In September of 2010, the centenary year of The University of Queensland, performers and composers who had been associated with the university’s former ensemble-in-residence, Perihelion, gathered to reflect upon the group’s contribution to Australian music. The recognition of Perihelion’s commissioning and performance activities during the late 1980s and 1990s informed a large part of the evening’s proceedings, though the event was far more interesting for what was conspicuously absent from the discussion. Though there was an acknowledgment of the efforts of the ensemble in supporting and disseminating the work of composers, there was very little by way of appreciation for the position of the performer in the creative ‘equation.’ This paper will briefly explore the factors contributing to the obscurity of performers in Australian music history and suggest some possibilities for future directions in research.

On 30 September 2010, twelve years after its initial conception, former members of The University of Queensland’s ensemble-in-residence, Perihelion, and composers who received commissions from the group, gathered in their old rehearsal space, the Nickson Room, to celebrate the achievements of the ensemble over their decade of existence. Associate Professor Patricia Pollett (viola), Carson Dron (piano), Philippa Robinson (bass clarinet) and special guest Katherine Philip (cello), performed Rob Davidson’s Tyalgum, a piece commissioned by Perihelion in 1997 while Davidson was a PhD student at UQ. ABC Classics’ Martin Buzacott then chaired a discussion with panellists Andrew Ford, Colin Spiers, Roger Smalley and Stephen Cronin, four Australian composers who had been associated with the group. Many other former members and associated composers were also in attendance, and some contributed additional comments from the audience. Notwithstanding the reflective character of the event, it also represented an important pivot-point in the history of the School, being held on the cusp of the formation of its new ensemble-in-residence which will perform the university’s centenary musical commission (by Andrew Ford) later in the year.

As a centenary event which was conceived from the perspective of historical musicology, two important musicological points of interest can be discerned from the discussion. The first relates to an expected outcome—namely, a revived recognition of Perihelion’s contribution to fostering a living community of composers in Australia. The second point of interest, however, entailed a more subversive revelation regarding the poverty of deep thinking being undertaken by practitioners with regards to the complexity of cultural forces at play in the production of new music in Australia. The occasion

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highlighted how far we have come from the profound cringe evident in the national musical psyche up until the late twentieth century, but also laid bare the distance we have yet to travel in developing a genealogy of certain cultural processes which can be made relevant and communicable to those whom they most intimately involve.

A NATIONAL MUSIC

The commissioning and performance activities of groups such as Perihelion were made possible largely through the policy shifts which accompanied a conscious nation-building effort, similar to that which had rescued England’s ailing native musical culture a century prior. During the 100 years of UQ’s tenure, the way music has been listened to and produced in Queensland has undergone a multitude of changes. Up until the 1950s, the notion of returning ‘home’ to England for the summer was still a common parlance, and in a climate where the profession of composition was considered with ‘embarrassed skepticism,’ it was little wonder that Australian composers sought legitimacy in off-shore training. The example had been set by Percy Grainger, who, despite living most of his life outside of Australia (and indeed eventually becoming an American citizen), is a composer to whom we clutch tightly in our official music histories. Miriam Hyde, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Arthur Benjamin, Margaret Sutherland, and Peter Sculthorpe all undertook their compositional studies in London in the early decades of the century. More recently, Ross Edwards, Anne Boyd, Alison Bald, and Martin Wesley-Smith were drawn to York by the vibrant department headed by Wilfred Mellers in the 1960s and 1970s, while Moya Henderson, Gerard Brophy, and Mary Finsterer chose continental Europe.

The perennial fear of parochialism combined with a burgeoning national pride prompted a dual response from Australia’s large cultural institutions. With unabashed paternalism, the ‘training of [public] taste’ was to be directed by the operation of three fields of influence: music journalism, education and government policy. Indeed, the mandate of institutions such as the Australian Broadcasting Company, Commission, then Corporation (ABC), was explicitly cast in such terms: ‘As Australia’s national broadcaster and major cultural organisation, the central objective of the A.B.C. is to extend the range of ideas and experiences available to Australia and contribute to the development of values within the community and a sense of national purpose and identity.’ Similarly, §6 of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 envisaged the ‘broadcasting [of] programmes that contribute to a sense of national identity,’ and in relation to international broadcasting it aimed to ‘encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs.’ As Australian cultural purveyors became more assured in the credibility of the nation’s developing stylistic autonomy, a greater emphasis was naturally afforded to the fostering of native talent. In 1985, the Director of the Music Board of the Australia Council noted ‘little apparent benefit to Australian musical life’ in providing funding to Australian composers who lived overseas.

Perihelion was resident at UQ from 1988–1997, during which time they commissioned a total of sixty-two new works from both established and emerging Australian composers, including Ross Edwards, Moya Henderson, Peter Rankine, Michael Smetanin, Elena Kats-Chernin, Andrew Schultz, Nigel Sabin, Stephen Cronin, Colin Spiers, and many more. Thirty-six of the commissions were assisted

5. Ibid., (1)(b)(i)
financially by the Australia Council. The ensemble’s sizable contribution to facilitating the creation and performance of new Australian works is undeniable. Like other prominent Australian performers and ensembles-in-residence who commissioned an extensive body of work, the impact of their contribution was no doubt compounded by the pubescent character of the national musical culture. Despite their clear historical significance, and apart from the occasional nostalgic gathering such as that precipitated by UQ’s centenary, performers have generally escaped canonic treatment by the field of historical musicology.

PERFORMING HISTORICISMS

The last six years has witnessed an awakening to the possibilities of the conception of performance as a cultural artefact in musicological research. Initiatives such as the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM) and the work of associated scholars such as Nicholas Cook, John Rink, and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson have sought to offer an empirical model to performance studies, including making use of ‘tools’ such as statistical analysis, expression algorithm software, sonic visualisers, timescapes and dynascapes. ‘Practice-led research’ is now a familiar and accepted methodological approach in an academic context; there are an increasing number of music departments in Australian universities offering performance PhDs in place of the Doctor of Musical Arts; and the inclusion of ‘non-traditional research outputs’ in the new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework has further strengthened the perceived legitimacy of this tendency.

A satisfactory dissection of the performer’s act of rendering a musical work, however, is yet to be undertaken, and so too is the writing of a history of Australian music which views the process of musical culture holistically, as an essentially collaborative interaction between various members of the new music community. Indeed, Perihelion’s celebratory concert and forum highlighted the extent to which this process remains hidden from those whom it most closely involves, suggesting a continued failure on the part of musicology to engage the minds of those who practice music, either as performers or composers. It may be that there are new and more fecund possibilities for performance research in employing approaches borrowed from the new “creative turn” in translation studies and generally re-figuring the performer’s work in terms of intertextuality, or as being located within the purview of the Bloomian project.

The economic imperative now driving the “practice-led” model in Australia is no-doubt a useful means of rationalizing a transient “outcome” whose cultural value is evidently contestable, though one wonders whether such an approach will ultimately further obscure the contribution of performers rather than revive it. To require the object of study itself to compete for support with the very academic disciplines which study it seems anathematic, or, at best, highly reductionist. The commissioning and performance activities of ensembles such as Perihelion should invite financial support on its own terms. By the same token, musicological investigation in the area of performance studies has missed its goal if performers and composers continue to feel entirely detached from the outcomes of the very research which claims to draw insight from the product of their professional practice.