

Thursday, 18 December 2014

Dear Jack

Yesterday I saw you through the rain heading towards the Hunter building, where we first met 34 years ago. I want to reiterate what I said to you the night of William Dart's Lilburn lecture at the music department. Without your arrival at Victoria in 1980, and the stimulating, relaxed classes you taught in Music 301, I would never have finished my music degree. (The next year I took Allan Thomas's stage one class, which led to *Blue Smoke* 30 years later.)

I was a popular-music person who loved what I was discovering: an expansion on the limited classical piano pieces I'd learnt, or the Bach I heard in church. (Like Neil Finn, I think I tuned out from the sermons and tuned in to what was being played on the organ. At my mother's funeral recently I made sure we included some lovely Douglas Mews incidental pieces from the 1960s that have never been bettered, and are glorious to sing.)

So your open-mindedness and general good cheer made that year pivotal to me (even if the impenetrable philosophies of Xenakis gave me headaches). While the earlier music history lectures were fascinating, you made the most challenging music exciting. And most importantly you instilled in us the idea that New Zealand had a music heritage to be proud of, and we were part of it. The idea that championing New Zealand music – in whatever form – was something that benefited society was directly from your gentle but determined influence.

They say if you find a job that you enjoy, you never have to work, and that's what it's been like for me. I've been lucky with the various jobs I've held, all have which have had a musical element to them. I could never teach music, my theory is inadequate, and I could never play the piano in public. But I've managed to stay involved in it.

In 1996 when I was writing the book on Neil Finn an elderly aunt passed away and I got a phone call that she had left her piano to me. It was the family Bechstein upright, bought new in 1898 in Dublin, and then sent out here in 1930 for my grandmother. That's on my father's side. They weren't especially musical, so the piano was still in very good condition having not been thumped for three generations. It's a beautiful ebony, with golden inlay on the front. Its action is very even, but light: so it is perfect for the grace notes of Mozart or the blues.

To make it even more special, in 1989 when I visited Dublin, an elderly cousin told me that one day in about 1900 his uncle – my grandmother's brother – brought a friend home from university, and he sat down to play the piano. The uncle went upstairs to see his mother and ask for sixpence so they could go out for a drink. "Who's that playing the piano?" she said. "My friend Jimmy Joyce," came the reply. She said, "He's good. You can have a shilling." Then the cousin said darkly, "And that piano went out to New Zealand to your grandmother ..."

With a piano like that, one is obligated to play it, so I dived back in: some Mozart and Bach, too much Randy Newman, and his influence Harold Arlen (who wrote wonderful blues-influenced standards such as 'Stormy Weather', 'Over the Rainbow', 'One for the Road' and 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea').

A piano-teaching cousin sent me some music, and among the pages were Lilburn's two Christmas pieces (for LB). One of them was so much fun to play: the one with all the parallel 3rds. It's so melodic, and your hands just fall onto the right keys.

She came from Taihape, which is where I first got into music (her mother attended parties in Wellington with Lilburn in the late 40s). So with all these connections I wrote to Lilburn in 1999 to tell him what I'd been up to since the day in 1985 when I was lucky to interview him at length. To tell him about the "Joyce" piano, that I'd become friendly with his niece in Taihape, and how much I enjoyed playing the LB pieces. I got a lovely letter back – hand written on the back of a used aerogramme – and he said those pieces were written as a joke, and that my working life sounded "very conducive".

It wouldn't have been nearly as conducive if you hadn't walked into the Hunter Annex in your worn-out clothes in February 1980 to begin your temporary diversion into teaching. At the end of the year the class – almost as one – seemed to call out, Are you coming back next year, Jack? "I don't know," you replied, with a smile. "I need to get some composing done. But the money helps." No one teaches for the money, and when they are as

inspirational as you it's a vocation. You kept managing to compose, but there are hundreds of people like me whose lives would not have been as conducive without you.

*Blue Smoke* is about the baton being passed between generations of musicians, and I feel lucky to have been included in this particular team. Thanks Jack.

Sincerely,

Chris Bourke

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<http://bluesmokebook.wordpress.com>