

REMEMBERING RICHARD TOOP (1945–2017)

Christopher Fox, Rachel Campbell, Paul Attinello,
Daryl Buckley and Richard Barrett

It was with regret that we heard of the death of the musicologist, Richard Toop. Richard was a great scholar, an inspiring teacher and a wonderful writer; above all he was an advocate for new music, about which he wrote critically, wittily and always perceptively.

Since 1975 Richard had been based in Australia, where he taught at the Sydney Conservatorium, but he was born in England, in Chichester, and studied at Hull University. In the late 60s and early 70s he was active as a contemporary music pianist and in the mid-70s became part of the Cologne music scene, working as Stockhausen's Teaching Assistant at the Cologne Staatliche Musikhochschule from 1973 until his move to Australia. But his most significant contribution to new music was as a writer. His 1999 book on the life and work of Ligeti is a superb introduction to the composer's work,¹ and in 2005 it was followed by his book of lectures on Stockhausen, *Six Lectures from the Stockhausen Courses Kürten 2002*²; he also co-edited the collected writings of Ferneyhough with James Boros.³

It was, however, in the many articles he contributed to a host of journals that he perhaps had the greatest influence. As well as writing for distinguished periodicals such as *Perspectives of New Music*, *The Musical Quarterly* and *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* he also wrote for less well-established journals such as *Contact*, which was where I first came across his writing, first on Stockhausen, then on Ferneyhough, and most substantially in the article 'Four Facets of the "New Complexity"'⁴. By then I was a co-editor of *Contact* and I was able to observe at first hand how a pioneering piece of musicology like Richard's article could transform people's understanding of an area of contemporary musical endeavour, in this case the music of Michael Finnissy, James Dillon, Chris Dench and Richard Barrett. We sold more copies of that issue than any other, which was perhaps just as well as the scale of Richard's article meant that it had double the normal number of pages. It was a characteristic Toop piece, moving smoothly between contextual and musical analysis, produced with the cooperation of the composers featured but drawing its own conclusions, and for many years it dominated the discourse about these composers' work.

¹ Richard Toop, *György Ligeti* (London: Phaidon, 1999).

² Richard Toop, *Six Lectures from the Stockhausen Courses Kürten 2002* (Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 2005).

³ James Boros and Richard Toop, (eds.) *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ Richard Toop, 'Four Facets of the "New Complexity"', *Contact*, no. 32 (1988), pp. 4–50.

More recently he invited me to contribute to a double issue of *Contemporary Music Review* that he was co-editing. We had never met and I had no idea that he knew anything about me, but in 2010 we began a lively correspondence that continued until the issue was finally published at the end of 2014. I discovered a number of things about Richard: his fortitude during his lengthy cancer treatment, the breadth of his knowledge, and his insatiable appetite for new music. The latter was demonstrated in an email dated 30 December 2014 in which he announced that 'I've been checking out your Soundcloud page (or whatever), and having an aural Fox-binge. Most enlightening! I'd hesitate to call you the English Jo Kondo (!), but it does strike me that in both cases I get much more from listening to several pieces in succession than from single ones. I guess that confronting these variously (mainly) monocentric works sketches out a sort of personal 'world' that I fail to infer from individual instances (much as I like some of these too). Curious, but very enjoyable ...'

Whether or not I agree with him doesn't matter; I feel privileged to have been involved with such a generous musical intelligence, as did Rachel Campbell, Paul Attinello and Richard Barrett, whose tributes to Richard Toop follow.

Christopher Fox

Writing about and remembering a person you've lost can be salutary in the days after their death. However, in Richard's case, my urge to remember and celebrate is in tension with his rejection of funerals, memorialising, and the pleasures of nostalgia. He was, after all, the principal musicologist of the *tabula rasa*, the postwar desire to reject the past in favour of the utmost presentness and the intoxication of the new – or, as he often characterised this avant-garde, 'art that boldly went where no art had gone before'. He was also, as he often stated, a creature of the 1960s, and the excitement of that era was the only source of any tiny hints of nostalgia in his anecdotes (actually, a little also crept in when he spoke about his daughter or granddaughters). In virtually everything he did, he faced firmly towards the future, even to the extent of spending most of his life interested only in living composers and the openness of stories yet unfinished.

Richard's primary motivation as a scholar was to understand composers, the creative process, and the nuts and bolts of how musical works were created. He established the history of early multi-serialism (or total serialism) in 1974 in 'Messiaen/Goeyvaerts, Fano/Stockhausen, Boulez',⁵ now regarded as a classic article. His multiple publications on Stockhausen were landmarks. His analysis (proceeding from the sketches) of Brian Ferneyhough's *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* was described, by Paul Griffiths, as 'belong[ing] with Ligeti's of *Structures 1a* as a modern classic of the genre'.⁶ He charted the work of composers who had been placed under the New Complexity banner (Finnissy, Dillon, Dench, Barrett) in 'Four Facets of the "New Complexity"' and was later incorrectly blamed for coining the term.

Richard was immensely proud of a fax from Ligeti, displayed on the wall of his office for some years, in which Ligeti said Richard's

⁵ Richard Toop, 'Messiaen/Goeyvaerts, Fano/Stockhausen, Boulez', *Perspectives of New Music*, 13, no. 1 (1974), pp. 141–69.

⁶ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 299.

monograph really ‘gets’ him. Stockhausen and Ferneyhough both also credited Richard with rare insight into their work. Stockhausen invited Richard to lecture in his summer courses at Kürten from 2002 to 2008, and some of these analytical lectures were published in book form.

Several weeks before he died, Richard gave me permission to upload pdfs of his articles to the academia.edu website. I’m learning that, if one counts the scripts of talks he regarded as ephemera, there are hundreds, and I’ll be doing it slowly over several years. He has written on Liza Lim, Kagel, Kurtág, Robert HP Platz, Michael Smetanin, and others. He had been hoping to finish a book on Walter Zimmermann. His work is as wide as it is deep. Many of his liner notes have the quality of original scholarship.

I will take this trouble because Richard’s work is not only important to other musicologists like myself, but because – and I think this was what he was most proud of – it has concretely influenced composers. Many composers I’ve met express awe and envy on learning I studied with Richard. They read his articles in order to understand what Stockhausen and Ferneyhough were doing, and how they were doing it.

There is no doubt in my mind that Richard has played a major part in the history of musical modernism in Australia. For a start, he taught composition to a group in Sydney who came to prominence in the 1980s: Michael Smetanin, Elena Kats-Chernin, Gerard Brophy and Riccardo Formosa, and later to other significant figures such as Damien Ricketson and Matthew Shlomowitz. He also influenced generations of performers and teachers through his music history lectures at Sydney Conservatorium. As Peter McCallum noted recently, Richard was proud to have educated them to the point they ‘could distinguish between Xenakis, Stockhausen and Ferneyhough purely on the basis of the sound’.⁷

Richard’s presence here, his teaching, his public talks, his lengthy, boozy lunches with many of us: he made sense of modernism’s aesthetic and technical bases, he challenged us to find our own relationship to it, he helped uncover its beauties, and through his many anecdotes he allowed us to imaginatively entertain the possibility of hanging out with Kagel and Stockhausen. He brought the critical attitudes of Darmstadt and Donaueschingen to Sydney as we saw how he approached premieres and endlessly discussed aesthetics. Michael Smetanin had multiple premieres and commissions in the Netherlands. Damien took his ensemble to Warsaw Autumn. Richard made modernism’s (Euro-centric) internationalism part of our lives. *ELISION* flourished.

There will be, however, those who remember Richard’s presence less fondly. Richard enjoyed polemicising. I have seen major composers (for whom he advocated passionately) tremble when approaching him after a premiere. Richard had a masculinist and oedipal view of art: toughen up, I can imagine him saying. He told me that his critical salvos were a sign of respect, and it was when he didn’t bother to speak with you or critique you that he was really uninterested. ‘Australians cannot cope with discourse’, he would say.

As an incorrigible relativist and child of postmodernism, I can’t take this attitude myself. But I insist on this as we remember him: he was much more stylistically open-minded than his reputation suggested (he loved Vivier’s music!) and he wanted nothing more nor less than to be challenged. He was enormously open-minded and

⁷ <http://music.sydney.edu.au/vale-richard-toop/>.

completely lacked fear when it came to being challenged or having his mind changed. In fact, that's what interested him, he craved it. A committed modernist perhaps, but one completely against orthodoxies of any sort. The future was open, as he saw it, and so was he.

I have stories that demonstrate this. The reason he supported me professionally was because I was apparently rare amongst those who had taught with him in that I wanted to change what he'd been doing, and I frequently argued with him. One year, we taught music history with someone who had been at UCLA (in Richard's view, the home of highly suspect postmodern musicology, 'McClary-land' he called it). He sought this situation out as he was interested to encounter what these ideas might have to offer in a teaching context and to be challenged himself. Above all, he was hoping he would hear something interesting.

It's also worth noting how entertaining Richard's own critical salvos were. In the 1980s, when bemoaning the insufficient amount of Australian music on the ABC, he called the classical station 'muzak for a north shore [i.e. very middle class] retirement village'. He was fairly sanguine and unsurprised that this marked the point at which he ceased being asked to make radio programmes.

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Born on 1 August 1945, Richard was nearly not born at all as the house beside that in which his father and pregnant mother were sleeping was destroyed in the Blitz. He had a southern English childhood, and if the privations of postwar England touched him they seem to have been mostly forgotten in favour of the excitement at being taken to London and introduced to museums and culture by his two aunts.

At a regional grammar school he won the music prize in 1962 and asked for the score of *The Rite of Spring*, which was presented by the future Prime Minister Edward Heath, only recently nicknamed by *Private Eye* magazine 'Grocer Heath'. Richard appended 'grocer fugue' to this, for a reason that no doubt made sense when he told me about it, a few years ago, over an indeterminate number of glasses of wine. Richard's own words best describe his engagement with new music in this period:

... imagine, if you will, a tubby teenage Toop in 1962; he's sixteen. He's already utterly intrigued by the 'New Music' phenomenon, but he's still very much a beginner, trying to work out what's going on. Where does he get to hear it? Almost exclusively, on the radio. The BBC Third Programme has a weekly *Thursday Invitation Concert* which has consistently fascinating repertoire, including mediaeval and Renaissance music, hard-line classical chamber music, and every now and then some radical contemporary music. But the main source is the Continent. He soon discovers that the most promising time for 'new music' broadcasts is late in the evening, when he's lying in bed, trying to find programmes using the rather random efforts required by an old crystal set. So one evening in late May, he's prodding away, and out of the blue, he happens on a rather crackly version of ... a 25-minute block from *MOMENTE* ... on West German Radio. Was that an Epiphanic Moment for me? I'm not sure I really believe in such fancy terms, but be that as it may, it came pretty close. I remember the sheer impact of the music; I remember being utterly astonished.⁸

⁸ Richard Toop, 'Climbing a Musical Everest: Unravelling the sketches for Stockhausen's *MOMENTE*'; paper presented at the Sydney Conservatorium Musicology Colloquium Series, March 2014.

In the early 1960s he also had live contact with composers and their new scores: at the Dartington Summer School in 1961 he heard Berio, Nono and Maderna, and the following year, Lutosławski. At this point, he was composing, and his final piece at school was partly determinate, partly indeterminate, scored for spatially separated instrumental groups. Soon after, he taught himself German, primarily to read *Die Reihe*.

In the late 1960s Richard became active as a new music pianist around London; repertoire included Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra and several of La Monte Young's *Composition 1960* pieces. Most notable, perhaps, was his performance in October 1967 of Eric Satie's *Vexations*, lasting about 24 hours at the Arts Lab, Drury Lane; it seems to have been the first documented solo performance of the work.⁹

Contact with Stockhausen began in 1969, and from 1972 to 1974 he was Stockhausen's teaching assistant at the Staatliche Musikhochschule in Cologne; lessons mostly took place in Richard's apartment and, after several hours' analysis, Richard's wife Carol served refreshments and baby Samantha was allowed, as Richard put it, to 'terrorise' the students. These included Claude Vivier, Walter Zimmermann, Moya Henderson and Kevin Volans. I asked Walter, years later, if Richard had been 'like this' – i.e. musically encyclopaedic and erudite – at the age of 28. 'Oh yes!', he said.

Relations with Stockhausen deteriorated in 1974 and back in London looking for employment, Roger Woodward mentioned a lectureship at the (then) N.S.W. State Conservatorium of Music. So began a 35-year association and the advent of the Australian part of Richard's life.

Australians, conscious of their peripheral position in relation to the centres of new music Richard wrote about, often asked him, 'What are you doing here?' He usually noted that he came for the job but also that he liked it here. For one thing, it provided an opportunity for a productively distanced view of those centres of new music. Secondly, he said that, after disembarking on his first flight into Sydney, the taxi took him through Kings Cross, and, on noting several Italian and Greek restaurants, he thought, 'This will do, this will do'. The wine he subsequently bought confirmed the impression.

What Richard sought in life and art was amazement, wonder, and, in the nineteenth-century sense, transcendence. I asked him recently if he thought Schoenberg's music really was the result of his analysis of the German classics and a self-conscious attempt to combine their qualities, and if this was what led to much of it being so difficult. He agreed but noted that this was what made it wonderful: the aesthetic, technical and emotional gymnastics whose effect was to thrill.

Rachel Campbell

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I am looking at notes from a series of meetings with Richard Toop in 1998.

At a point when the musical and academic worlds were most open to me, Richard was the model of how I wanted to work, as well as the

⁹ www.gavinbryars.com/work/writing/occasional-writings/vexations-and-its-performers#_edn8.

¹⁰ www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/richard-toop-obituary.

person I most wanted to work with – deeply knowledgeable about a vast array of experimental musics, fully aware of the breadth of composers' imaginative investment in the sounds and symbols they tried to create – and funny.

Being funny was important because he knew that so many musical works were meant to be flights, or dares, or satires, or insults, friendly or vindictive by turns – and that those elements often ended up combining with the subtlest or most audacious of existential and perceptual intentions. It was easy to glide from the seriousness of Stockhausen and Schnebel to the more 'mutant' works of Bussotti and Kagel and Nilsson, and he found them all worthy of his attention – he knew that enjoying the peculiarly experimental possibilities embedded in so many works made it a great pleasure to study them all.

I remember visiting his apartment several times when I was living in the next continent – and yes, the place was really a mess (you didn't want to look at the kitchen, but it was better to go out to eat anyway); that mess was strewn with scores and papers and notes from the many brilliant musicians he knew, all of which looked to me like gold. I still have photocopies – an intricately reoriented piano piece by Logothetis with Richard's notes for his own playing of it, an unpublished manuscript of Haubenstock-Ramati; and he was the first person I asked for advice when I discovered the long-lost sixth and seventh *piano pieces for David Tudor* by Bussotti, in the third subbasement of Universal's offices in Vienna, because he would know just what to do with them.

When I headed for Sydney in 2001, we had a definite understanding that we would work together – I'd have been glad to have been a junior collaborator, to have rushed around and dug up people and scores, worked out our long list of mutual ideas, and turned it all into publications. That didn't happen; and when I became jobless and deported, I had enough of my own resentments against politicians and institutions that my enjoyment of avant-garde experiments decreased, enough that it was hard to recover; and our contacts devolved to occasional friendly emails and a phone call or two.

But, for me at least, Richard was the ideal version of the specialist in experimental musics: he knew all the composers and musics and works I had always found the most fascinating, most disturbing, most inspiring; he realized that these composers wanted to transform our understanding of the world, and that these works were also supposed to be enjoyed – fantastically, and at times hilariously. My favourites among his writing were the short pieces, which suggested Borges' interpretative values – if you can explain a brilliant analysis, reflection, connection, in a couple of pages, why should you write any more?

He was sort of interested in everything that could be interesting. I wish the field had been more influenced by his ideas: he should have been a mentor for us all.

Paul Attinello

In the Australian new music scene of the 80s and early 90s Richard Toop was an extremely rare being. He was a man of ideas. He was incredibly articulate, able to tease out some of the most arcane ideas and thinking of composers, bringing them forward in a public discourse marked by its persuasiveness, enthusiasms, and fearlessly intellectual yet witty engagement. Toop was never constrained by the debates in the Australian new music world of the day. His polemic cut through the dogma and nationalistic fervour often cloaking new Australian work and its evaluation. He brought a broader perspective

and a revealing context to that which all too often sought to hide within claustrophobic confines on an island continent.

Richard Toop charted many of the early significant milestones in the development of the ELISION ensemble. I brought him from Sydney to Melbourne to review several of our concerts during the early 90s. Especially memorable was his attendance for performances of works written for ELISION by the British composer Richard Barrett, including the world premiere of *another heavenly day* at the Malthouse's Beckett Theatre in 1991. This very concert was reviewed, in fact, at length in *TEMPO* magazine!

Later on, Toop covered the very first ELISION CD releases and our performances in Sydney during 1995 and 1996, as a supportive critic of the work of Michael Smetanin at the time, especially Michael's song cycle, *Skinless Kiss of Angels*.

When the ensemble rebased in Brisbane, Toop came to witness the premiere of the installation-performance cycle *Dark Matter* in 2001 and again, beautifully dissected, in conversation with Real Time's Keith Gallasch and Richard Barrett, the concerns of this extended work and the composer.

I remember Richard Toop very fondly. It is worth repeating that he was a man of ideas, unafraid of discourse, valuing thought and discussion. And for a young artistic director in Australia his was a voice, an advocacy that resonated, crucially, elsewhere in the world.

Daryl Buckley

I was hoping to begin these few words with an account of how and where Richard and I first met, but, try as I may, I can't put my finger on it. It must have been in London some time in the mid-1980s, but I suppose the main reason for my not knowing is that through his writings, and through our shared enthusiasm for the music of Stockhausen, he seemed somehow always to have been around. I remember in particular reading in *Contact* back in the early 1980s his reports on various music festivals and events, and being struck by his ability to identify so readily the central point of interest, or central flaw, in a piece of music and to express it with the same wit and wisdom I would eventually experience in person when we got to know each other. This same wit and wisdom would always shine through even his most analytical writings, so that, whether he was writing about something I didn't know at all, or something very familiar to me, his words would have the effect of making me want immediately to listen to the music in question, from the new and wider perspective he had opened. (His *Six Lectures from the Stockhausen Courses Kürten 2002* are a prime example.) The discipline of musicology can surely aim at nothing higher than this.

From the late 1980s onwards, Richard wrote just as perceptively about my own work too, and we were discussing only three or four years ago his further plans to do so. No doubt he contributed at least as much as anyone else to whatever knowledge and understanding there is of the music I've written, for which I will always be grateful; but I will always be far *more* grateful for his constant enthusiasm and encouragement on a personal level for more than thirty years. If I've remained optimistic about the importance and potential of 'our' music to the present day and beyond, a principal reason for this was that *he* always did, and from a position of knowledge rather than of ignorance.

Richard Barrett