

# **A composer-in-residence project at Meekatharra School of the Air, Western Australia**

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## **Abstract**

*The 'Composition over the Airwaves' project aimed to provide musical opportunities for children in remote areas in collaboration with a composer. The project aimed to explore ways of enabling children disadvantaged by their remote settings to work creatively using HF radio. The children wrote and performed several pieces in a variety of improvisatory and interpretative styles. The compositions used as their impetus the remoteness of the children and required that their works be a reflection of the environment in which they lived. The project was completed during the 1999 academic school year. An important outcome was the constructive expression, collaboration and social interaction that resulted from the two residential camps not usual to the children. An unexpected outcome was the collaboration with the Art specialist at Meekatharra School of the Air who enabled the graphic scores to become tactile.*

## **Introduction**

The Meekatharra School of the Air (MSOTA) was established in 1959 with 27 children and one teacher. Today there are eighty students from pre-primary to Year 7. MSOTA is the largest school of the air in Western Australia covering some 540,000 square kilometres. The area extends 200 kms east of Wiluna and continues to the Western Australia border, north to Newman, as far west as Mullewa and south almost to Wubin. The community of Meekatharra is made up of mining and rural families situated around the township of Meekatharra. There are nine full time teachers, a registrar, a principal and a library assistant. Transmission is provided courtesy of the Royal Flying Doctor Service and parents can hire a 2-way radio so that their children can participate in 'on-air' lessons. The MSOTA broadcasts from two studios and houses much correspondence material. Contact with the students happens in a variety of ways and includes home visits by teachers, sports camps, activity days held at various stations and the annual learning seminar for home tutors and students.

## **The Meekatharra School of the Air 'Composition over the Air' project**

The main participants in the project were the children of the MSOTA choir, their parents or governesses, the composer (Roxanne Della-Bosca), Helen Wakefield (MSOTA Art teacher) and the researcher. The project was initially to be made available to all students, but given the issue of distance, only those children who were already members of the MSOTA choir were invited to take part in the project. It was thought that the students and their families already had an interest in music and would value the opportunity to explore this further.

The choir is scheduled for weekly rehearsals which are facilitated through broadcasts. It is unusual that a choir should form under such conditions. The children enjoy the choir and have the support of their families. They come together about twice a year and sing at special events or camps. Roxanne Della-Bosca was invited to be the composer in residence by the researcher. A graduate with a developing reputation as a new composer, Roxanne had a keen interest in promoting composition as part of the music education of young people. The 'Composition over the Air' project also presented other challenges that Roxanne felt would extend her own boundaries. In contrast to the situation encountered in less remote environments, Roxanne provided the students and their families with access to expertise in an area not usually explored through distance education settings. Also, Roxanne could provide both stimulus and nourishment for the arts in this remote mining and rural community.

The researcher coordinated and co-developed the project with Roxanne Della-Bosca. Many of the workshops were delivered by the researcher or in a collaborative team-teaching mode with Roxanne. 'On-air' lessons were managed through the telephone link at the School of Music at the University of Western Australia. The main role of the researcher was to provide experience and expertise in working with children in educative settings.

### **Encompassing aims**

The project sought to address the potential of the arts as a vehicle for liberating isolated children through the following specific aims:

To provide musical opportunities for children in remote areas.

To bring together children disadvantaged by their isolation, using music (as a social art/collaborative process) as a tool to achieve this.

To make music a realistic vehicle for students' investigation of the world in which they live.

The specific objective of the project was to establish a Composer-in-Residence program with the School of Isolated and Distance Education - in particular a primary level School of the Air - involving isolated students in musical experiences designed to develop listening, composing and performing skills whilst providing a positive experience of contemporary musical ideas.

### **Project design**

The project took place during the 1999 academic school year. A considerable amount of pre-planning and project design occurred- in excess of sixty hours. Applications for funding were made and whilst the total amount of the project was not able to be secured it was decided to continue and manage as best we could. Funding for the arts and projects such as this are highly competitive. We did however, secure support from ARTSWA, Country Arts Network (CAN), The School for Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), MSOTA and the School of Music, University of Western Australia (SOMUWA). The composer and researcher donated their time.

The project was divided into stages which are detailed as follows. They included visiting the Home Tutors' Seminar Camp, Geraldton; designing the 'On Air' Composition Program; a music camp at Edah Station; performance and recording; individual on air contact and postal correspondence; and a final camp held at the School of Music, University of Western Australia.

#### **Camp 1: Home Tutors' Seminar Camp, Geraldton**

The first camp was aimed at introducing the students and their home tutors to the process of composing through meeting and working with the composer and researcher. We aimed to establish the project as being about the exploration of and organising of sound.

It was essential to both the composer and researcher that there were practical sessions which involved both the students and their teachers (home tutors). An exploration of pitch, rhythm, beat, timbre and texture was tackled through movement exercises, games, singing, improvisation, discussion, score reading and writing. The students listened to a wide variety of music, particularly 20th Century styles and genres. Through these sessions we hoped to provide the students with a repertoire of experiences and understandings - a pantry-full of ingredients. The students composed simple improvised and interpretative story works and wrote accompanying graphic scores. The students worked for approximately 2 hrs per day for three days. Although these students did not initially have a highly developed understanding of music we did not feel that this would impact on their capacity to be creative. It was thought that the children could be introduced to the process of exploring and evaluating in order to solve problems. This camp also provided Roxanne (the composer) and

I (the researcher) with the opportunity to discuss the project with the home-tutors and music teacher so that we all fully understood what was going to occur.

### **The 'On Air Composition Program'**

Essential to the project were the interactive HF radio broadcasts and the specially designed student workbooks/portfolios. Five 30 minute sessions were designed with pre-recorded taped material to be broadcast live in collaboration with Meekatharra SOTA. A communications line was made available from the MSOTA broadcast desk so that the students could hear Roxanne and me talking. This was established from Perth. The link was made via telephone line to the MSOTA broadcasting suite and relayed to the children. It was hoped to explore sounds and shapes, duration, contour, pitch and dynamics through listening. A series of cumulative composition activities provided in the booklets ensured an element of individual exploration and development.

As the children had very little previous experience of creative music-making we thought it appropriate that each program explore an aspect of the fundamentals of music. Unfortunately only two broadcasts were successful. The technology collapsed and we waited patiently for the technician to arrive at MSOTA to solve the problem. (We gained a new understanding of the difficulties that distance education faces!) The repair took eight weeks during which time we attempted to instruct the music teacher on how to deliver the broadcasts - even providing a script - and resorted to individual tapes that were sent to the students. It was not appropriate to deliver the broadcasts once Camp 2 arrived.

### **Camp 2: Edah Station**

Camp 2 aimed to draw together all of the information and experiences of the project so far in order to work towards larger scale compositions. One of the families volunteered to provide their station as the venue for a concentrated period of composition and music making. The students began a more challenging exploration and evaluation of composition ideas under the guidance of Roxanne. Various composition strategies were modelled for the children and they were encouraged to discuss their own ideas and those of others. The students were asked to observe Roxanne composing and to interview her at the end of her demonstration.

A considerable amount of time was spent working slowly and carefully. Stephanie wrote in her journal that:

'we had lots of instruments and played a story, but without any words. Then we drew shapes and lines on the white board as a group to resemble the sounds. For example we had three instruments playing at the beginning, and had to resemble them. We drew a type of rectangle with short, straight lines in it. It was very hard to get the correct pictures for the sounds. But it was fun.'

We felt it was important to guide the children in order to help them recognise that sound events change in character depending upon what precedes or follows. The children were encouraged to share descriptions of how they generated, modified and judged their ideas while composing. Brenton wrote:

'...(I) always thought music was about beat and songs, but now I have learnt about music from a different angle and it really gets me thinking.'

They were asked to perform their work in progress and to do so until happy with the results. The composer and researcher did not interfere other than to ask leading questions and to ensure that discussion remained productive. The children were given opportunities to learn from each other. It was essential to the development of the compositions that both group and individual pieces were composed. The students were encouraged to listen and discuss each other's work. A social and congenial atmosphere was established.

At the Edah Camp we began our collaboration with an artist. We introduced graphic and tactile scores and worked alongside the art teacher of MSOTA Helen Wakefield. The students explored form, harmony and texture (part writing) through listening, composition activities, art activities and discussion. Benjamin writes:

'With our artwork we used the colours green, blue, red and yellow material. I thought it was going to be easy but it was not. I was really pleased with myself. I really enjoyed today. Too bad everyone is going today.'

Helen's own impressions are insightful of the collaborative process. She writes:

'What is a graphic score? This was the burning question. Just one of many? Why was I going to choir camp? No one could really tell me. As an art teacher I wondered what part I would play? I threw a few art materials into a box and hoped for the best. I wondered what was in store...It didn't take long to find out. Belinda and Roxanne asked the students to make sounds with assorted items. Then shock, horror...we were asked to represent the sounds as symbols on a board. Initially this required a fair degree of head scratching, brain work and creativity as we (I was learning too!) were not allowed to use traditional musical notes, which, in any case would not have been adequate or appropriate in representing these unique sounds. Once we established how to write/represent sounds in this new amazingly open-ended format the rest appeared relatively easy. Time was then devoted to experimentation and practice prior to the end compositions. The final scores became not only graphic, but tactile scores, works of art in themselves. The students drew on their imagination, the materials, the inspiration of the sounds and each other while working like slaves to finish creating the artworks in time. Later, when thinking over the few days at Edah, and the wonderful work created by the students, I thought how perfect the words 'graphic score' were. I was surprised how I hadn't really envisaged the outcome initially but pleased that I went through the same learning processes as the students. It was a combination of technology, music, art, problem solving and mathematics. Technology (experimentation, planning, designing, modifying and producing) was the umbrella over the whole experience.'

During the Edah Station Camp the children began to write a journal of their daily work. The entries were unguided and students were provided with quiet time to write personal reflections about the day's events. The journals are full of details about their intricate games, catching wild goats and, thankfully, about their music making. Christopher wrote on the last day:

'Today we got into groups and did all the steps to complete a composition. We made a story or scene, practised, made a score, performed and then recorded our composition. I liked making the score.'

Whilst most of the entries were more about recording events of the day some included more personal expressions such as Thomas who wrote:

'I loved chasing goats on the hill and playing sport with my friends.'

All of the children's quotes above are from diaries that they kept.

## **Performance/Recording**

Essential at all stages was the performance and recording of compositions, by individuals and groups. Recording was both audio and visual. Students were able to listen to and review their work at all times.

## **Teacher and Student Resource**

The accompanying teaching resource booklet of 'On Air' lessons has the potential to be developed further for use in other similar settings.

## Individual On Air Contact and Postal Correspondence

After Camp 2 the students were set individual tasks and were required to develop a major composition piece. As students were developing their major work, they were encouraged to show and discuss their progress with the resident composer in readiness for the final camp. The students were provided with a guide in order to complete the required task. They had to make decisions about the length of the piece, how they would measure time in the score, what instruments they would use, whether the piece would be based on a narrative, or a feeling, or some other stimulus. They had to be concerned with structure (having a beginning, middle and end) and with their score - what symbols would they use and how would they create their score?

## Camp 3: SOTA Music Camp, School of Music, University of W A

The final camp was based around the major pieces that the students had been working on since Edah Station. The students brought tactile scores and their compositions and were required to direct the group in a performance. Whilst this camp also had a focus on the process it was an aim to settle on the actual composition. It was surprising to see the students 'getting on' with the process - mostly unaided. Together they rehearsed, performed and recorded their final compositions. A new level of independence emerged and the results were beyond our expectations. Roxanne writes:

'the quality of the work was much higher than expected, as was their rate of learning. The parental support was also fantastic. The audience response was fantastic and the amount of energy was fantastic.'

This final workshop was the culmination of the project and the children composed new individual pieces and group pieces. Each piece was given a thorough revision and opportunity for exploration and comment by the group and the composer. The children performed each other's work and developed further both graphic and tactile scores. Introduction of new concepts such as harmony, form and texture were also included. Students participated in an interactive score and developed ostinato rhythmic patterns from a dining room setting.

## Outcomes

The project was designed to encourage creativity and was combined with skill-based musical activities and creative tasks. There were opportunities for constructive expression and social interaction. Each was of similar importance for this group of students, parents and teachers. As Stephanie wrote:

'It was neat to see all my school friends. I hear them on the radio every day but haven't seen them for six and a half months. We played footy.'

The scope of the project was broad and the experience was an enriching one for all those involved. Composing music became a vehicle for developing and furthering the children's self-esteem, self-confidence, creativity and other meritorious qualities such as commitment and enthusiasm. Roxanne reflects that:

'the kids developed their sense of self worth in a team situation, enjoyment of their own creativity, broadening of their technical imagination, broadening of their musical attitudes...and some visually and aurally beautiful work!'

There was also an opportunity to develop students' cognitive capacities in music perception, writing, performance, communication skills and positive attitudes to the arts. Of major significance was the collaboration between artist and community. Implications of the project included introducing an isolated community to the artistic process and promoting the value of arts creation as 'real work' in contrast to a leisure activity. The project raised community awareness of composition and contemporary music as a valid art form, a 'real' profession

and a 'real' personal option. Roxanne has since reflected that she tried to consider the entire process as a composition process for herself:

'I tried to evaluate the activities and tasks we designed from a composition point of view. I wanted to be certain that the activities would captivate my own imagination if I was the one doing them. I also tried to use my own sense of the composition process in order to guide the way that the activities were presented - their timing and order for instance.'

The 'Composition over the Air' project has enabled further links with the five Schools of the Air and the School of Isolated and Distance Education of Western Australia during 2000. A qualitative study will begin, which will pursue the perspectives of parents, teachers and students through an investigation of the delivery and management of arts curricula through distance education. This exciting project will look closely at arts provision and its delivery in remote and distance settings.

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