

# Euphoric days

**James Murdoch** is a writer, historian, musicologist, administrator, broadcaster and life-long supporter of Australian composers, with a special interest in Peggy Glanville-Hicks. He was the first director of the Australian Music Centre.

**T**he genesis of the Australian Music Centre, actually goes back to 1966 when I received the journals of the Donemus Foundation (which hosted the Dutch MIC [music information centre]), and the Canada Music Centre.

I realised Australia had to plug into that UNESCO network.

While on the executive of the World Record Club during the 1960s, I pushed for the issue of the 'new wave' Australian compositions, and we released a two-volume set, *Australian Music Today*, and strongly promoted it through the Club's monthly magazine, and it sold very well.

We formed immediately the Foundation for the Recording of Australian Music (FRAM) and issued a stream of Australian works. In preparing the liner notes to these now-historic issues there was no source of information, no archive or documentation, and I had to start from scratch. This led to me writing *Australia's Contemporary Composers* for Macmillan (1972) and Sun Books (1975).

**a government razor gang skulked in the aisles of archive boxes as well as in performance spaces**

In 1968, following sold-out houses for contemporary music in Melbourne (yes, Melbourne), Peter Maxwell Davies invited me to go to London to manage his career and his—with Harry Birtwistle—crack group The Pierrot Players (which later became The Fires of London). Just before I left, I shot off a letter to Bill Cummings of the Prime Minister's Department (Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers

[CAAC] and the Australian Council for the Arts [ACA] had just been established), saying what I thought they should be doing. The central thrust of this was the need to establish a music information and promotion centre as soon as possible. I heard nothing for

two years. Then, out of the blue, when I was in full flight in Europe, the Prime Minister's Department asked me to return to Australia to be a Consultant to the Music Committee (later 'Board') of the Australian Council for the Arts, as well as to CAAC. The music centre was on both agendas.

I returned to Australia in 1972, to take up the position of Music Consultant to the Music Committee, and my detailed proposal for the Australia (later 'Australian'—a crucial shift in policy) Music Centre was presented to my first meeting, and remained a permanent item on its agenda for many years to come.

At the end of 1972 Gough Whitlam swept in, and it was all go. The Music Board subsumed CAAC. Australian music was lucky with its first Music Board, led by Chair Don Banks; it was a Board of highly committed and passionate people, and Don, already ill, gave it his life's blood.

While the Board completely endorsed the establishment of a dazzling new organisation and [was] aware of its ramifications, the proposal met opposition from the



James Murdoch (centre) demonstrating the Australian Music Centre's listening facilities to Senator Carrick (left) and Ken Tribe at the Centre's opening party (1976)

Financial Committee, who saw—quite rightly, looking ahead—a lusty, greedy baby that was going to demand lots of milk. As Don famously quipped to Gough, 'We're all set to go off like a rocket! All we need is the financial fuel!'

In the event, at first they didn't offer us enough, so we said politely, 'With respect, Mr Chairman, sorry, but we'll defer starting it until you have enough money'. It was brave, but very cheeky. So we upped the ante and finally we all compromised, and met halfway from what we needed and what they found. Fatal.

The Articles of Association were signed in August 1974; I was appointed its National Director, resigned from the Australia Council, found new premises above the Spaghetti Factory in the Rocks (couldn't have been more central), furbished them on a shoestring, found a terrific staff and we opened to the 'profession and the industry' in September 1975 and to the public in February 1976. It had taken ten years. We immediately embarked on a vigorous programme of research, documentation and publication.

In those euphoric days, we undertook an extraordinary reach of projects, almost all of them sponsored outside the Australia Council. With typewriters (affordable and accessible computers were a long way off) we prepared and published eight Catalogues of Australian Compositions, so at last we knew about 134 string quartets and not only the fifteen or so anybody could remember, but also unsuspected scores of film music, electronic music and jazz, rock and pop. A crucial marketing tool was the *Directory of Australian Music Organisations*, giving access to hundreds of thousands of music lovers. Who'd have thought we had 120 symphony orchestras in the country? The second edition was even bigger and this time was computerised and printed for nix by John Sands Pty Ltd. The *Directory of Australian Music Research* set the cat among the pigeons, as it disclosed how little, as well as how much, had been achieved in musicology. The Myer Foundation found the funds for me to engage Peggy Glanville-Hicks to head our

Asian Music Studies Programme (yes, Australia was designated an Asian country by UNESCO), and IBM kick-started our film *Notes on a Landscape* which dealt with ten composers, was screened widely internationally and gained for IBM a Mobil Award.

Henze, Lennox Berkeley, Gian Carlo Menotti, Peter Maxwell Davies, and many more.

Clearly, before us was the proposition that we were building something not just for the day, but for generations to come.



Australian Music Centre facilities in use

Our landlord was SCRA (Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority), who loved us and gave us gratis five thousand square feet of carpeted space where we presented La Boîte in over three hundred and sixty 'Carpet Concerts' of music of all sorts by 'ethnic' Australians. We felt the music of Asia and of the 'ethnic' mix, and that of the Aborigines, to be of central interest to Australian composers. Alas, few of them came. But the concerts were packed. They were self-sustaining. We collected every Australian score we could. When a new record or book or published music came on the market, we launched it, and rather than it dribble out unnoticed, all Sydney came to honour it. Our first drinks waiter was a young student named Neil Armfield. We had exhibitions of instrument makers, photographs of musicians (a mark of its success was that Tom, Dick and Larry bitterly complained they were not in it), Australian sheet music with celebrity pedal-pushers on the pianola. Glanville-Hicks hosted sandwiches and coffee for Australian composers to meet John Cage, Aaron Copland, Hans Werner

When I say 'we', I mean my various Boards and its members, and especially my fabulous staff, who were paid no overtime but who donated their time and energies wholeheartedly to our projects. We all seemed to work eight-day weeks. We enlisted the aid of an army of volunteers, led by the redoubtable Betsy Brown. This is the first opportunity I have had to publicly acknowledge them all, and I do so now with profound gratitude.

All this caused somewhat of a frisson. Some music organisations looked at us ruefully for seeming to cream off too much money and attention from an increasingly and highly competitive fund-searching national scene. A government razor-gang skulked in the aisles of archive boxes as well as in performance spaces.

In 1979, I was appointed World President of the then twenty-one Music Information Centres. The rest is history.