehlow's collection of Central Australian song (later published as Ellis 1964).

On her return to the University of Adelaide in 1962 she again worked as research assistant to Strehlow, before taking up a Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Department of Australian Linguistics, and later an Australian Research Grants Council Research Fellowship in the Elder Conservatorium of Music (University of Adelaide). During this period she began to carry out her own fieldwork, initially recording Aboriginal music at various locations in southeastern South Australia. These early fieldwork experiences, which convinced her of the sophistication of the music as well as making her aware of the social injustices suffered by the people with whom she worked, were fundamental to her later work.

As she began to work more intensively in northern South Australia, especially with Antikirinya and Pitjantjatjara people, on the request of both men and women she became increasingly involved in documentation of women's ceremonies, which at that stage had been little studied. Realising that the social, linguistic and musical complexity of the performances required a broadly-based approach, in 1966-68 she formed an interdisciplinary team of women researchers to carry out the Group Project on Andagarinja (Antikirinya) Women. Her collaborators included Luise Hercus (linguist), Isobel White (anthropologist), Rhonda Toussaint (photographer) and Lynda Penny (social psychologist). In addition to publishing in national and international journals numerous scholarly papers on Aboriginal music, during the 1960s she was also elected to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and in 1968 became the first Australian scholar to be elected to the Council of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

In 1969 she was appointed to a Lectureship at the Elder Conservatorium, and in addition to her university teaching and research load began to work together with interested members of the Aboriginal community in Adelaide to set up a program of music training for Aboriginal people. Over the following years this developed into the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in

Music, which Ellis co-founded with elders of the Indulkana community in northern South Australia in 1975. A key feature of the Centre was its employment of traditional Pitjantjatjara musicians to teach about their own music. During the 1970s Ellis became increasingly interested in the role of music cross-culturally and in education and therapy, and began to publish in these areas, in addition to maintaining her prodigious output in ethnomusicological analysis. Her book summarising and integrating her interests in all these areas, *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living* (St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1985), has been influential both within Australia and internationally, and has been reprinted several times.

With her move to Armidale to take up the inaugural Chair of Music in 1985, Ellis was able to consolidate her research collection and to implement her vision of an integrated music education, which aimed to give students a means of understanding their own cultural background as well as integrating the study of performance, composition, Western historical musicology and ethnomusicology. With the aid of a succession of Australia Research Council grants, she collaborated with Guy Tunstill, Linda Barwick (both former postgraduate students at the University of Adelaide), Megan Morais, Udo Will and Judith Martyn-Ellis in a series of research projects on Central Australian music. She was also very active internationally, presenting her work as an invited speaker at numerous international conferences in Europe and the United States as well as publishing widely in prestigious journals. Within the University she was a tireless administrator, and she also contributed to professional bodies (she was President of the Musicological Society of Australia 1988-89).

For her achievements in ethnomusicology and music education, she was honoured with the Order of Australia in 1991 and with an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of New England in 1995. A collection of essays in her honour, *The Essence of Singing and the Substance of Song* (Barwick, Marett and Tunstill 1995), contains an assessment of her work (Barwick and Marett 1995) and an extensive bibliography of her publications (Barwick 1995), as well as essays on Aboriginal performing arts by most currently active scholars in the field. Her own reflections on her career can be found in her response to that volume (Ellis 1995), as well as in a number of other articles (Ellis and Barwick 1989, Ellis, Barwick and Morais 1990, Ellis 1992a, 1992b, 1994).

Her family — husband A. M. (Max) Ellis, children Beverley Ellis, Roger Ellis and Judith Martyn-Ellis, and grandchildren Ursual Martyn-Ellis and Matthis Schwarze — were a constant support to her throughout her professional career. Max and the children accompanied her on many field trips, and Max was also an active collaborator in her research and teaching at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music. All three offspring have gone on to have musical careers: Beverley as a cellist (based in Freiburg), Roger as a member of the Sydney band, The Mambologists, and Judith as a singer and musicologist.

Her legacy to future students of Aboriginal music includes seven books and over sixty-seven articles in scholarly journals, as well as her extensive collection of papers, fieldnotes, photos, films and tapes, which she donated on her retirement to the National Library of Australia.

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LINDA BARWICK