SELECT VOCAL WORKS FOR FEMALE VOICE BY SIX AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS

by

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned mainly with representative vocal works for female voice written by Australian composers of the twentieth century. In order to give historical and compositional perspective to the topic, the first chapter presents a brief account of the development of Australian composition, while the remaining six form a series of separate studies each dealing with one composer, relating salient aspects of his life and works, but concentrating on an analysis of a vocal work or works.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUSTRALIAN MUSICAL COMPOSITION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is undeniable that the development of musical life in Australia in the latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century was modelled upon inherited British traditions largely from Late Victorian England which became firmly rooted in Australia, taking much longer to shed than in England where composers were able to rid themselves of the restrictions imposed upon them by Victorian fashions fairly early in the century.

One man who possibly could have hastened the progress of musical development was Percy Grainger (1882 - 1961), "one of the more challenging and adventurous musical intellects of the early years of the twentieth century".[1] Grainger possessed some strikingly original ideas, his

> interests extended backward to an uncanny and subtle appreciation of structures and performing styles in medieval music, and forward to theories of beatless music, heralding the spirit of indeterminacy in the present decade, graphic notation, tone-colour composition and possibilities of acculturation between Eastern and Western music ....[2]

Unfortunately, this aspect of his personality was overshadowed by his colourful and, at times, eccentric behaviour.

[1] Andrew D. McCredie, *Musical Composition in Australia* (Canberra: Government Printing Office, 1969), p.7.

[2] *Loc. cit.*

The establishment in the 1890's of the Melbourne University Conservatorium, the Albert Street Conservatorium (later known as the Melba) and the Elder Conservatorium within the University of Adelaide, infinitely strengthened the musical life of the early 1900's. Their appearance (along with that of the State Conservatorium in Sydney in 1915) "opened up new opportunities for professional training and provided permanent facilities for the propagation of music, each becoming a focal point of activity ...".[3] Men like Marshal Hall, Fritz Hart, Henri Verbrugghen and Alfred Hill, who could collectively be described as "The Founding Fathers of Australian Music",[4] were closely associated with these institutions. Their influence was not confined merely to pedagogy, but extended to other areas: Marshall Hall, for example, was responsible for the establishment of orchestral concerts in Melbourne. With the establishment of the above institutions, the modern musical life of Australia could be said to have begun.

A significant event of the interwar years was the creation in 1932 of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which acted as broadcaster and entrepreneur and established orchestras in all capital cities. It was also responsible for the organisation of concerts of Australian music as early as 1933 and, in addition, sponsored composers' competitions, commissioned works, and devoted whole broadcasts to music of individual composers. This resulted in a vast increase in the hitherto limited

[3]David Tunley, "Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century: A Background," *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Frank Callaway and David Tunley (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.2.

[4]*Loc. cit.*

outlets for Australian composition. In recent years, premiere performances of significant new Australian works became a fairly regular feature of the Sydney Proms, while an extensive project to record Australian compositions, old and new, was commenced.

The years 1955 - 1965 represent a period of rapid growth and increasing sophistication for musical creation in Australia and, during this time, a number of developments have taken place: the Elizabethan Theatre Trust was inaugurated as the basis for future opera, ballet and drama ensembles; an opera house was founded in Sydney, as well as a massive Arts Centre in Melbourne and the Canberra Theatre Centre in Canberra. Moreover, a number of festivals were established--the annual Perth Festival, the biennial Adelaide Festival of the Arts and specialist chamber music festivals, organised by Musica Viva. Simultaneously, there was an increase in the number of conservatories and a rapid appearance of new music departments in several universities all of which have played a significant role through the running of seminars and workshops and the appointment of forward-looking composers to their staffs.

The 1960's saw "the emergence of a repertoire coming from a group of composers who were to give a totally new complexion to Australian music".[5] This decade was also notable for a growing awareness of music from the European avante-garde (partly due to the reduction in the time-lag between important musical developments overseas and in Australia) which, in turn, saw the establishment of an Australian branch of the

[5]Tunley, p.3.

I.S.C.M. in Sydney followed by branches in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane and Newcastle.

From this atmosphere, a number of composers with distinct musical personalities emerged in the sixties: Meale, Sculthorpe, Butterley, Werder, Dreyfus, Sitsky, Brumby, joined later by composers working overseas, Banks, Humble and Williamson.

A further reflection of increased support during this period can be seen by the growing number of commissions offered to composers, most of them emanating from the universities, A.B.C., Musica Viva, Australasian Performing Rights Association (A.P.R.A.) and the Australian Opera. Towards the end of the decade, further financial support came from an unexpected source, namely, the Federal Government, first through its Advisory Board, Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers, and later through the Australian Council for the Arts (now known as the Australia Council).

The only regular source of financial support up to this time has been the Music Foundation,[6] whose official responsibilities include the sponsorship and propagation of the Australian composer and his music. It is operated by A.P.R.A. and has assisted materially in providing composers with the opportunity of having their works copied, recorded and performed.

In comparison with the conditions surrounding the early composers, the Australian composer of today has entered an era of patronage that

[6]Rober Cavell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), pp. 270-71.

would seem to rival that of the princely courts of the eighteenth century. This has come at a time when Australia has experienced some revolutionary changes in her economic and social structure, resulting in "an unprecedented level of prosperity and displaying an ebullient spirit of national awareness and independence".[7]

[7]Tunley, p.5.

CHAPTER TWO

Peter Sculthorpe (1929 -)

Perhaps the most important and successful of living twentieth century Australian composers is Peter Sculthorpe who emerged from relative obscurity as Australia's representative composer both nationally and internationally in the early 1960's. He is probably the first composer to establish a concept of what Australian music might be, and the only one who has thought seriously of a musical response directly related to our Australian temperament. This attitude is reflected in the frequent use of Aboriginal and Australian-oriented subject matter[1] and in the way in which his music conveys the characteristic elements of the Australian landscape. He now occupies the position of Reader in Music at the Department of Music, University of Sydney, playing an important role in making the University of Sydney the compositional centre of Australia.

Sculthorpe was born in Launceston, Tasmania, in 1929. He commenced piano lessons at eight years, and by the age of twelve had begun to give broadcast recitals of his own compositions. In 1945, he won a scholarship to the Melbourne University Conservatorium of Music, graduating in 1951. While studying in Melbourne, he fell under the spell of serialism through Ernest Kreneck's book *Studies on Counterpoint*, an

[1]Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), p.202.

exposition of the twelve-tone technique of Schoenberg.[2]

For five subsequent years after returning to Tasmania in 1951, he experimented with partially and wholly serialized music still with the Kreneck book as stimulus. Finally the realization came that he was moving towards a point where silence would be the only thing left to serialize and this caused a paralysis in his musical thinking.[3] From then on, he decided to put more of himself into his compositions without being unnecessarily concerned about using the latest techniques.

In 1953, Sculthorpe wrote *The Loneliness of Bunjil*, for string trio, followed by *Sonatina* for piano. Both these works are based on Aboriginal subject matter; the *Sonatina* is especially important as it is characteristic of many of Sculthorpe's later works.[4] It was selected for inclusion in the 1955 I.S.C.M. International Festival in Baden-Baden and was highly acclaimed. The years 1956-59 were principally occupied in writing music for theatres, radio, film, and television.

Sculthorpe was awarded the first Lizette Bentwich Scholarship in 1958 which took him to Wadham College at Oxford University to study with Egon Wellesz and Edmund Rubbra. It was there that he was able to clarify his approach to composition and determine that whatever he

[2]Peter Sculthorpe, "Sculthorpe on Sculthorpe," *Music Now*, 1, No. 1 (1969), 9.

[3]Robert Henderson, "Peter Sculthorpe," *The Musical Times*, 107 (1966), 595.

[4]Sculthorpe, 9-10.

wrote would be Australian. While overseas, he wrote two *Irkanda* (meaning "remote and lonely place") compositions, *Irkanda II* for string quartet and *Irkanda III* for piano trio.

Unfortunately, Sculthorpe had to return to Australia unexpectedly in 1960 due to the death of his father. *Irkanda IV* was written in memory of his father; the *Sonata for Viola and Percussion* dates from that same year. The *Sixth String Quartet* written in 1965, was also occasioned by a death, this time of a friend.

In 1965, Sculthorpe was commissioned by Sir Bernard Heinze to write a piece for the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of Arts to be held in London. Most of his compositions up to this date had been written in the *Irkanda* idiom, and he realized that further composing in this style would probably result in his repeating himself. So, in the new piece *Sun Music I*, the intensely personal accents of his work were toned down and a new kind of sound was added to his musical language.[5] This work is important not only because of the interesting new timbres and densities explored by Sculthorpe in it, but also because it is echoed in a number of subsequent compositions.

Sculthorpe's style is generally marked by a withdrawn, intensely personal quality. The music grows in small sections; it is "wholly aggregated from a family of characteristic rhythmic structures, the

[5]Covell, pp. 207-8.

uniting principle of which is simple repetition ...".[6] Sculthorpe himself describes his characteristic method of composition as "accretion".[7] Another aspect of his economic use of material is the re-use of previous compositions, discovering the new contexts for the cells of his musical sources. Various styles have been employed as represented in the following compositions: the *Irkanda* style, conveying an intense longing and loneliness; the *Sun Music* style which is essentially "sound" music which reflects a more objective approach than that of the *Irkanda* style; Balinese gamelan style as represented in *Anniversary Music*;[8] a style involving "pop" elements, such as those used in *Love 200*; and aleotoric, improvised works such as *Dream* and *Landscape*.

In 1974, Sculthorpe wrote *The Song of Tailitnama* for the A.B.C. Television documentary *Sun Music for Film*. Aboriginal subject-matter forms the basis of the composition with the text taken from the Northern Aranda poem, *The Song of Tailitnama*. It is scored for soprano, 6 'cellos and the following percussion: tamtam, water gong, chinese cymbal, crotal (high "e"), chinese bell tree pair of bongos, pair of timbales, music sticks, guiro, wood chimes and sand block.

As in so many of his other compositions, the music is aggregated from small, non-developmental, highly-structured rhythmic/melodic

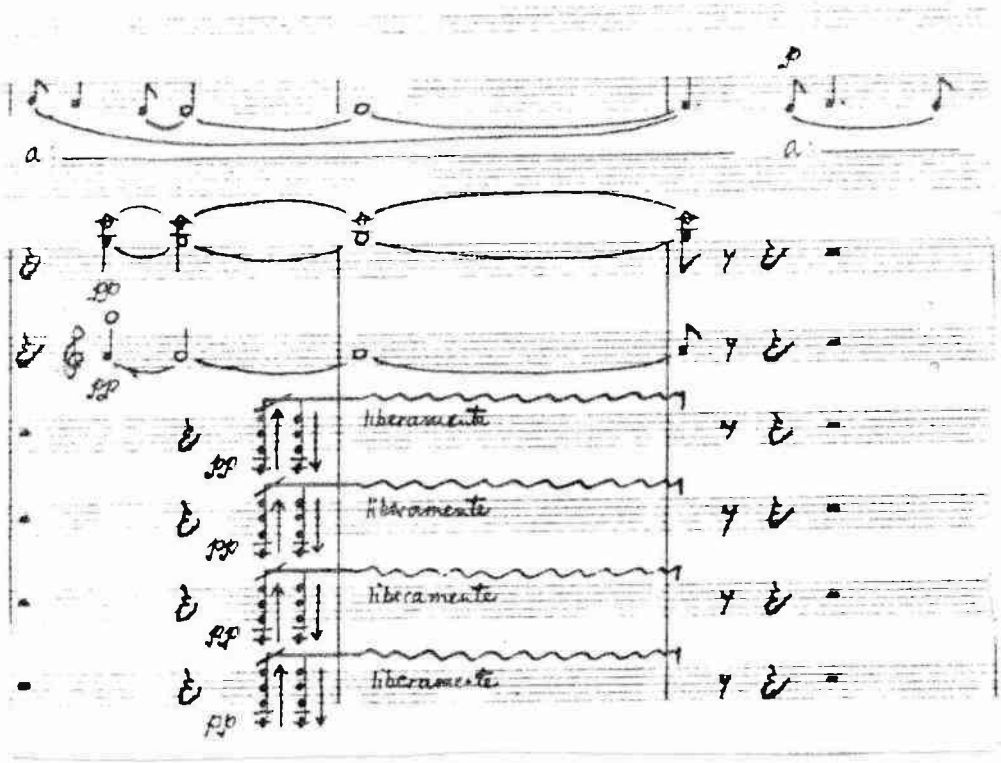
[6]Michael Hannan, "Peter Sculthorpe," *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Frank Callaway and David Tunley (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.137.

[7]Covell, p.201.

[8]*Ibid.*, p.211.

patterns. Structurally, the composition divides into three main sections separated by short transitionary passages. Dislocation is avoided by a synthesis of the different material used in each section.

Sculthorpe opens the composition with an introductory passage marked "Lontano" ("heard from a distance") evoking the atmosphere of early morning. The accompanying 'cello ensemble is divided into sections--some making special effects such as whispering sounds and different types of bird-like sounds, while others provide sustained chordal accompaniment:



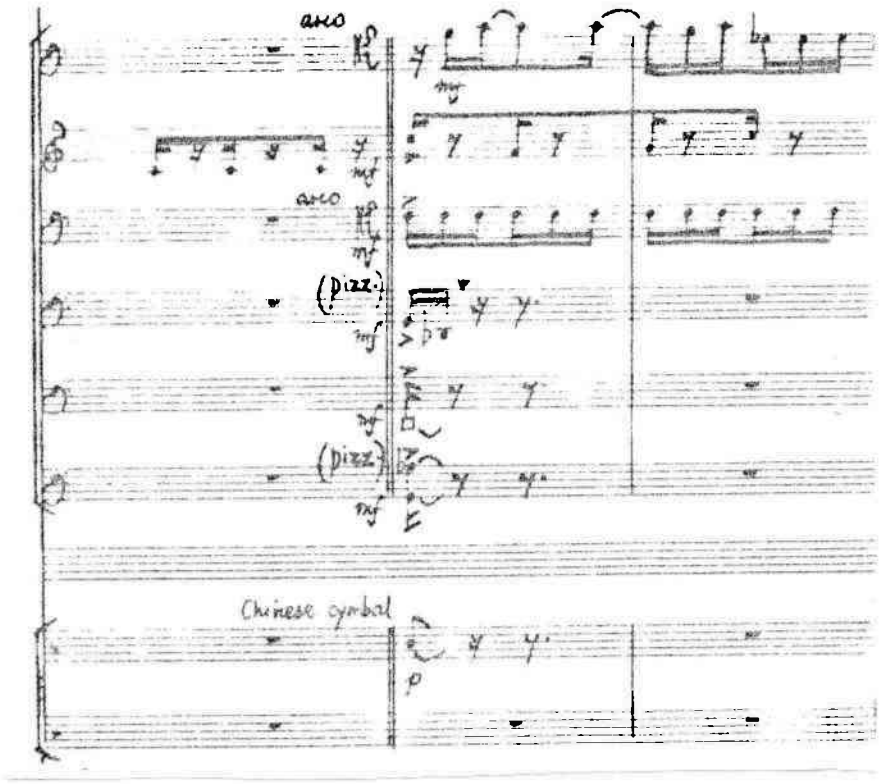
Ex. 1

This is then followed by a section entitled "Music of early morning", lasting approximately one minute, during which two percussion players are required to produce as many different sounds as possible from instruments which include a water gong, guiro, sand block and

wood chimes. The section begins softly and builds gradually to mf. Sculthorpe instructs the water gong player to hold the instrument and "make splashing noises in water".

A short transitionary fragment follows (two bars before Fig. 3), leading immediately into the first main section of the composition.

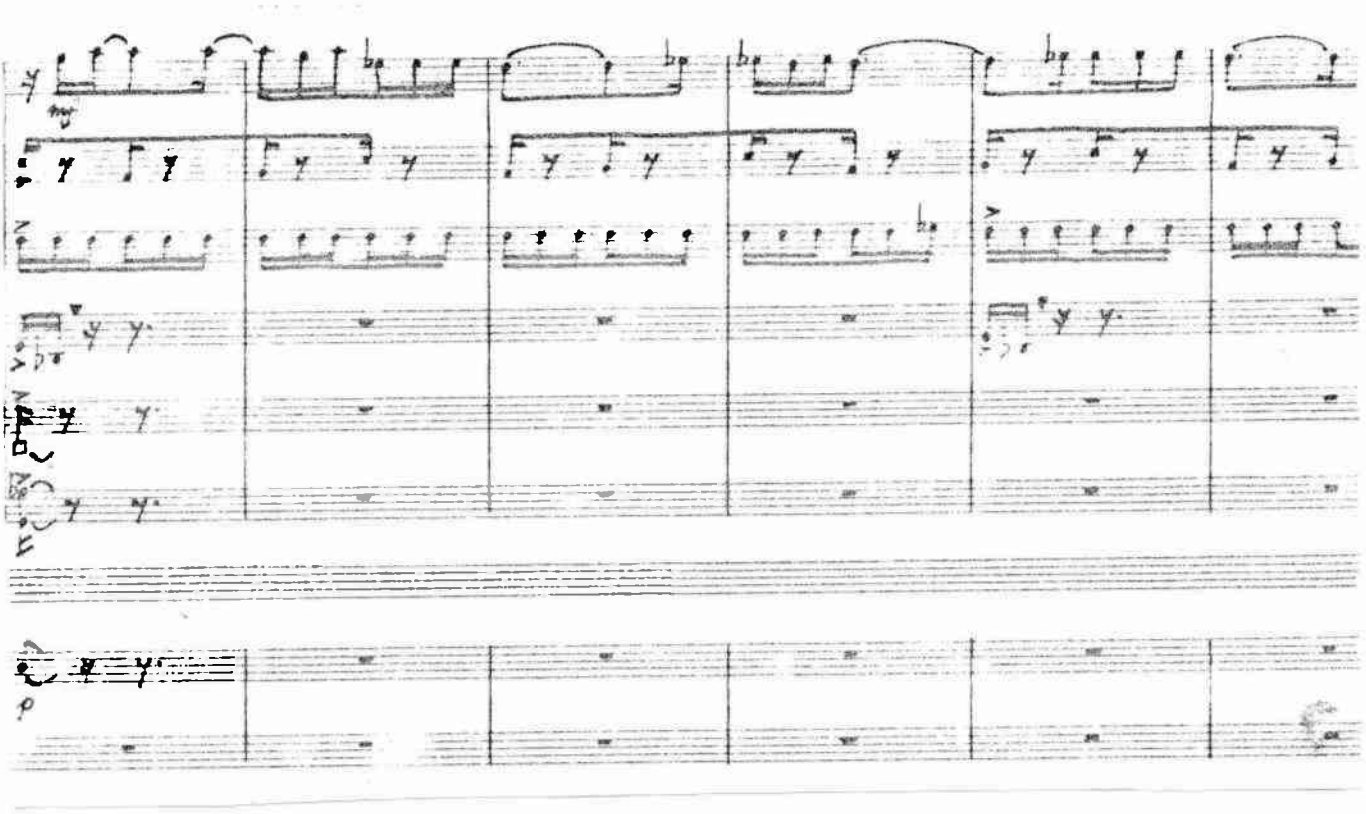
The first section is a direct contrast to the previous introductory passage; whereas the latter is essentially "arioso" in style, the former is rhythmically precise with a declamatory melodic line. The texture is primarily linear with the upper three 'cello parts playing individual lines while the lower three share a type of chordal accompaniment:



Ex. 2

These lines together make up a twenty-four bar non-developmental melodic/rhythmic pattern which is repeated three times. However, each twenty-four bar pattern is in turn constructed from a smaller motif

repeated in varied forms which together constitute the larger pattern.

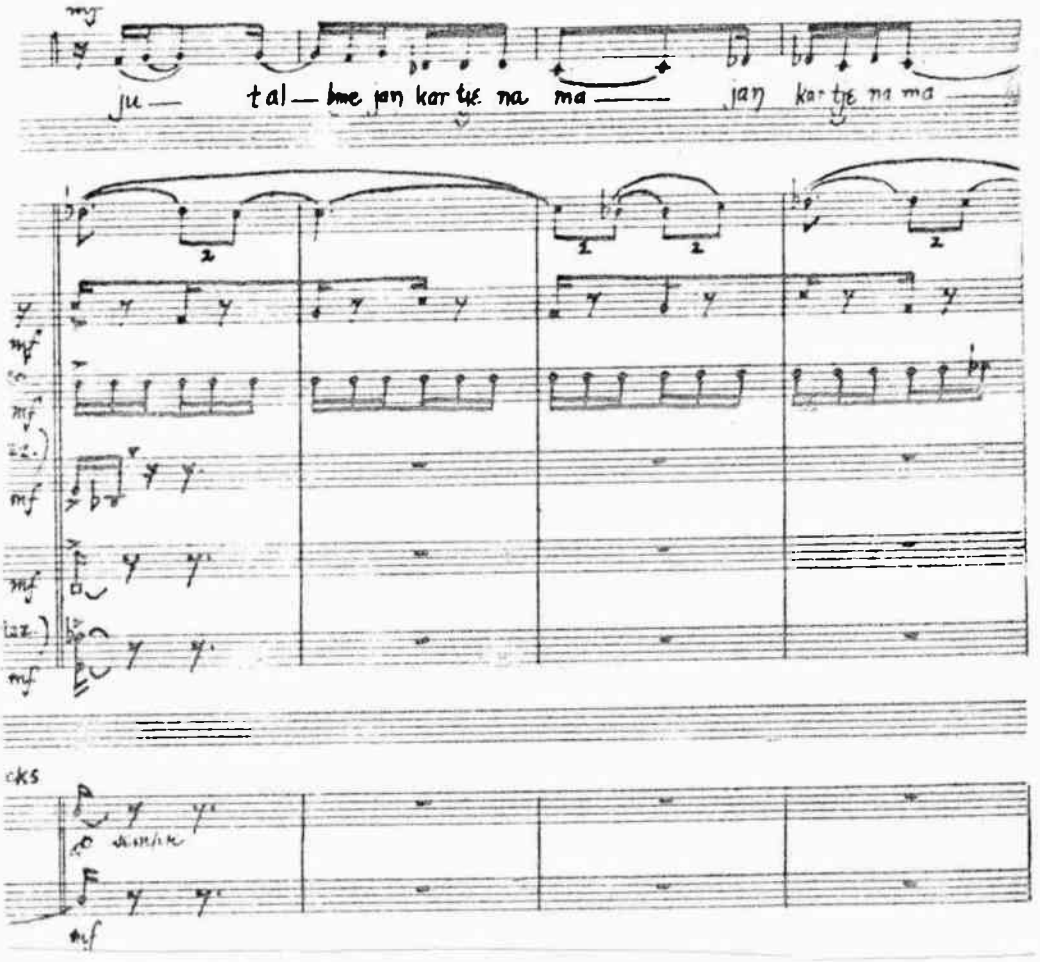


Ex. 3

Through the use of special effects such as "col legno", different percussive sounds are produced which increase in intensity halfway through this section (Fig. 5).

A transitionary passage follows, characterized by changing time-signatures and sustained and pizzicato chords (based on the notes used in the transitionary passage between the introductory and first sections) separating the first two sections. The second section is almost a repeat of the first section except that the melody that was

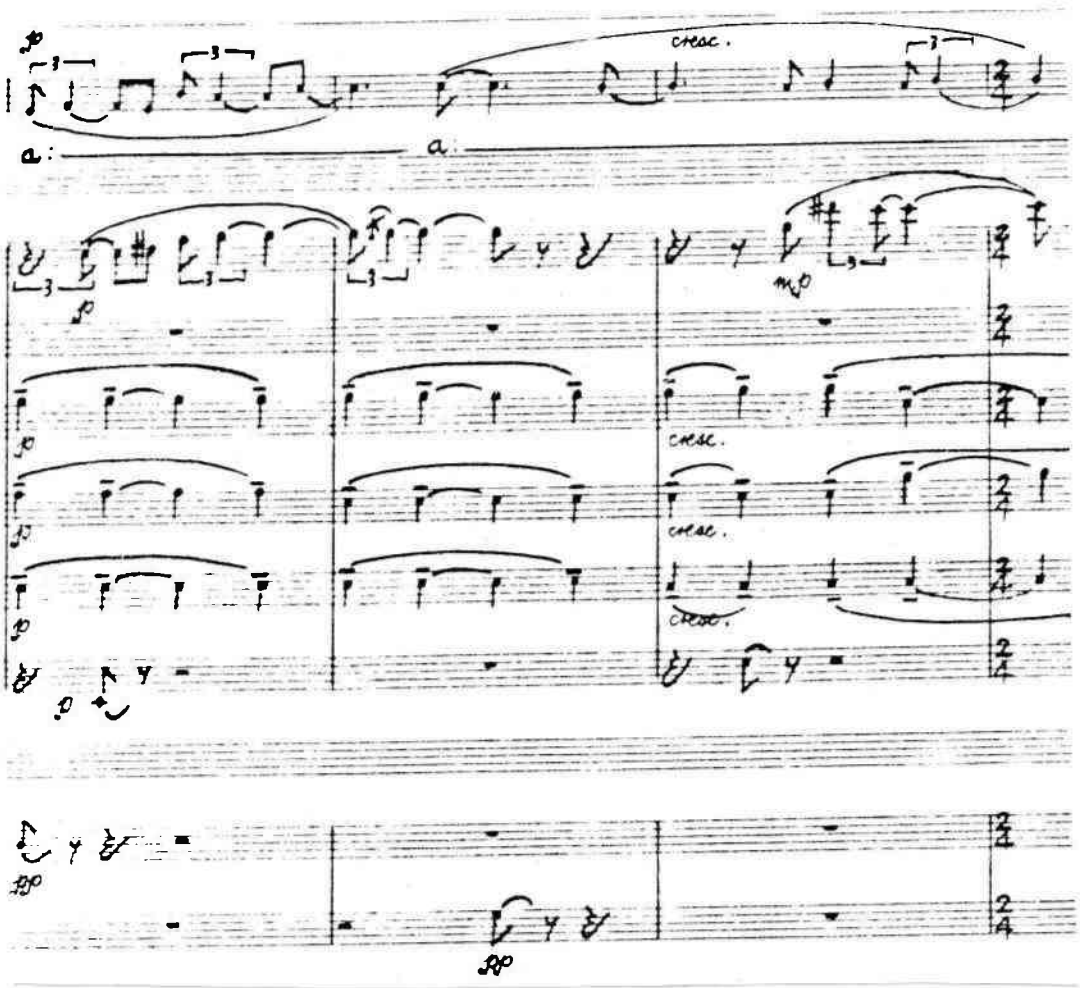
played by the first 'cello in the first section is taken over by the singer and transposed down a major second. The first 'cello, in turn, is given a new melodic fragment (see Example 4). At the end of the second section, another transitionary passage occurs using material from the two previous transitionary sections, as well as material from the first section (Fig. 11).



Ex. 4

Section three, marked "calmo", is an extension of the introductory passage. The vocal melody is slightly varied rhythmically with one group of 'cellos providing a chordal accompaniment, while the first and

second 'cellos share a new melody:



Ex. 5

In *The Song of Tailitnama*, Sculthorpe successfully combines Oriental influences (reflected in the character of the melodies, harmonic language, and the choice of percussion instruments), Aboriginal subject-matter, and elements of his "sound" music style (represented by his use of special effects). The work exhibits a type of symmetry which is a result of the matching of the different sections which together constitute the work: the introductory passage and the last section employ the same basic material as do the inner two sections.

It must not be forgotten that this composition is intended to be heard in conjunction with a film and because of the absence of the visual aspect, its true impact cannot be realized.

CHAPTER THREE

James Penberthy (1917 -)

Another Australian composer who, in his early works, has striven to write music that is specifically Australian both in inspiration and spirit, is James Penberthy. Born in Melbourne in 1917, he received his first music lessons from his father, an accomplished musician. After leaving school, he attended the Universities of Western Australia (where he majored in History and English), and Melbourne (majoring in Music). Then, from 1936 to 1942, he was a schoolmaster at Wesley College, Perth and Trinity Grammar, Melbourne, forming orchestras and teaching the young players their instruments.

After serving as a naval lieutenant during the war, Penberthy enrolled in the Bachelor of Music course at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium, later graduating with first-class honours in composition. He then became Musical Director of the National Ballet in Melbourne from 1947 to 1950 and toured Australia as its conductor. It was this practical involvement with the theatre that inspired Penberthy in the writing of his early works, most of which were ballets. From 1951 to 1953, he studied in England, France and Italy under a Victorian State Government Scholarship.

Although Penberthy has withdrawn all his works written before 1947, his total output still comprises of approximately one hundred and thirty works, making him one of Australia's most prolific composers. The course of his creative development is immediately apparent when glancing at the

list of his works. The early works, most of which are theatrical, were inspired by Aboriginal folk-lore or other subjects with specifically Australian associations,[1] as were the instrumental compositions from this period.[2]

During the sixties, Penberthy's output reduced quite noticeably. This was due mainly to the impact which the 1965 Hobart seminar for composers had upon him. He saw developing an unavoidable confrontation between the avante-garde and traditional schools of music. Realizing that up until now his composing had followed a fairly traditional stream and, not being able to accept the radical ideas of the avante-garde, he decided to adopt a "middle of the road" attitude. He has since experimented with different methods of composition including serialism, electronic music, computer use, mathematics and aleotoric principles.

All of Penberthy's vocal works, of which there are but a handful, were written after his stylistic change. The *Four Indeterminate Songs on* $E = MC^2$, a song cycle for soprano and tape recorder, was the first of these works and was written in 1967. It is the second of three compositions (the others being *Cantata on the Hiroshima Panels* (1959) and *Hiroshima* (1970)), inspired by the memory of the bombing of Hiroshima. In the song cycle, Penberthy combines the mathematical processes with *musique concrete*. In 1971, he composed two song cycles with texts based on the writings of the Indian philosopher Krishnamurthy: *Commentaries*

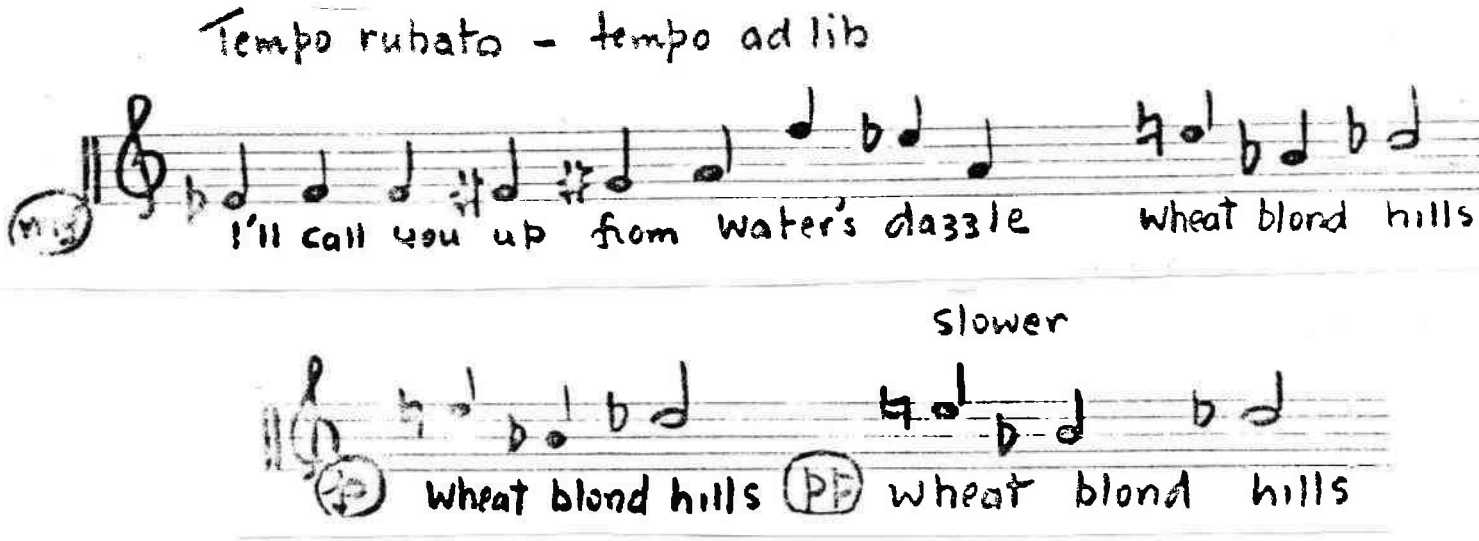
[1]John Meyer, "James Penberthy," *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Frank Callaway and David Tunley (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 81-83.

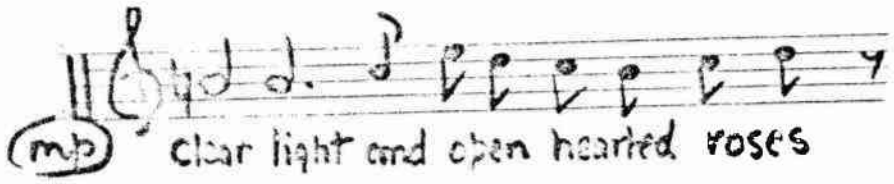
[2]*loc. cit.*

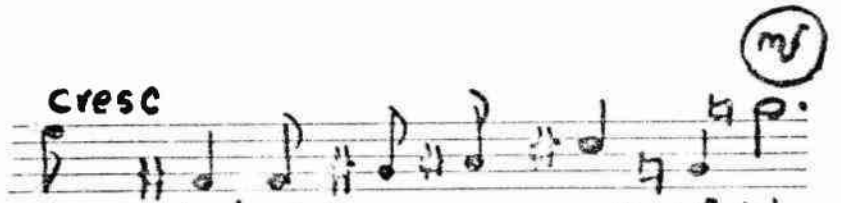
on Living for announcer, chorus and large orchestra; and *Commentaries On Love* for soprano and string orchestra. The former, premiered at the 1972 Festival of Perth, has been described as an Australian *Erwartung*.

A fairly recent vocal work of Penberthy's, which also exhibits the influence of "musique concrete", is *Love Song* written in 1973 for a Sydney Opera House commission. The text is by the Tasmanian poetess Gwen Harwood with whom Penberthy had previously collaborated namely in *Commentaries on Living*, *Symphony No. 8* (Choral), and the libretto for a new three-act opera *Stations*. *Love Song* is scored for soprano, prepared tape (two tracks) and two harps.

Love Song is not worked out in a thematic sense, but relies on the text which can be divided into a number of sections. Each section is indicated by the duration of the tape for that particular section. The tape runs throughout the composition which opens with a flourish from the voice and harp to the text "Roll back you fabulous animal, the human sleep". This is then followed by an "ad. lib." section for voice and tape only:

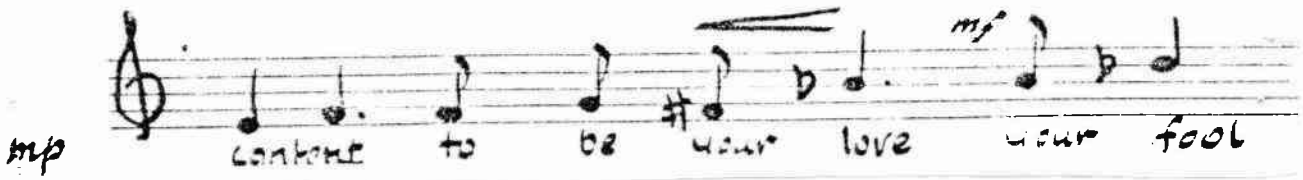


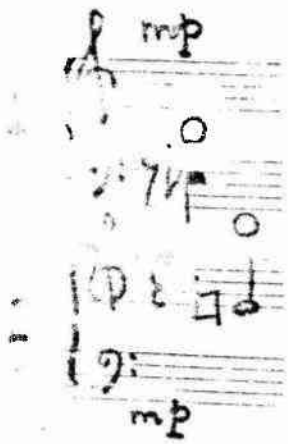


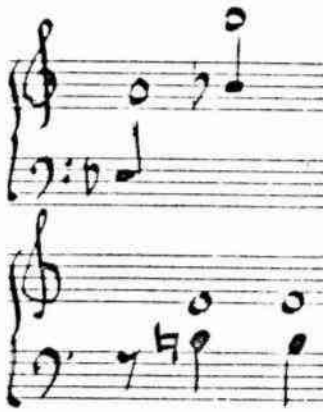


The section ends with a passage of chords from the harps.

Ten seconds of tape follow, leading into the second section which is characterized by phrases in the vocal part punctuated by short interjections from the harps:





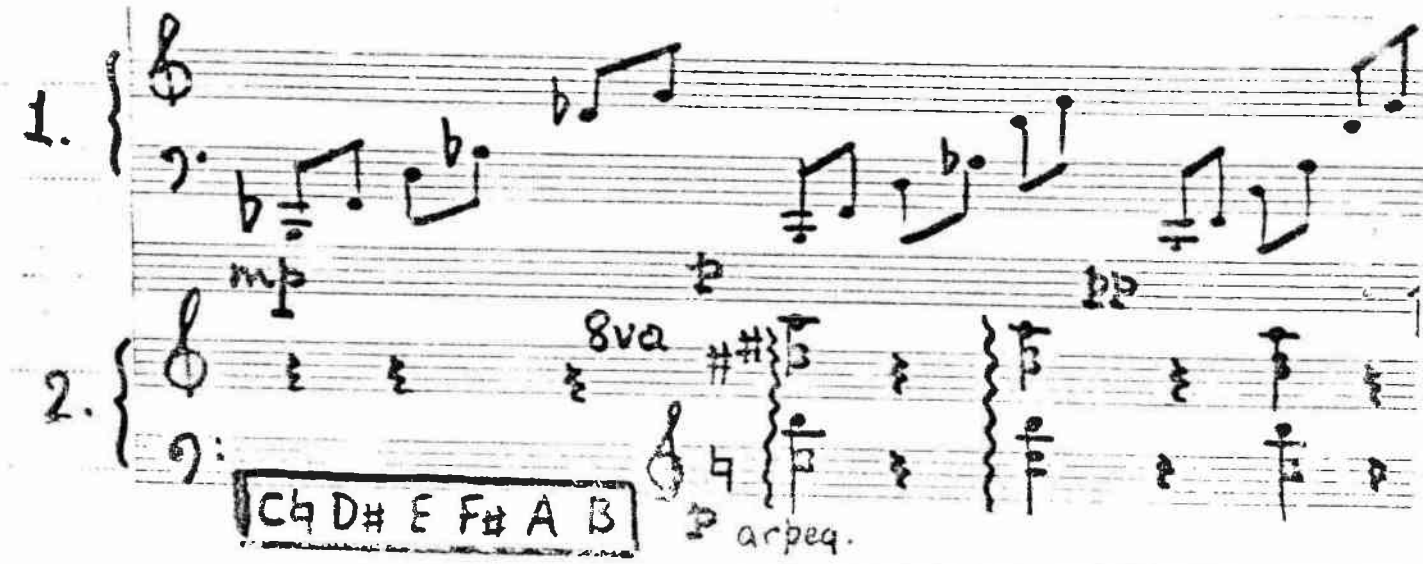


The text for this section is as follows:

> Content to be your love your fool
> Your creature tender obscene,
> I'll bite sleep's innocence away
> and wake the flesh to build a world
> from new energies of light and space.

Throughout this section there is a build-up in tension finally resulting in a point of climax which is reached in the last two lines of text.

A contrasting third section is then opened by the harps sharing a new fragment which recurs throughout the section:



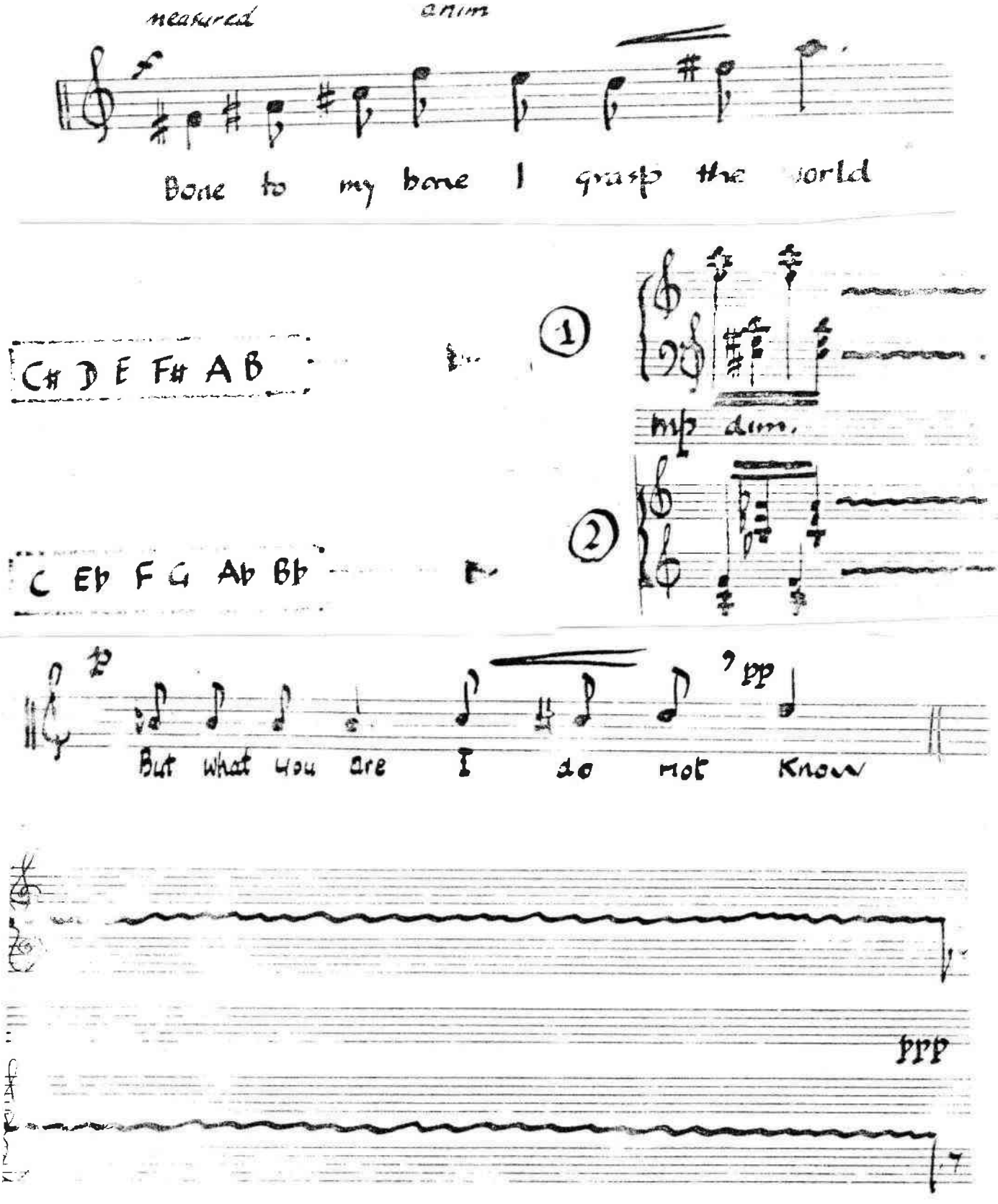
The text:

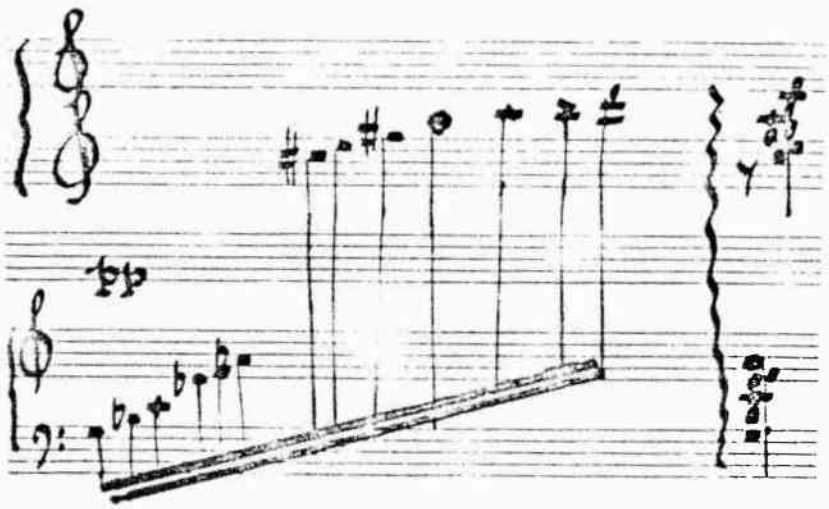
> wings for blue distance
> fins to sweep the obscure caverns of your heart
> A voice to lift the sweetness
> close leaf speech against the window glass
> a memory.

The word "memory" acts as a link between the third section and the following transitionary passage:

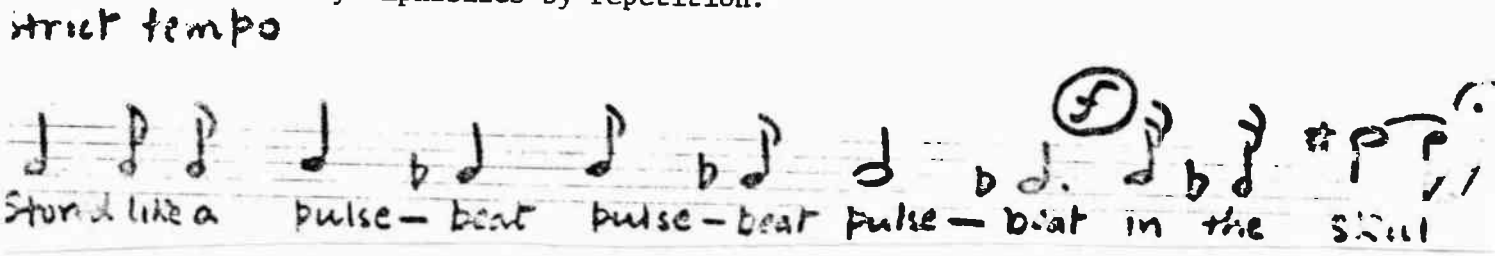
> A memory of chaos weeping
> mute forces hammering for shape.

which finally leads into the final section where voice and harps gradually reach a climax, then abruptly die away:



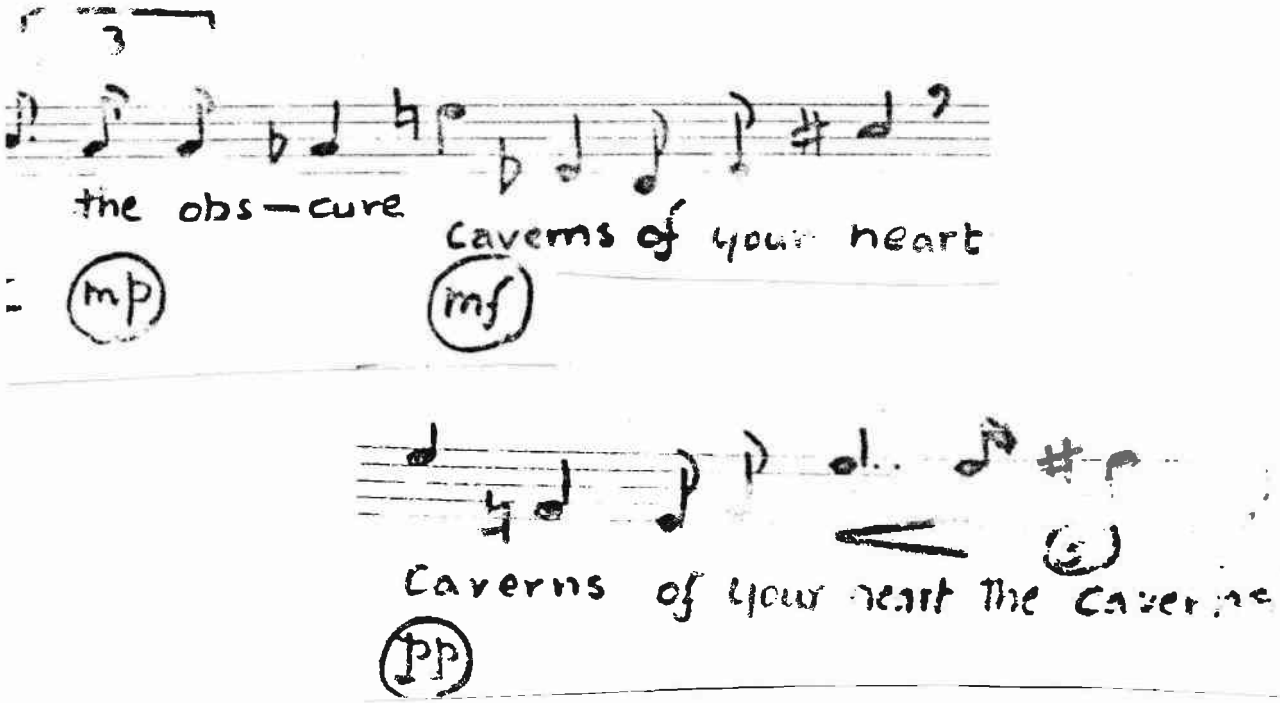


The text features many highly-coloured, evocative phrases which Penberthy emphasizes by repetition:



Despite the use of the tape, the composer has remained attached to the romantic concepts characteristic of his earlier music.[3] The vocal part is lyrical but at the same time displaying expressionistic characteristics exemplified in the use of widely spaced intervals:

[3]Meyer, p.83.



Penberthy has yet to establish himself as one of Australia's foremost composers. At present he is still regarded as a relatively minor figure in the national context, even though a number of his works compare favourably with those of his better-known contemporaries. His output, though varied in quality, covers virtually every form and medium. At present, he is in charge of the Music Department at the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education.