

Mozart in the Antipodes

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There is much that is said, and written, about the transplanting of culture, and how incongruous this can be. Like snow on Christmas cards in the tropical heat or architecture inappropriate to climate; examples both of holding fast against the need for change in a physical sense, or of assimilation in a cultural sense. In Australia, this is a significant part of cultural cringe, and still part of the growing pains of the "Australian" identity. Nevertheless, cultural transplants are part of the basis of any new cultural synthesis, and a successful contrast, or even a marked clash, may continue to have a lasting cultural resonance, even as an individual experience.

I do remember one hot, still, tropical night many years ago, trudging a back street of a outback town, red dust clinging to my legs, mosquitoes homing in on me, tired out by a long day hitching on an even longer highway in the tropical north. Just dropped off from a truck on the outskirts of the town, I was caught short of a place to stay, and was looking for a safe spot to drop my swag. I needed to settle and sleep rough, for the few hours left before dawn, and thus save a bit of the money I still had left in my pocket.

The moonless night was intermittently lit by the flicker of pre-monsoon lightning on the horizon, silhouetting stilted houses under the hunched outlines of trees, and the odd quick shadow of a bats showed against the faint stars of the night sky; in the distance, the scattered barking of dogs. The air was heavy, as it always is before the Wet, pressing round me as I trudged along the darkened street, ringing with insect calls.

Suddenly, there burst forth from one of these shadowy houses nearby, the cool, limpid, and precise notes of a Mozart piano concerto. I stood motionless in the humid mango-smelling air, transported by the timeless music that lifted me from my discomfort and tiredness, and bore me on a tide of confident sound, the legacy of another age celebrating an emerging self-awareness in another time and place. The brilliant, soaring waves of sound, penned by a hand long still, now were heard again as a tribute to the power of an individual, highly creative yet from an age of formal and stylized manners and aesthetics.

Somehow, there was, within the contrast of that other-worldly music with the heavy tropical night, in the harsh setting of that antipodean continent, a strange congruence that related the discipline and controlled creative inspiration with the discipline and endurance required to survive and thrive in an ancient, unforgiving land. There was an elemental quality to the music, superb in the economics of its simplicity, with a clarity that was almost stark, so similar to the elemental quality of the harsh, and even savage, tropical setting where little survived that was redundant or superfluous. The economies of scale of a demanding natural world were echoed in that formal man-made music, clear, buoyant, and concise, in the stillness of the oppressive night.

I stood, transfixed by the unexpected event, my tiredness forgotten, my eyes to the stars still visible past banks of pre-monsoon cloud. How I wished I could have walked towards that music, towards the light I could see dimly above me through the palms and leafy growth of a tropical garden. To draw near, and sit in silence to listen, to sounds so timeless and enduring, like the land that lay under the tropical night; both somehow linked, yet from such different dimensions in time, culture, and geography.

But regretfully, I stilled this impulse. After all, what would those other listeners think if I should suddenly appear, a stranger, streaked with the grime and red dust of the day, wild-eyed from tiredness and the dimness of the night. In the end, with my spell complete, such an intrusion would be the breaking of theirs. So, I remained standing alone in the dusty road, my worldly goods still on my back, mosquitos unnoticed at my ankles, consumed by the music and the long hot day forgotten, with other images, other memories, even other concerts in other places, now strong and inspiring in my mind.

Eventually, the music ended, and the other, now smaller, sounds of the night were heard again. I waited, but there was no more of those other soaring and brilliant sounds, and so I walked on again, though with more purpose and optimism, immediate problems and discomforts much reduced by a new frame of mind. I have never forgotten those moments of resonance and contrast, so unexpected, so thrilling in that heavy night, these many years past. The lightning continued to flicker, and the ubiquitous barking accompanied me as walked on once more.