

A music of our own

The search Douglas Lilburn began for a New Zealand classical tradition remains exhilarating. BY LYELL CRESSWELL

When I was a student in Wellington, there were no dead New Zealand composers. Now (far too soon), we have quite a number. Perhaps this means a tradition is emerging in New Zealand music. Things have changed since 1946, when Douglas Lilburn gave a lecture to students at the first Cambridge Summer Music School, but most of the issues he raised are as meaningful today as they were then. In this lecture, *A Search for Tradition*, Lilburn spoke from a unique position; he had no models, he was the first significant composer to be performed in this country.

The lecture is a plea for "the necessity of having a

Douglas Lilburn: interested in identity, not nationalism.

music of our own ... A music that will satisfy those parts of our being that cannot be satisfied by the music of other nations."

Lilburn is not interested in nationalism, but in a search for identity. He talks about the difficulties facing aspiring composers, about music education, about thoughts of leaving New Zealand and about the use of Maori music. He finds aspects of the landscape – rhythms, contours, colours and light – that need to be harnessed to "bring us into harmony with them". I think myself that through landscape artists find a way of using natural forces to convey their expressive vision. The confrontations and the harmony within the landscape can become a metaphor for human conflict and aspirations.

Lilburn enjoins us to cast off dependence on older countries and to find our own identity and "feeling towards the people and the environment". I agree that we must find the music in our own souls, not simply from the sounds that are around us – music that can satisfy a "spiritual need".

In the later, more wary, lecture *A Search for a Language* (1969), Lilburn quotes poet Allen Curnow: "We don't write the works we want to write, but the works that are in us." However, he suggests that since all types of music are now easily accessible, our composers have no choice "other than to be eclectic" – picking and choosing what we want from wherever. It seems to me this applies to composers everywhere. He says all music is "dependent on those who have gone before", but



Lilburn and poet Allen Curnow.

I believe we can express the same things in a way that is particular to ourselves – in a way that is not the same as before.

In *A Search for a Language*, Lilburn's intention is "to re-examine the position of the composer in this country". He touches on the dangers of security, and the career prospects for the creative mind – "a creeping paralysis of academicism" – but speaks of a number of improvements in the recognition of composers. His main question is whether there can be a specifically New Zealand style. He wonders if our society has become too comfortable to foster meaningful music, or too far removed from the suffering of repressed humanity, or simply too dependent on trends from abroad. He craves works that "come from inward necessity rather than from outward occasions" and seems to conclude reluctantly that there is no specifically New Zealand style.

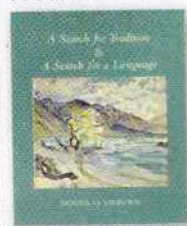
I know, however, and from my own experience of presenting concerts of New Zealand music in Edinburgh, listeners find a difference and a freshness in New Zealand music, although they are unable to say just what this is.

Lilburn is now dead. He was a hero, but the search "remains exhilarating". It goes on for a music that will fulfil "that sense of belonging somewhere" and the "necessity just to sing from the heart of our belief".

The Lilburn Residence Trust must be congratulated for producing this splendid edition of these important lectures to mark the 10th anniversary of Lilburn's death. As well as various photographs, biographical information, perceptive introductions by JM Thomson and an astute afterword by Jack Body, the book contains an apposite parallel "text" of reproductions of paintings and drawings by Rita Angus and pages from Lilburn's scores. ■

A SEARCH FOR TRADITION & A SEARCH

FOR A LANGUAGE,
by Douglas Lilburn
(Lilburn Residence
Trust, \$24.99).



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