

# ROGER DAVID COVELL AM FRSN FAHA

1931–2019



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With the death of Roger David Covell we lost a prolific and astute music critic, musicologist, composer, conductor, educator, and musical entrepreneur. He was an outstandingly influential and effective public intellectual and a great mentor to many musicians and academic colleagues. His contribution to Australian music is immeasurable.

Roger was born in Sydney on 1 February 1931 but grew up in Brisbane as he was barely a month old when his father died, prompting his mother to move closer to family. He attended Brisbane State High and the University of Queensland, working as a cadet journalist with the *Courier Mail* during his studies.

Musically he was a child of the ABC. He listened to anything and everything the ABC broadcast, and had a special penchant for rhythmically complex pieces. But he also liked Henry Purcell's music to the extent that he would run the two miles from his primary school to be home by the time the broadcast came on. He enjoyed singing, learned to play the piano, and composed his first pieces, including orchestral scores, in his early teens. After graduating with a BA, he went to Britain in 1950 where he worked as an actor with various theatre companies and also for the BBC and the Festival of

Britain. While in London, he cemented a close friendship with former school-mate Peter Porter, the poet, with whom he kept up a correspondence throughout the years.

Upon his return to Australia, he re-joined the *Courier Mail* in 1953 where he quickly established a reputation. This led, in 1960, to the offer by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to become their chief music critic. During his 40 years tenure (until 2001) Roger Covell not only championed dozens of home-grown composers and performers but also educated and influenced several generations in a myriad different ways; through concert and opera reviews, reports from overseas (mostly European) musical events, opinion pieces and commentaries on policies and events impacting the arts. He has been an eloquent and witty writer as well as a shrewd observer with an assured sense of quality and ability to spot talent. His ability to describe the sound of music quickly became legendary and earned him the respect of composers and performers. Musicians recognized themselves in his words and nodded, 'ah, he actually knows what I'm trying to do; he understands me!' His remarkable talent to bring vivid colour to language, capturing in words the essence of a musical experience, or explaining with incisive clarity the cultural significance of policies, appointments, and other broader developments around the world or in Australia remains unparalleled.

He was not shy of opinion but he was never opinionated. His penetrating insights were delivered with succinct, minimalist language that nevertheless captured the essence of what he described. A famous instance is his opinion of 'Advance Australia Fair' which, before it became the official anthem, he described in his book, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, as having 'the worst type of jingoistic words and a tune of ... trudging mediocrity' (p. 32).

Roger's encyclopaedic mind, a veritable fountain of knowledge on art, artists, history, literature and culture whether Australian, British, American, French or Italian, infused everything he did. It was also the source of his undying curiosity that kept him intellectually open to the very end. This deep and broad oversight of culture enabled him to write the first comprehensive book on music in Australia, published in 1967 and immediately recognized as seminal. Reviewers praised Roger for his sharp and intuitive judgments; for having 'prophetic vision', and 'his finger on the pulse of happenings'.

His insights took readers by surprise realizing how far Australia has actually come and what an important role he played in all this.

In *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* Roger offered a philosophical stand while being deeply insightful and proposing stimulating ideas for the future. He urged for a greater recognition of Percy Grainger's compositions leading to considerable new scholarship on him in the ensuing decades. He also provided sound judgment of the contemporary situation through his choice for detailed discussion younger composers who have all become the best-known of their generation and beyond: Peter Sculthorpe, Nigel Butterley, Richard Meale, Larry Sitzky and George Dreyfus.

Other major projects on Australian music included his collaborative work on Australian bush songs and singers, the editing of the two-act musical play *A Currency Lass or my Native Girl*, and the ARC-funded project later published by Currency Press under the title *Entertaining Australia*.

Roger's scholarship was of course not at all limited to Australian music. His passion covered a large range, but in particular French, British and Italian music, opera and choral music, the compositions of Britten and Handel, and Monteverdi, on whose *Coronation of Poppea* he wrote his doctoral dissertation conferred in 1976 by the University of New South Wales.

He had a long and fruitful association with UNSW and his scholarship found its best outlets in his public lectures and performances. In 1966 the university invited him to establish music on its Kensington campus. He joined the academic staff as a senior lecturer, becoming Associate Professor in 1973 and receiving the personal Chair in 1983. During his reign the small music unit attached to the Vice-Chancellor's office grew into a Department of Music within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and then a much enlarged School of Music and Music Education, when in 1993 the Oatley College of Advanced Education amalgamated with UNSW, following the Dawkins reforms. He remained Head of School until his sudden and untimely retirement from teaching due to temporary ill health in 1996.

It was in the height of his activities at UNSW that he was elected to the Academy in 1983, immediately becoming a tireless and deeply engaged participant at many of the annual events. He served on Council from 1986 to 1988, delivered the Academy Lecture in 1996, and was Head of Section for The Arts from 2000 to 2003. In 2008 he was a co-convenor of the Annual Academy Symposium *Inspiration of Place: the Artistic Life of Cities* held at the Sydney Opera House. In his engagement he sought to raise the profile of the Arts as well as musical scholarship and to influence cultural policies and funding for the Arts.

Roger's influence as public intellectual and music critic is immeasurable and rightly recognised. However, his contribution to music at UNSW has been equally extraordinary and perhaps less remembered. His tireless entrepreneurship quickly created a vigorous musical life through weekly lunch-hour concerts, resident artists, and the establishing of various on-going musical ensembles, starting with the Grainger Singers, a small SATB vocal consort that was followed by the larger Dowland Singers and later the Collegium Musicum choir. His visionary entrepreneurship also included the co-founding in 1983, with clarinettist Murray Khouri, the Australia Ensemble. He remained Artistic Director of this seven-piece professional instrumental ensemble until his full retirement in 2013.

His biggest achievement, however, was undoubtedly the establishing of a semi-professional chamber opera company in 1968. A real tour de force at anytime, anywhere, UNSW Opera remained active under his direction until 1997. It premiered many new Australian works (including Barry Conyngham's *Edward John Eyre* in 1973 and Peggy Glanville-Hicks's *The Transposed Heads* in 1970, directed by Aubrey Mellor) and performed several other little-known operas by various European composers, often for the first time in Sydney.

Roger's preparation for these performances was astounding: He translated all texts into singing English and prepared the performing scores according to latest research on the works. Being a born educator and working with a tight budget, he always involved the students in most aspects of the productions, assisting with designing and building sets, creating costumes, singing, performing, and organising. True opportunities of what university administrators would nowadays call 'work-integrated-learning'. For Roger, it was all just natural, what one does when one is the head of a music department and in charge of music on campus!

UNSW Opera was also the first opera company to perform in the Concert Hall of the new, as yet 'un-opened' Opera House. In July 1973 Roger Covell conducted a double bill of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Barry Conyngham's *Edward John Eyre* in the Concert Hall. The staging was produced by Aubrey Mellor with costumes by Dorothy Duncombe. Their success was such that EMI Australia decided to record their performance of Conyngham's music-theatre piece in 1974. Fresh off their success in the Opera House the company took these productions on tour to Aberdeen and London as part of the Fifth International Festival of Youth Orchestras. What a series of opportunities for a young composer! And how typical of Roger's visionary and tireless mentoring: He did not stop at commissioning, or first performance, but provided repeat performances, a recording, and then even an international tour!

Over the years Roger and his colleagues put together some 50 productions (operas and ‘dramatized lectures’) to great acclaim, covering a varied repertoire from *Music for the Dukes of Burgundy* and the medieval play of *Robin and Marion* to works by Monteverdi, Mozart, Rossini, Verdi and Britten as well as new and old pieces by Australian composers, such as Alison Bauld’s *Exiles* and *In a Dead Brown Land* or the hugely successful show of colonial songs and dances entitled *Australia’s Yesterdays*.

His leadership of music at UNSW was also extraordinary from a scholarly point of view. The degree programs he conceived, whether at the master’s or bachelor level, again clearly showed his commitment to offering the best by international standards. He benchmarked against the City University of New York’s post grad program and against comparable British and US undergraduate programs. The content provided equal importance to musicology, ethnomusicology and the study of Australian Indigenous and folk music; it covered then fashionable areas like music analysis and electronic music as well as discussions of positivism and colonizing Western narratives. These programs were broadly based; academically rigorous, giving performance and musicology equal importance within the limits of a skeletal staff of four, including Roger. For him the craft/practice and the theory of music always went hand in hand whatever he taught or how he thought of developing young musicians.

Roger also had great connections with academics in other faculties and embarked on interdisciplinary ventures when this word hardly existed. As early as 1975 he collaborated with Antonio Karbowski and Harvey Holmes from the School of Electric Engineering to develop a new electronic instrument, the Timbron, later to be developed into Fairlight, the first Australian synthesizer. Typically, he also set out to create a notation

system to enable composing for the Timbron that could be fingered, squeezed and danced on to produce sound.

As a lecturer Roger was entertaining and informative inspiring generations of students. His multi-media lectures with slides, tapes, videos, overhead transparencies and chalk, as well as singing and playing created the backdrop to the excursions of his mind as he was reminded by one thing of something else, leaping over centuries and continents telling amusing and memorable anecdotes while illuminating the stylistic, historical and social significance of events and compositions.

Roger’s achievements were recognised in a number of awards and prizes including being made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1986 and receiving the Geraldine Pascall Prize for Music Criticism in 1993, a Centenary Award in 2003, the Long-term Contribution to the Advancement of Australian Music Award at the Classical Music Awards in 2006, and the Sir Bernard Heinze Memorial Award in 2013.

Roger has left his indelible mark on everybody who was fortunate to come into his orbit and experience him as critic, lecturer, colleague, mentor; generous and entertaining host of dinners and lunches in the beautiful homes in Blackheath, Mechelen, and Elizabeth Bay of him and his wife, Patricia Brown. We all share a sense of gratefulness mingled with awe at his astounding breadth of knowledge; his dry wittiness, ever so perceptive, succinct, and softly spoken; his clearly articulated vision for music, for Australia, for education; his ability to inspire and stimulate; and his unerring sense of quality both personal and artistic. We have lost a great Australian, a national treasure.

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