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Coastline Project

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Tracing a flutist's unfolding practices and transitions

By Dr Jean Penny

Winding down through the Otway Ranges in southern Victoria, Australia, through steep hills and lush rainforest, the first glimpse of the sea, whether azure blue, green or purple grey, is always stunningly beautiful. It entices one immediately into the littoral zone, to the convergences of land and sea, thrilled and delighted, and inevitably struck by the

sensation of the self as ephemeral presence, transient observer; it also reveals and accentuates an existential personal drive to create music that might re/present this spectacular place.

This feeling is transformational and signifies an intense change of direction that has occurred in my practice – especially since the experience of living and working in Malaysia from 2011 to 2016, and the more recent isolating impact of COVID-19.

In this article I articulate transitional and transformative practices of a flutist (myself) through unfolding trajectories of classical performer to creative practitioner, researcher and writer. Transitions in my practice have been recurrent, as I have moved through the captivating worlds of orchestral playing, performing solo and chamber works of the classical music canon to newer notated music, experimental music, electronic music, intercultural music collaborations and now works that revolve around places I live or visit.

Perhaps the most significant part of this progression has been a change in self-perception, giving me permission to create my own works and to entwine experiential texts with music making, to toss off some traditional goals and turn towards sculpting sounds and atmospheres through my instrument. Along with this change runs a deep curiosity about working with multiple media centred around flute performance, and the imaginary worlds this inspires.

This shift is discussed here alongside the experience of creating a new work for flute and electronics – a work that combines concepts of convergence, resonance, instability, density, and unbounded time. Flute and electronic techniques mix with environmental recordings to evoke sensations and reflections educed at four locations along the southern Victorian coast: the rolling waves at Apollo Bay, the beach at Skenes Creek, tessellated pavements at Lorne, and the remains of 100-million-year-old concretions (bowl-like rock formations) at Teddy's Lookout, Lorne.

This location is part of a most treacherous coastline, famous for its beauty but also as a place of myriad shipwrecks (possibly around 700)

and death, including the massacres of the indigenous Gadubanud people. In this article I will also describe some processes of a/r/tography that evolved through the project, intertwining creative instrumental music making, including choices of aesthetic, materials, and musical constructs, with reflective discourse, observations and narrative.

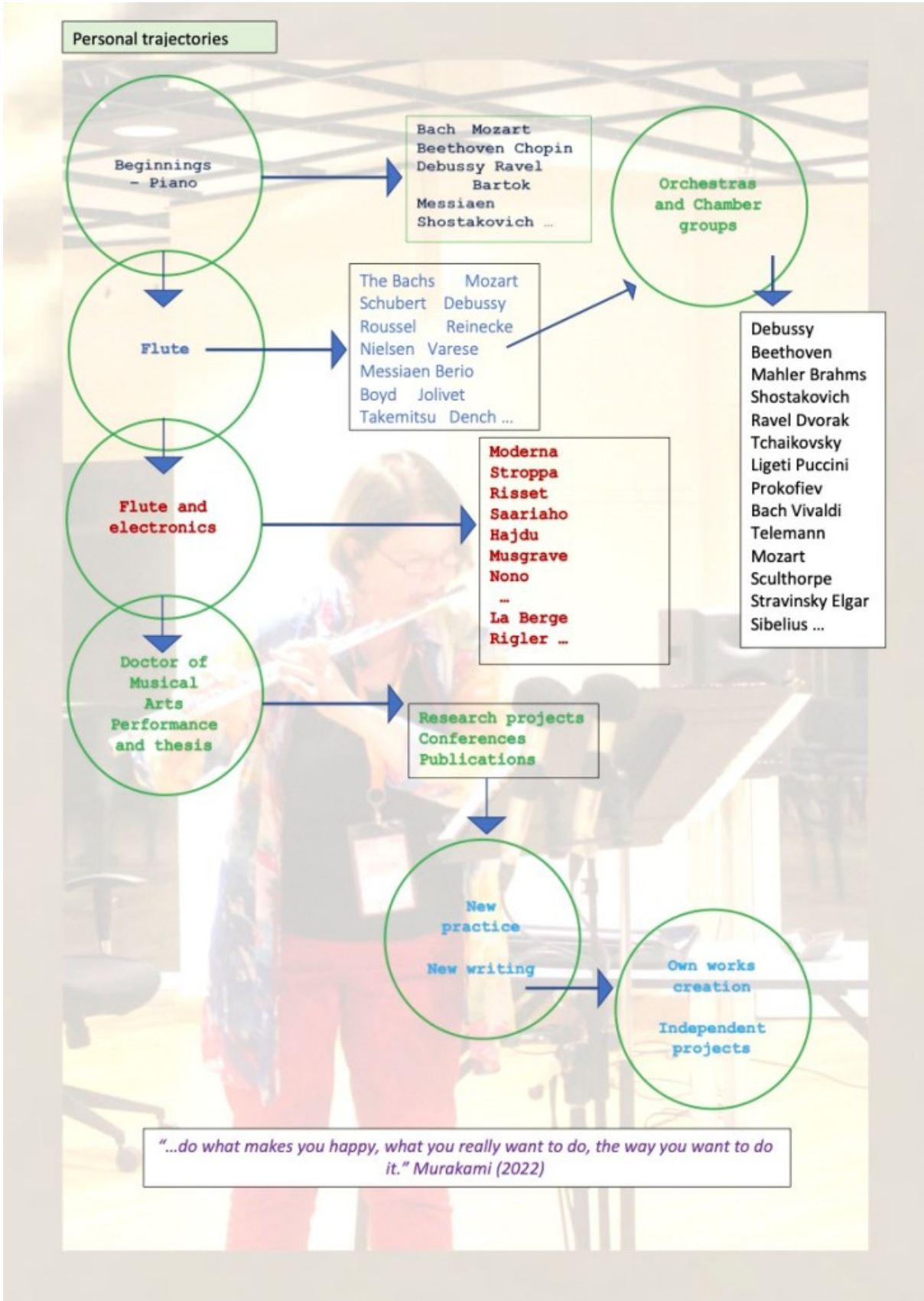
Transitions



Author, transitions

Beginning my musical life on the piano (my mother was a piano teacher) I took up flute lessons at age 10. My love for these two instruments was equal, and their differing repertoires and demands utterly magnetic. Studying them equally up to then, towards the end of my undergraduate degree, I dropped piano and focussed everything on flute.

I won some prizes, scholarships, an honours degree, and picked up stunning work with some of Australia's best orchestras and groups. But then, I looked for something else. I curated and performed new music concerts (quite rare in Melbourne at the time), I undertook and completed a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in flute and electronic music, I followed disparate pathways that caught my interest, and perhaps most of all, gave myself permission to evolve my practice and musical identity in new ways.



Personal trajectories diagram

Unfolding practice

Several unplanned opportunities created possibilities to follow and construct these new directions, and to develop a progressive practice through intensive project building and dissemination. A deepening of resolve evolved both during and after completing my DMA in which I was able to explore not just the developing flute and electronics scene and repertoire, but also my personal interactions and reflections on performance and technology. This has been the driving force behind all subsequent projects:

The major focus of the project has been to assess the impact of electronics on the flautist: this has revealed an evolving, enactive performance practice captured here as *The Extended Flautist* – a transformed and transformative entity incorporating musician, instruments, electronic devices, spaces, interconnections and sounds. Tracing the journey towards musical presentation through a narrative that gives voice to the performer, that tilts the focus inwards, that prioritizes intense observation of performance elements has given a vision of the microcosm of the flautist within the evolving meta-instrument and interconnections, performative expansions and new expressions (Penny 2009, p.177).

This study led to a university position in a most unexpected place. Working as a Senior Lecturer in Music in Malaysia was an amazing cultural and societal journey that also opened up opportunities for funded research, for collaboration with local composers and a broadening of understandings and ideas. Amongst teaching, performing, and other research studies, I lead a major 3-year project, *The Imaginary Space*, that centred on intercultural exchanges in performance and composition.

In *The Imaginary Space* project intercultural investigations were located within an electroacoustic performance environment. A unique series of music outcomes and models reflecting symbiosis of Malaysian and Western art music through composition and performance were created. ... Sounds and performance practices from each tradition were traced, documented, culturally and scientifically analysed, and used to forge

new sonic worlds and spaces through symbiosis and electronic manipulation. ... Crucial to this project was a commitment to understanding each other's culture, developing meaningful exchange, and creating the 'imaginary space' for emergent music (Penny 2014). On my return to Australia almost 5 years and various distractions later, Covid-19 related isolation offered another opportunity to explore new perspectives. Transitional work occurred, including developing my flute version of Katharine Norman's *Making Place* (more information at <https://www.jeanpenny.com/making-place.html>) based on Malaysian sounds and images; I then made another version for alto flute based on Australian sounds and images (Penny 2022).

These interchanges drew me towards a focus on place that manifested in a set of *Postcards from Lockdown* (Penny 2021) and a work re/presenting a local geological site, *Lal Lal Falls* (Penny 2023). As I became captivated with ideas of place my playing became more free, intuitive, and personally expressive as I began to improvise more and notate new works for performance.

The key change from playing exactly what is on a score of another's composition to creating my own pieces has been a most significant transformation in my practice. I simultaneously uncovered the joys and values of threading together practice and writing, and the influence of the ideas of a/r/tography. The process of a/r/tography has been described thus:

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing. It is a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings. (Springgay, S., Irwin, R., & Kind, S. W., 2005, p.899).

It is an iterative process, that alternates between playing, creating, investigating, reflecting, and writing, allowing methods to emerge and potentials to gather. I find a starting point, a concept, an intention; I experience a place; I listen, look, feel and think; I record and photograph; I identify layers and elements; I consign everything to memory; I return home; I return to place; I return home; I begin to play;

a piece emerges slowly, very slowly; I investigate histories and geologies; I develop layers in the work; I write; I return to the place; I re-write a lot; I trial environmental sounds, intermingling flute sounds and transforming electronic techniques; I have faith that a piece will eventually materialise! I write a lot more.

The Coastlines Project is an exemplar of this.

Coastlines Project

Here in my study sit my flutes, my music library, my desk, books, papers, some pictures, some batik hangings, all sorts of things – it is the place for practising, creating, planning, and working. The window overlooks the garden and a creek, eucalyptus bushland, and a park beyond. Birds flutter and call, bees buzz about, an occasional dog or cat and even a kangaroo roams past. It's calm, quite beautiful.

Here I scroll through photos, listen to field recordings, recall memories, play around with flute and electronic sounds and write things down. Colours and sounds spin around in my head, suggesting structures and atmospheres. *Gadubanud Coastlines* becomes immersive, compelling, rewarding.



Beach at Lorne, Victoria, Australia

The title of the piece, *Gadubanud Coastlines*, refers to the name of the original Aboriginal inhabitants of this part of southern Victoria. Little is known about these people, although traces of their lives have been found and stories told (Clarke 1990).

Both the people and the language have fundamentally disappeared, following massacres in the nineteenth century by incoming migrants and authorities (Clarke 1995). As well as the title, this gives the work an undercurrent of unease and obligation for acknowledgement.

The work is for flute and electronics; it is an imaginary, non-mimetic re/presentation of place, reflecting sensations experienced on site, using field recordings of the area and structures alluding to sea, sand and rock formations found. The layering of environmental sound, instrumental sound, electronic treatment of sounds, and visual imagery is structured in four sections that explore an experience of the littoral zones at Apollo Bay, Skenes Creek, Lorne, and Teddy's lookout.

Here is an overview of the four sections:

1. *Convergences* – Sounds of the sea and wind in dialogue with fleeting flute microsounds and motifs; fluctuating circles, crashes, stillness, flux. Electronic effects include amplification, spatialisation, reverberation, harmonisation, multi-delay.
2. *Fragmentations* – Sounds of beach materials (pebbles, sand, driftwood) against a background of waves; Intermittency and ephemerality expressed through flute sequences of runs, whistles, wisps, ricochets, glissandi, tremolos, pizzicatos. Electronic effects include amplification, multi-delay, harmonisation, reverberation.
3. *Tessellations* – Rocks and patination interpreted as intensified blocks of sound against gurgling waves flowing into the pools and crevices. Electronic effects include vocoder, reverberation, delay.
4. *Concretions* – Contemplation of ancient geological time, the bowl shapes of the concretions, vastness, and infinity using sustained notes, close multiphonics, softness, and key clicks against distant sea and wind. Electronic effects include

reverberation, pitch lowering, multi-delay, vocoder, spatialisation.

Sound Processes

Establishing the sound aesthetic for the work evolved from experiences of being on site, becoming acutely aware of the sonic environment and identifying layers and sensations associated with materialities of the sound. I created sets of flute sounds to capture and categorise these elements, chose and recorded environmental sounds, determined how electronic effects would be used, and what place the visual components would have.

Flute

Delicate, flickering sounds	Pizzicato, key percussion, breath tones, tremolos, vibrato, tongue rams
Flow sounds	Wind, curving melodic gestures, water sounds, runs
Textured sounds	Timbral changes, harmonisation, breath tones, multiphonics, microtones
Tranquil sounds	Held notes, slow tempi, softness, silence, floating notes
Rhythmic drivers	Repetitions, ground bass

Electronics

Environmental sounds	Field recordings assembly as a partially interactive layer, including isolated sounds, blend, spatialisation, foreground/background placement, timbral treatment
Effects	Use of a bespoke Max patch to activate amplification, reverberation, spatialisation, harmonisation (intensity, density, layering), multi-delay (echoes, voices), vocoder (timbre changes), and other processing
Interactivity	Flute sound activating effects through Max software, developing processes for sound to trigger

Imagery



Imagery in this work consists of videos taken on site at Apollo Bay, Lorne, Skene's Creek and Teddy's Lookout. The video is meant as a series of impressions of atmospheres and place which enable a visual perspective and context and inspire the work creation and performance.

It is intended as a source of memory, not only of visual beauty, but also of the actual feel and sound of the coastlines. Treating the images in various ways (with colour, patination, movement, etc) through interactive sound/image software aims to further interpret, and create a connective, tangible link to place.

Listen now to the music at <https://www.jeanpenny.com/projects.html>

Reflections

Beginning and ending this article immersed in location as place and as music, I have attempted to convey some of the significant transitions that have occurred in my musical life. Of course, personal circumstances

dictated many changes, but underlining everything has been a passion and curiosity to broaden experience, to unfold new trajectories, and to find artistic richness from doing so.

This project required me to unravel performative and compositional processes in new ways. A merging of practices occurred, as my principal role as performer expanded into creating the music and learning to activate specific software.

Through writing, which initially occurred as a continuum of jottings, reflections, and intermittent descriptions, I was able to develop a collection of thoughts about place, music making and flute performance; I could interrogate the importance of landscape as a source for understanding diverse perspectives and histories; I could create a space for contemplation; and I could identify needs and skills. Textual responses clarified ideas, grounded my work, confirmed decisions, and drew me on to further progression and new thinking.

A/r/tography – I have become used to this word. It now conjures up a rich set of memories and ideas about interweaving practices and was realised in this project through a willingness to alternate between playing, notating, digital transferrals, playing, revising, activating electronics, playing, writing, playing, shifting foci, increasing awareness of significant issues of place, and writing.

Negotiating cultural engagements, the spatialities and trajectories of time and place in performance, and creative artistry underlines the role of the performer in provoking new thought and perhaps ‘artivism’ as well as the conveyance of the pure beauty of a flute. I conclude with an inspiring citation from *The Artistic Turn: A Manifesto*:

The artist moves in a realm of shifting meanings, imaginings and interpretations: on the one hand, exploring new possibilities and suggesting new subjectivities; on the other, ambiguously constrained—as well as sustained—by social, political and historical contexts and attitudes.

Artistic endeavor is embedded in situation and inter-relationships, confronted with power and vulnerability rather than with rules and

information. It takes place in exchanges between the subject and the world, interrogating both the social and the natural worlds, intertwining the human condition with transcendence, reality with the imaginary... The artist must, in some sense, project the illusion of being a physical, intellectual, aesthetic and embodied hero (Coessens, Crispin and Douglas, 2009, p.139).

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Australian flutist, Dr Jean Penny, works at the intersections of flute performance, artistic research, writing and new music creation. She has published widely and presented her research on flute performance, interculturality, place and space, and technology and performance at numerous Australian, Asian, Scandinavian, British and European fora.

Dr Penny has extensive performance experience with major Australian symphony orchestras, chamber ensembles, and recitals throughout Australia, in Malaysia, the UK, Hungary, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Italy and Spain, as well as work in multiple education and academic spheres.

She graduated from the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University with a Doctor of Musical Arts in 2009. Subsequent academic appointments have included Senior Lectureship in Music at U.P.S.I., Malaysia (2011-2016) and Honorary Research Fellowships at U.P.S.I (2016) and Federation University Australia (2018).

Her current work revolves around creation and performance of music exploring aspects of place and her writing delves deeply into this experience.

Recent work can be accessed online at

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1260967/1753737>

<https://echo.orpheusinstituut.be/article/new-sounds-ancient-resonances-re-presenting-lal-lal-falls-in-music-for-flute-and-electronics>

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