

PROFILE

Edward Cowie



(Photograph, Chloe Rosser)

Edward Cowie was born in England in 1943. In 1964 he began composition studies with [Alexander Goehr](#) and in 1971 he won a [Chopin](#) Fellowship to study with [Witold Lutosławski](#) in Poland. Between 1973 and 1983 he was Associate Professor of Composition at the [University of Lancaster](#). In 1983 Cowie became Professor and Head of the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, Australia, moving to [James Cook University, Townsville](#) in 1989 as Professor and Director of the Australian Arts Fusion Centre. He returned to England in 1995 to become Professor and Director of Research at [Dartington College of Arts](#). In 1988 he became an Australian citizen and since November, 2023 has chosen to live in Australia. He is married to the distinguished Australian visual Artist, Heather Cowie.

Cowie is a polymath. He originally trained as a physicist but was also a student of painting and learnt violin and piano from an early age. He began composing in his early teens. He refuses to accept compartmentalism in the arts and sciences and holds doctorates in both

music and theoretical physics (the latter combining mathematics, fine art, music and ornithology). In 1983 Cowie was awarded the first Granada Composer Fellowship with the [Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra](#); he was also the first composer in association with the BBC Singers and Artist in Residence with the RSPB. He has had one-man shows of his paintings and drawings worldwide, has written and presented radio series for both the BBC and ABC and made two acclaimed films for television. His music is published by United Music Publishing. Since 2019 a steady stream of albums on Metier Divine Arts in 2019 has gained an ever wider appreciation of his music.

I first encountered your music when BBC Radio 3 broadcast your Gesangbuch cycle in the 1970s and listening to that music again I am struck by how consistent your musical voice has been. You have a very distinctive compositional vocabulary, although it is also one in which nothing seems to be ruled out. How did you arrive at the soundworld you inhabit? Are you aware of changes that I have missed?

My 'sound world' has coexisted with other sound-worlds from the moment I realised what listening could teach me. Those first sound worlds were metropolitan (Birmingham until I was 5), then isolated rural (Suffolk from 5 to 7 and then the Cotswolds from 7 to 18). I can't emphasise enough what a continuous revelation the sounds of wild nature were to me. Link that to the fact that I was born with a natural ability to draw and that I have an all-encompassing curiosity (my teacher Sandy Goehr thinks I'm Humboldt reborn!) and you can see that when a musical language first nudged me to compose, the dominant sonic resource, so far as form and systems were concerned, was derived from nature.

I started learning the violin at 8 and the piano from 10 onwards. I was a very good violinist but when I was 20 a serious rugby injury to my left hand put an end to that, so my piano skills had to improve. The repertoire for strings had an especially huge, sometimes shocking influence on me. I remember playing second violin in Bartok's 4th and 5th quartets in my late teens and being overwhelmed by what the music 'spoke'. The early 1960s saw Britain dominated by the 'new' (already old) music of composers like Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. Under the influence of Sandy Goehr, with whom I studied on and off between 1964 and 1971), I absorbed Second Viennese music with great enthusiasm. Their music prompted me to see and hear connections with soundscapes from and in nature. From Schoenberg I learned of the dangers of too much systematisation of pitch and harmony, though *Ewartung* remains one of my favourite orchestral works. From Webern I learned about the important of pitch and moment (this also relates to my studies in theoretical physics and mathematics). From Berg I learned about the potency of fusion(s) between all sorts of musical styles and languages and, above all, the fecundity of polytonal ways of thinking about harmony.

Any changes are to do with experience. I toyed with serialism in the early 60s; hated it. I flirted with tonality in the early 70s; even less successful. Gradually I realised that 'voicing' could be adapted to context and inspiration: forms and harmonies in my science-inspired works (such as the *Particle Partita*) are more dissonant and complex than works inspired by the movement of water and clouds (the Concerto for Orchestra, the recent Bird Portrait Cycles). It's a bit like T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*: 'arriving at a place for the first time where you have been before'.

It's also very clear that a preoccupation with the natural world informs everything you create, from the sounds of particular creatures to the way in which your music proliferates. Is this a conscious strategy, or rather a reflection of the sort of person you are?

'The Natural World' encompasses a vastness beyond my comprehension. It may well be that the sheer scale and magnitude of the Natural World, itself a microcosm of the Cosmos, is the progenitor of my appetite for knowledge of that same natural world. It's a reflection of myself but not just as a manifestation of an inbuilt intuitive energy. Consciousness of the infinite connectivity between all forms and behaviours of forms in nature harks back to Pliny the Younger, Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe, Humboldt, Ruskin, Klee, Kandinsky and to some extent, Messiaen. They all had a deep curiosity for the natural world and made a practice of observing, analysing and theorising about it. Perhaps they had childhoods like mine, embedded in a vast multiplicity of 'behaviours of things'. In any event, from a very early age, I wanted to learn about how the universe works by engaging in field study, reading and analysis. Nothing I learned as a result of a musical training has given me such a huge kaleidoscope of formal and structural paradigms and dynamics.

Yet ever since I began to learn to play a musical instrument and then to compose music, I've encountered considerable opposition to the causality that initiates and fires my musical imagination. I suspect there might have been less hostility to my music were it not common knowledge that I study nature as a means of creating music and that I paint and draw to prepare and prime new music. Messiaen also still suffers from a degree of scepticism because of his use of birdsong in some of his most important musical compositions. For better or worse, my music is (in)formed by a continuous study and experience of nature. Such an approach challenges and even threatens a more conventional (and conservative) idea of a right and proper way to conjure music, but it's in my nature, naturally, to be a composer who is in and part of nature.

You also make visual art, which seems to develop in similar ways to your music: there are linear connections, but also juxtapositions, all characterised by a sense of an organic flow. How do you decide when you are going to make sounds and when you are going to make images?

It's easy to forget that the word 'imagination' is derived from 'image'! Jacob Bronowski, a great mathematician, always insisted that he couldn't practice mathematical thinking without visualising the mathematical materials he was thinking about, and many of us might not be sure how many of our senses are at work during the acts of perception and thinking. Our ancient ancestors were no doubt multi- and inter-sensual in their daily lives, with rituals that certainly involved acts of visualisation, music-making, dancing, storytelling, tasting food and perhaps even various forms of tactility.

The serious study of the creative processes in the arts began in the epoch of Plato, went into eclipse for a thousand years or more and then re-emerged in the 15th century Renaissance. Those early studies and writings didn't go as deeply into the nature of the creative process as they did when Plato's 'Academy' was reborn in the academic arts institutions that emerged in the late 18th and into the 19th century, although such academies focused their methodological studies within the confines and syntaxes of each specific discipline. Even the Bauhaus didn't manifest a truly interdisciplinary study programme; only Klee and Kandinsky focused especially on formal and dynamic connections between the visual arts and music.

Not until I founded The School of Creative Arts in Wollongong in 1983, and then The Australian Arts Fusion Centre in Townsville in 1988, was there anywhere in the world where a serious study, linked with creative practices, of what was known as 'Arts Fusion' took place. Subsequent incarnations seem to me to be very frail and problematic attempts to find some kind of alchemical fusion between one arts practice and another. Only in The Arts Fusion Centre did arts and science-based practitioners and theorists work together. Maybe Klee, Kandinsky and I have all been wrong, but I doubt it!

My personal fusion of (natural) science, visual art and music is in stages. Field-work first: actually perceiving different habitats and often drawing in an unmediated and representational way. In a second sketch-book I may draw more abstract modes of representing the forms and behaviours of forms surrounding me. Such sketches might, for example, include representations of phenomena like wind on water, cloud-drifts, sunrise/sets, flight patterns of birds and insects, and often non-music-notations of sound patterns of creatures like birds but also of ambient environmental sounds, in situ. The third stage often bridges field-work with work in my studio and always includes many more musical notations; notations from the voices of sounding creatures but also sounds generated by things like water, wind and even fire! The fourth stage is one in which a new form of visualisation, where things like speed, density, symmetry or non-symmetry are not only drawn or painted but translated and relocated into musical materials. So there is no point at which I use one mode of self-expression and then another one. The connection between seeing and hearing is an absolute one where 'infolding' is always perceived as a natural process.

Your musicmaking has always seemed to be nurtured by close relationships with particular performers, like the Kreutzer Quartet in more recent years and the BBC Singers in the 1970s and 80s. Is this how you prefer to work?

My earliest experiences of playing music were as a soloist on either violin or piano. But in adolescence duos between violin and piano, violin and cello, piano and voice, or flute and piano happened quite often. It didn't take long for me to realise both the pleasures of performing with someone else and the myriad problems and difficulties that could arise! As a university student it was possible, for the first time, to play duos, trios and quartets with highly gifted (some of them already professional) players. I deliberately chose to play with wind, brass and even percussionists because it was undoubtedly the best way to learn how these different species of instruments worked – their limitations and their capacity to go beyond conventional means of generating sound.

Playing in a string quartet in the early 1960s, for example, was a powerful habitat for collaborative practice and between the ages of 9 and 11 I sang frequently in Gloucester Cathedral. Consequently, by the time I was twenty-one, the human voice and chamber music were my favourite environments in which to experience music. And because many of these players were friends, I wrote a great deal of music for both voices and small groups of instruments. Decades later, they remain my favourite musical medium.

You mentioned my decade of collaboration with Peter Sheppard Skaerved and The Kreutzer Quartet. To that astounding group must be added the names of many other soloists and duos, musicians with breath-taking technical skills and ear-popping creative brilliance; they know who they are because their gifts and mine are combined, fused in an ongoing outpouring of performances and recordings. These are collaborations involving a continuum of learning in all directions.

I should have written lots of books about music but, every time I've tried, the creative process has spawned writings of unspeakable tedium and academic stolidity. I certainly should have written about the benefits to a composer of collaboration. I been very lucky in the length and breadth of collaborations I've had (and still have) with musicians of great diversity. For any kind of collaboration to work, however, it's essential that the participants in such creation-sharing have a high degree of empathy and mutually dynamic curiosity: for their own and other instruments and for the music and imagination of the composer with whom they are working. Failed collaborations in my own past have been due to a lack of curiosity in the musicians concerned.

Though often performed by great orchestras in my thirties and forties I must confess I always found the experience harrowing, frustrating, frightening and frankly disappointing. Exceptions to this were the three years I spent as a Composer/Conductor Fellow with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the few occasions when I have conducted other orchestras with whom I was able to work fairly frequently. Collaboration with an orchestra is less complex than working with small groups or even a duo in my experience. You can't carry out a slow process of testing and experimentation with a symphony orchestra because their schedules are always full and the expenses of working outside rehearsal for a specific project are too high. Usually there's no time for a composer to get to know the orchestra or for the orchestra to get to know the composer.

I've not written any significant orchestral music for almost ten years. Waiting a decade or more for one or two performances isn't rewarding and there are already enough orchestral pieces of mine waiting to disturb the air. I doubt that at my age I have the time to add anything more to that domain! The problem for orchestral musicians is, of course, as difficult as it is for the composer. Sitting amongst squadrons of string instruments, strung out in lines of wind or brass, on an island with harp or timpani, or in a jungle of percussion, any form of intimacy with the composer is remote.

The best collaborations I have experienced are when I the composer and the musician(s) realise that the **music** itself is what is being collaborated-with! Both composer and performer(s) are concerned with the future. There is no past tense in great collaboration, only the evolution of continuous moment-to-moments that the progression towards realisation and performance is bound to attract. My five decades of working with the great BBC Singers, for example, has been one of the most powerful, energising and sheer pleasurable collaborations of my career. They have always offered me an unlimited and unlimiting palette of possibility in the creation of new music. Putting it simply, we always liked each other and I have never given them anything to sing that I couldn't make in some way with my own voice. I knew how very brilliant they were and they certainly knew that I never gave them anything to perform that wasn't backed by serious reflection and consideration of the need to write music that was and is effective.

Collaboration, with its consequence sense of familiarity, engagement, investigation, risk-taking, strangeness, passion and drive, is more than ever my chosen path. Moving back to Australia after almost thirty years away is just the most ideal way of allowing the infinite diversity of the living and dynamic world and universe to stimulate me into deeper and more profound journeys of exploration.