Jenny McLeod: Tracing Threads

My subject is New Zealand composer Jenny McLeod, and I will be speaking, at least in part, about work I did here in the Turnbull as I was working on her biography: *Jenny McLeod – A Life in Music*. That book was published last year by Te Herenga Waka Victoria University Press**.**

I imagine many of you know at least something about Jenny. You may have played some of her music on the piano, or have an LP of *Earth and Sky*, or have heard the NZSO or Stroma perform one of her pieces. Perhaps you've been in a choir that sang one of her songs, or maybe you saw the film *The Silent One* and remember the music she prepared for that movie? I suspect most New Zealanders with an interest in the local art scene will have come across Jenny or her music, and there was a period in the early 1970s when she was almost inescapable.

If your acquaintance with Jenny's music is a little deeper, you may have noticed that her output was pretty diverse. My first encounters with Jenny's work were with her chamber and choral music – music firmly located in the art music realm. It was only later that I became aware of her popular music interests and her film score writing. And I'd initially thought of her as primarily a melodic composer – Jenny wrote good tunes – so I was a bit surprised by some of the more abstract, dissonant music I discovered when I started digging more deeply into her catalogue.

Jenny was born in 1941 and began piano studies as a five-year-old. She could sight read easily and quickly became a very capable performer. By the time she left high school, the Cambridge Summer School of Music was in operation. The summer school was a programme operated by Auckland University's Centre for Continuing Education and ran for a couple of weeks each January at St Peter's School in Cambridge in the Waikato. At the first summer school, in 1946, Douglas Lilburn famously delivered his address, A Search for Tradition. By the 1950s the programme was well-established and student performers and composers travelled from all over New Zealand to participate. In 1961, at the invitation of her friend Phillipa Harding, Jenny attended. She recalled that in the early 1960s smart young women from the provinces generally did a BA and then went teaching. It was what she had planned to do, too, but she had so much fun in Cambridge she thought 'Blow it. I'm not going to Teachers College. I'll do music instead.' Beginning in March 1961, she studied at Victoria University College with Fred Page, Margaret Neilsen, David Farquhar and Douglas Lilburn. She began mainly focussed on piano performance but soon enough shifted her attention to composition. Here's snatch of her early orchestral music, written whilst she was Lilburn's student, and first performed at Cambridge:

Little Symphony:
https://www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/resound/audio/201781583/jenny-mcleod-little-symphony

To my ear, there are echoes of Stravinsky in this music – it's hardly surprising.

That's Jenny in the dark jacket greeting Igor Stravinsky when he visited Wellington in 1961. After completing her degree at Victoria, she won a Queen Elizabeth the Second Arts Council grant and moved to Paris where she studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Olivier Messiaen. Jenny had heard Messiaen's music at the Cambridge Summer School in 1962. That year cellist John Kennedy – father of the perhaps more famous Nigel Kennedy – was a guest instructor, and he gathered a group of interested students in the gymnasium one afternoon to play them a recording of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. Jenny later wrote: 'My feelings upon hearing this music were indescribable. I was completely stunned, in a way that I had never been before by any music I'd ever heard. I knew immediately that I had to get myself to Paris, and get to this man.'

Jenny loved Paris and found Messiaen a brilliant and stimulating teacher. However, one year in his class was enough for her, and after a summer spent following Pierre Boulez around Europe, she moved to Cologne where she studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen in his Course for New Music. Whilst a student there she composed her chamber work *For Seven*.

For Seven: **https://soundcloud.com/user-299076310/jenny-mcleod-for-seven**
[Just a sample…]

Returning to Aotearoa she took up a teaching position at Victoria University, becoming a permanent member of staff in 1967. Over the next few years, she composed *Earth and Sky* and *Under the Sun*, music theatre pieces for massed children's choirs and mixed ensembles.

Earth and Sky Act 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qw9DRf7GUlM
The full recording is available for audition on Spotify

In 1970 Jenny was appointed Professor of Music at Victoria and got a lot of media attention for her advocacy for popular music in the university context, her liberal views on drugs and, a little later, her membership of the Divine Light Mission, a meditation movement founded by Indian guru Mahara-ji. After *Under the Sun*, which was performed in 1971, Jenny more or less disappeared from public view as a composer for some years. Retiring from the university in 1976, she lived in communities with other Divine Light Mission devotees. She did make music during this time, but of a very different sort to the art music she had formerly composed. The Turnbull has some recordings of the songs she was writing during this period.

Little Owl Song – you'll need to go into the Turnbull to hear this: MSC-011834

It's charming music, closer to Cat Stevens than to Karlheinz Stockhausen.
Leaving the Divine Light Mission around 1980, she re-emerged into the public's eye in 1981 with *Childhood*, commissioned by Roy Tankersley for the Bach Choir. Jenny was reluctant to accept the commission, but Roy – who is the sweetest man, actually – kind of insisted and Jenny, thankfully, relented. This is the final movement.

Childhood, Part X: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=NEsndT8qmuU

Over the following five or six years, Jenny was a full-time composer, writing film and TV music, works for solo piano, chamber groups and orchestra. As an example of her TV music, this is from the children's TV series Cuckooland.

Cuckooland, Episode 1:
https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/cuckoo-land-episode-one-the-house-1985

Adjacent to this work, the 'classical' music she was writing during that period was informed by her interest in film music, and in contemporary popular music. In these works, classical instruments and ensembles play music that knows about the melodies, harmonies and rhythms we normally associate with popular music, what we might hear on ZB. This is a fragment of Jenny's 1986 chamber work *Suite: Jazz Themes*.

Suite: Jazz Themes:
https://www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/resound/audio/2018723243/jenny-mcleod-suite-jazz-themes

Reaching a creative impasse in the late 1980s she once again withdrew from composing, re-emerging a few years later with music informed by her study of Tone Clock theory, an approach to music analysis and composition formalised by Dutch composer Peter Schat. Her first Tone Clock pieces were for solo piano.

Tone Clock No. 4:
https://sounz.org.nz/works/18380

Jenny's creative work, while always on the move, in some ways stabilised during the 1990s and to my ear, the music she composed over the remainder of her life, while certainly various, is is, more or less, of-a-piece. The tone clock was always part of her thinking – in terms of theoretical concerns, harmony and so forth – but she didn't lose sight of melody or the traditions that had originally spurred her interest in music. Her late chamber music is in some ways indicative.

Dark Bright Night:
https://www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/musicalive/audio/2018806822/jenny-mcleod-dark-bright-night

Jenny's interest in te ao Māori, and her desire to grow connections into the Māori community saw her forge strong links with Ngāti Rangi in the Ohakune region. Those relationships were a major concern for her during the final thirty years of her life. It was the encouragement of a Rangatira amongst Ngāti Rangi that led her to compose the opera *Hōhepa*, which premiered in 2012.

***Hohepa*: https://sounz.org.nz/works/20747**

Jenny died in 2022, aged 81.

As you can hear, there's really a lot of variety in her music. One of the challenges I faced – as a musicologist – as I wrote her biography, was tracing a pathway through that very eclectic mix of music in a way made sense of some of the twists and turns of her creative life.
Talking to Jenny about the range of her output, she told me:

> What have looked like these enormous zigs and zags, to me have always been a carry-on of something that was [already there … So] it's not these big zigs and zags that people look at and think, 'Oh, did she give up something because something else looked more attractive?' That was partly it, especially when I sort of swung over to pop music, but I was playing rock and roll when it first came in, as a kid.

With the remaining time, I want to drill down into a couple of the really big shifts that occurred in Jenny's compositional work. The first of those is her migration from art music to popular music which occurred in the early 1970s. To do so, I need to talk a bit about the quite complex circumstances of her life in that period.

When I began work on Jenny's biography I gathered up all the publications and interviews and what have you that were publicly available – you know – the usual first things you do when you're trying to find out about something or someone. What I found was that there was plenty of material on Jenny in the 1960s and into the early 1970s when she was a rising star of New Zealand music and subsequently a kind of radical professor. There was also plenty of material on her from the mid-1980s when she was very active as a composer of all sorts of music. That good coverage continued on into the nineties and the new century, too. However, there was a big gap of coverage between about 1972 and 1984. I knew from later interviews that the 1970s had been a somewhat turbulent decade for Jenny and at first brush the story appeared to go something like this:
Jenny McLeod, Douglas Lilburn's golden child, returned from Europe, composed ground-breaking works for young people and, in 1970, was appointed Professor of Music, the youngest professor in the Commonwealth. Then, she got involved in rock and roll, smoked a lot of drugs, and joined the Divine Light Mission, this sort of dodgy eastern meditation cult. In 1976 she blew off the university and went to live in a ashram. It's a great story, right?
And that rather scabrous summary is, it turns out, basically factual. But it doesn't convey at all the complexity of Jenny's character or how nuanced her choices were during that time. When I began work on this project, I was pretty anxious about that period because there was so little documented, but interviews with Jenny and those who had known her during those years, and then a really fantastic find here in the Turnbull, were what enabled me to get a more accurate bead on Jenny's life and work during those years.

The first step in making sense of these shifts in Jenny's music was discovering she had played rock and roll – and really a lot of other music, too – as a teenager growing up in Levin. In her Lilburn Lecture, delivered in the Turnbull Library in 2016, she talked about her first experiences with rock and roll, and located that music in a kind of gestalt, as simply one part of a single, larger – and for Jenny, coherent – field of activity.

The Lilburn lecture:
https://www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/appointment/audio/201825762/the-lilburn-lecture-2016

II. BEGINNINGS
What? No tradition?
In the 'fifties, small-town kiwi-land seemed to have just about every tradition.
I played piano, piano accordion, recorder, tambourine, drums, guitar,
and sometimes (not very well) my brother's trumpet or the clarinet.
(I wanted to play the bagpipes, but didn't have the breath.)
Could sight-read easily, anything and everything: classical (especially Chopin),
Bartók, standards, show music, old-time dance music, hymns, anthems, opera, *et cetera*.
Folksongs learned in the afternoon were performed that night, and then forgotten.
I sang in three choirs, accompanied the Messiah, local revues, shows, singers,
choruses, operettas, high school assemblies, entertained at concerts, talent quests, parties,
improvised vocals washing the dishes, played by ear for country-hall socials,
piped on the organ at the Methodist Church, and again for funerals, weddings, receptions,

played with the only violinist in town, rocked with my brothers in our front-room band,
played guitar and yodelled 'Wake up, Little Susie!' at the bad boys' home.
To me it was all one *huge* tradition, a riotous profusion!
And all of it mine!

Jenny's formal studies at Victoria and in Europe might have landed her quite some distance from the vernacular traditions she had been involved with in Levin, but working on her 1970 music theatre piece *Under the Sun*, she said:

> There was a rock group in it and one night we got into a jam session. This was something I'd never done before, I'd *never* improvised. We went on till three, four in the morning and when I came out of there I felt completely refreshed, renewed in a way, and this had some sort of message in it for me.

Jenny was by that time an enthusiastic consumer of pop music – she loved the Beatles and the Stones and Stevie Wonder, but that experience with the rock band seems to have triggered her appetite to once again be a participant in rock and roll. When I spoke with Jenny about these changes in her music, it was in the early 2020s – almost fifty years after she experienced that evolution, and while I didn't doubt the accuracy of her recollections, they didn't seem to convey the kind of urgency I thought she would have needed to make such a break from the traditions she had been primarily working with – which is to say, moving from classical and avant-garde music across to pop and rock. This is where Turnbull Library holdings came into their own. Among Jenny's papers was a leave report she had written for Victoria University in 1975.

Jenny had taken a year's sabbatical in 1974 and during that leave had spent a great deal of time playing rock music with a group of friends. She had done so because she thought she saw in rock and pop music a 'common international idiom … a musical language more articulate than the strange or beautiful effects, gestures and noises of the avant-garde.' She determined that only by playing the music could she develop the understanding necessary to compose music in that style.

In her leave report to the university summarising her activities during that year away from the classroom, she wrote:

[p.1] …as my ears opened up increasingly to tribal, folk and non-western music, I began to listen differently to rock and see it as a western parallel. I started hearing in it things I hadn't heard before, because my perceptions and conceptions were not attuned finely enough. I was attracted by the common qualities of spontaneity, naturalness, cultural all-pervasiveness and integrity…

Jenny's reading of Claude Levi-Struss and Michel Foucault led her to the understanding that:

[p.2] …any language makes it possible to say certain things but impossible to say others; and that the gaps created by these impossibilities will gradually be filled by a new language, which

will ultimately supersede the old… There came a dawning recognition that (especially) the harmonic language of rock music can be seen as a perfect example of this process […and] all that was prohibited in classical music tonality has become that which, to my ear, is most characteristic of today's mainstream rock harmony.

Jenny went on to explain her membership of a band, her work to gain some mastery of rock music during her sabbatical leave, and how those experiences were changing her approach to composing music:

[p.4] In the course of my work, I saw the possibility of a kind of "classical" music evolving from the rock language, music that could be written down and allow for improvisation as well, that could utilise both conventional instrumental resources (e.g. the orchestra) and the electric resources of a rock band […]
Towards the end of my leave this actually began to happen, and I found myself writing a series of pieces "apt for piano or orchestra with rock band" which do seem to be in something approaching the "classical" rock style I had dimly envisaged.

Reading this was a lightbulb moment for me, and the kind of 'popular' music she composed during the 1980s suddenly made sense as part of an oeuvre that had begun with *Little Symphony* and *For Seven*. It wasn't that Jenny had abandoned the lessons of that earlier music; it was that she substituted the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic languages of classical and avant-garde music for the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic languages of the rock music she was studying and playing.

I think you can hear this in her Rock Sonatas for solo piano. I'll play you a little bit of her second one. In formal terms, this music is straight out of the Brahms playbook, but the harmony and rhythms and melodies are closer to the Beatles or Billy Joel. Here's a snatch of the first movement.

Rock Sonata No. 2. **https://sounz.org.nz/works/12451?locale=en**

Jenny's *Rock Sonata No. 2*. A kind of rocky 'classical' music. Having completed that shift in her compositional style around 1987, Jenny – of course – initiated another. When Jenny made a zig, there almost always followed a zag.

That next shift – from this kind of pop classical music to the rather more austere sound of the Tone Clock with which she began composing in 1988 – was also something I was able to make the best sense of by reading Jenny's own, contemporary accounts which, once again, were archived in the Turnbull.

Jenny had been flat out through the 1980s writing music mainly on commission. In 1987 she suddenly stopped and once again seemed to disappear from view. That disappearance more or less coincided with her travel to the United States where she was a guest composer at a festival

to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Louisville Orchestra. There she met Dutch composer Peter Schat. The following year Jenny told music writer Elizabeth Kerr:

> I knew he was some kind of serial theorist and was prepared to dislike his ideas from the outset, and indeed did start by arguing furiously, as serialism was a complete no-no for me. But the more I listened the more I realised that he was not talking about serialism at all but some kind of new tonality system.

When Jenny met Peter Schat, she was in a difficult spot. She had accepted two major commissions, and taken part-payment for one of them from The QE II Arts Council. And yet she found herself unable to compose any music, let alone the commissioned works. She needed time to reflect, to work out a new direction, to find the way forward. In 1988 she wrote a long letter to the Arts Council, laying out her situation.

More than fifteen years ago, I embarked on a long-term exploration of the language of popular music, sensing that there was a possibility here for a 'classical' music to come into existence, via what seemed to me still to be a 'common language'. Up until August of last year, I followed this line fairly consistently, until finally I think, in my two rock sonatas for piano (of 1987), I did actually achieve the classical music I had set out in pursuit of so long before …

Struggling with the two commissions she had taken on, Jenny realised her musical well was running dry:

The popular language I had worked so hard to achieve turned out finally to be a dead end. Sonata form, though it served me well enough for a time, proved finally deeply unsatisfying, truly a 'dodo', a dead form, and I began to find myself wanting to smash it, and to smash the language, from frustration . . .

There were truly the strains of a 'rock' Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Mozart, etc. floating around there, as I had suspected, in the 'ethers', and I came upon them and mined them many times. But though this was all in terms of present-day popular scales, rhythms and harmonies, I felt the music I came up with was still ultimately so similar to that of its progenitors, that once again I was almost just repeating what they had already done – even though my tunes, and rhythms, and harmonies were new, and sounded as though they belonged in the current age. (Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.)

Jenny also admitted that, ultimately, she found the expressive potential of this kind of music too limited for her needs. It was around the time she came to this realisation, that she met Peter Schat in Kentucky. She was so taken with his ideas, and his music, that instead of returning to Aotearoa after the festival, she flew on to Amsterdam and spent the best part of a month studying Schat's system, going over scores and articles with him.

The more I did this, the more it became clear to me that, as I had sensed, there was indeed a potential for me here, a' way to go', and I became more and more hopeful, as new vistas and possibilities – a new way of thinking, in fact – started opening up.

Jenny went on in the letter, to explain how this new way of thinking had re-energised her composing. She began, slowly, to use Schat's system to write small pieces for piano – music that was eventually published as *Tone Clock Pieces 1-7*. The experience of working with the new system also led her to realise that she was now completely out of touch with the music she had been trying to write for her two large commissions, a realisation that led her to abandon the works.

I just cannot keep on with work I am not satisfied with. My little piano music, on the other hand, is pleasing and satisfying to me. Here I feel (at last) that my own true and original voice is starting to be heard.

For me, coming to this music completely from the outside, the stylistic shift Jenny made between *Rock Sonata No. 2* and the first tone clock piano pieces was almost shocking. But, getting the inside story, the background, from Jenny's letter to the Arts Council about <u>how</u> and <u>why</u> those changes had taken place, helped me to make sense of this major shift in her work.

Later in life, when I knew her, Jenny tended to be both self-deprecating, and equivocal. She was constantly saying things like (and these are verbatim examples from my recorded interviews with her):

'As soon as I say something I can think of just the opposite as an example.'
One time, when we were talking about classical audiences and popular music:
'I find this hard; as soon as I say something, immediately the opposite comes along and says 'Oh yeah?''
And another time:
'Now when I'm talking to you and I say something, immediately the opposite comes into my head.'

In the two documents I've shared with you, from 1975 and 1988, Jenny is – for her, anyway – unequivocal, and her then-contemporary and carefully reasoned position, is more clearly stated than it was when we spoke about these matters 30 or 40 years later.
Admittedly, both of these documents were formal explanations written by Jenny to agencies who were paying her for her work – so a degree of self-examination and rigour is unsurprising. However, Jenny's other writing – explanations of her work, meditations on the arts and culture, music theory, philosophical writing, there's lots of it – was writing primarily undertaken, as far as I can tell, for her own purposes. And that stuff is often equally trenchant.

The writer Joan Didion claimed, 'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.' I suspect Jenny did this too. She wrote really quite a lot of stuff and, reading it now, it seems she was using that exercise to make sense of the things she

encountered. There's not a lot of auto-biography in her accounts, but there is a kind of intellectual diary being kept, and as a biographer I found these documents incredibly illuminating. Thankfully for me a lot of Jenny's writing is in the Turnbull archive and I was able to read it as I wrote her story.

About two weeks before she died Jenny wrote to me and gave me perhaps the greatest gift any biographer could hope for.

> Due to your thoughtful and extended cross-examinations I've come to understand my own life a good deal better than I did before (when I had simply forgotten so much of what happened in the past, being someone who more characteristically looks forward to the unknown rather than backward to the occasionally less palatable).

I was deeply touched by her letter, and I've re-read it many times. But, you know, all I <u>really</u> did much of the time as I wrote Jenny's story, was reflect back the thinking and rigorous self-examination she herself had undertaken. That she had documented that thinking, and then archived it in the Turnbull, is something for which I remain truly grateful.

Ngā manaakitanga,

Norman Meehan.
Wellington, 2024