

From Ruthless Jabiru: Postcards from the New World – Eugene Birman

by eab2124 / on 30th October 2015 / in Features, Short Reads / 2 Comments



Much like two distant branches of a very large family, Australia and the United States (the latter, in which I grew up) don't know enough about each other – at least, when it comes to their continually emerging classical music traditions, they don't. As the British Empire's more distant outposts, historically speaking, and both defined just as much by their Anglo-Saxon origins as their burgeoning immigrant communities, the two nations' cultural identities developed in parallel: similar objectives, yet rarely meeting.

The most superficial and common discourse on the nations' cultural life takes up exactly such questions but rarely discusses the cultural identity of the continents before the arrival of Western Europe colonists, yet it is exactly this "native" identity that is primary in understanding where we – and they – are all going, and where we are coming from. At least, it is these thoughts that began to occur not more than one hour after I stepped off the plane in Louisville Airport, Kentucky and into a nondescript university lecture room about two-thirds of the way into a [Peter Sculthorpe](#) piece.

[Brett Dean](#) was speaking about music in Australia, music written by the now-several generations of composers, some of Anglo-Saxon extraction, many not. He was in town for a post-[Grawemeyer](#) victory lap of sorts, as the Featured Composer of the [University of Louisville New Music Festival](#). And I was invited to come to collect the [Frank Robert Abell](#), a new prize for young composers offered by the same institution, along with a performance of my "Red Desert", a composition for ensemble that could not have been titled more appropriately considering the Festival's theme. It was during this week, in the autumn of 2013 just weeks after my first workshop with [Kelly Lovelady's Ruthless Jabiru](#), that the names Peter Sculthorpe, Liza Lim, and others became to me more than encyclopedic entries.

Alongside other cultural archetypes shared between the United States and Australia, none is perhaps more consummate than the idea of open space. Not so much a musical trope than a mindset, the idea of open spaces, of environment, of country but not necessarily nation, is something that has become an inexhaustible creative fount for Australian and American composers.



It is there in the expansive compositions of [John Luther Adams](#), in Sculthorpe's soaring, panoramic works, in the visceral tug-of-war between the compressed and the massive that so endeared me to [Liza Lim's](#) works – it is also there in a composer who comes from neither of these nations but represents Europe's own last frontier: [Kaija Saariaho](#). Indeed, driving through northern Finland [earlier this year](#) seeing only tundra and stunted pines extending deep into the horizon, the connections are impossible to ignore. Saariaho, Adams, Lim, Sculthorpe were and are composers as explorers, as frontiersmen.

Kelly Lovelady is the pioneer behind the first all-Australian professional string orchestra in the UK, Ruthless Jabiru, that will not only perform works by the aforementioned composers (plus myself – a new work for Ruthless Jabiru in conjunction with Sound and Music's [Portfolio programme](#)) but also premiere one of Peter Sculthorpe's very last works prior to his unfortunate death, commissioned by the ensemble.

The premiere of Sculthorpe's incomplete yet significant, "Postcards from Jabiru," in the aforementioned musical context is a unique event in British cultural life – in any cultural life. Had I taken a later flight to Louisville, or skipped Brett Dean's lecture entirely, this would have been my second chance. For most audiences, Ruthless Jabiru's "On Reflection" will be their very first.

To contribute to offset the considerable production costs for this extraordinary event, please see: <https://australianculturalfund.org.au/projects/on-reflection-a-concert-for-peter-sculthorpe/>

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