



Harmony & Hardship

Robyn Till and Joe Blake on the importance of music to our pioneers

Music was a most important element of 19th Century life in rural Australia. In the uncertain and lonely hardship of colonial existence there was a need to place these unpredictable lives into some sort of order and context. Music was the perfect vehicle. As a form of expression one could sing about love, hardship, people or politics. It brought individuals together and consoled those who were isolated and alone. Over time it symbolised the growth of a nation through the presence of culture.

Because many homes were makeshift and threadbare, a piano was one of the most desired items. In 1844, one squatter wrote about the “great gratification” that a piano had brought to his family even though they “drank from bowls and basins, owning no cups”.

Without a piano, people made music with what instruments were available and the numerous itinerant workers required their instruments to be

portable, small, robust and easily repaired. Things like the jaw harp (sometimes mistakenly called a Jew’s harp), mouth organ or squeezebox became popular because they fitted in well with the lifestyle and as such influenced the mode of music played. Whistling and singing were often used as an accompaniment to the vigorous dancing that was brought from “home” and was not only a popular pastime but one that transcended all barriers.

As the nation was established, the distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was reflected in their choices of music. While the shearers were singing songs about the Wild Colonial Boy in their quarters, passing around the stories and sentiment of their lives, the colonial gentry were in the homestead listening to the “delicate skill” of a flute player accompanied by the piano playing songs they may have heard at concerts in Sydney or Melbourne.

Songs were used to spread news and salve the loneliness but they also celebrated a way of life in a new country. Music, along with the paintings by Tom Roberts and others contributed to an Australian national identity. A carefree larrikin and bushman was portrayed along with images of isolated women assisting their partners and suffering the

hardships. However, as with many of the songs such as “Dennis O’Reilly”, sung to the tune of Paterson’s “With my swag all on my shoulder”, you can only hear the good-humoured larrikin.

When I arrived in Melbourne town,
The girls all jumped with joy,
Said one unto the other,
“Here comes my Irish boy.”

Although not as prominent, women also had a voice in songs such as The Great Northern Line, sung to the tune of “The Knickerbocker Line”.

My love he is a teamster, a
handsome man is he,
Red shirt, white moleskin trousers,
and a hat of cabbage tree;
He drives a team of bullocks, and
whether it’s wet or fine
You will hear his whip a-cracking
on the Great Northern Line.

Through the words of these songs we are able to gain an insight into the lives of those pioneer men and women. At Pioneer Settlement Museum, we have a number of unusual instruments. Some are automatic, playing music by turning a handle (a barrel piano and organ) or pumping a bellows (player piano). Others like the strohviol need special skills but they all bring as much joy now as they did in the past.

👤 Joe Blake and Robyn Till, Manager, Museum Services. For more information call the PSM on 5036 2410 or visit www.pioneersettlement.com.au

Sound Design: The Australian Sound Design Project Website and Data base

The Australian Sound Design Project is a website and data base publishing the sound designed works in public space in or by Australians, located at www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au. It aims to raise the consciousness about the design of the acoustic habitat. The project is hosted by the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne and funded on an ARC grant and New Media Arts Board grant of the Australia Council. To

date there are over 50 original sound designs published and a cross-referencing system that is an important research tool, complete with text, images, audio, video, bibliography and links.

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Ed. Dr Bandt has worked on two exhibitions in regional Victoria (Geelong and Horsham) in 2002 that used sound as a medium for expressing aspects of heritage and loss of culture.