"Talking Music: Conversations with New Zealand Musicians" by Sarah Shieff

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I carry a little tape recorder around with me when I travel, as other people might carry a camera. For a musician it’s logical to use a tape recorder in the same way, simply to record environments or sounds that one comes across.

Jack Body (born 1944) is a tireless advocate for New Zealand music. When he is not working on his own scores or teaching composition, he is likely to be found producing recordings of other New Zealand composers, raising funds for supporting guest musicians, or planning a concert series to promote the work of younger composers. Body’s quiet speech and self-effacing manner belie his enormous tenacity: when funding for his opera Alley (1998) collapsed at the last minute, it seemed that ten years’ work would be in vain. ‘It was all there, ready. If it had been necessary to commit murder, maybe I could have done it.’ Fortunately, there was no need for bloodshed: instead, Body’s huge fund-raising effort secured sponsors for Alley within the private sector. Nothing daunted by this near disaster, he is now planning even
larger multimedia works. ‘I am convinced of an essential fact of life: the more labour invested, the greater the reward.’

Jack Body grew up in the Waikato. Both his parents came from farming backgrounds. ‘My mother was very intelligent and artistic, but she never went to secondary school — she had to stay home on the farm and help her mother bring up the younger kids.’ Body’s maternal grandfather sired six children and then wandered off. ‘He quite liked it in England, so he stayed. My grandmother had to bring up the family by herself.’ Body’s father, Stan, grew up on a farm near Te Aroha. ‘He and his brother were sent away to boarding school, but when my grandfather died my father came back to farm. Eventually, my uncle took over the family farm and my father bought another one, which is where my sisters and I were born.’ Before Jack was a year old, however, his father decided he was tired of milking. The family moved to just outside Te Aroha township, where Stan Body went into business as an earth-moving contractor.

Although Jack’s parents had little interest in music, they encouraged their daughters to learn the piano. Hearing his sisters playing, he asked if he could have lessons too. ‘I was a solitary child — there weren’t many playmates around, and my sisters were rather older than I was — so it was an ideal interest for me. There was plenty of time to practise.’ Body’s first
teacher was William Cranna. ‘I adored him, and what he represented. He only taught part-time — he worked at the power board during the day — but he still managed to organise end-of-year concerts for his pupils in a local church hall.’ One year, Jack played his own compositions. ‘I’d taken some little excerpts from the Royal Schools grade exercises — the ones where they give you a couple of bars to identify a cadence — and continued them. Even though the inspiration didn’t last for more than a few bars, I knew I was onto something pretty exciting: it was such an incredible thing, to be able to write notes down and play them.’

As a boarder at King’s College in Auckland, Body found his solitary ways — and his passion for painting and music — helped create something of a personal mystique in a highly conformist environment.

I started to develop little eccentricities. I would suddenly say things that had no connection to what was being discussed. I would impose a code of silence on myself for a day or two at a time. As I got older I became a night owl. I used to love practising the organ alone in the chapel at night, or painting at night in the art room.

Even though Body enjoyed cultivating the image of an artistic odd-ball, the dynamism of music master L. C. M. Saunders meant that music was in fact a
central part of school life. Body credits Saunders with some of his most significant early musical experiences. ‘The annual Messiahs and St Matthew Passions could be pretty rugged at times, but Saunders was able to engage some very high-calibre soloists. My strongest memory is of the glorious rolling resonance of Noel Mangin’s voice.’ Body also cherished a personal friendship with his teacher. ‘I took private piano and organ lessons with him, and quite often he would have two tickets for concerts. If his wife wasn’t interested, he’d invite me to go instead.’

In his final year at King’s, Body completed the preliminary examination for Elam School of Fine Arts, but opted instead to study music at the University of Auckland. ‘I found painting relatively easy, while my efforts at composing were painfully slow and difficult. In fact that was part of the reason composition attracted me. It was such a complex and exacting art. I wanted to rise to the challenge.’ For a young man who wanted to compose, the challenge included completing a degree in music without studying composition. ‘Only when you had studied harmony, counterpoint, aural perception and music history were you allowed to go on and do your master’s in composition. But I remember writing things, even in my first year.’ Works completed as an undergraduate include People Look East (1965), Ave Maria Gratia Plena (1965), and music for a production of the York nativity play, all written for the choir of St Mary’s Cathedral, Parnell. ‘Peter Godfrey taught me
organ for a few years, and insisted I join the cathedral choir, which was a marvellous music education. He was very supportive and encouraging.’³

Body’s high Anglican musical education stood him in good stead when, as a third-year university student, he was appointed organist and choirmaster at St Aidan’s Church in Remuera.

Body began his master’s degree in 1966, studying composition with Ronald Tremain.⁴ ‘He was a profound inspiration. He showed us that music could be created and experienced in the here and now.’ As founding president of the Auckland chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music, Tremain organised performances of Boulez, Stockhausen and Dallapiccola, as well as Serocki, Skalkottas, Davidovsky, Earle Brown, Hans Otte, Lou Harrison, Maxwell Davies and Roberto Gerhard. ‘By sharing his enthusiasms and seeing how these influenced his own thinking, I realised that as a composer one learned most from the music of one’s contemporaries.’⁵

Tremain left the university in 1967 and Body completed his MMus under the supervision of Robin Maconie, who had recently returned from his own studies in Europe. In his final year at university Body also attended teachers’ training college — ‘I’d taken out a studentship when I started university, and that was one of the conditions’ — and took over as president of the ISCM.
Until then, we’d had concerts in the Art Gallery — quite formal, with small audiences, and we’d play seriously avant-garde music. When I took over, being young and foolish, we organised a three-day festival called Aucklanders and the Arts. There was mime, and an exhibition of paintings, and some mad improvisations. We took over the Student Union building as an unconventional and inexpensive venue. Nobody could see anything. It was probably a bit unprofessional, but we wanted to make our own statement.

In 1968, Body’s Turtle Time [CD track 7], a setting of a text by Russell Haley for piano, harp, harpsichord, organ and speakers, premiered at an ISCM concert. ‘It was a piece which reflected well the youthful spirit of the times, with its challenge of authority and its drug-enhanced striving for some kind of liberation.’ Body’s friend and colleague Noel Sanders regards this work as a watershed, noting that its overlapping layers of sustained keyboard sound look backwards towards the capacities of the organ — Body’s own instrument — and forwards towards his involvement with gamelan.6

An energetic avant-garde scene revolved around Body’s flat at 27 Birdwood Crescent, Parnell. ‘It was an expansive house, down in the gully in Parnell. It was fun — it had a great history.’ In March 1969 he collaborated with poet Ian Wedde, kinetic sculptor Leon Narby, lighting designer Keir
Volkerling and painter David Armitage on a ‘total ceremony’ of the Stations of the Cross, presented at the university’s Maclaurin Chapel. ‘None of us were particularly religious, I think: it was just an excuse to enjoy ourselves.’ Wedde based his text on fragments of the Catholic missal and the Bible; Body had assembled his *musique concrète* sound-image in Douglas Lilburn’s Electronic Music Studio at Victoria University in Wellington. ‘Although it would probably look terribly naïve from today’s perspective, it was a big event for all of us.’

Partly as a way of postponing the inevitability of entering the classroom, Body took up an Arts Council grant to study in Europe in 1969. ‘Originally I applied to go to North American universities — Michigan, particularly — but it would have meant enrolling for another degree, and being in an institution. The European system was more open: you studied something because you were interested in it, not because you wanted a piece of paper.’ Body’s first stop was Mauricio Kagel’s Ferienkurs für Neue Musik in Cologne. The major project during his four-month stay was an experimental video of short, apparently arbitrarily juxtaposed sequences of Dada-inspired music theatre.

It was fascinating to take part in. There was one section in a bare studio where they choreographed the cameramen filming each other. The soundtrack was a tape recording of a child crying and a
dog barking. Then they released a live goose in the middle of the studio. The director of the television studio was furious. He said he’d never seen such amateurism. His argument with Kagel went on for hours. Kagel finished by declaring it was the most imaginative television production he’d seen in years.

With his grant extended into 1970, Body’s next stop was the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht, where Gottfried Michael Koenig had begun using the computer program Project II as an adjunct to composition. ‘Cologne had been cold and a bit miserable, and although Kagel was an inspirational figure he’d also been rather remote. The six months I spent in Utrecht were much more congenial. The teaching was done in English, and the course was very well-organised: we had to do practical work in the studio, and learn programming.’ While in Utrecht, Body began work on 23 Pages (1971) for large orchestra, commissioned by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation for the twenty-fifth anniversary of its Symphony Orchestra.

Body returned home overland through the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia. Listening to a short-wave radio on a beach in Greece inspired the electro-acoustic piece Kryptophones (1973)—‘suddenly music and voices from all of Europe, Africa and the Middle East flooded in, the airwaves filled with a whirlwind of sound’—and the singing of the Tibetan monks in Bodhgaya
in North India became one of the inspirations for the choral work *Pater Noster* (1973). Although the trip through Asia was short, it began a love-affair which remains one of Body’s most abiding musical and personal passions. ‘I’d allowed myself a twenty-four-hour stopover in Jakarta, but that glimpse of Indonesia left me with an image of harmonious sensuality I could not forget.’

He spent the first few months after his return at Waihi Beach. ‘I knew I’d have to go teaching when I got home, but I avoided it for a while: I hid away at my parents’ beach house and tried to be a composer by the seaside.’ After finishing *23 Pages* he found he had run dry.

I had a crisis of sorts. I didn’t really know what to write, or why. You can’t write just because you feel like writing a piece one weekend, or even because someone asks you to write something. Each piece has to have its own reason: it might be for a performer, or for an ensemble, or it might start with a concept. But I always have to have a strong reason to write, and I didn’t have one.

The Department of Education caught up with Body in the end and, after a couple of false starts in Auckland schools, he accepted a position at Tawa College. ‘That brought me to Wellington, and I’ve been here ever since.’
Although Tawa College treated him well — including giving him six weeks off in the middle of the year to tour with Gaylene Sciascia’s dance company New Dance ’73 — he had resigned before the year was out. ‘I enjoyed working with kids, and when schoolteaching worked it was very rewarding, but it was also utterly exhausting. What struck me was the anarchic energy of adolescence. You were doomed if you tried to make them sit still and learn. You just had to join in the anarchy.' In an article about his classroom experience written for *Islands*, Body displays his obvious enthusiasm for teaching as well as revealing why he may have found it so exhausting:

SHEEPDOG GAME: the Dog leaves the room. the Shepherd nominates what the Dog will do (crouch under a chair, place a hand on a certain spot). Dog re-enters. Shepherd gives the instructions: high whistle (or hum) turn and move to the left, low to the right. (the piano also proved satisfactory for signalling). Important: move only for the duration of the signal. Example: very short high followed by sustained low produced a forward motion (from the original position). always working against the clock. Refinement: finger clicking signifies up, clapping down. i was asked to be the Dog. i find myself climbing on to the desktops and out a high window. but there's a rubbish bin out there i complain. out of deference to age
(?) I am redirected along the tabletops to the next window. No rubbish bin here. Halfway out and the whole class erupts outside to watch the landing.

— Mr Body, did the music room door jam yesterday?

Even before resigning to devote himself to composition, Body had found time for his own projects. While teaching in Auckland he had been involved with dance classes in movement and theatre with Jennifer Shennan, and completed scores for theatre and mime productions. Body also conducted an ambitious programme of music theatre for the 1972 University Arts Festival, in which his own multimedia *Sexus: Everyman’s Guide to Christian Living* formed half of a double bill with Stockhausen’s *Kurzwellen*.

Working freelance, and with his reputation as a musical organiser steadily growing, Body was able to devote even more of his energy to multimedia events. In March 1974 he co-ordinated New Zealand’s first Sonic Circus, commissioned by the NZBC and the New Zealand Students’ Arts Council. Although the idea itself was not new — John Cage had mounted a Music Circus in the Round House in London in 1972 — Body’s innovation was to devote the whole programme to New Zealand music. The event featured the work of seventeen New Zealand composers and took place over six hours, in eight separate venues in Victoria University’s Student Union building.
Audience members were encouraged to select and structure their own programmes, circulating around the venues as their interest dictated. ‘It was the spirit of the times, really: all in and all free.’

Later in 1974 Body made a four-month trip to Bali and Java. ‘I thought it was paradise on earth. I went to a local music school and told them I’d like to stay for a while, and asked if they could sponsor me if I could get funding from New Zealand.’ The Akademi Musik Indonesia in Yogyakarta invited Body to return in 1976 as a guest lecturer, but he did not waste the intervening year. TV One planned a new drama series for 1975 and Body was commissioned to write the theme music. ‘Close to Home made me famous, really. People seemed to like it, and to recognise it. The money was nice, too. Until then, I’d been getting a couple of hundred dollars a year in royalties from all my music, but suddenly I was getting a thousand dollars a year.’

Carol to St Stephen was another of the year’s successes.9 Commissioned by Wellington’s Bach Choir, and now a standard text for study in New Zealand secondary schools, Carol to St Stephen is a ‘deconstruction/recomposition’ of a fifteenth-century carol for three soloists and choir. The work begins with the choir singing the original carol, Eya, Martyr Stephane, in which believers pray to St Stephen to intercede on their behalf. Body’s ironic ‘deconstruction’ follows: although the original is always audible, its dramatic force is translated into a crowd baying for the blood of the
saint, and then hissing in excited fear as he is stoned. The ecstatic words of the dying saint hang in the air at the end of the piece.

The year 1975 also saw the realisation of the electro-acoustic work *Musik Dari Jalan*. While in Indonesia, Body had been fascinated by the calls of the street sellers and sounds of the street. *Musik Dari Jalan*, based on the field recordings of ethnomusicologist Allan Thomas, was awarded first prize in the prestigious International Festival of Electro-acoustic Music, held in Bourges, France, in 1976. ‘I was in Indonesia by then, and Douglas Lilburn entered my piece. So it was a dead surprise when I got news of the win through the post.’ John Rimmer’s *Where Sea Meets Sky* was selected for honourable mention in the same competition: of the eighty-four composers from twenty-three countries who had submitted entries, two of the ten finalists were New Zealanders. ‘I remember Douglas remarking on it some time later, and saying that if it had been football it would have been splashed all over the papers, but it hardly got a mention.’ In the year prior to his departure for Indonesia, Body also found time to design a second Sonic Circus, and produce a three-LP set of New Zealand electro-acoustic music, realised in Douglas Lilburn’s Electronic Music Studio.10 ‘At that stage there’d only been two public performances of New Zealand electro-acoustic music. Larry Sitsky told me later that when the boxed set arrived in Australia they’d been quite taken aback: I think we were quite a long way ahead of the game.’
Body returned to Indonesia supported by a living allowance from New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ‘The Akademi Musik Indonesia was a state academy, but it taught basically Western music. It was a kind of colonial hangover: Western music was the sort of music you learn. You didn’t learn traditional music in the same way. It was much more part of the whole cultural pattern. The academy gave me a base, really, from which to try to understand the lifestyles and cultures in a broad sense.’ Although he spent some time studying gamelan, he quickly became more interested in village music traditions virtually unknown outside their local area. He was just as fascinated by environmental sounds:

Even traffic noise had a quality different from what I had been used to. There was a predominance of big vehicles (buses and trucks) and small vehicles (motor-bikes, bicycles and various animal-drawn conveyances), but not many cars. The engines of the motorised vehicles tended to be at least twenty-five years old and that too contributed a particular sonority which was quite different from what we’d hear in a New Zealand city street. Early in the morning or in the late evening when the motorised traffic would be lighter I’d frequently hear the asymmetrical rhythms of a particular bell — a pair of bells in fact — that would signal the passing of a cart hauled
by two oxen. I discovered that these brass bells with wooden clappers varied in size and would be chosen according to the relative size of the beast. Since the oxen were always in pairs one would always hear a pair of bells, and from the tempo of the sounds be able to judge whether the cart was loaded or empty.  

Body met his partner Yono Sukarno at the end of his first year in Yogyakarta. ‘We began a project together, recording street musicians. I got a big fat tape recorder — a Nakamichi, which was the state of the art in its time — and whenever a street musician passed by, or we met somebody, we rushed out and recorded them. Travelling around we discovered an extraordinary richness in regional musics, some of which are very rare. I became fascinated by collecting and recording.’

Although he was highly attuned to his sensory environment, the political environment of Indonesia in the 1970s made little impact.

People in Java knew absolutely nothing about the invasion of East Timor. There was complete control of the media, so it was not an issue. When Yono first came back to New Zealand people asked him about Timor, but nobody could have known what it was like. Stories would come back to Indonesia from people who’d been in
the army in East Timor saying they were the only person left in their battalion. Everyone else had been slaughtered. None of this was able to be published at the time. People were not permitted to talk about it.

Body chooses to make his political statements indirectly. In Indonesia he had seen how music's many traditional functions helped provide a sense of social cohesion, and he began to see his activities as a composer as 'rather meaningless and elitist' in comparison. 'I began to question the values I'd been brought up with, and whether I could continue with my view of musical composition as a meaningful and productive activity. Suddenly I felt my music needed to relate to the immediate circumstances I saw around me.' A series of electro-acoustic pieces based on recordings made in Indonesia sprang from this dual impulse: an ethnomusicological desire to record an environment in which music and everyday life were inseparable, and his desire as a composer to pay tribute to the music, musicians and culture with which he had felt so grateful to come in contact. Later works have been more overtly political. Body's *Little Elegies* (1985), commissioned by the NZSO, was intended to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of television broadcasting in New Zealand. 'I had just seen the film *The Killing Fields*, and found it shocking, and very moving. I
asked myself what unique contribution television had made to our culture. To me, the answer was the news — events worldwide brought to our living rooms within hours, packaged and presented as entertainment in the 6 pm news slot, sanitised so as not to put us off our food.’ Body wanted to convey his sense of outrage at this trivialisation of human tragedy, while pointing out that even the most anguished protest is insignificant in the face of such suffering. ‘It’s a very sombre piece. I don’t know if it was appreciated: I got paid, but nobody particularly thanked me. Maybe if I’d quoted all the TV theme tunes current at the time they would have been happy, but I felt as an artist I had a right and a duty to use the occasion to express what I really felt.’

Jack and Yono returned to Wellington at the end of 1977. ‘When we got back we were living on The Terrace, pretty much hand to mouth. I was picking up a little bit of tutoring at the university and at polytech, and doing workshops in schools. I felt a bit contemptuous of people who worked in universities. I wanted to write. Working freelance seemed a good way to live.’

Douglas Lilburn was due to retire in January 1980, and suggested Body apply for the vacant position. ‘Originally I applied jointly with Gillian Whitehead and Lyell Cresswell. We were going to do it year about. I was to be first up, but then it turned out the other two weren’t that serious about it: Lyell had his career in Scotland, and Gillian also had other commitments. So I had the job for a year, and then another year, and it 1982 it was made permanent.’
At the same time, Lilburn had retired as editor of Waiteata Press Music Editions, which he had established in 1967 under the umbrella of Victoria University’s Wai-te-ata Press. Since 1967, Lilburn had produced three facsimile editions of contemporary New Zealand scores: ten titles appeared in 1967, five in 1969 (including Body’s *Four Stabiles for Piano*) and a further five in 1972, including *Turtle Time*. ‘When Douglas left university in 1980 he suggested I reactivate the Music Press. I did, and got carried away for some time. We brought all the old issues back in, so we’ve got about 180 scores now, and growing.’ Waiteata also produces promotional CDs of scores published by the press. ‘We distribute the CDs free to international radio stations, performers and orchestras. The idea is that when people hear the music they want to play it. We provide the scores, and the royalties come back to the composers.’ Waiteata Music Press receives a small annual grant from the Lilburn Trust. ‘Other than that we have no regular funding, so we have to ask for the rest. There’s lots of letter-writing.’

If Body’s early pleasure in capturing music on the page finds its contemporary parallel in his music publishing, his love — and mastery — of music transcription might well have its origins in the same delighted impulse.

I’ve turned to transcription [of indigenous musics] when I’ve been unable to focus on original composition — as Ravel is supposed to
have turned to orchestration in similar circumstances. I like to transcribe music in which I sense a particular quality — melodic, perhaps, or rhythmic — which my ears find attractive but which I have difficulty deciphering. I want to understand what is happening in this music to give it this special quality. My ideal is to learn something that I might be able to apply in my own composition.

In practice, however, Body’s transcriptions — made with the help of an old-fashioned variable-speed dictaphone — have become considerably more than additions to his stylistic toolbox. In a process he calls ‘double-transcription’ he first tries to capture the ‘essentials’ of a new and often unfamiliar sound phenomenon, and then translates those into a form playable by Western musicians.16 ‘I try to recreate the music I’m transcribing in another form, with the intention of transmitting at least something of those qualities to which I first responded. Some people construe this as cultural exploitation. It’s a tricky area: while it’s foolish to suggest that intercultural exchange isn’t universal, one must still respect one’s material.’ To that end, Body uses recordings he has made himself wherever possible — ‘this means I have some knowledge of the social and cultural context in which the music belongs’ — and presents the original music in its entirety, even when it has been translated into another musical form.
His first major exercise in transcription was *Melodies for Orchestra*, commissioned by the NZSO to celebrate the centenary of the University of Auckland in 1983. For this he chose three unrelated pieces of music: the Horos Serra, a fast Greek dance played on a two-stringed fiddle, a flute melody from West Sumatra, and a recording from Pune, India, of a street band playing film music themes. ‘The choice was quite arbitrary: these were pieces I had been listening to at the time — music that caught my ear and fired my curiosity.’ Each transcription was as literal as Body could make it. ‘After that, the task was to find the right glue to stick the three sections together, and maybe provide something more — but still wholly derived from the original. The originals are still there, intact.’

The impetus for the next major transcription project came in the form of an invitation from the Kronos Quartet. ‘At that stage they weren’t very famous. They were doing gigs on campuses, and when they were visiting Vassar College they asked Annea Lockwood about New Zealand composers.’ She told them about me, and they wrote and asked if I had anything for string quartet. I said, “No, but I soon will!”’ *Three Transcriptions* premiered at the International Festival of the Arts in Wellington in February 1988. The first transcription comes from a recording of the *long-ge*, a multiple jew’s harp from Southern China. The second movement uses a *vallha*, a bamboo tube zither from Madagascar, and the third movement is a
ratchenitsa — a wild dance in 7/8 time from Bulgaria. ‘The Three
Transcriptions were a hit for the Kronos Quartet. They hadn’t really got into
transcriptions or ethnic music at that stage — mine was one of the first, and I
think they remember that.’ The following year Body completed Epicycle for
the Kronos Quartet — ‘they thought it was one of the most difficult works they
had ever played’ — and Arum Manis followed in 1991. ‘They’d accept another
piece, too, when I can find the time. It’s interesting, really: several New
Zealand composers have had a big break with an international artist or group.
Kronos was mine, Evelyn Glennie gave John Psathas and Gareth Farr theirs,
and Douglas Lilburn’s, perhaps, was the Boyd Neel String Orchestra. The
heavens smile at least once in one’s lifetime.’

Body’s interest in non-Western music is often audible in pieces
which are entirely his own. In Five Melodies for Piano, written in 1982 for
Margaret Nielsen, he set out to explore ‘different types of melody’. In the first
movement the pianist is required to dampen specified pitches with the left
hand while playing running semiquavers with the right, producing the effect of
a melody within a melody. The second movement features ornamentation
inspired by bagpipe music, and the third makes extensive use of the
harmonics which result when the strings are stopped at pre-determined
points: ‘I had in mind the ancient Chinese zither, the gu-qin, an instrument
from which the player elicits a range of exquisite, subtle sounds using both
hands.’ The fourth movement sets a wide-leaping melody against a two-note drone, and the fifth movement’s delicate bell sounds evoke the tonal qualities and subtle melodic shifts of the gamelan.19

In 1987, Body’s interest in Asian music took him on his first field trip to China. Recording the music of the minority tribes of Gansu province — where Rewi Alley ran his industrial school for boys — Body gained some insight into the forces which shaped the life of that extraordinary man. ‘Alley had obviously connected with something: a temperament, and a culture with a recorded history of three thousand years. Although Indonesia is a different experience altogether, I began to identify some of my own responses and to link them with what might have motivated this man, a New Zealander, to devote sixty years of his life to China.’ Alley’s story presented itself as a perfect subject for an opera. Working with Alley’s biographer, Geoff Chapple, as co-librettist,20 Body began transcribing folk songs recorded in Gansu. The goal was to complete the work by 1998, the centennial of Alley’s birth: the Wellington International Festival of the Arts had undertaken to produce it that year. Body engaged Gansu folk singers Ji Zheng-Zhu and Li Gui-Zhou; Beijing’s Huaxia Chamber Ensemble would join a small orchestra of New Zealand musicians. The production would be directed by the New York-based actor, choreographer and opera singer Chen Shi-Zheng, who had left China in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Chen would also take the role of
Yen Wang, the Chinese judge of the dead. Actor Martyn Sanderson would play the old Alley, and Australian baritone Lyndon Terracini would play Alley as a young man.

The opera begins with the old Alley slumped in his chair. It is the hour of his death. He is haunted by disturbing, fragmentary images from the past. Yen Wang, the Chinese god of death, enters and begins a scrutiny of the old man's life, which brushes past the titles and honours gained in sixty years' work inside China. The examination evokes Alley's younger self, and the determinants of his life in China: the suffering, the strength and the individual beauty of the youth of the Chinese masses. 'What is your name? Who are you? Where did you come from?' Yen Wang asks. The enquiry unlocks the past and, as Alley looks back on the defining moments of his life, Yen Wang forces him to relinquish his dreams. 'If he dreams of industrial co-ops, the god would show how futile it was in view of later events. If he believes in youth taking power, the god shows him the Cultural Revolution. In a sense he's smashing down Alley's dreams in order that he can die.'

Body's own dream itself came close to foundering. Alley had been commissioned by the Festival of the Arts and was to be its biggest production of 1998, but a funding débâcle saw a substantial grant from Creative New Zealand reallocated to other projects. Six months before the première, and half-way through pre-production, Alley had no funding at all. 'To have an
opera accepted by the festival would be the dream of every composer in the country, and that chance would only come once in a lifetime. *Alley* was my chance, and it was ripped out of my grasp. I was just so angry and powerless.’

A passionate newspaper article by Geoff Chapple focused public attention on the issue.21 ‘Miraculously, Geoff’s plea produced an overwhelming response. Against all odds, we were suddenly back on track.’ Supported by a raft of private individuals and trusts, *Alley* was premiered on 27 February 1998.

Although audiences and critics were enthusiastic, Body regards *Alley* as a qualified success. Funding had already broken down when he returned to China in June 1997 to collect more *houzi* — the rhythmic call-and-response songs of Chinese work teams — and to rehearse the folk singers and the Huaxia ensemble. ‘At that time the whole production had collapsed, so I’d lost heart and didn’t really take advantage of the possibilities of working with those musicians, as I had planned to do. Some of the finest musicians in China were in that ensemble. They could have done much more marvellous things than what I’d written for them.’ Body is keen to mount a revised *Alley*, this time with the planned dream-like film component (abandoned for financial reasons) and possibly with surtitles: Body and Chapple both felt that the directorial decision not to have surtitles meant that much of the richness of the text was lost to the audience.22
While revisiting *Alley* may be a possibility, Body is not given to dwelling on the past. *Carmen*, his current project, is a celebration of the life and works of Wellington’s famed drag queen.

It’s to do with gender and power. In a way, mankind’s first gods were female, and the most potent force is the power of reproduction, which belongs to women. So if a man really wants to have power, maybe he becomes a woman. It’s also about musical kitsch. A dancer would dance seductively as Carmen would have danced in her cabaret: a Hawaiian hula, an African snake dance, Matahari’s dance, Salome’s dance, and Carmen’s flamenco. The music to accompany it would be gorgeous 1950s kitsch — like Mantovani, but much bigger: beyond kitsch and into the sublime. There’d be a symphony orchestra, a guitar soloist who plays the ukulele and the Hawaiian guitar, and singers: a Maori kuia, a flamenco singer and a male soprano — all powerful figures representing a kind of yin-yang cross-over. The singing and the orchestral music will be quite serious and dark — all the texts are incredibly powerful poems by women — but then suddenly it would turn a corner, and you’d be in the midst of all this kitsch. The exact opposite of the deadly serious stuff. Delicious.
Body is not fazed by accusations of exoticism. 'I believe one of the functions of art is to be outrageous, to be provocative, to be politically incorrect. As an artist, one has to be learning new lessons all the time. For instance, one has to learn not to become an embittered, grumpy old man.

There's a few of those around. I hope that I can grow old joyful and unrepentant.'

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1Born in Scotland in 1923, William Cranna trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, Glasgow. He taught piano in Te Aroha until 1957, and thereafter in Morrinsville and at St Paul's Collegiate, Hamilton, until his retirement in 1988.

2L. C. M. Saunders (1908-95) was music master at King's College from 1936 to 1974 and reviewed music for the NZ Herald from 1940 to 1993.

3English choral conductor and organist Peter Godfrey (born 1922) was appointed to the staff of the University of Auckland in 1958 and retired as Professor Emeritus in 1982. He was director of music at Auckland Anglican Cathedral from 1958 to 1974 and director of music at Wellington Cathedral from 1983 to 1989.

4Composer Ronald Tremain (1923-98) attended Douglas Lilburn's composition classes at the Cambridge Music School and studied piano, conducting and composition at the Royal College of Music, London. He studied composition with Goffredo Petrassi at the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia, Rome, and conducting at the Accademia Chigiana, Siena. Tremain lectured in music at the University of Auckland from 1957 to 1967 and from 1970 until his retirement in 1989 was professor of music at Brock University, Ontario, Canada.


6Noel Sanders, ‘Convocations, Evocations and Invocations: Jack Body and his Calling(s)’, Music in New Zealand, Summer 1994-95, pp.20-4.

7Jack Body, Kryptophones (Kiwi-Pacific LP, SLD 46, 1973).


9Jack Body, Carol to St Stephen (Wellington: Waiteata Music Press, 1997; Ode/Manu CD 1412).


13See Jack Body, Suara: Environmental Music from Java (Manu CD, 1380, 1993).

14The Wai-te-ata Press was established in 1962 by Professor of English Don McKenzie to assist the teaching of aspects of early book production. Wai-te-ata became a small printing and publishing house, and produced first editions of poetry and prose, including volumes by Alistair Campbell, James K. Baxter, Peter Bland, Sam Hunt and Bill Manhire. Waiteata Music

Douglas Lilburn established the Lilburn Trust in 1984. The objects and purposes of the trust, administered by the Alexander Turnbull Library Endowment Trust Board, are ‘such charitable purposes in New Zealand as would tend to foster and promote New Zealand music, the advancement of musical knowledge and appreciation, the support of the musical arts, and the preservation of musical archives’. On his death in 2001 Douglas Lilburn bequeathed the residue of his collection of scores, sound recordings and papers to the Alexander Turnbull Library, and the residue of his estate to the Lilburn Trust.

Jack Body, Pulse (Rattle CD, RAT D009, 2000) pairs five of Body’s transcriptions with the original field recordings.

Composer Annea Lockwood (born Christchurch, 1939) studied composition at the Royal College of Music with Peter Racine Fricke. After further study in Europe, she returned to London and freelanced as a composer–performer in Britain and Europe until moving to the US in 1973. She has taught at Vassar College, New York, since 1982.


Geoff Chapple, Rewi Alley of China (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).
