AN INTERVIEW WITH RON NAGORCKA

— by Warren Burt, August 1, 1985, Woodend, Vic.

You've been outside concert halls all your life in your music. Why do you think that is?
First of all, concert halls are not all that easy to get into, especially for a young composer doing the sort of things I was interested in at the time —

What were you interested in at the time?
I was interested in as much experiment as possible. I was interested in experimenting with timbres. I wanted anybody who performed on a traditional instrument to go crazy with it, and there weren't many performers around at that time who were willing to go crazy with it.

That time was when?
1971, 1972 — And I was also interested right from the start of my compositional career in working with people who were generally considered to be non-musicians. I was interested in working with people who felt that they weren't musicians, but could easily perform the sort of tasks I set for them. In other words, anybody could be a performer in my music. It's not quite true that I've been right outside the concert hall. For instance, Doug Lawrence has played my organ pieces a lot, and they're in concert halls. A fair amount of stuff has happened in concert halls. But most of my activity for the last ten years, it is true, has been outside the regular concert hall.

I'm thinking of two pieces — Atom Bomb and **Seven Rare Dreamings,** both of which I've been involved in — **Seven Rare Dreamings** as an observer, and **Atom Bomb** as a performer — but it seems to me that neither of those pieces would work in the Seymour Centre or the Melbourne Concert Hall.
They certainly wouldn't work in the Concert Hall, because it's far too large. Both of those pieces require an intimacy with your audience that you only get in small concert halls or places like the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, places like that.

Or the pieces wouldn't work, for example, in Melba Hall.
No, maybe they wouldn't. We did do **Sanctus** in Melba Hall once.

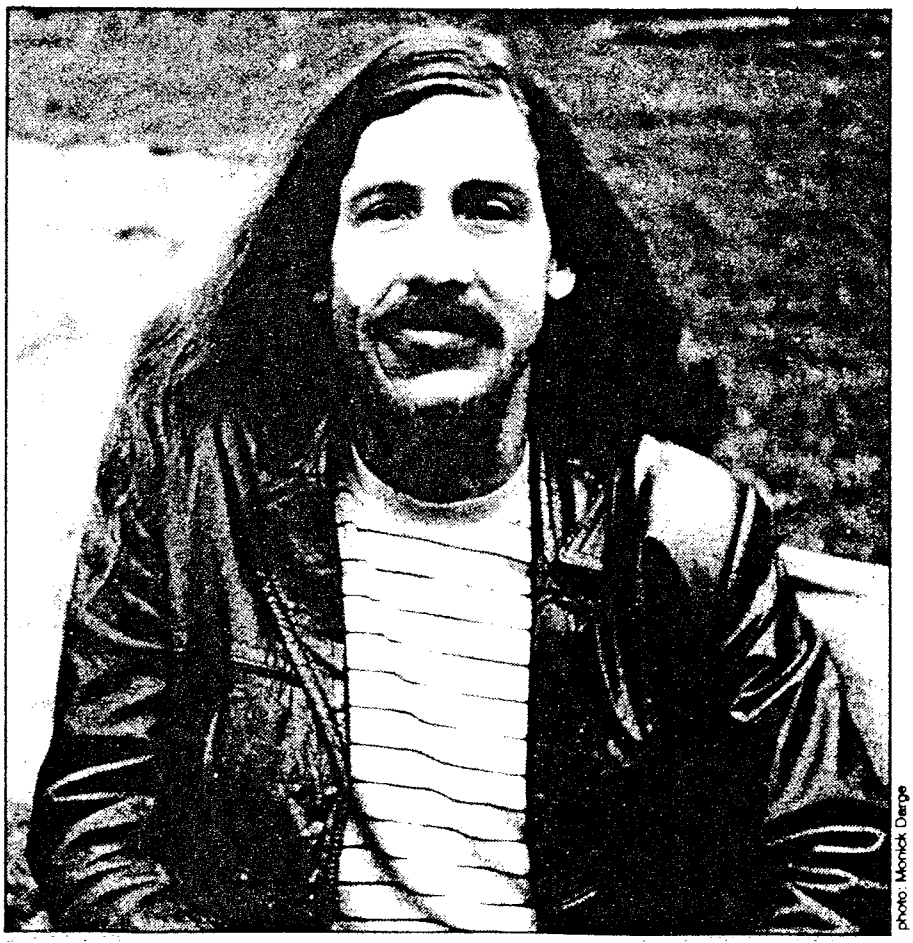
Sanctus is different because it's designed to fill up a large space.
Yes. **Sanctus** is designed for a cathedral.

Which is an important point to make about your music — that the pieces are not "neutral" — they seem to be designed for specific environments.
Yes, it's true with just about everything I've composed, I've had a specific place in mind where I think of it as being performed. Just about everything's been written that way. I have the space and the people in mind who are going to be involved. If it extends beyond that place into other places, then that's interesting too, but I tend to compose that way.

So, in a sense, you're not concerned strictly with the composition of a purely musical piece, but you're also concerned with the composition of the context within which that piece will occur.
Absolutely. That's been one of my big interests. And so, I was always willing to enter a concert hall and do a piece there, but if I did, I would want to be taken seriously, and I would want the musicians to do exactly what I asked them to do. Now, the things I probably would have asked them to do they probably wouldn't have accepted. I would love to someday do a piece with a symphony orchestra, but the symphony orchestra would probably have to walk around in the concert hall because I'm interested in experimenting with that context. One of the *obvious* things to do is to get rid of that notion of all those performers sitting out there in front of all that audience. You play with the context, and that's fun. But it's very hard to think of any symphony orchestra I know actually accepting that and doing it.

So was it that concern with setting up a context that led you to found the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre in 1975? What were the reasons behind founding Clifton Hill?
The reasons behind Clifton Hill were very specific, and it is related to that idea of context. After leaving California, and when you first arrived here, in 1975, I was interested in looking for a place which could be a performance space. The first, and most important thing about it was that it would be a performance space. But secondly, I wanted a place that had a community orientation, that was outside of the University or academic context. I thought that was fundamental to what I might try and do. Thirdly, politically, by that stage already I think I'd become an anarchist and Clifton Hill was definitely an anarchist idea. Fundamental to it was that you didn't have to pay to get in, that performers would not be paid — they would be there doing it for the love of it or for the interest of it — so that the moral obligation of the performer to give the audience member his money's worth would be removed. This means you can perform anything you like in any way you like and not be scared of failing. As you pointed out once, the best thing about Clifton Hill was that it was a place where you could fail, and in that sense it served the purpose of quite a few of us being a place were we could do anything we liked, and have the appreciative attention of our friends. That's what Clifton Hill really was. And as such, yes, it worked as a centre for a community of musicians which was nice to see. It worked.

Clifton Hill's been closed for two



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AMC News, No 9, Spring 1985

years now — it seemed to die a very graceful and natural death. Where next do you see our search for context going in terms of placing your musics?
I can only answer that in terms of what I'm immediately interested in, because I have no idea of where that interest might lead, or what might happen to me and my music over the next few years, but at the moment, I'm interested in lounge rooms. I have two particular lounge rooms in mind, one in Woodend and one in Mount Macedon. They look like lovely places to do music, and I'm already thinking about what music will happen in these lounge rooms, and that's as far as my thinking on that question goes at the moment.

Being involved in doing a series of lounge room concerts myself this year, and also seeing Ernie Althoff and Chris Mann involved in similar activities, it seems to me that we may even be returning to some sort of Chopinesque soiree concept, an idea that one very interesting place for new musical ideas to be presented is at these soirees.
It has a very similar feel from what I can sense of what those things were about, and what's nice about them is that it removes you from the critics. I think it's a wonderful freedom to be your own boss, and so I'm much more interested in lounge room concerts than anything else at the moment, because I want to be in control. I should also say that if I really was given control of the Concert Hall, I wouldn't mind at all.

You also mentioned working in the Hanging Rock Hall.
Yes.

You live very near Hanging Rock, and this ties in with your idea of music being connected with the earth. Could you talk a little bit about that?
The Hanging Rock Hall is very small. It's used mainly for little parties that people have. You can hire it out for a small fee. Doing it in the Hall, at the moment, is where I would be prepared to do a concert at Hanging Rock. In other words, what I'm saying is "Look, I'm one of the European people who don't understand this place at all, but we like it, and we make up stories about it. So that's ok, we'll sit in our hall down below the Rock and make up stories about it. What I would be *very* wary of doing because of whatever relationship I've managed to have with Hanging Rock — I'd be *very* wary of going up on to that Rock somewhere and doing a piece of music on top of it because I think the place *is* powerful. Yes, I'll take part in the mythology all you like, but I think the place to start is probably down there with the tourists.

A polite way of introducing yourself, "Dear Sir", to the power of the Rock.
Yes, something like that, but it's also a protection against taking yourself too seriously.

Which is one thing that might distinguish Australian environmental composition from, say, an American approach.
It *may*. I do sometimes think there's a bit of over- Californian intensity in some American stuff.

This exploration of music and its relation to the earth also comes into your work with the didjeridu.
Well, it stems from there. There's no doubt that the musical introduction into that notion comes from the didjeridu, and from working with it getting out into the bush and finding and making didjeridus, and from having experiences with it which convinced me that, yes, it *is* the voice of the Rainbow Serpent and therefore you must treat it with a great deal of caution and a great deal of responsibility. And so, the pieces I've done with the didjeridu, **Sanctus** and **Seven Rare Dreamings,** within the terms of what I knew at the time, seem to me to accord with that responsibility, to have been responsible with it.

It seems to me that so many white Australian composers use the didjeridu as a symbol, of the lost aboriginal culture, of the vastness of the continent, etc., but they don't really penetrate to the essence of what that instrument was in the terms of the society that originated it, and what the relationship between Aboriginal society and white society is, and how that instrument is a mediator between those societies. You seem to be one of the people who's done that – you, at least, have taken the didjeridu seriously.
I think what you've got to remember is that being born in Australia is like being born the product of a rape. So you've got a great deal to come to terms with in your own thinking in how you approach *anything* to do with the land, with the country, with what Australia is about. It also seems to me that all our European oriented thought processes somehow are misplaced here. It's really hard to figure out how to actually handle this country when you're dealing with drought and bushfire and all the rest of it. You realize we haven't got a clue of what we're doing in this place. We're making an utter disaster of it. If we want to get anywhere with not making a disaster of it, it seems to me we ought to ask some people who've got some wisdom and understanding of what this place might be about, and who better to ask than people who've been here for 40, 50, 100,000 years, or whatever it is these days.

Whatever power it is we're going to try and tap into, we've got to work at it pretty hard before we're going to get there. We need to do a lot of careful listening.

Your interest with the didjeridu, and a music of the earth brings to mind Bill Mollison's idea of permaculture, which he adapted from Aboriginal ideas, and that leads into a consideration of people who have influenced you, like Mollison and Bateson, and Fuller and so on. Could you talk about that?
Yes. The influences came through from Fukuoka. He's a really important influence. A couple of years ago I managed to get hold of his book called "The One Straw Revolution" which is basically a Taoist book about farming. It's a marvelous book and I recommend it to anybody and everybody. It's where Bill Mollison really gets his ideas from. The notion of gardening that is presented in Fukuoka's book is that it's something that's perfectly natural, that you don't have to interfere with. You don't pull out weeds. It's not just bio-dynamic and not using insecticides and so on. You use the absolute minimum technology that you can manage to use, and the idea is that you set up something that just happens around you, and all you've got to do is walk around it occasionally, and pick this and that, and throw a few seeds on in spring, and the whole things just goes. It's a great idea, I mean, wouldn't it be wonderful if the whole world was like that?

It seems to me that you're trying to make music in that way, sometimes.
Well, yes. That idea of process, of what a process is about connects to all those other influences that you're talking about.

Right. And you idea of working on the context in which a piece happens is the same thing as getting the plot ready so that the process can happen properly.
Exactly. The other analogy is to building, which is the other thing I've been doing a lot of over the last couple of years. The way I like to build anything is to first of all spend a lot of time deciding exactly where that is going to go. I mean, your connection with the earth really is important, and finding exactly the right spot for a building is a magical process anyway, and then, you look at that place very carefully, and you decide where you're going to put in one pole. You don't decide *anything* until you put that pole in, and then you look at all the rest. And you make each decision, each step of the way, and in the end you'll come up with something. Now it might take you 10 years longer to build you house, but in the end you'll get exactly the house you want. Now, that's how I like to approach my music, and it's one of the reasons why I have to keep my music out of the control of any sort of bureaucracy or establishment because immediately the demands, deadlines, and so on, crowd in on you, you're like somebody building a house where you've had to submit a plan at the beginning as to what the house is going to look like. You're stuck. You've got to be free to change and move around and do what you like and have a good look at the situation before you make the next move. That's the way I like to work...

Getting back to Bateson and friends...
Yes. Fukuoka connects perfectly to Bateson because I think Fukuoka's saying exactly the same thing: that what we require is a synthesis between mind and nature. Not just a comparison between the two, but a total blending and it seems to me that the one culture I can see that operating in well, the one culture where permaculture is a natural idea, is Aboriginal culture. The way they farmed Australia is that process: burning selectively here and there, digging selectively here and there as you harvest things, and letting nature get on with it and provide you with absolute plenty. So you've got lots of time to sit around and think and talk and make up dances and songs. It's a lovely image of the world, that one. Somebody described Aboriginal culture as being a vast culture of the mind, and I thought, that's a lovely phrase, wouldn't it be nice if you worked toward the vast culture of the mind once again.

Along with non-specifically musical people like Bateson and Fuller, who are the musicians whose ideas have affected you the most?

Well, where do I begin? It's like the end of a ceremony where you mustn't forget to thank the people who arranged the flowers. One of my earliest influential experiences was reading the Cage story where at the end of the lecture Cage was challenged with the statement, "If that's music, I could write it too". To which he replied, "Have I said anything to suggest I thing you're stupid?" From this I learned that there is no such thing as a stupid thought. Actions, however, are an entirely different matter. As for the rest, well, I could begin with old Steve in the pub down the road! But aside from him we can begin with the big names, which are Cage and Partch. I think you could spend a long time getting a lot out of both those composers. I think my early influences are from people like Keith Humble and Ian Bonighton. I acknowledge a great debt to both those gentlemen, and then, the people I met in California. People like John Silber, and then working again with Jean-Charles Francois, meeting and doing work with Kenneth Gaburo, and having discussions late into the night over bottles of whisky. Kenneth is an important influence in a peculiar sort of way. I think it's his East Coast incisiveness that comes through, his wonderful analytical mind. You couldn't put anything past Kenneth, he always had that answer for you. It was very instructive talking to him. It was important for me to work with Bob Erickson, whose understanding of sound, and knowledge of how it operates, and psychoacoustics was marvelous. And Pauline Oliveros, whose ideas were always closely parallel to mine. So all of those people — and then people that I met in California, David Dunn, Roberto Laneri, Ron Robboy, all people I'd be interested to do things with. And then from Europe, the names that immediately come to mind are Xenakis, whose ideas of stochastics relate, for me, very closely to Bateson. And in terms of political thinking I owe a great deal to Cornelius Cardew. Then in Melbourne there's yourself, Chris Mann, Ernie Althoff and Les Gilbert. It's mostly you four — we've been most closely allied in our ideas and understandings.

For the past few years, we haven't seen much of Ron Nagorcka outside or inside the concert hall or the lounge room. The last piece of yours I can remember is Ash Wednesday, done at the Paris Autumn Festival in 1983, and if I can be a bit Willessee-ish it seemed like pulling teeth for you to get that one out.

Oh, it was. That was an enormous effort, getting **Ash Wednesday** out, and I dare say if Chris Mann hadn't got me up to Launching Place one day and walked around the place having lots of interesting discussions about music, it would have been even harder.

Why the silence? What's been preventing you from making the statements you were making so eloquently for so many years?

The first thing to say is that there isn't really a silence. Music's everything we do. The other thing to say is that music may be an art, but life is an art, too, and I was still, at that stage in 1983 grappling with a marriage separation, and I really needed to find myself again. I've been doing that, and I didn't really have very much to say to anybody else while I worked through that. And it gave me the opportunity to exercise that notion that music is everything we do, and *really* do it seriously. My piece of music for the past two years is really where I live, my house and garden. And of course educating my son Derek — who doesn't go to school.

You mentioned that for a good number of months you tried to live without clocks to develop a sense of time that was different than Western clock time.

Yes, it was hard, because I had to know when the weekends were, but at least I could lose a sense of somebody calls this five past three, and always being aware of the fact that it was half past three or six o'clock or whatever. It was much nicer to be aware of the sun's high in the sky, or it's dark now, and I feel tired, so I'll go to bed, gee, it's dawn, I'll get up — operating on that sort of level. If the essence of Aboriginal music, or any music lies anywhere, I think it is in rhythm. Rhythm's the most important thing you have to tackle. And so to actually understand a different sense of time altogether, I mean, the sort of timelessness that's contained in the dreaming, for instance — if we start entertaining the notion that the dreaming has a certain very powerful reality, then we have to try and relate to that sense of time, and that's very hard for people who've had clocks for 500, 600 years to even begin to do. But it's interesting to me that right after settlement, the main complaint by white men about Aboriginal people was that they were never on time.

That says more about the white people than it does about the Aboriginal people.

It's a *very* instructive comment, indeed.

All this talk about philosophy and religion, and ideas and whatever. What does it *really* have to do with music, though. A colleague of mine a couple of months ago said, "After all, in the end, music is about sound, isn't it?" and implied that all the "idea stuff" is just superstructure and decoration to the sound. What do you say to that?

I think the Charles Ives quote is as good as any — "My God! What does sound have to do with music?" No. There is no music without *deep* experience to express. The best music is spiritual, and unless you can find something in your *soul*, you may as well not even try.

Composers' Forum

A focus of this issue is the context in which some Australian composers are functioning. In line with this, we sent out requests to a number of composers asking them to write short statements to us describing their intellectual passions, interests, sources of inspiration etc. The following responses were received...

Here is a list of my current interests, passions etc. The order is somewhat arbitrary.

sound synthesis techniques (esp. waveshaping & granular stochastics)
cellular automaton, chaos theory, fractals,
dynamic stochastic processes, information theory
spherical geometry (geodesics),
synergy, Buckminster Fuller, tuning & temperament, numerology, astrology, transmutation of matter
earth's harmonic grid, music of John Bull, Edgar
Varese, geomancy.
classification of plants by family
coincidences
i ching
omnicomprehensivity

David Worrall
West Brunswick, VIC

1. My central concern for some years has been with Australian aboriginal music, and although this concern was social in origin, it has a profound effect on my musical direction.

My basic premises have been that :

— one might expect that if two cultures interact, for whatever reasons, they would sooner or later adopt elements from one another which would be more than mere superficial acknowledgements of each others' presence.

— any such transitions in Australia have been essentially one way, but aboriginal music is a particular area which generally has not been used as a source of inspiration in any integral way by composers.

— to me, particular aspects of aboriginal music seemed to reflect the "larger" environment in which we live.

— I like the way it sounds.