

Channelling Dulcie's Piano: How the River Taught the Piano to Sing

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Abstract

Channelling Dulcie's Piano: How the River Taught the Piano to Sing (CDP) is an audio-visual work connecting the human and more-than human through data translation of post-flood river systems on to an aging surplus-to-needs pianola. The work sits at the at the confluence of experimental sound art, acoustimology, climate concerns and piano performance practice. The site of the work is the largest river system in Australia, following the Murray River from its mouth in South Australia, along its tributaries to the Great Dividing Range in northern New South Wales. The piano – the central object of this work – was towed 3000 kilometers on a trailer over ten days and eight performance locations.

Keywords

Sound art, composition, verbatim performance, piano history, ecologies of place, eco-acoustics.

Teaching the piano to sing

Channelling Dulcie's Piano: How the River Taught the Piano to Sing (CDP) is an audio-visual work connecting the human and more-than human through data translation of post-flood river systems on to an aging surplus-to-needs pianola. The work sits at the at the confluence of experimental sound art, acoustimology, climate concerns and piano performance practice. The site of the work is the largest river system in Australia, following the Murray River from its mouth in South Australia, along its tributaries to the Great Dividing Range in northern New South Wales. The piano – the central object of this work – was towed 3000 kilometers on a trailer over ten days and eight performance locations.

The goal of this work is to develop a new sonic language for the piano that explores new techniques, new performance environments and a new performative rationale. In this work the river is teaching the piano what and how to play – with the performers serving as the musical translators as they navigating through new and ever-changing sonic territory. Central to *CDP* is listening. When we listen, we pay attention. When we pay attention, we offer respect. When we offer respect, we can start the process of relating to place in new ways.

CDP brings together many knowledge systems. It is an art-science collaboration, documenting the health of the

river systems through ecoacoustics; it talks to the colonial history of Australia, the function of the piano in outback towns and the changing social fabric of non-urban environments; it talks to ideas of craftsmanship, redundancy and waste – what do we do with these pianos that are surplus to needs; it is relational, sensing thresholds between the human and non-human as the surface of the water becomes a liminal space for listening; and it is about engaging deeply to the resonance of land that has co-habited with humans for tens of thousands of years.

CDP produced eight 30-minute audio-visual performances, based on verbatim interpretation of sound captured through site-specific three-channel hydrophone recordings of waterways. Researcher-performers Vanessa Tomlinson and Jesse Budel used the daily underwater recordings from eight locations to unlock and explore sound worlds on the piano inclusive of the keyboard, strings, body of the instrument and all mechanical components that make up a pianola. Tomlinson's body of work as a percussionist and Budel's history of working with pre-loved pianos enhance the more conventional piano practice that inform this work. The daily transformation of the instrument itself is yet another state of flux, as it entangles with the environment over the course of its journey (as strings stretch, wood warps, screws loosen and veneer unfurls). Videographer Greg Harm captured the performances in-situ and his interpretations of the underwater sounds, the performance site, the state of the piano, daily performances, and video capture added another layer of translation to the work.

CDP proposes a new methodology for simultaneously listening and playing that draws on verbatim theatre - a form of theatre built from transcribing exact words of individuals, rather than constructed from the imagination of the playwright. These transcriptions are not executed in real-time, but temporally altered by the performance situation. However they often retain the exact nuance of the original speaker – including non-verbal utterances. In an Australian context, Rea Dennis quotes Playback Theatre's founder Jonathan Fox's description of *playback* as a form that "enables the audience to share personal stories, to experience being listened to and heard, and in some cases experience transformation in witnessing the enactment of their story" [1].

In *CDP*, the voices are the sounds from under the water, including the sounds of fish curiously touching the hydrophone, of shrimp eating, of running waters and of invasive carp jumping. These sounds, or “voices”, are played back in performance without variation or preview. The recordings are sounded above water, in close proximity to their source, on top of the piano - verbatim. Sounds that were previously inaudible to human ears are exposed, enabling the performers to hear, to witness and to enact a sonic engagement with the recordings using the entire pianola.

A key priority in the composition of *CDP* was to work with sounds captured through the recordings without any mediation. Our process for sound capture followed by live performance/playback involved submerging three hydrophones in each water source covering a distance of 6 - 20 metres, recorded using a Zoom F8N. We checked that the three inputs were active, monitoring levels, but otherwise we did not interfere with the 30-minute recording duration. During that time, the performance area was quietly set up: opening up the piano, setting up the playback system, placing a series of percussive tools around the piano, collecting water from the source river for “tuned” bottles, preparing cameras and performance attire.

Immediately following the audio capture, the files were transferred to a MacBook and mixed in stereo format in Ableton Live 11, ready for playback through two Bose Bluetooth Sound-link Mini speakers situated on top of the piano. Each performance began 30 minutes before sunset, and the time between completing the recording and beginning the performance was never more than one hour. The performers did not listen to the recording until the performance began.

The score for each performance was essentially the recording. The performance instruction was to *become the medium for underwater sounds. Play what you hear on any part of the piano. Allow the above water sounds to enter your field of listening. You may follow your own logic, but always return to becoming a medium for underwater sounds.*

Each of the eight performances followed a particular process; 0’00” – 10’00” one of the performers (either Jesse Budel or Vanessa Tomlinson) began by playing with the recording; 10’00” – 20’00” the second performer joined the performance; 20’00” – 30’00” the first performer left the performance, leaving the second performer to play solo. The starting and finishing order changed each day.

Both Budel and Tomlinson have extensive experience working with extended techniques and pre-loved pianos. Budel is founder and curator of the [Murray Bridge Piano Sanctuary](#), which features eight colonial pianos in various states of weathering and ruin. With traditional playing techniques problematised through failing or missing action, corroding metals and seasonally-expanding and contracting wood effected by the temperate south-eastern South Aus-

tralian climate, the instruments become unique percussion instruments excited by bowing, scrapping, striking, plucking and strumming.

Tomlinson is a creative director at [The Piano Mill](#) – a purpose built architectural structure for 16 pre-loved pianos that has produced nine new compositions including the original commission *Alls Grist That Comes to the Mill* [2]. She is also part of the Bloom Collective that produced *Piano Bloom* [3], and has been an active interpreter of Annea Lockwood’s *Piano Transcripts* including *Piano Burning* (performed at Brisbane Festival 2021) and *Piano Transplants* (Rising Festival 2022). In all of these activities her experience as an experimental percussionist guides her acceptance of the state of each piano.

Budel and Tomlinson also have experience working with hydrophones, and a familiarity with underwater sounds, and freshwater eco-acoustics. Tomlinson has worked alongside Leah Barclay as a colleague for many years, listening in to compositions, apps and collaborating on *100 Ways to Listen* [4]. In addition her recent work *P.L.A.C.E.* [5] was the precursor to *CDP* – learning how to listen and play in realtime, how to sort through information, and how to communicate this to other performers. Budel has previously utilized hydrophone recordings in the works *Long Island* [6], which explores the impacts of motor-traffic in the aquatic soundscapes of the Murray River at Murray Bridge SA, and interdisciplinary project *Das Wasser Im Bade* [7], which explores domestic and communal waterways of the Adelaide Plains.

The piano used in *CDP* had personal significance. It is a 1920’s Milton pianola, housed until 1992 in the home of Vanessa’s Nana Dulcie Tomlinson in Fullarton, Adelaide. Originally gifted to Jesse to become part of the Murray Bridge Piano Sanctuary, it was later decided to drive the piano to the Piano Mill site where Vanessa has close artistic associations. Memories of the instrument were shared on the journey, by the campfire, and over dinner – opening stories of family, music, traditions, and new possibilities.

These were explored throughout the eight *CDP* performances, utilizing materials including two glass bottles filled with water from the performance site, forks donated from the landowners of site 1, a crocheted doily from an op-shop, sticks, twigs and leaves collected on site, and donations from audience members. Sounds were made on the front, sides and back on the piano, on the strings and nuts of the instruments, and sometimes using the keyboard mechanism. The musicians remained nimble and responsive within each environment as they conjured sounds in realtime from the constantly transforming instrument, to match the unexpected interplay of underwater sounds.

Performance sites included:

- Murray Bridge – the Murray River flood plains at Mobilong (haven for birds).

- Renmark – Murtho Forrest Landing Campsite, Murray River.
- Wentworth – Private property on the Darling River, near the confluence of the Murray River.
- Wilcannia – Warrawong Bush Camping, Billabong off the Barka (Darling) River
- Brewarrina – Beds on the Barwon, Barwon River near the Fish Traps.
- Moree – Pringy’s Farmstay, Mehi River
- Willson’s Downfall – The Piano Mill overlooking Boonoo Boonoo Creek

The biggest surprise in the project was the enormous variation in sound across the eight sites of the same larger water system. One site was full of melodious song, another had only rhythmic information. One was dominated by constantly running water, and another had a full spectrum of activity – way beyond what the performers could execute at one time. The challenge was to stay or to return to being in the moment of transmitting these underwater sounds through the medium of the piano. Above-water sounds from curious birds and trees intermingled with the underwater soundscape, and the performers often framed the listening experience, rather than literally translating the material. This slippage was common and curious – and yet the eight performances sound remarkably different from one another, reflecting the idiosyncrasies of place.

Through the interweaving of the piano, our travel, the changing topography and the changing weather, *CDP* responded with and to the river system, ecosystems and attendant soundscapes. The work encapsulated multiple temporalities and spatialities, offering unique means of perceiving, representing and envisioning the Murray Darling Basin and its human and other-than-human communities. Physically traversing the country, driving the piano 3000 kilometers from The Piano Sanctuary (Murray Bridge, South Australia) to The Piano Mill (Willson’s Downfall, New South Wales) *CDP* shares the normally inaudible underwater sounds of the river system.

The series of eight performances travelled up the Murray River, turning north on to the Darling/Baarka River, heading east at Bourke onto the Baron River, and travelling up into the Great Dividing Range via the Mehi River and Boonoo Boonoo Creek. On the way, tributaries, lagoons and billabongs were encountered, teeming with water and life in the post-flood environment of May 2023. This is an experimental sound work, but it is also a marker of time and place in Australia’s history – listening to invasive catfish, encountering abundant birdlife in billabongs, hearing the results of climate change and European settlement, camping with introduced wild cats and endemic possums, goats and kangaroos, experiencing change-in-motion of landscape and climate, all bound up in the transformation of the

piano itself as it shed its colonial past, to learn a new musical language, of place, of water, and of time.

Drawing on Tomlinson and Budel’s interests in acoustic ecology and freshwater acoustic monitoring, the multi-day composition consists of recording the water-source using hydrophones; playback of the recording verbatim in the performance with Tomlinson and Budel performed live with the underwater sounds, "channelling" the fish sounds through Dulcie’s piano - teaching the piano to sing.

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