

INTERVIEW WITH WARREN BURT BY TEGAN NICHOLLS – 13 OCTOBER 2010 – WOLLONGONG TAFE CAMPUS – ON VOCAL WORKS

T.N: As a composer and former member of the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble, what is your definition of the term "Extended Vocal Techniques"?

W.B: (performs vocal multiphonic) I see. Ah, I was actually thinking about this one on the bus on the way in today, and I was thinking, it's important to remember that when we started working with this stuff in 1970, 71, 72, very, very little else was being done that wasn't either training people to sing folk songs, or training people to sing rock or training people to sing opera, art song, whatever. And so, anyone who was doing anything different got lumped into "extended vocal techniques". Also, things which now we have complete access to like, you know, (sings sustained harmonics) *Hoomei* singing from Mongolia: at that point, there was maybe like one UNESCO record out, and the only deep research to my knowledge that had been done on, for example, Tibetan chant, in the West at that point was Bonnie Barnett's work from about 1968 to 70. It was really very, very new stuff, and so anything different than traditional methods of vocal technique for traditional song was considered extended vocal technique. And that could be things that were (performs ululation) just ululation stuff which are basically still straight singing just with a little bit of extreme wobble on them, or it could be really extreme noise band things. So yeah, at that point my definition was anything that's not folk song or bel canto.

T.N: Cool, so, given the breadth of the term, what are your thoughts on internal classifications or sub-genres existing within EVT use? For example, the techniques employed by Meredith Monk differ greatly from those Trevor Wishart uses, yet both are composers associated with the term EVT.

W.B: Right, and this is because of the fact that at a certain point extended vocal techniques meant anything but regular singing and how far you wanted to go was a matter of personal taste, and also a matter of your training. In the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble for example, we had three people who were professional singers and three people who were non-singers. And so the non-singers could do basically anything, and the professional singers would very gingerly work their way around the edges. Except for Deborah Kavasch who just plunged in vocal cords and all. For example, I was the only one who, because I didn't have any pretences about having an art song or pop singing career, I was the only one who plunged boots and all into the stuff that really could damage the voice. There was a potential there for vocal damage. I thought: well, if I end up not being able to do a (sings low note with much vibrato) I'm not going to do it for a living, it's not my problem. But everybody else, you know, whether they were opera, trained opera people like Deborah Kavasch or cabaret singers like Anne Chase, everyone was watching it, you know. The least little bit of pain- pull back. Warren, would you like to try this? And I'd try it and it'd be fine.

T.N: So, in your own sound poem *Nighthawk: I*, recited words make up the vast majority of the sound material. In the score you call each of the 40 parts "Musical statements". Could you please elaborate as to why you have labelled these texts so? Could you please

explain the title?

W.B: Sure, ok, the title is easy. “Nighthawk” was the word that resulted most at the end of the piece because of the process I used. If, you know, “fuzzy bunny” had been the word that had come up most at the end it would have been called Fuzzy Bunny, but there was no “fuzzy bunny” in the original source material. So I was surprised as anyone, when I was working on the piece, to see “Nighthawk” emerging. When I started the process I didn't even know it was going to happen. And I learned, through that piece, I learned about the nature of the entropical nature of reiterative systems. These days there's been so much work done with chaos theory and all that, with feedback systems where you take the output of one thing and feed it back in an so onto another process, the same process again and again and again that we now, “we” being the scientific-artistic community, have a pretty thorough understanding of what is involved in those iterative functions, I guess you would call them. And we now know how to twist them for our own evil or expressive ends. But at that point, back in 1973 it was like, what's going to happen if I do this process? So that the word “Nighthawk” came out at the end was serendipity.

I'm also reminded, for example, of John Cage's story of why 4'33” is four minutes and thirty-three seconds long. He wanted to write a piece consisting of silences but he wanted it to have some rigour, so he used the same process he was using when composing *Music of Changes*. Except with *Music of Changes* he was getting random numbers for pitch, duration, texture, density and so on. Here he just used the parameter of duration. And so, he just did random numbers, you know, a drawing of random numbers to get different durations, and the durations added up to four minutes and thirty-three seconds. If the piece had ended up being six minutes and nineteen seconds long it would have been called 6'19”.

T.N: With the particular word though, you say that it became the title because it showed up so much at the end.

W.B: Right.

T.N: Was there a reason for including that word “Nighthawk”?

W.B: It was from *Peterson's Guide to the Birds of North America*. One of my obsessions is ornithology, and so I'm bird friendly. So if I'm going to have two piles of books which reflect my interests, there's not only going to be, say, *Perspectives of New Music*, the music theory magazine, there's also going to be socialist-realist novels from the 1930's – Dorothy Canfield. The Roger Troy Peterson *Guide to the Birds of North America* is of course going to be there because I'm a birdwatcher. A computer manual of course, and so on and so on. So I put books with my interests into two piles, called one A and called one B and then generated randomly chosen Fibonacci numbers which told me to take so many words from this and so many words that. And the numbers would determine which book to use, and that's the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Open it up, ok, there's my passage and that passage was about a bird called the “Nighthawk”. So that sentence was used at the beginning of the piece. Over the course of the piece, that sentence gets

picked more and more until by the end, about 70% of all the words in the final section are “Nighthawk”s.

T.N: And what about the term “Musical statements”?

W.B: Well at that point I was refusing, along with a whole bunch of people at UC San Diego, to make distinctions between language and music. We were all hell bent to completely obscure those things as much as possible, and to be as musical and literary as possible and mix them up. This was under Kenneth Gaburo's influence (he coined the term “compositional linguistics”, but also a lot of other people were doing it as well. Robert Erickson, another one of the composers at UC San Diego, although mostly involved in instrumental timbre, had done a number of pieces where he blurred the distinction between language and music. His piece *General Speech* is where General Douglas MacArthur's “Duty, honour, country” speech is recited through a trombone. Like (mimics trombone speech), and so on. We were all of us trying to blur that distinction. And also, don't forget that all the scratch outs in *Nighthawk* are all performed as (performs extended vocal sound simultaneously with nearby bird squawk).

T.N: (laughs)

W.B: Thank you. I told you I was bird friendly. That bird is me friendly.

T.N: Yeah, you're in sync.

W.B: Yes, nice. Ah, so don't forget that there's a lot of extended vocal techniques in *Nighthawk* itself, all the little scratch outs and things -which come out of my inability to copy words without making mistakes- all become extended vocal techniques. And finally, the structure that I was using to make that could have just as easily been used to make signals to control pitches or to select colours for a video or piece, or whatever.

Going even further back in my undergraduate years, this was one of the lessons Joel Chadabe taught us was when we were working with one of the early Moog synthesisers. You set up a control thing, a control patch on the synthesiser and at the moment you plug it into an oscillator you are now making a musical piece. But if we take that very same plug and we plug it into an oscilloscope and we observe the visual output, you're now making a visual piece. And let's say that we had, with the technology of the day, seven tape recorders with tapes of speech on them going into seven amplifiers, voltage controlled amplifiers that we could open and close. You take that voltage and you plug it into controlling those gates and then you're making a literary piece, you can transcribe the output of those recordings, the speech into words. And so the same sort of structure could be used to control visual or verbal or sonic events.

So I feel quite comfortable calling each of the paragraphs of *Nighthawk* musical statements. The language is musical, as in, “Nighthawk, Nighthawk, Nighthawk. Relatively, relatively, relatively, Nighthawk.” There's all sorts of musical stuff that is happening there right? I'm not just reading. Although there is a case to be for reading it

like that, and then hearing the music in the most quotidian of speech. But by the end of the poem I'm really pumped and performing it, and the energy that's going into that is a musical energy.

T.N: Is the performance aspect something which is essential to the piece?

W.B: Absolutely. I mean, I could imagine someone silently reading it, but I would imagine that somewhere along the line they would just want to start reading it aloud because it is a sound piece, and it's not one of those poems say that's written in the American academic tradition that is meant to be words silently scanned on a page.

T.N: So have you made a sound recording?

W.B: I actually did make a recording of *Nighthawk* way back when, I made a video recording of a live reading. I coloured this video recording and as video it didn't make it. It just wasn't interesting enough. But I found if I took coloured slides, that would work. I coloured myself in black and white, really black black and white, bits of white blasting through the black. I found that if I took that and made slides out of that, projected slides behind me it worked really well. And so I have the video of me reading it that's colourised, I have the slides, but to the best of my knowledge no one actually videoed the whole thing with the slides and my reading. But there is the original recording on rapidly crumbling $\frac{3}{4}$ inch video tape. I should probably one of these days make a recording again, but at the moment I'm still alive and still able to talk so I think I'd rather do the piece as a live performance. It takes a lot of energy, It's an hour long reading and you have to get faster and faster over the hour.

T.N: Do you think that without the piece being performed, without being in a space with real human interaction, that there is any kind of lacking? If you were to listen on an iPod with headphones it's a different experience. Is that live experience something?

W.B: There's as much difference there as there is listening to Beethoven's Fifth on an iPod and being next to one hundred people blasting their heads off with it. There's always a difference between live performance and recorded performance. And if we're dealing with notation stuff, well, look at the score of Beethoven's Fifth, listen to a recording of Beethoven's Fifth, be in a hall where an orchestra is playing Beethoven's Fifth. Those are three totally different aesthetic experiences. It may be two centuries later and it may be a different idiom but I think the same thing applies.

T.N: Ok, cool. Alright, I'll move on. In his 1961 composition *Visage*, Berio designates a largely non-verbal role to the voice. From the perspective of a composer who has worked with the non-verbal side of vocal expression, what are your thoughts on how this decision may then effect the listener's interpretation and experience of the work? As for the semantic minority of the work, how do you interpret the inclusion of the word "parole"?

W.B: Obviously he's Italian, he's writing in Italian, and so "parole" - "words".

T.N: Yep

W.B: It's a contrast with the rest of the piece and it's also making the point that what we've heard are not words, but they are words. They're not words in the literal sense, but everything is so freighted with semiotic meaning that they might as well be. I mean, the opening bit which is sort of the birth of language out of guttural, primal expression, is misinterpreted by a lot of people as orgasmic or sexual in some sense. I am not sure, in the few times I met Berio I never actually asked him if that was a miscalculation or a delightful by-product or was it intentional? It may indeed have been intentional. There's all sorts of emerging out of nothing, the big birth of things, you know, birth is to do with sexual reproduction and blah blah blah. But some of the states of vocal expression now strike me, fifty years later, as incredibly obvious and "oh my God, why would someone want to do that". On the other hand, they may have also been that obvious back then and he may have been doing them as a rebellion against the dominant aesthetic idea in European arts at that point, which was we want things to be as subtle, and elusive and multi-referential and not overt and over-the-top as possible.

T.N: Do you find that since he has cast a woman that it's somewhat more unsettling, considering the times? That an audience is being confronted with a woman showing this auto-erotic behaviour rather than a man?

W.B: Well there may have been some of that, I mean, we can't discount that. More practically we have to remember "who's he married to at that point?".

T.N: Of course.

W.B: I mean, it is his wife, Cathy Berberian who is doing the vocal sounds. And we're not even talking about the relationship here. Who's he living with 24 hours a day? And what is her research project at the moment? It's extended vocal techniques! So you could say that the work is actually portrait of his domestic environment. He's living with a person who is doing this all the time, what else is he going to write? When we look at music history I think it's always important to remember as a ground the practical side of things. Why did Schoenberg write *Pierrot Lunaire* for a flute, a clarinet, violin, cello, piano and cabaret singer?

T.N: 'Cause that's all he had on hand?

W.B: 'Cause that's who his friends were at that point! He didn't write string quartets until he had friends who were a string quartet.

T.N: So speaking of the non-verbal side, how it pretty much makes up the majority of the work for the voice. Well, not like the electronics say anything. So how do you think this decision may then effect listener's interpretation and experience of the work?

W.B: It depends on how sophisticated the listener is. Listener as fifteen year old boy is just going to be sniggering all the way through, and also be weirded out, like "why would

people do that and be so emotionally naked.?” Because one of the things when you're a fifteen year old boy, (and I can't speak for a fifteen year old girl) is that you must never show your emotions in any way possible except in exaggerated ways which mock the notion of having emotion. So that's one audience. Another audience would be someone who absolutely hates contemporary music in any form whatever and they're just going to go “oh gibberish”. Another person may listen and go “wow, listen to all these emotional states and how they're combining”, you know, someone who was say, into theatre. I presume that most artists of that time were mostly writing for at least the desire of a literate audience that would be familiar with things like James Joyce reading his own work, which recordings in Europe at that point would have been circulating around and would have been well known. I think the missionary need to want to explain every bit of contemporary music was a couple of years in the future from that point and it was because there were people who were more communicative in traditional languages, like for example, Leonard Bernstein, who were disappointed that they weren't being communicative so felt they had to explain everything. Also the missionary thing of “we must draw people in. They don't like this because they don't understand it.” And so if they understand it they'll like it. Well it maybe if they understand it they won't like it anyway.

T.N: Yeah. You mentioned, just then when you were talking about audiences, theatre, and that someone from a theatre perspective might see something different. It kind of makes me think of narration and narrative and if there is some sort of narrative to the work. Or if you were looking for some sort of narrative in the work, looking for some sort of answer, or meaning or truth. How do you think that is effected or altered or questioned by Berio, basically only giving us non-verbal signs to sort of lead us on our way?

W.B: Well also don't forget this is the period of abstraction. The abstract expressionists tried to make as abstract a gesture as possible, and then when they stood back and looked at it they realised it was actually an autobiography of energy. You know, like, “only Franz Klein can do that”. A lot of people can do that, but that particular energy is only going to be from Franz Klein and in that particular gesture. So in the visual arts there was this thing about making pieces as abstract as possible. In music there was this thing about let's not use traditional melody, traditional harmony. Let's try and make things as abstract as possible. Of course now, sixty years later, we have just absorbed all that, and a Jackson Pollack is completely narrative to us. Or abstract music like, say, the Schoenberg piano concerto just sounds melodic to us. Our ears have expanded to the point where whole bunches of stuff now sound melodic again or look narrative, which may not have been intended to be so. The interesting thing, and Berio I think was aware of this, the interesting thing in *Visage* is that he probably has, and I'm speculating here, but he probably has this aesthetic of “let's make this as abstract as possible and remove verbal meaning”, and then within ten minutes of him and Cathy having the mike on they realised “oh no, there's all sorts of emotion here”. So by being abstract maybe we allow the emotions to pour forth more.

T.N: Ok, well that leads onto the final question. As a musical instrument, the voice is

quite unique. Not only is it one of the earliest sounds we are exposed to (when still in the womb) and learn (as infants beginning to vocalise) but it is our primary daily communicator. When coupled with language the voice fulfils an expressive and practical function. When language is removed, it could be said that the voice becomes more like other musical instruments: pure sound. What are your thoughts on this statement? Can the voice ever detach itself from its connotative links to human life? Are these issues that you consider when writing for voice?

W.B: It depends on what I'm writing for the voice. If I was writing for example, an art song, as I did for Lotte Latukefu a couple of years ago, those considerations don't come into it at all because I want to write something that's in her vocal range and the words are very important, I want her to articulate those words. And so those issues didn't come into it at all. She then as an actress takes those words and flies with them and gives them meaning in theatrical accentuation which I wouldn't have thought of. And so that's great. On the other hand, if I'm writing something that's abstract and not using words then sometimes I can think about that and sometimes I don't. What's interesting to me now listening to those EVT recordings thirty years later is the emotional connotations of them. At the time we were not thinking about the emotional connotations at all, we were having fun exploring the voice. And if that meant you had to scream, well that's just a scream, not a scream of pain, a scream of delight, that's just a scream. Listening to it years later, a lot of that stuff really does have emotional connotations. If I think back the time when we were actually doing these things and in some cases I think "oh yeah, that really relates to that" and in others I think "God, that doesn't relate at all to what was happening around us."

One of the interesting pieces in this way is a piece by Gregory Whitehead which was on the ABC a whole bunch, It was called *Pressures of the Unspeakable*. About eighteen years ago, he brought a whole bunch of people into the recording studio and had them scream, I mean, these are screams of pain right? You know, he's not torturing them. And then he thought, "ok well let's see how abstract we can be" and he spliced them all together, and the piece is pretty much after a minute of two unlistenable because we can't get past the emotional connotations, at least I couldn't.

The Belgian composer Godfried Willem-Raes found this out in the early seventies with a piece called *Bellenorgel*, bell organ or bells organ. What he did was he harvested a whole bunch of telephone bells, alarm clock bells, door bells, mounted them on a two meter by three meter or two meter by one and a half meter wooded frame. And then had a whole bunch of old telephone company solenoids which could actually be programmed to do semi-random things and had them trigger off all these bells. The idea being, we're going to have a random order of these things and this thing's going to be fun as it hangs up there and it'll be in a museum and it'll be clanking and buzzing away. Uh-uh. Unlistenable! Because all those sounds are violations of our private space. You may not think your ringtone is anything threatening but you don't know who's on the other end of the line until you look and see. Before cell phones you never knew who was calling until you picked up the receiver, it could have been anyone. It could have been the worst threat in the world. Same thing: you don't know who's outside your doorbell. And so the implied

threat of all these sounds, and the fact that they're all meant to shake you out of whatever state you're in, to go and do something, meant that by the end of it, the piece just gave you the heebie jeebies. It was really hard to divorce listening from semiotic content. It can be done, you have to put yourself in a very special frame of mind, but it's really difficult. And that's one of the lessons we learned from abstraction, from those early days of abstraction, was which things are susceptible to abstraction and what things aren't.

T.N: So you bring up an interesting point. I recently been reading a lot and one of the definitions I've come across for music is that it is “areferential sound”. But you've just given me an example of these sounds which you wouldn't think hold much meaning to you, reference different states within. So would you dispute that definition?

W.B: Oh absolutely. I think the definition of music as areferential sound is too narrow and limiting. Yeah, I mean, they're not thinking about song. I'll give you an example of areferential music: opera. Ok, here's the storyline, we have to know the storyline right? And they're singing these things, and they're singing in such a way, bel canto, that usually you can't understand the words if they're even singing in a language that you know. And after ten minutes you're just lost in this spectacle and it takes a real effort – which is called being an opera fan (and I plead guilty to being one)- to actually listen and follow it through. It's a foreign language, and it's got nothing to do with emotion as they, whoever “they” are, experience it. As a singer you've been trained into it and you have more benefit of the doubt to give to opera than “ they” do, but man that can quickly degenerate into areferentiality and that's what we think of as normal!

T.N: Yeah, exactly. It's funny, because you were talking at the beginning when we were discussing the definition of EVT as being anything outside of bel canto, and yet now that has come around to being the-

W.B: That can be so incredibly abstract, especially with a wide vibrato (sings with exaggerated vibrato).