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12. WIDENING HORIZONS

(Interactions in the '50s)

I used to think that in the '60s, when I first went overseas to live, I really grew up, because I became a citizen of the world. But in fact it was in Wellington in the '50s that riches and treasures appeared before me, there for the taking. It was more by good luck than good management that I took them, and became a new person.

It is difficult to separate the three parts of my life which kept me on the run in those days — home-making and cooking for an extended family of seven plus numerous visitors, secretarial work in the Biology Department at Victoria College, as the Wellington University was then called, and degree work in its Music Department.

Social life added another dimension to all three and became very interesting. Friends were now being invited to dinner automatically, not occasionally as in Dunedin days. Coffee shops became important meeting-places along the lines of the English pub. Communications — my long suit — became easier and more exciting.

Something of our family life has already been told. We could now afford to live fairly well, but only because I went out to work. In 1952 I was taken on as a secretary by the Registrar of Victoria College, to work for a notoriously difficult professor of zoology. The Registrar eyed me closely and decided I might be able to cope.

I did. But things were dicey for a while. My professor was demanding and not given to paying compliments. After three months of trying hard to please him we had a row over something inconsequential, and I announced that as it was clear I could not please him whatever I did, I would now leave him. This gave him such a shock that I suddenly found myself overwhelmed with compliments and told that I was the best secretary he had ever had bar none. I stayed, and from then on my difficult boss ate out of my hand and I broke the record for handling tough professors.

I loved that job, and joined enthusiastically into the social life of the Biology Department. Tea breaks and lunches were taken en famille with staff and senior students. The biology boys taught me how to marvel, with them, at the miracle of life. It was tremendously exciting when a baby whale, removed literally from its dead mother's womb, was brought in to be reared by us in a mighty glass tank specially built for it in one of the labs. When we lost the poor "little" thing (it probably weighed half a ton) a month later I wept, along with the Biology girls and the sniffing boys.

"What do you mean, what an ugly, scary creature?" my difficult professor would say when I retreated at the close proximity of a giant weta waving its feelers in my face. "It's not, what do you think of the weta. It's what does the weta think of you."

I typed the theses for the Honours students, and they all helped me later, when I too had to hand in a thesis — on manuscript paper — to make my scores

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look beautiful with their elegant calligraphy. In fact, although music was alien to most of them I received great support from the biologists for the five years it took me to complete my degree, from the dread professor down to the technicians.

I discovered that it was possible for me to take a unit while I was working on the University staff, and in fact most of the other secretaries were doing it. This came for free, except for books and examination fees, and two hours a week could be taken from my secretarial work for the purpose. Any more had to be arranged with one's professor. And my professor was now a tame animal! I decided it would be fun to do a unit, and give me an added interest. But which subject should it be? It was 18 years since I had been to school. Perhaps Music? Like the Music Appreciation classes I took during the war in Dunedin? And so, thinking the course would be similar to that, but more so, I innocently enrolled for Music I.

The Music Department at Victoria was then a comparatively new one. Mr. Frederick Page ran his small department, assisted by Mr. Douglas Lilburn, a shy, private person who had no official degree and had never taught before, but was New Zealand's most distinguished composer — as he still is. During my first year another member of staff was added, David Farquhar, a second composer. And a third one, Larry Pruden, helped with tutoring. So Mr. Page, himself a concert pianist and not a composer, taught Music History, surrounded himself with a creative staff and demanded creative work from his students.

A mystique built up around the Music Department. We students seemed to be either pitied (by the conservative Canterbury University Music Dept.) or envied by students from the other three Universities who wanted to compose too. We were made to create even if we were not natural creators. I, it seemed quite early in the piece, was creative. I adored my five years' course in that Department and will always consider myself one of the privileged.

The Music 1 course then consisted of three parts —Music History and Analysis, Harmony, and Aural Training. The first part was, indeed, like the W.E.A. course in Dunedin, though much more sophisticated, and the ear tests, for me, were a joke But the Harmony was a closed book to me when I began, and very scary.

"Don't look at my work, Mr. Page!" I said at our first tutorial—a public one held in class. (I had been listening to his comments on other people's work.) "I'm sure it's all wrong. Could you recommend an easier textbook for me to use until I get used to all this?"

"Let me see now," replied Mr. Page, pushing my forearm aside. He glanced at my manuscript paper. "Yes, you are right. There are rather a lot of mistakes there. But don't worry. I don't know another book to recommend you, but the one you are using is very good. Just hang in there, Mrs. Freed. Just hang in there."

I felt ashamed and despondent. ready to cry with all those clever young things listening to my humiliation. My self-esteem was shattered.

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At the end of the session Mr. Page mounted his dais and delivered his judgment on the work of the whole class.

"I've seen now what you can all do. Some of you know a lot. Some of you think you know a lot. And some of you know nothing." He paused and glanced at me. "And I'm putting my money on one or two of you who know nothing!"

This was, at least, encouraging. And as it turned out, the old boy was right. But I didn't believe him until the end of the year when we sat Finals.

I struggled with Harmony all the year. With one-to-one tutorials after that first one, and no Terms exams, I had no idea how good the others were, but assumed they were all swimming happily while I was still frantically dog-paddling. I had no idea, when I entered the examination room that morning to sit the Finals paper in Harmony, how on earth I would be able to write anything in a vacuum, so to speak, with no piano to suss things out, only my inner ear which was going to have to work overtime inside my head. Surely I would fall flat on my face!

One of the three questions was to set a given poem to music for voice and piano. I did this very fast, because it was easy. but I felt far from happy about, the whole paper. How many ghastly mistakes had I made which could have been fixed easily with five minutes at, a piano?

The marks came out first on a noticeboard outside Mr. Page's door, in his hand-writing. I seemed to have got two 75 % marks, top equal, for the whole Stage I unit, with the cleverest girl in the class.

I tapped on the door.

"I can't read your figures very well, Mr. Page. Have you written 75 or 45 for me?"

"Seventy-five, Mrs. Freed. Seventy-five."

"I don't believe it!"

"Oh, yes. You were the one who wrote the good song."

"But that song sang itself!" I cried. "It was so easy — it was a gift!"

"The others didn't think so," replied Mr. Page dryly.

That experience gave me one of the most exciting lifts of my life. I was walking on air. Yes, I would certainly go on with this music degree caper, however long it took me to do the course part-time.

I never managed to distinguish myself again to the extent I did in Stage I

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Harmony, but I did complete the highly technical and specialised course. The work became increasingly difficult, and a great challenge — and joy. I particularly loved all the creative work, especially as classes grew smaller at higher levels. We had private tutorials, and Douglas Lilburn, my teacher for most subjects requiring music-writing and creativity, was for me a superb teacher.

For Counterpoint I we studied Palestrina-style 16th century music writing. No other New Zealand University at the time seemed to be doing this. It was considered barbarous, old-fashioned. We used a text by one Jepperson, a Swedish writer. I loved my Palestrina counterpoint because I sang his music in a choir. Thirty years on I was representing New Zealand at an annual conference in Europe of the International Association of Music Libraries, and found myself at a reception trying to talk to a shy, inarticulate Finn. Over our glasses of chianti it came to light that we were actually both composers as well as music librarians.

"We used a book by a Scandinavian to study 16th century counterpoint," I said.

"Was it Jepperson?" he said. "I studied with that book, too!"

I was delighted. Nobody I knew, beyond a few other Victoria University music students, had ever heard of Jepperson.

"I was already married with twin baby girls when I did that course," my new friend mused. "My wife worked at night so that I could go to University by day. I well remember when I had to prepare my exercises for tutorials. I put the twins to bed in my boat and rowed twenty or thirty yards out, and let the ripples rock them to sleep. Then I got the peace and quiet I needed to do those exercises!"

It was a great bond, and I well understood the intense calm one needs to write strict counterpoint. I usually had to have a hot bath after the several hours it might take me to write a fugue.

Instrumentation with Douglas Lilburn was great fun. There were only two of us taking it that year, a singer called Suzanne Green now well-known in London, and me. We both adored Douglas, and sat each side of him on a bench as he commented on our exercises. When he asked Suzanne a question she found difficult to answer she would touch his tie and say, "That's a very nice tie, you know!" Blushing scarlet with embarrassment, he would turn to me, and I would give him an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile and a big wink. We heard he once remarked to Mr. Page that he "had to go into class now and teach those two terrible girls," but admitted he rather enjoyed it.

I enjoyed it, too. When I talked about purple horns and dark red trombones, he exchanged an understanding look with me. Nobody else knew what I was talking about. For me timbre, or "colour", is literal colour. I see it. I thought everybody else did too, but they don't.

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Well, there were ups and downs, but the course was rich and beautiful for me. I passed everything. I even managed to get an A for acoustics, a subject I never managed to understand.

Social life, which now included musicians, was also rich and new. My best friend was fellow-student Peter Crowe, an original type who adored dodecaphonic music. Although much younger than me, we were the two "oldies" in senior classes. I never knew until 30 years later that he had been in love with me all the time.

Peter was calling me a "real" composer long before I guessed I might be one. We went to orchestral rehearsals together, the rare opera performances which came to town, and discussed music by the hour. Peter read widely and came out with various questions he would "dare" me to ask Mr. Page in class, to disconcert him.

"Mr. Page!" I called out one day. "Mr. Crowe says he has just read a book about Stravinsky which says that Stravinsky said Beethoven couldn't write a tune. What do you think about that?"

The question threw Fred. The lecture disintegrated as he kept returning to this new, worrying idea.

"Well, now, Mrs. Freed," he announced as the clock pointed to end-of-lecture time. "Like many another naughty girl, you've been left carrying the baby!"

Peter knew practical things. The year before I was due to do the unit called Composition, Peter drew my attention to a valuable prize for composition being offered nationally by APRA and the N.Z. Broadcasting Corp. One section was for a New Zealand ballad set for voice and piano. He persuaded me to enter, and I found a poem by Katherine Mansfield, then dead but not out of copyright. Not knowing any better, I wrote to her husband in London asking for permission to enter the song. Time went on, and nothing seemed to be coming back from England, so I found and set another poem, by A.R.D. Fairburn, then living in Auckland. I wrote to him for permission. Nothing happened. A couple of weeks before closing date for the competition I learned that publishers could give permission, so I wrote to the two concerned. On the day entries closed letters arrived from both, giving me the go-ahead. I submitted the two songs, and the K.M. poem won.

However, something even more strange happened. Just before the letters from the publishers were received, both Middleton Murry in England and A.R.D. Fairburn in Auckland died! My biology colleagues surmised I must have killed them with shock when they got my letters. From then on they nicknamed me Poison Pen Freed!

Mr. Fred Page must have been pleased that all prizes for that competition were awarded to Victoria Music Department people, even including a student, but he said nothing to me at the time. But the following year when I enrolled for the Composition unit he remarked wryly that I must be feeling pleased I had won, because now how could they possibly fail me at the end of the year?

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Peter advised me to submit an entry for the Philip Neill Memorial Prize for composition awarded by the University of Otago. I wrote the woodwind quintet required that year, and duly won it. This was mere honour and glory, but nice. I also won a prize offered annually by the Wellington City Council for the most promising student of composition at Victoria. I thought Peter would get it, but I did.

So I did quite well both before and after graduation, but nothing progressed much beyond the original flash in the pan. Peter and I feel we belong to "the lost generation" of New Zealand composers. The country was not used to having composers of serious music at all in the 1950s. They really didn't quite know what to do with us. At the end of the decade we creative Victoria graduates were just a tiny band of eccentrics, encouraged only by a benevolent N.Z. Broadcasting Service. Later my music was published, performed and broadcast over the BBC in Britain and in Australia, but it meant little to my reputation in New Zealand.

At one stage I took private lessons in London with Peter Racine Fricker. He was nice, but he did not teach me much. I also worked a little with Elizabeth Lutyens at an English music school, and she was fun. She did not teach me much either, although she taught most of the others plenty. And once I spent two weeks at a music school in Siena at the composition class run by the well-known Italian composer Donatoni. He taught me nothing at all. However, it was all fun, and one learned plenty from the other students. Working with these three well-known overseas composers made me realise how lucky I had been to be taught by the silent but inspiring Douglas Lilburn in New Zealand.

As the years went on, back in New Zealand I became disheartened at the general lack of interest in the work of local composers like me, and the constant need to promote oneself, which I hated. I virtually gave the game up, except for writing music for the theatre which I have always loved doing. Now we have a New Zealand Music Centre set up here to promote composers, and I find myself looked on with respect as a veteran who survived the hard days of the '50s and '60s, and a few goodies have started to fall into my lap.

However, fame (or lack of it) and number of public performances, broadcasts, etc. was really immaterial. What really mattered to me was the chance discovery of my ability to write music at all — a new and marvellous form of communication.

I stopped trying to act in plays, I wrote music for them instead. I stopped thinking of myself as a singer, I wrote songs instead. And for me the challenge of designing a new piece, for brass band or any medium, is still fascinating, almost obsessive, a completely wonderful form of self-expression.

So much for my life in the '50s, and learning how to compose. That, indeed, was an accident of fate. It shocks me now to think how easily I could have missed out on discovering that I could even do it. Why did I go to Victoria University to work as a secretary? And once there, why did I decide to study music? And finally, armed with a music degree, why did I allow a professor to persuade me to change my

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whole future life style by applying for a place at New Zealand Library School?

Surely it must have been All Meant!