

Interlingua symposium

Extending Improvisational Language in Music

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Manikay as relationship

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Relationship is at the core of *manikay*; Relationships are where stories are carried – in the chatter around a campfire, around a meal, fishing together, driving long distances, brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents catching up, shaping each other as they remember the past and tell stories of connection and shared experiences.

This is ceremony. It is sharing in who we are together. That's why we began by dancing, not by talking. And it is a lot of fun. Don't underestimate the importance of *manikay* as having fun, being together as we move and make noise.

Manikay is all about relationships that are carried through ceremony – in the event of ceremony and also in the patterns of the songs that are carried through the generations.



Wägilak *manikay* singers in Ngukurr, NT

For Wägilak, there is an important understanding of relationships as something that grows out of difference—productivity amid difference. This is a core principle Wägilak society and the Yolŋu ontology which can be seen reflected in the complimentary moieties Dhuwa and Yirritja. Individuals from both Dhuwa and Yirritja are needed for ceremony to occur: the singers come from the father's side, the *yidaki* (didgeridu) player and dancers from the mother's side.

Ceremony is all about the meeting and intermingling of difference. Difference is productive, not tribal, and the intercultural at the heart of Indigenous culture.

That is why we can say that what we are doing today, dancing here at the Interlingua Symposium, is ceremony. Here, we are meeting together in our difference.

On a theoretical note. I feel that this is why common thinking about *otherness* is not really relevant: to conceive of a distant culture as *otherwise* to our own. A culture that is *other* is one in which we

have no voice or conversation. What we say is too distant, irrelevant, and risks colonizing the voices of indigenous musicians.

This concept is insufficient, especially in music and the sustenance of musical traditions.

You can hear this in the questions of university students. 'I want to learn about Indigenous culture but I don't know if I am allowed.' This debilitating fear of appropriation stems from a politicized notion of the other as untouchable and unapproachable. No productive conversation can emerge out of this framework. Nothing relevant to who we are going forward together. This ethic does not permit musical engagement as a doing—it remains conceptual. We are unable to learn to respect and appreciate through performance, in seeking to come to a deeper, living understanding of the intricacies of another culture, actively and in dynamic conversation with that tradition.

To ask questions through performance, to grapple with what it means to conceive and create sound from another perspective requires a level of engagement, experimentation and freedom to create, that the popular ethic of *otherness* does not permit.

Further, our materiality and bodies mean that *otherness* is not possible, because we only have a body in relation to others – we are only a self within a community.

I want to suggest that the invitation of this workshop today is to engage with *another perspective* in a practical, tangible, life-changing way. This word *another*, is much more productive and respectful than the concept of *otherness*.

We need freedom to discover our voice alongside another, in conversation with them.

Daniel and David's approach to this forum begins with an invitation. An invitation back in 2005 that is honored today, which was extended by the Wägilak elder Sambo Barabara.

Barabara invited the Australian Art Orchestra to participate in *bungul* (ceremony). They could ask questions to understand the process of *manikay* (song), but most importantly, they were to participate.

This invitation was also relational. The invitation to participate in ceremony was an invitation to work together, to become responsible to one another. It entailed the responsibility of listening—respect—and of taking relational connections seriously.

Ceremony emerges out of living relationships. Music is always a dynamic, interactive thing that brings people together and mediates their relationships.

This is a 2-way process. Daniel Wilfred explains that the *Creative Music Intensive* is more than the opportunity to learn about *manikay*: 'I like to listen to how you play your instruments. Your sound. And I put my song in that.'

What emerges from this intermingling of people, ideas and traditions, is something entirely new. But it is also very old, a narrative that has been sustained through the generations. This is a narrative of identity and place, who we are, together, in relation to those who have come before.

All of us, gathering together in song, past, present and future.

Three images from manikay that illustrate the Wägilak approach to ceremony.

Bilma - clapsticks

Clapsticks tell a story. The clapsticks bring momentum and life to a performance, impelling the dancers on and underpinning the narrative structure. They are the *bones* of *manikay*, the core. Daniel says, 'Everything comes from the clapping sticks. They are not just sticks,' outlining a conceptual pattern for dance, 'they have a song.'

Tradition is carried by the clapsticks. This is not tradition as a fixed, rhythmic pattern but in the life that is brought to the performance. The sticks have a song.

'When following the clapping sticks, we are not counting but following. Always going somewhere [Djuwalpada's journey]. Moving through country.'

At the Creative Music Intensive, everyone grooves together, pulled by the clapsticks into song.

Likandhu – elbows pointing

Djuwalpada, the Wägilak ghost, is painted with pointed elbows. The songs tell of his elbow pointing, as he searches for the honey. This is an image of connection, like the elbow between the trunk of a tree and its branches.

Manikay is about connection. Every song, every image, has multiple points of connection to other images and songs. Every ecological cycle, place in the land or sacred site has multiple connections with others. Every family has multiple connections with other families, and these are brought together in ceremony.

The generations are connected, parents and children, coming together with the same song. In the Creative Music Intensive, new connections are made, new angles extending out from the core of *manikay*.



David Wilfred, elbow-pointing during a performance of *Crossing Roper Bar*. His niece, Maxine Wilfred is pictured in the background.

Raki - String

Song is like a string in many senses. Individual vocal lines weave together, voices from the past are woven into a song of the present, through the influences and traditions that inform performance.

To sing Wägilak *manikay* is to extend the string line of ceremony, that is, the story and connections of the Wägilak people.

Performances of *manikay* are dense, with multiple vocal lines interwoven. This creates a thick, knotty texture, a bit like a woven bag. This string bag carries all sorts of important meaning.

Some of those meaning are new. In the *Creative Music Intensive*, new voices are woven into the *manikay* tradition.



Mälka dil'yun
marrayi bulunyirri
Rrr, rrr, rakirri
Rrr, rrr, gawudju

“That string bag.
Now we are painting up.
Rolling that string,
rolling and making it longer”