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Modernist and Postmodernist Arts of Noise, Part 2: From the Clifton Hill mob to Chamber Made Opera's *Phobia*

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Abstract

This paper will continue to trace negotiations outlined in Part 1 of the music/noise dichotomy as expressed in modernist and postmodernist works.[1] *Drawing connections with the trajectory of "glitch" in popular music since the 1970s, the paper will examine a number of key ways in which the music/noise dichotomy has been addressed as a borderline dispute between, for example, the embodied and the disembodied, the scored and the unscored, the accidental and the intentional, sense and nonsense, culture and nature. Two key figures from the highly influential group of sound artists who came together at Melbourne's Clifton Hill Community Centre during the 1970s are Warren Burt and Chris Mann. They collaborated on "Subjective Beats Metaphor" (1983), which plays with biological vocoders and electronic voice manipulation, illuminating constructions such as subjectivity, accent and syntactical meaning. Chamber Made Opera's recent production, "Phobia" (2004), is a startling tribute to Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo" and Hollywood noise artists, or sound effects teams, achieving a mesmeric amalgamation of music theatre, performance art and "physical theatre" in which "noises off" mime the disintegration of characters' mental states, sense into nonsense, meaning into materiality.*

The other recent Australian noise art works to be discussed here engage with the music/noise dichotomy in different ways from *Stack*. Chamber opera *Phobia* (2003) is by composer and "sound conceptualiser," Gerard Brophy (born 1957), with Chamber Made Opera's Douglas Horton as writer/director and the performing groups, the Ennio Morricone Experience and desoxy.[2] *Phobia* plays self-consciously with emotional connotations of sounds. Two key figures from the highly influential group of sound artists who, along with Bandt, came together at Melbourne's Clifton Hill Community Centre during the 1970s are Warren Burt (born 1949) and Chris Mann (born 1949).[3] Their late modernist, experimentalist collaboration, *Subjective Beats Metaphor* (1983) (for speaking voice and electronics),[4] contains no 'music': it is *all* 'noise,' and it contrasts starkly with *Phobia* and *Stack*, which combine music and noise in their postmodern grappling with, and transformation of, modernism's project of the art of noise.

Lettrist Nonsense Sound Poetry Meets Late Twentieth Century Glitch: *Subjective Beats Metaphor*

Subjective Beats Metaphor mixes late twentieth century noise art with the tradition of Dadaist and Lettrist nonsense sound poetry of the 1920s to 1930s. Burt traces his interest in mistakes, errors and glitches to the early 1970s, where he perceived the effects of mistakes, hearing them not as deviations from a norm, but as sounds in their own right, and which he found, "in their own right," quite "beautiful."[5] Similarly in his work with technology, he has often pushed circuits or software beyond that envisioned by the designer.[6]

Comprising chance procedures operating from both the narrator/performer (Mann) and the sound manipulator (Burt), much of *Subjective Beats Metaphor*'s agenda reflects mid twentieth century high modernism's eschewing of emotion and its processes in music making, in favour of objective, formalist quests for purity and expansion of the medium. It also embodies Cageian experimentalism's

desire to transcend composer/audience subjectivity. Mann recites an original text,[7] the reading of which is electronically modified and distorted by Burt; Mann can hear only the "treatment," through headphones. The audience hears the combined outcome of this process. Mann is unable to meaningfully inflect—or reflect on—his reading, and this forces an acute (though unwillful) modification of the wilfully anti-aesthetic "rant"-like text. Rather, Mann is rendered robotic, de-personalised, without subjectivity. In Mann's words, he is reduced to a "biological vocoder, transmitting information with a neutrality that [approaches] that of a piece of electronic equipment."[8] The work performs an "experimentalist," anti- high art gesture: the reading is inflected with a strong working class Australian accent (produced from a somatic memory, as Mann cannot hear himself to moderate it) and its "anti-aesthetic" pitch is evident in much of the choice of vocabulary and syntax.[9] Much of the monologue is akin to a fractured inner dialogue or letter home from a faux naïve Australian traveller in New York: for example,

> as they say down under fuck off … we are on the other side of the world to you so that means when we sneeze you fart … whatja say t that then in that me metaphor has done a bunk n it don look too good order schmorder I think so imply a lot Christmas so now th question is is it more real to go by bus or by car?

Yet, the subjective voice of this narrative is dismembered by the reading and its sonic treatment (as well as the "nonsense" aspects of the text), acting out modernism's quest for objectivity and its scorn for the purely emotive.

A modernist abrasion of "worldly" sense here is stark. The text itself slips in and out of linear intelligibility. The electronic sounds make no "sense" in correlation with the text. The sounds unpredictably, "accidentally," erode the sense of the text. The humour suggests an experimentalist lampooning of academic/"uptown" modernism's "secret language" where meaning is opaque, known only to the creator.[10] Simultaneously, the audience is aware that sense is being eroded at a significant level for the performer (Mann) who cannot hear or discern the "sense" of his performance. Semantic clarity is sacrificed for the modernist celebration of sound properties for their own sake, inflected with the Cageian joy of "unplanned" noise discoveries.

Fun and *Phobia* at the Foley Desk

Phobia alludes archly to Cageian modernism in scene IV with a score direction for five of the six strong ensemble, "performed at Foley desk in the fashion of difficult contemporary music concert," with a "prepared" upright piano on whose exposed strings the sixth performer, crouching, plucks a menacing three note motive (starting A-C-B, Bb-Db-C, etcetera) that crawls up the eight octaves. A generically hybrid or indeterminate work that treads the line between scored and improvised, mobilising a pastiche of musical styles that range from jazz and minimalism to "world" music, *Phobia* could best be described as a comico-serious meta-commentary on the role of sound—including noise effects and music—in cinema and, specifically, in the noir genre from which it unashamedly steals its plot, which is that of Hitchcock's 1958 psychodrama, *Vertigo*, with a few character and place name changes.

Avant-garde noise art and cinema have been in dialogue from the outset: when Luigi Russolo moved to Paris in 1928, for example, movie studios showed an interest in the eight intonarumori, or acoustic machines, that he had invented for his "art of noises."[11] Film and the avant-garde art of noise having crossbred in their earliest days, *Phobia* could be seen as a ritual gesture of reclaiming the art of noise from the mainstream cinema into which it was absorbed by Hollywood and demoted to an accompaniment of image and dialogue—augmenting them, interpreting, but always subordinate.[12] In *Phobia*, whose title announces what every noir film at some level is "about," noises or sound effects are not the incidental by-products of actions, serving to "signify" those actions (footsteps crunching on gravel, the creaking of a door turning on its hinge, typewriter keys clicking, and so on). Rather, such noises become the primary stuff of aesthetic composition itself—as, indeed, they always have been for soundtrack editors, but only implicitly for audiences.

The production of this work reflects the activities of Foley artists during the 1950s and 1960s, when the entire sound track, including the dialogue and hand produced sound effects, was often dubbed after a film's completion.[13] It should be noted that postproduction dubbing of sound effects, dialogue, and music remains the norm. What has changed is not the use of post-dubbing itself, but rather the way

in which these sounds are produced. This used to be mostly Foley artists performing in real time to a projection of the relevant filmic section. Now it is mostly done on consoles using a library of pre-recorded sound effects. That is to say, sound libraries—which have existed since the inception of sound—have now entirely replaced the "live" Foley artist, except in public performance works such as that of *Phobia* or the Blue Grassy Knoll. Douglas Horton comments, "The theatricality, musicality, irony and humour of [*Phobia*] is partly inspired by the absurdities and intricacies involved in producing this sound world."[14] *Phobia*'s set *is* its enormous Foley desk (along with a car windshield, six or so tables piled high with technical oddments, microphones, and scripts), the six protagonists—five men and one woman—creating every sound, including all the effects, instrument playing and all the voices.

Phobia's narrative encompasses a fairly comprehensive list of entrenched noir signifiers, including: false identity, double cross, paranoia, (male) mental anguish, (because of) (female) betrayal on the romantic front, revenge, (female) madness (diagnosed), suicide attempts (and success stories), beautiful female being seduced by sleazy parts of town, male heroic acts of saviour (in one of the attempts), (male) obsession (undiagnosed) (on the romantic front again), bungled police chases, detective surveillance and plot unravelling, and shocking denouement (including [female] death and murder on the part of enraged and outraged [male] lover).[15] While *Phobia* roughly rehearses the convoluted Freudian plot of *Vertigo* complete with voice over and dialogue, the on stage action, which is to say the visual entertainment, of the work consists not in Hitchcock's characters acting out their phobias and phantasies, but in the performers performing the actions required to produce the noises—the sound world—of the piece. These include a special Foley door laden with numerous latches and locks, countless other found or modified objects, clogs and musical instruments (comprising cello, double bass, percussion, tuned and untuned, and trumpet). Thus the sounds and their production, in this "opera," are no longer incidental to or expressive of narrative events and actions, but are, rather, self-referential, and the audience is invited to take its primary pleasure in admiring the performers' skill and cooperative precision in creating the sounds from an unlikely variety of objects or "instruments."

In *Phobia*, both modernist and traditional hierarchies of visual narrative and music/noise are upended. Not only does an audience *hear* the visuals but it *sees* the sounds: what is usually invisible background—sound effects—becomes visible foreground. Instead of seeing a victim's bones being broken, the audience sees the breaking of a large celery stick over a bowl; another character's shuffling feet in a gravel tray simulates the visitor crunching his sinister way up the drive; and characters are seen attiring themselves in plastic to ensure their every movement is audible, giving the audience the claustrophobic acoustic impression of being right up next to the characters. We hear the sounds of a couple dancing—but what we see is Teresa Blake bending double on an amplified strip of the stage, her hands inserted backwards into a man's shoes, and shuffling around on all fours. On one level, the distinction between the visual and the aural is as stark as possible: the sight of snapping celery does not conjure breaking bones; but on another level, because of our heritage of such sonic signposts, in this context the noise of breaking celery *can* conjure breaking bones.

An important dimension of *Phobia's* take on the role of noise effects and music in noir is its postmodern meta-commentary on music's ability to manipulate our affective responses. In *Phobia*, there is no wholesale revelry in, or simple "return to," affectivity after high modernism shunned the emotive or subjective; rather, *Phobia* inserts postmodern inverted commas around the whole issue of emotional responses to the suspense-genre that is orchestrated by sound effects.[16] In noir, the critical undermining of character psychology and its construction through the narrative is often achieved via a swapping of power roles across gender lines. The characters in *Phobia* take this destabilisation still further: no actor "is" character "x" or "y" for the duration of the work, rather, all the actors share the roles[17]—yet the archetypal personages of femme fatale, private eye and so on are readily discernible, showing how entrenched these archetypes are. Just as character mobility precludes any fully engaged or "pure" emotional response, there is little entry to any character's individuality or affective state of mind, no inflections from emotional nuance—apart from a kind of robotic, pervasive shock state; there is no consistent "grain of the voice"; the program of affective vocal communication is re-purposed (as in Burt and Mann's *Subjective Beats Metaphor*, but with different consequences).

At one point in *Phobia*, a character recites his lines and then plays them back on a Dictaphone, augmenting the sense of displacement and capturing the sinisterness of noir's ringing telephone, in response to which, as Anna Krien observes, *Phobia*'s performers duly "tense like electrocuted cats."[18] Self-referentially, the actors perform what a cinema audience might have been feeling, turning the connoted emotion of a sound into a denoted performance, so that *Phobia*'s audience hardly needs to do

any feeling for itself. Victoria Laurie suggests that *Phobia* "should be watched with eyes wide open, then shut, then open again; not to block out the scary bits but as a way of pinpointing the show's almost indefinable brilliance";[19] this is also a way of pinpointing the way sounds in context—and here, every disturbed moment in Hitchcock's films has been magnified—become signifying icons, and in this work the blurring between art and life is acute. It is in this way that one never, during the show, become "scared"—despite the myriad potential "scare"-inducements provided, both aurally (complete with a repeated distant scream and gasping heavy terrified breathing into telephones) and narratively.[20]

It is here that a most significant ramification of *Phobia's* postmodern toppling of the noise/music dichotomy occurs. One's critical focus is always engaged, apprehending how *this* sound is made, which conjures *that* action and in turn elicits *that* emotion, not to mention the attendant humour: it is difficult to combine pure terror with laughter. The response that emerges is a kind of wryly smiling *knowingness*—and in this way *Phobia* is at a far remove from much of *Subjective Beats Metaphor*. Furthermore, the two instances of "realistic" narrative realisation in terms of stage "action" that do occur, are the two most hyperbolic or most tragic narrative events, and these are treated in a fashion that indeed subverts the genre. The suicide of a woman jumping from a high building is repeated numerous times; she also falls (in acrobatic slow motion, backwards) down a flight of stairs.[21] These events become on one level abstracted, visual tableaux of beauty, and on another level they are rendered as something akin to a musical ritornello: they are far from amounting to horrifying moments of character demise.[22]

Phobia defies any single generic classification, least of all as opera, whether chamber or full scale. Much of the score comprises jazz charts with the odd bass line, rhythmic patterns, chord charts (although much of it is monodic), motivic snatches, call-and-response fragments, and directions for "comps" and "feels."[23] Brophy underlines the importance to the work of sonic cultural associations when he insists that *Phobia* is "about memory"; while he acknowledges that all music is dependent, to varying degrees, on memory, here, "particular attention is afforded the darker recesses of our powers of recollection."[24] That so much of the music can be successfully realised from such minimal score direction attests to the extent and depth of musical "memories." There are no arias, not even singable melodic lines. Music in *Phobia*, rather, is de-programmed; it is treated as another near visual *effect*. The emphasis is on rhythm at the expense of melody, apart from a few tantalising solos for cello, trumpet and vibraphone—tantalising because they are allusions *to* or memories *of* full blown musical episodes, rather than fully worked, coherent passages: a score direction for Scene II, for example, reads: "a spasmodic, deconstructed bop section over an insistent, driving drum solo which gradually builds but never quite comes together." Similarly de-programmed, the vocal parts are often mere monotone chanting of the dialogue. While the effect of the six members of the chorus speaking as one — "whispering confessions down the line"—is, as Daniel Ziffer describes it, "chilling,"[25] this prevents any soaring melodic experience and merges the aural and visual as the static melodic lines are presented as static visual tableaux by the characters. There is also much simultaneity of dialogue snatches, radio voice overs, intrusions of conflicting parts of the narrative into others. Because the lines are uttered either in chorus or monotone, the dialogue becomes abstracted and de-subjectivised.

Since the sounds in *Phobia* rarely "express" the objects that produce them (for example, the sound of a string bass-line is produced by striking books rather than plucking a double bass, and the work includes the gratuitous production of "sound effects" that perform no narrative or emotive function), the sounds become "autonomised," not subordinated to—or even illustrative of—narrative, as in cinema. Rather than making music to *accompany* dialogue, the composers of *Phobia* make music *out of* the dialogue. In a Laurel-and-Hardy-esque slapstick routine, two characters use kitchen utensils as musical instruments and each other's bodies as literal sounding boards, while engaging in the jerky, rapid and wooden dialogue of the old thrillers: the discourse is transmuted into a polyphonic percussion exchange, on two bodies.[26] But the work's "autonomising" of sound functions very differently from that of modernist noise art. Not only is *Phobia* "about sound" and sound's complex interface with noise,[27] but it treats the object of representation, not as the natural/accidental sounds/noises of "life" itself, but as a box of aesthetic tricks, a set of sonic conventions, deployed to manipulate audience responses in the noir genre of cinema that we can no longer (if we ever could) apprehend as an objective representation of "life" but only as a cluster of stylistic devices and effects. *Phobia*'s treatment of sound can be described using Michel Chion's term, "anempathic," relating to sonic juxtapositions in certain forms of cinema, where sounds confound the listener because of unexpected and non-realistic placements or balance in sound effects, music, speech etcetera; this can be deployed for overt or subconscious effect.[28] Indeed, these days we can now only think about noir cinema "in

quotation marks" as a dated style available for an art of pastiche. From this perspective, postmodern *Phobia*, with its relationship of parody, affectionate homage and "repurposing" to an earlier genre of entertainment, contrasts with the early and mid century modernist phenomena described in Part 1 of this paper and exemplified in *Subjective Beats Metaphor*.[29]

Concluding Remarks

The few works discussed here only scratch the surface of current Australian "noise art." A more representative sample would need to have included those of such composers as Roger Dean and Hazel Smith,[30] Jon Rose, Alistair Riddell, David Hirst, Ernie Althoff, David Chesworth, Rainer Linz, Les Gilbert, Sarah Hopkins, Alan Lamb, Trevor Wishart, Richard Vella, Cindy John, Kay Morton, Catherine Schieve, Amanda Stewart, Philip Brophy, Ross Bolleter, and Brigid Burke, just to name a few.[31] Of the examples addressed in this two part paper, the art of noise in *Subjective Beats Metaphor* carries on the tradition of modernism's impulse to provoke, to push the envelope of the aesthetic by incorporating the anti-aesthetic, dating at least as far back as Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) urinal which emptied art of content and placed aesthetic frames around anti-aesthetic material. *Phobia*'s effects are both to embrace and extend modernism's proposal—from Russolo through to Cage—for finding "acoustic enjoyment" in noise (outlined in Part 1). The postmodern noises in *Phobia* are expressive of their own making rather than *solely* expressive of events or actions of which they are the sonic by-product. By placing noise effects—usually the background—into the foreground, the direct emotional fear responses are downplayed: we can directly perceive what is pulling our responses, what is making our heartbeat race. At the same time, the noise effects themselves, in their wittiness, virtuosity, and iconic significance, comprise the fabric of the "musical" content of the works, thus becoming aestheticised. Yet, with the audience's awareness of the contrived nature of noise and its effects made clear at every moment in performance, the noise effects are also very much of the "world": the art/nature divide is no longer sharply delineated.

Notes

[1] See David Bennett's article, immediately above in this volume.

[2] Gerard Brophy and Chamber Made Opera, *Phobia* (2003). Members of desoxy are theatre performers, Teresa Blake and Dan Witton. The Ennio Morricone Experience comprises Dan Witton, Boris Conley, Graeme Leak, David Hewitt, and Patrick Cronin. Design coordinator is Jacqui Everitt; sound engineer Steph O'Hara; producers Performing Lines and CMO.

[3] See Ernie Althoff, "The Clifton Hill Community Centre: 1976-1983," *New Music Articles,* 7 (1989), http://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/repr/Clifton_Hill.html accessed 17 Jul 2005.

[4] Warren Burt and Chris Mann, *Subjective Beats Metaphor* (for speaking voice and electronics), *NMATAPES 2* (Melbourne: NMA Publications, 1983). Commissioned by the Paris Autumn Festival.

[5] Anon, "Warren Burt," *The IDEA: The Indian Documentary of Electronic Arts*, 5 (Jan-Jul 2002), http://retiary.net/idea/idea5/IDEA_5/warren/warren.htm accessed 7 Jul 2005.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Reprinted and called "other" in *New Music Articles,* 2 (1983), p. 3.

[8] John Jenkins, "Chris Mann," *Twenty Two Contemporary Australian Composers* (Melbourne: NMA Publications, 2001), http://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/22CAC/mann.html accessed 13 Jul 2005.

[9] This ploy can be related to the rise in the use of Australian vocal mannerisms in theatre, radio and film at this time the works of Barry Oakley, David Williamson, John Romeril, Barry Humphries, the Pram Factory and La Mama as a whole. Katherine Brisbane and others identify a self-conscious combination of working-class Australian strine with sophisticated linguistic play as a chief dialectic within these works, drawing in part upon the precedents of Banjo Paterson, *The Bulletin*, etcetera. See Katherine Brisbane, *Not Wrong Just Different: Observations on the rise of contemporary Australian theatre* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency, 2005).

[10] See Robert Morgan, "Secret Languages: The roots of musical modernism," *Critical Inquiry,* 10.3 (1984).

[11] See Richard Abel and Rick Altman, eds, *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: IUP, 2001).

[12] Extensive literature exists on the history of the way in which early to mid twentieth century avant-garde music became associated with horror, thriller and other genres as "spooky" music, thus both popularizing yet rendering banal the association made by Schoenberg and others of modern urban life with atonal and/or otherwise discordant musics. See Phillip Brophy, ed., *Cinesonic: The world of sound in film* (North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1999).

[13] Sound effect artists, after Hollywood sound artist Jack Foley.

[14] Douglas Horton, "Writer/Director's Note," *Phobia* program note (Melbourne: CMO, 2005).

[15] *Phobia's* narrative intricacy conforms neatly to noir*'s* narratives which were "frequently complex, maze-like and convoluted, and typically told with foreboding background music, flashbacks (or a series of flashbacks), witty, razor-sharp and acerbic dialogue, and/or reflective and confessional, first-person voice-over narration." Tim Dirks, "Film Noir" (1996/2005), http://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html accessed 29 Jun 2005.

[16] One reviewer commented "while the atmosphere created is rich—and occasionally intense—the audience will have to decide for themselves whether it is at all enjoyable." Daniel Ziffer, "Phobia," *The Age* (23 May, 2005), http://theage.com.au/news/Reviews/Phobia/2005/05/22/1116700591154.html accessed 25 May 2005.
[17] "Voices are baton-passed," as Horton puts it. Horton, "Writer/Director's Note."
[18] Anna Krien, "Chamber Made Opera's *Phobia,"* http://www.theprogram.net.au/reviewsSub.asp?id=716 accessed 19 Sept 2003.
[19] Victoria Laurie, "An Open-and-Shut-and-Open Case," *The Australian* (28 April 2005), http://www.chambermade.org.au/phobia_reviews_aust2005.htm accessed 5 May 2005.
[20] An alternative reading arises here if one accepts the essentially Freudian/psychoanalytic linking of laughter with nervous tension / threat / repression / etcetera—which is a widely accepted and applied model within film criticism and cinesonics. Then the conflation of humor with fear (and sex) would become a salient feature of noir which *Phobia* exploits, extends and perhaps brings to the foreground. So while one might not actually become "scared" as such, one certainly becomes (or more accurately, could become) tense due to a certain degree of, albeit fragmented, character and/or narrative identification, leading to considerable tension, which elevates the tendency to find the work humorous. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-75), vol 8.
[21] Here the gender lines remain traditional and fixed.
[22] Catherine Clément's now infamous 1989 charge comes to mind here about traditional opera audiences becoming transported by the beautiful arias to the extent that they can gloss over the heinous acts of murder occurring on stage. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989).
[23] Such as "muzickdoos [sic] begins its extremely volatile and rubato naïve dance. This is accompanied by the naïve, child-like song from David." *Phobia*, scenes IX-X.
[24] Brophy, *Phobia* program notes. He continues: "The omnipresent ominous foreboding of the text is underpinned with the sounds of menace and darkness, and studded in this slowly writhing morass are the shards of more familiar but disembodied music."
[25] Ziffer.
[26] This also evokes the way Fred Astaire used to turn his environments into instruments by tap dancing and using his cane on them, as well as the many other comic and vaudevillian performers of early sound cinema who experimented with sound (the famous stepladder dance sequence, the Marx brothers, Eddie Kantor, etcetera).
[27] Gerard Brophy, "Composer's Note," *Phobia* program note. Horton declares that the distinctions between music, sound effect and theatricality are "seamlessly" blurred. Horton, "Writer/Director's Note."
[28] Michel Chion, Walter Murch and Claudia Gorbman, *Audio-Vision: Sound on screen* (NY: Columbia UP, 1994). Cited in Roger Dean and Hazel Smith, "Sonic Narratives: Intermedia transformations in the work of Australysis," *Music and the Australasian Media: Australasian music research,* 8 (2004), p. 95.
[29] In the context of Australian performance history, the work of Richard Murphett and Opencity too also constitutes a form of music theatre criticism or intervention into the form of film noir and its dense musicological associations. See Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman, eds, *Performing the Unnameable: An anthology of Australian performance texts* (Sydney: Currency/RealTime, 1999).
[30] Interestingly, the detective genre is also parodically explored by Dean and Smith of austraLYSIS in their *The Musecal Detective.* Dean and Smith, "Sonic Narratives," p. 95.
[31] For a recent overview of experimental music in Melbourne, see Robin Fox, "Experimental Music in Melbourne: A definition and historical overview," *Context,* 24 (Spring 2002), pp. 15-32.