

MY RELIGION MY PLAYGROUND MY BACH

by Ian Muldoon*

“If I had a religion, it would be music, because I find it to be so rich, so universal, so profound.”

-Kaija Anneli Sciarrino (14/10/1952 – 2/6/23) Finnish composer.



Finnish composer Kaija Anneli Sciarrino, pictured in 2013... PHOTO CREDIT CHRISTINE OLSSON

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child’s ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York & Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Melbourne’s St Kilda. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled “My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast”.*

The other night at a Jazzlab (Melbourne) gig a scientist opined that music is merely melody, harmony and rhythm. It's mathematical. Mmmmm okay. The late dead genre of smooth jazz has been described as follows: "If you were a secretary working in an office building, and it was three or four o'clock in the afternoon, what could be played on the radio that might enhance your mood ever so slightly, but you never stop to think about what you're listening to?" (New Yorker 6/7/23). AI may soon be pumping out music for all, I thought. AI recently produced a critically well received novel so why not music? Music is just mathematics, yes, and the human body is just a bunch of cells, right?

To a chemist, the body is a bunch of chemicals, which is true. To a priest the body is a repository of the soul. To an economist, the body is a unit of labour. A computer can make sounds like Bach. Réjean Rhéaume is one who uses a synthesiser to create pieces by Bach, Ravel et al and sells it to Apple music. But is it music? I say an improvising jazz musician **is** the music and cannot be divorced from it and AI may be able to reproduce a simulacrum of music but it cannot create the individual mystery of it, especially and particularly improvised (jazz) music.

In any case, to quote Cecil Taylor, "any music discovered thereby is not even incidental, but accidental."



Cecil Taylor: any music discovered thereby is not even incidental, but accidental...
PHOTO CREDIT FRANS SCHELLEKANS

An anecdote reminds me of my love for improvised music. A young man is resting with fellow soldiers beneath a still-standing tree on the Western front in 1917. He hears bird song. Moved by it, somewhat electrified by the moment, he asks what it is and is told that it's a nightingale. That's the first time I've heard a nightingale, says he. In jazz, that nightingale may appear at any time in the creative moment. The young man is resting amongst the carnage of soil soaked with the blood of thousands

of his fellow countrymen and may join them at any moment – bird song is the beauty of life that he may lose. At this moment, we presently bear witness to carnage in Ukraine and existential crisis in nature. In the present moment I am that young man. When I hear something fresh and new and beautiful in improvised music that is the beauty of life that I may lose. I ache with that beauty and the possibility of its loss.

To me the music called jazz is the finest human expression of music to have evolved. Much of the power of the glory of jazz rests in live performance in a club setting, watching it being made. But added to this is the context of its genesis the cry for freedom, its focus on individual expression, the technical accomplishment of its creators, the miracle of its creation in the moment, and its passion and energy. On this last, allow me to refer to a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony on 21st May 2023 by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel: passion and youth and real vigour of the players was how audience member Stephen Schreiber recalls the performance. And this was his memory of that event.



Gustavo Dudamel: he conducted the performance Mahler's Ninth Symphony on 21st May 2023 by the New York Philharmonic, a performance which showed passion, youth and real vigour of the players...

The music called jazz is a young music, invented by the young, overthrowing the past edifices of symphonies, chorales, and Masses which once filled the castles and churches of kings and queens with the eulogies and hymns to their greatness. Jazz is a revolutionary music born in a revolutionary country which became the first modern democratic State, albeit, one, like the Greek original, built on slavery.

Like democracy, jazz may be untidy, contradictory, feckless, impatient and loud or hushed as a Japanese April bloom but it can also reach the highest artistic musical heights, brimming with life, with power, and *joi de vivre*. And so the music goes on, grows up, and thrives, blossoming and embracing all cultures, all peoples, a true democratic music, inclusive and passionate, vital and true and free, given voice by the likes of Aviva Endean, Callum Mintzis, Helen Svoboda, and Chloe Kim reflecting their rich cultural heritage which may include Australian atheists, Ukrainian Jews and the cultures of Finland and Korea and Africa.

And music is performed in a context. A classical recital of piano works I recently attended had all the formality of ritual, in a large hall, with raised platform, most patrons “dressed up”, the pianist in black tie and patent leather shoes. The music was lacklustre and did no great service to Brahms or Beethoven. Another solo performance I attended had a young woman in a beanie, casual pants and socks and played an hour of music that had me in tears. It was the most profound, emotionally powerful, engaging, intellectually stimulating, music I had witnessed live in years. No ritual. Direct audience connection. A humble and warm and gentle and open connection with all present, not just the coterie of mainly female young supporters in attendance. It was Ms Aviva Endean, to my mind and heart, one of the great artists I have heard in my lifetime.



Clarinetist Aviva Endean, at Jazzlab, Brunswick, Vic, on June 2, 2023...

Ms Aviva Endean performed at Jazzlab, Brunswick, Victoria on the evening of Friday 2nd June, 2023 to a respectful and engaged audience. Endean was the winner of the 2015 Freedman Classical Fellowship. But, please note, she attended the Europe Jazz Network's conference in Novara, Italy, in September 2019 along with Paul Grabowsky, as the AMC's Artistic Associate, as part of the Australian Jazz in Europe market development project. In 2021, she was in residence at the Peggy-Glanville Hicks composers' house. This COVID lockdown period may have focussed Ms Endean on solo experimental work though the judges of the Freedman specifically noted her willingness to experiment. This willingness and her dexterity were on full display at Jazzlab in the moment.

Ms Endean's toes, fingers, mouth, were actively producing sounds at the same time. Her standard musical instrumentation seems to be the clarinet and the bass clarinet supplemented by *inter alia* tape loops, pre-fabricated effects pedal, tiny speakers, just the mouthpieces of her clarinet and bass clarinet as well as tenor recorder and slide whistle. Sometimes she reminds one of Roland Kirk mouthing multiple instruments. She has a highly developed microphone technique making wordless voice married with electronics and using circular breathing to create eerie and seductive sound music. A good reference point for her music in this performance in terms of improvised (jazz) is the work on the document *Streaming* (Pi Recording) 2006 by Muhal Richard Abrams: piano, percussion, George Lewis: trombone, laptop, and Roscoe Mitchell: saxophones, and percussion. In terms of length, structure and in some parts there are similarities with these great artists of the genre.

Muhal Richard Abrams / George Lewis / Roscoe Mitchell

Streaming



A good reference point for Aviva Endean's music in this performance in terms of improvised (jazz) is the work on the document Streaming (Pi Recording) 2006 by Muhal Richard Abrams and others...

However, the sense of atmosphere, the mood created, the purity of sound of the clarinets, the texture, the largo tempo and development of the works reminded one of some film soundtracks and certainly imagery was prompted by the two pieces she performed. Ms Endean humbly joked: "film, yes like home movies!" but I replied no, films by the likes of that poet of the cinema Terrence Malick or the cinema of Ivan Sen or Herzog.

Director Werner Herzog is renowned for the film music used in service to his films including Wagner, madrigals, Chanson, choral and classical music. More recently John Zorn and Paul Grabowsky have been prolific contributors to film but two distinguished Australian artists who have also had a major impact have been Lisa Gerrard with inter alia *Gladiator*, *Insider* and *Whale Rider* and Nick Cave with Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.

I specifically recall the vivid, grippingly beautiful and memorable lone voice of Gerrard in *The Insider* (Michael Mann). With no strong rhythms or obvious melody, Ms Endean's music draws up states of mind, mood and imagery that seems ideally suited to cinema. Already her music has featured in the films *Assembly* by Angelica Mesiti for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019, and *The Emptyrean* by Amiel-Courtin Wilson. One can envisage one rich musical area for Ms Andean where her compositional and performing artistry are embraced by film and television directors.



Aviva Endean, on slide whistle and tenor recorder...

The context of her performance at Jazzlab included a recent pandemic and consequent isolation from live performances involving audience. There was a sympathetic affection even deep feeling for this performance of a lone artist making beauty out of that context. Her music was received in complete silence - no clinking of glasses, no chatter, no phones by the 40 audience members. It was a memorable hour of bewitching beauty by Aviva Endean. And despite what seemed to be a lingering head cold, Ms Endean performed with passion, and youth, and real vigour.

And she's written some words: "We should allow ourselves to move away from the impossible task of defining jazz as idiomatic musical language (and so) make real social and artistic progress while continuing to embrace the word 'jazz'." If there are some giant emerging artists in Australian music, Ms Endean is surely one. Ms Aviva Endean, an exquisite being creating the miracle of music in the moment, is a signal instance of those moments, like the soldier and his first nightingale, in which the joyful beauty of life itself is once again made real. "Only connect," E M Forster urged, in his book *Howard's End*. Ms Endean surely does. And her music, like life itself, is there in the air then gone, unique, precious and once. What moments they are.

Ms Endean was the opening act for a trio of young artists who may also be on that journey to real artistic accomplishment. They were Callum Mintzis, trombone; Helen Svoboda, contrabass; and Chloe Kim, drums; collectively known as Playgrounds. The occasion was the launch of their album *Playgrounds* available on Bandcamp.



L-R, Callum Mintzis, Helen Svoboda & Chloe Kim, at Jazzlab, June 2, 2023...

There are seven tracks on the album, the longest at 5:24 the shortest at 1:56. It may best be described as a musical gourmet tasting menu and exemplifies risk, trust, joy, vigour, passion and individual mastery of their respective instruments. All the works are collectively composed/played by the trio; they wish to emphasise the verb *play* and the track *Monkey Bars* exemplifies their intent magnificently.



Bandcamp app and high-quality download in MP3, FLAC etc. Design By Jacques Emery...

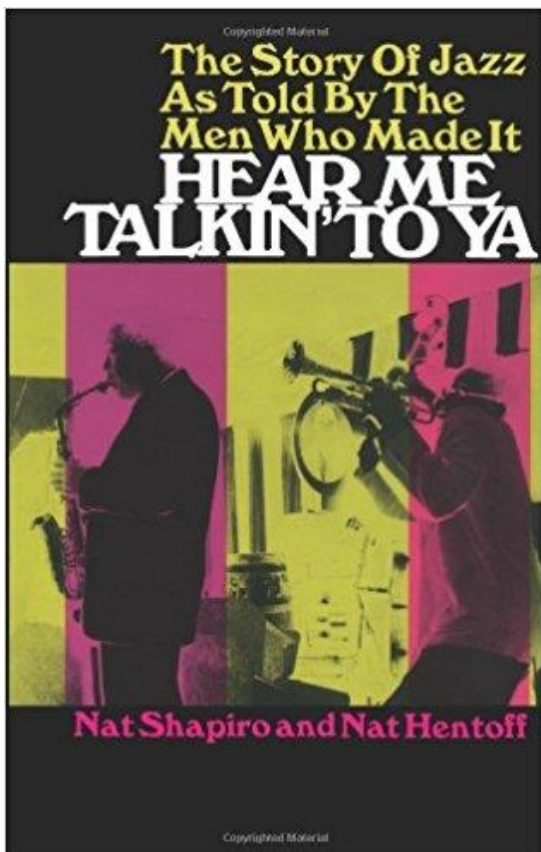
The solo trombone of Mintzis is stunning. On *Playing Bully*, featuring trombone, the bass is ominous, the drums prickly. It is an evocative, colourful and brilliant work by this young trio. Whilst Kim punctuates *See Saw* with metallic bell strokes, Mintzis constructs melody and satisfying structure with Svoboda's resonant plucking. Against expectations, *Swing* at 1:56 is somewhat ominous in mood, with some startling and bewitching arco bass sounds interspersed with the bow bouncing off the strings. The trombone sounds almost human with a series of repeated cries backed by the chattering percussion of Kim. It's an engaging and satisfying programme of music hinting at the great possibilities these young artists may bring to the music.

But no need to confine ourselves to the "jazz" genre. Michelle Nicolle presented her Bach Project at Melbourne Recital Centre on Independence Day, 4th July 2023. She was voice, Hugh Stuckey, guitar; Tom Lee, double bass; and Ronny Ferella, drums. Along with Bach there was one piece by Stolzel. All eight works were arranged by Nicolle. Compositions by Horace Silver, Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman got a look in. Easily the most satisfying and powerful performance was *Round Midnight* (Monk/Williams/Hanighen) where in the bridge she scatted Bach's *Little Fugue in G Minor* to superb effect. Of note also was the guitar work of Stuckey.



L-R, Michelle Nicolle, Ronny Ferella, Tom Lee and Hugh Stuckey, Primrose Potter Salon, Melbourne, 4/7/23...

There is an astonishingly rich cohort of young musicians presently making their way in improvised music, in a variety of formats, including experimental music, free jazz, and modern mainstream jazz which reminds me of Charlie Parker's quote first published in *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya* by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff: "There's a boundary line to music, but man, there's no boundary line to art."



Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: There's a boundary line to music, but man, there's no boundary line to art...