Encounters

Journeys within Musical Space: Real and Imagined

by Andrew Schultz *(Published on November 12, 2019)*

Australian composer Andrew Schultz is Professor of Music at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. For more see www.andrewschultz.net

He writes: The memorable physical journey down the dry bed of Central Australia's Finke River, depicted in T. G. H. Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, invited metaphorical and literal translation into musical terms in my 2003 symphonic cantata of the same name (with a libretto by Gordon Kalton Williams). In this essay, I discuss the ways composers draw on existing metaphors, and create new metaphors, for real, lived experience: in particular, the way music can act as a translation and transformation of experience and gain cathartic and dramatic weight in the process. The focus is on examples from my own musical works that translate space into compositional form; and on the challenges that exploring space in an unconventional way can create for a composer in the pragmatic and often conservative world of orchestral performance traditions.

In spite of its invisibility, the physical and sensory experience of music is powerful. Consider Giovanni Gabrieli's music for the high-galleried, domed, vast and voluminous spaces of the Basilica Cattedrale Patriarcale di San Marco, Venice. In a work such as his *Sonata con voce: Dulcis Jesu a 20* (C128) it is not only the sound volume and the opulent yet cleanly drawn lines of counterpoint that create an overwhelming and all-encompassing impression, but also the deployment of physical space itself and the resulting musical saturation of the listener's aural palette. The space in San Marco creates an aura of great power and majesty for sound as it travels around the many galleries and from walls to ceilings through a huge and complex volume of space.

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In spite of its invisibility, the physical and sensory experience of music is powerful. Consider Giovanni Gabrieli's music for the high-galleried, domed, vast and voluminous spaces of the Basilica Cattedrale Patriarcale di San Marco, Venice. In a work such as his *Sonata con voce: Dulcis Jesu a 20* (C128) it is not only the sound volume and the opulent yet cleanly drawn lines of counterpoint that create an overwhelming and all-encompassing impression, but also the deployment of physical space itself and the resulting musical saturation of the listener's aural palette. The space in San Marco creates an aura of great power and majesty for sound as it travels around the many galleries and from walls to ceilings through a huge and complex volume of space.

Such a sound-enhancing space as San Marco presents an experience of music that is quite different to that of the modern-day shoebox-shaped concert hall. Spaces such as San Marco have been an inspiration to many composers from Gabrieli's time to the present. There are many other such spaces ranging from cathedrals to the converted industrial spaces of our own era. By contrast, the large modern shoebox concert hall is seldom as exciting or unpredictable; its design is aimed at a uniformity of performer and listener experience. Modern design can, or should, guarantee a reliability of reasonable musical experience for the audience but rarely creates an experience of awe and wonder, much less fear or surprise.

A rapid arc of technological development in spatial sound began with electronic music in the 1950s and has continued with increasing speed in the decades since. The early development of stereo- and quadra-phonic sound through to the many recent technical innovations in the use of sound projection and active audio architecture have helped to shape audience expectations of how sound will be physically experienced. For example, surround-sound in cinemas and home media rooms is now a given for the presentation of dramatically convincing films and television shows. Furthermore, precisely positioned sound alone can often communicate sophisticated dramatic meaning without any explicit visual reference.

It is not surprising that composers in the post-World War Two avant-garde brought their experimentation with electronic music into the concert hall. Works like Stockhausen's *Gruppen für 3 Orchester* (1955-57) or Berio's C*oro for 40 voices and instruments* (1976) may have seemed radical in their time, in that they rethink orchestral space, but the principle they exploit is arguably no different to the one that excited Giovanni Gabrieli centuries earlier: namely, the sensory experience of sound in motion through physical space. That *sensual* use of space in Gabrieli or Stockhausen is not tied to narrative or extra-musical features. Or, to put it another way, there is no particular story-telling happening though their use of space. In these three examples, the use of space is mostly about the physical experience of sound.

But space in music can also be a powerful narrative element. There is a tradition going back at least to Greek tragedy for dramatic and violent events in a play to occur off-stage. The author thus employs the creative imagination and anxieties of the audience. We see messengers bearing reports of violence and we see the signs of the aftermath of conflict on the facial expressions of characters. And, of course, a short-hand for something happening somewhere else, but right now, is written in the text with the simple line: '*noises off*.' All of these will prompt the audience to imagine what could have happened, what is possibly going on elsewhere now, and what might be about to occur before their eyes.

These signals that something happens *beyond* the stage suggest an attitude to space that is as fascinating for composers as writers. So, in opera, many composers have experimented with musical events placed outside the visible stage area: think of the off-stage hunting horn effects in Weber's *Der Freischütz* or the off-stage shepherd's melody (played by the cor anglais) in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Likewise, composers have explored the use of off-stage effects in orchestral music: Mahler's symphonies have celebrated examples. We might also consider Holst's use of an off-stage chorus to suggest remoteness in the 'Neptune' movement of *The Planets Suite*. In this, Holst was not literally trying to 'recreate' the distant planet so much as suggest to the mind's ear the conceptual experience of distance and remoteness. This is achieved because the soft and ethereal sound of voices is travelling from beyond the normal stage area. He creates a potent musical analogy, a sonic translation and a creative metaphor for the distant planet.

To summarize: on one hand, we have composers exploring space for sensory experience alone; and on the other, composers using space for the narrative impetus it creates through metaphor and association. But like many apparent symmetries these are really ideas that sit at either end of a single continuum. There are many examples where music is deployed unconventionally in space in such a way as to create both a narrative metaphor and a novel sensory experience. The double chorus sections of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* are an example, for their use serves both dramatic-narrative and sensory-perceptual experience. Likewise, in George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), the distant voice heard at the end is both dramatically poignant and sonically refreshing. It signals time passing and the

imminent closure of the work as the audience has its attention drawn to the world beyond the performance.

As the list below shows, I have also tried to find ways to explore musical space in many of my works. In my early orchestral work, *Solace* (1981), I asked that the lower strings be divided across the stage as I was trying to achieve a real sense of motion within a fragmented melodic idea. It was hardly a substantial request, but it led to my first taste of the pragmatics of orchestral life when it was programmed by a professional orchestra in Brisbane – they simply ignored my request. Although the request on that occasion was considered impractical, I am able to report that other orchestras who have played the work – both before and since that performance – have taken the time to do as I requested, thus achieving the desired musical effect. Other compositions of mine that explore musical space include:

- *Etudes Espace* for organ (1986)
- *Black River*, opera (1988)
- *The Devil's Music* for orchestra (1992)
- *Dead Songs,* song cycle (1991)
- *Chorale, demon, beacon* for bass koto and 4 percussion (1995)
- *Diver's Lament* for orchestra (1996)
- *Violin Concerto* (1996)
- *Going Into Shadows*, opera (2001)
- *Song of Songs* for 18 voices (2004)
- *Falling Man/Dancing Man* for solo organ and orchestra (2005)
- *I am writing in this book*, song cycle (2011)
- *Peace* for orchestra (2013)
- *Sound Lur and Serpent* for brass and percussion (2014)
- *Southern Cantata* for soloists, choir, period orchestra (2017)
- *Larrakia Lament* for choir, didgeridoo and taiko drums (2018)

To mention a few in more detail: In the organ work *Etudes Espace* (1986), I set out to write three short pieces that explicitly exploit the sonic effects possible in a large acoustic such as a cathedral. For example, in the second movement, 'Piping', an extremely soft and immobile haze of notes backgrounds a single melodic line. In *Sea Call* for brass (1988), I asked for the players to be individually positioned around a large space and to do this I created a score with various rhythmic freedoms for each performer.

In the Sydney Symphony Orchestra commission *The Devil's Music* (1992), I asked for off-stage brass and piano. My idea was that there were various 'musics' all happening at once and that at different times in the work we heard some from afar and some from close at hand. The piece ends with a trombone solo from distant off-stage, which I marked in the score as follows: 'As far off-stage as feasible but still possible to hear – for example the Green Room or Mosman.' (Mosman is a suburb several kilometres from the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House where the work was first performed.) Likewise, in two other commissions for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (*Diver's Lament,* 1996, and *Sound Lur and Serpent,* 2014), I asked for the four percussionists to be spread across the rear of the stage and to play as separate units or stations. This is something I had explored the year before in *Chorale, demon, beacon* for bass koto and four percussion. In that piece the four percussionists were playing as though they were autonomous lights or beacons, each with their own cycle of individual durations.

In the *Violin Concerto* from that same year, I scored a long duet between off-stage horn and on-stage solo violin in the first movement. As in a number of my pieces, the reasons for doing this are sensory, narrative and personal. The melodic material shared by the off-stage horn and solo violin is adapted from my own quite strange experience of listening to brass music played from the other side of a vast lake in the Canadian Rockies as I climbed a mountain cliff. I was trying to capture distance and closeness as well as the physical majesty, mountainside echoes and my own human smallness in one enigmatic musical passage.

In the three-act opera *Going Into Shadows*, there are numerous off-stage and dispersed instrumental and vocal parts: the aim was to break open conventions of orchestral and operatic space. The metaphor, in an opera with a strong political theme, is that the real world is both inside and outside the theatre – there is no cocoon for the audience. My more recent orchestral work, *Peace* (2013), has two quiet and elegiac French horns playing from off-stage at the end of the work. They call to mind the somber and distant nuances of the J. M. W. Turner painting on which the work is based: *Peace, Burial at Sea*. And in the recent recording of my *Larrakia Lament*(2018), I arranged for the two taiko drums to pan (or move) very slowly. One pans from left to right, the other from right to left; they cross paths as the piece reaches its most dense moment. The aim was to suggest the dramatic wartime aerial battle scene that the work concerns.

In 2000, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra presented me with the opportunity to compose a symphonic cantata based on T. G. H. Strehlow's classic Australian text *Journey to Horseshoe Bend,* with a new libretto by Gordon Kalton Williams. Williams gave the following brief synopsis:

T. G. H. Strehlow's autobiographical novel *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* tells of the mortally ill missionary Carl Strehlow's desperate 12-day journey down the dry bed of the Finke River, Central Australia, to reach the Adelaide-bound train at Oodnadatta in 1922. It tells of Strehlow's death at the hotel at Horseshoe Bend (at least 270 kilometres short of his destination); of Theo (T. G. H. Strehlow), Carl's newly-confirmed 14-year old son travelling behind his parents in the van with their Aboriginal friends Njitiaka, Lornie and Jakobus; and of Theo's awakening to the storied landscape of the Aboriginal people as his father struggles with the Christian faith which has sustained him for 28 years as superintendent at Hermannsburg Mission, west of Alice Springs.

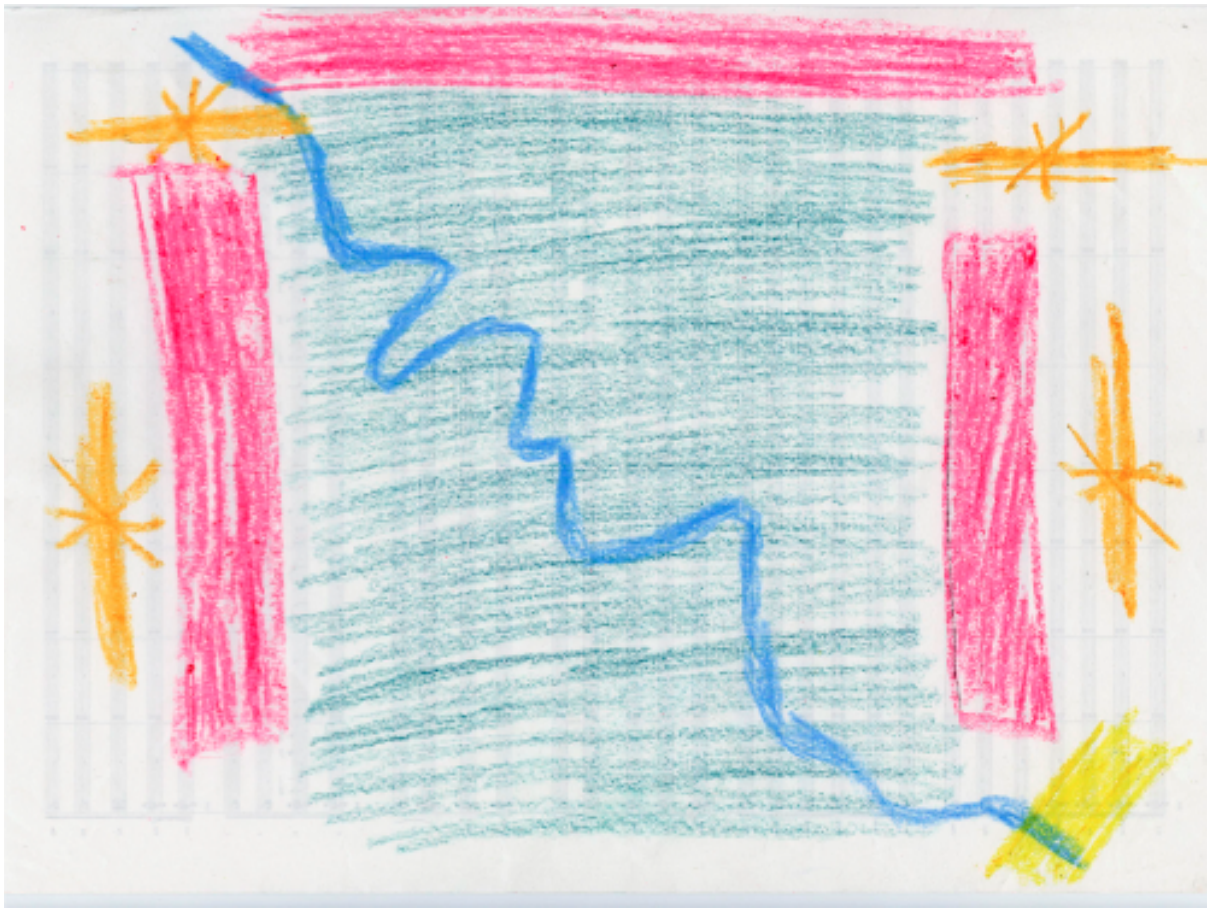
https://andrewschultz.net/program-note/journey-horseshoe-bend-opus-64/

My thoughts about how to create a large-scale work for choruses, actors and orchestra soon turned to planning the spatial experience of the work – partly because this is an ongoing musical interest of mine, but also because the spatial dimension of Strehlow's text is paramount, both on the physical, experiential level of an actual journey and on the personal, psychological level of an inner journey marked by trauma and catharsis.

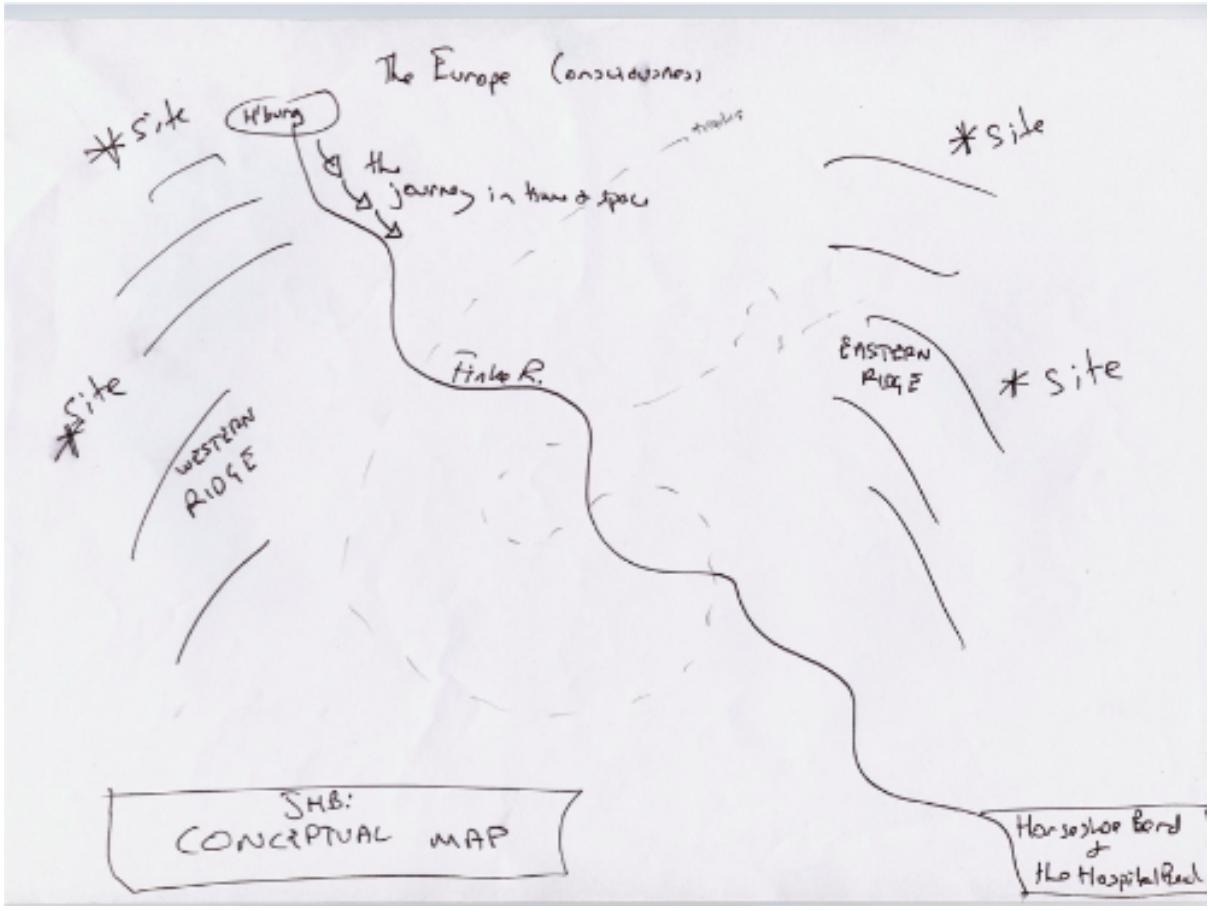
The following five images illustrate the evolution of the ideas that led to the eventual orchestral layout for my work *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (2003). The first image is an aerial photo that I took on a helicopter trip with the work's librettist in which we followed the journey of the Strehlows down the Finke Valley to the red cliffs and barren desert that surround Horseshoe Bend. In creating the musical work, I attempted to recreate the bowl-like symmetry of the desert valley surrounded by hills which themselves contained numerous indigenous sacred sites. The illustrations reflect my approach to transforming the landscape into a musical metaphor that suited the drama of the work's journey. I started with an admittedly childish crayon sketch and then planned the performance resources and conceptual ideas as though placed within the valley. The conceptual journey for the young

Theo, I considered, was one from a European consciousness to one informed by indigenous knowledge and a rich sense of self-identity. The final illustration is the CAD plan for the work's performance layout with the orchestra split around a warm timbral centre with percussion functioning as separate stations in the distant ranges.

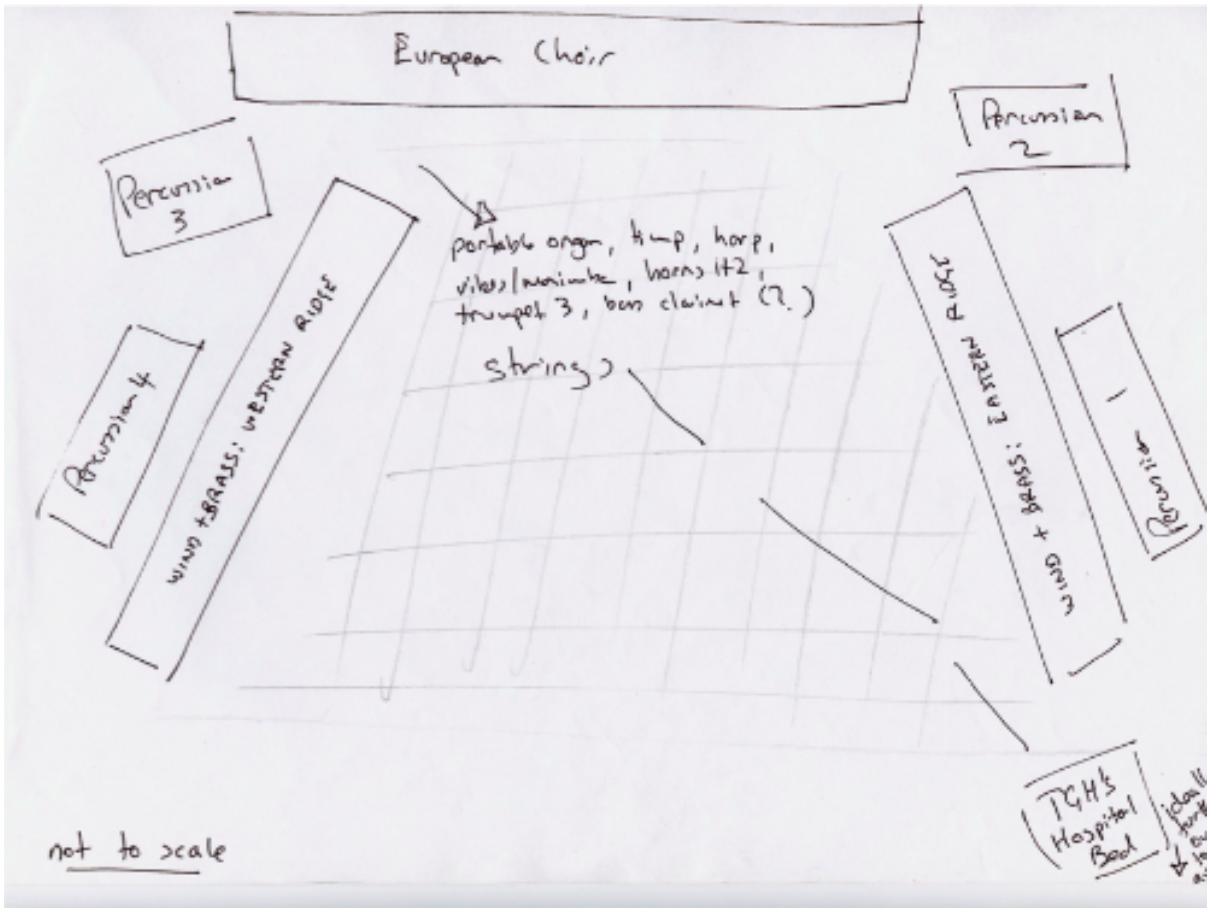
Finke Valley, heading south of Hermannsburg, 2000; aerial photograph.



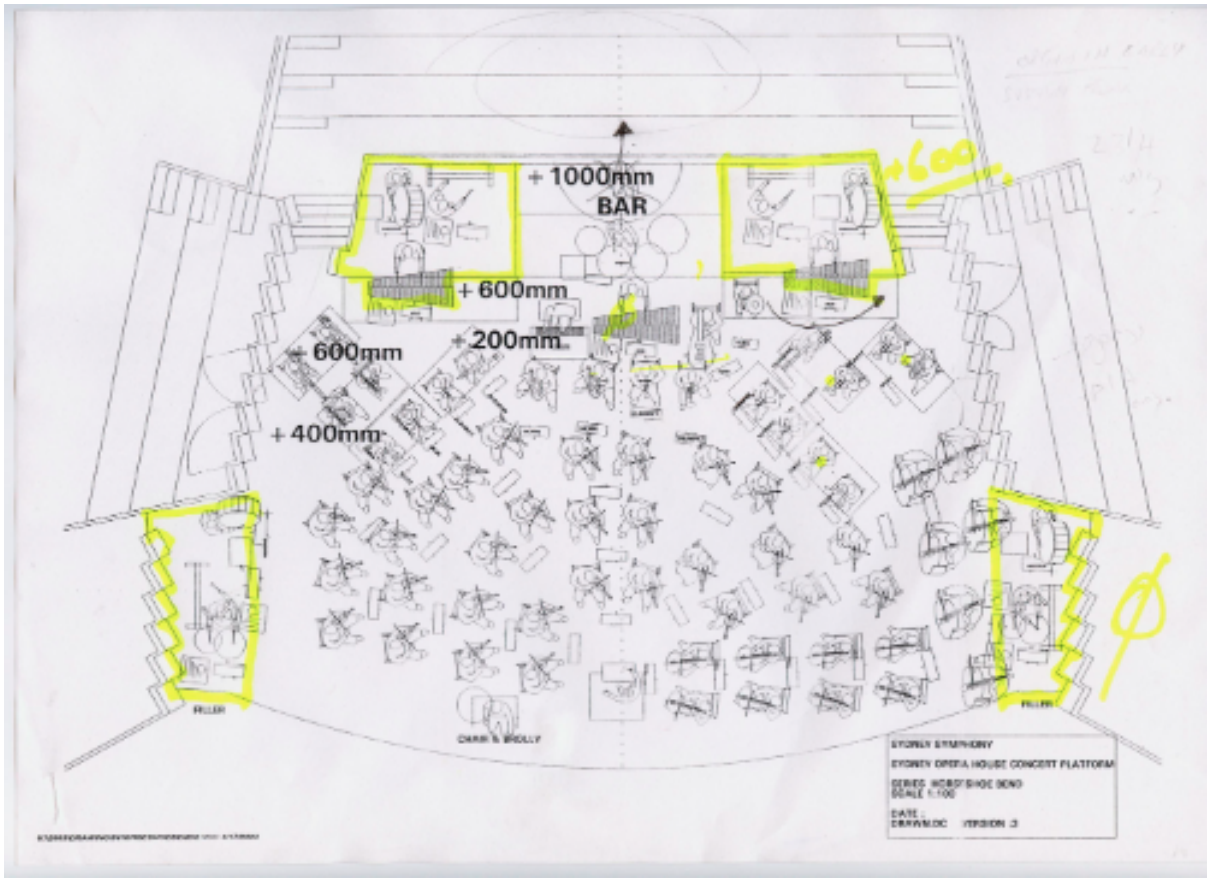
Author's sketch of Finke Valley: river in blue; mountain ridges in red; sites and destination in gold.



Journey to Horseshoe Bend: author's conceptual map.



Journey to Horseshoe Bend: author's sketch of performance space.



Sydney Opera House Concert Platform: layout of performing forces for *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*.

Starting from the opening scene of the 50-minute work, there is a clear aim to create a sense of a vast space with a valley spread before you with surrounding mountains full of rich indigenous cultural sites for the traditional Aranda owners of the land. I hoped to make the orchestra an active part of the storytelling of the work – to amplify and enrich the voices of soloists and choruses. Indeed, I had a sense of 'compass-bearing' in establishing where ideas were positioned in the musical landscape. For example, in Scene 3 the young Theo is given a Western Aranda geography tutorial from Njitka, his indigenous friend and guide, about where things are in the Finke Valley and how to identify them by their correct traditional names. Another illustrative example occurs later in the work, in Scene 4, when we hear the description of a distant cloud of dust kicked up by the horses of a local farmer, Mrs Elliott, and her group as they get nearer to Idracowra Station where the Strehlows are resting. It is a background feature depicted in the woodwind as the cloud of sand and dust moves from distant to close. And a final example, from Scene 7, where the sound of pickaxes hitting the hard, rocky ground near Horseshoe Bend can be heard as men prepare the grave-site where Strehlow's father was to be buried. I was trying to capture a stereo image of the echoing sounds I imagined that the breaking of the hard ground must have created on that harsh and desolate spot.

I was fortunate in that the commission from Symphony Australia and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra came with very strong support for the kinds of innovative spatial thinking I was interested in. Doubly fortunate, in fact, that there were administrators at the orchestra who were determined to celebrate the new work and also an artistic team of similar dedication. Just one example is the orchestra's willingness to provide surtitles for the work – something that has become common since but which at the time (2002) was still an expensive

and time-consuming process. Of course, exactly those kinds of encouragements to be innovative are the sorts of things which some orchestral administrators may hide from. There are, after all, always reasons *not* to do things that break from the norm. And I had a lot of these things in conjunction:

- a large orchestra incorporating amplification, some unusual instruments and a radically different layout;
- an indigenous women's chorus with a distinctive nasal style of singing;
- a typically Western chorus;
- various actors and singers, including at least one with Western Aranda language skills and the cultural authority and knowledge to use it in public performance;
- a child performer;
- complexity for the conductor and musicians in interpreting a novel score and stage layout; and,
- general trepidation that the vexatious anthropological legacy of T. G. H. Strehlow might not be a politically correct subject with which to engage.

As I write this, in 2019, I am embarking on a new large-scale 90-minute project, titled *Dark Well*, for two pianos. The work is site-specific and incorporates amplification, intricate digital sound and visual projections. The intention is that the experience for the audience will be comparable to that of being in a deep well, mine or pit: namely, a place that is immensely dark and where sound behaves in eccentric and unpredictable ways. Again, a musical journey, but this time inside the dark spaces of the listener's mind.