Pragmatism and In-betweenery:
Light music in the practice of Australian composers in the postwar period, c.1945-1980

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Abstract

More than a style, light music was a significant category of musical production in the twentieth century, meeting a demand from various generators of production, prominently radio, recording, film, television and production music libraries. These generators needed music that could accommodate a broad audience, and that maintained a connection between the mainstream of ‘classical’ music and the expanding influences of popular music. Light music provided an adhesive force between gradually diverging cultures of popular and ‘classical’ music and thus represents composers’ efforts, working with pragmatic intent, to forge musical styles in-between the popular and the ‘classical.’

Proceeding from this view of light music, the present study explores its breadth as a productive category for Australian composers. Considering Australian music from this perspective shows the widespread and intensive engagement of composers in a vital field of professional practice in the period following the Second World War until around 1980. Many Australian composers, whether based in Australia or working in Britain, drew opportunities from light music’s generators, and developed compositional approaches that blended the resources of ‘classical,’ jazz and popular music.

Focus is brought to the work of Australian composers Sven Libaek (b. 1938) and Don Banks (1922-1980). For Libaek, light music provides a place in which he can be recognized for his achievement within the ‘improvisatory’ environment of musical opportunity in postwar Australia. For Banks, recognition of his light music extends and re-shapes appreciation of his significance, highlighting his pragmatic drive and the breadth of his musical abilities and taste. For both composers, the values of pragmatism and in-betweenery represented in their light music were important sources of creative impetus and originality.
Acknowledgements

This study has occupied my thoughts for a long time, and after many years away from the academic environment. I am grateful to my supervisors Professor Mark Carroll and Associate Professor Kimi Coaldrake for bringing and keeping me on track during this time, encouraging me to develop modes of clear thinking, and maintaining confidence in my sometimes slow progress.

I owe many thanks to Sven Libaek for his patient co-operation with my interviews. His is an unusual career in Australian music, and I am grateful that he was able to help me build a picture of his achievement that I hope will bring better appreciation of his work. Jim Schlichting of Starborne Productions in the US helped with information about his role in Libaek’s career, additionally providing insights into aspects of the Easy Listening industry. I am also grateful to John Carmichael, who answered my questions about his relationship to light music so frankly.

I have relied extensively on the collections of the National Library of Australia (the Don Banks Collection, Australian Performing Arts Programs and Ephemera Collection and TROVE), the State Library of Victoria (Douglas Gamley Collection), National Film and Sound Archive and the State Library of South Australia. Beyond Australia, the BBC Written Archives provided ready access to key information, and the late David Ades of the Robert Farnon Society provided background on Douglas Gamley and Hubert Clifford.

Friends and colleagues in the professional music industry were a valuable and reliable source of support, advice and ideas as my study evolved. Conversations with John Wilson, Matthew Freeman, Phillip Sametz, John Polglase, Martin Buzacott, Simon Healy, Christopher Latham, Gordon Williams and Vincent Plush turned up all sorts of ideas and information to help my progress.

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Track Listing of Appendix CD

Recorded examples (compact disc attached to back cover):

Track 1: Sven Libaek, Australian Suite, movt. 3 ‘Australia Square’
Track 2: Sven Libaek, Australian Suite, movt. 1 ‘The Isa,’ (Parts 2-4)
Track 3: Don Banks, Coney Island (complete)

NOTE:
1 CD containing 'Recorded Performances' is included with the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

The CD must be listened to in the Music Library.