

## **Martin Wesley-Smith AM (10 June 1945 – 26 September 2019)**

One of Australia's most important musical figures was a much-loved member of the Kangaroo Valley community having migrated here from Sydney in 2000. Martin Wesley-Smith quickly fitted into Valley life, undertaking and initiating a range of musical projects for and on behalf of local people. He was instrumental in establishing projects to raise money for East Timor, an activity that is still going today, and he sought to improve the musical lives of the people of Kangaroo Valley by arranging concerts with visiting artists as well as starting a local choir (The Thirsty Night Singers). Outside of Kangaroo Valley, Martin was a much-celebrated music innovator.

Dr Martin Wesley-Smith (he seldom used the title) was a leading figure in Australian music composition. He combined political activism with music, many of his works protesting the inhumanity of the powerful and corrupt towards those who were not. He was an electronic and acoustic music composer of international significance. In marked contrast he also penned many favourite children's songs such as *I'm Walking in the City*, which you can probably still hear occasionally on ABC Playschool. He collaborated with his twin brother, Peter; together they created highly successful and important music theatre works and numerous songs.

Martin's musical output is seriously impressive by any measure. For this he received a number of prestigious awards including an AM, the Paul Lowin Award, The Don Banks Creative Fellowship and the *Ordem de Timor Leste*.

His musical style might be described as varied, and he has no imitators - at least none that I ever discovered. While his students greatly admired him, there is no "Wesley-Smith school of composition" and probably is not likely to be. His influence was subtle. This is partly because he was active in a wide range of musical styles and was difficult to copy; it is also because, in his time, he bucked the popular trends in serious classical music. Put simply, his music was different. He was criticised for this by some colleagues, particularly those of the modern 'complexist' persuasion; not fitting in can be a serious offence, but Wesley-Smith was nothing if not musically and personally courageous.

My friendship with him began on his first day at the Sydney Conservatorium in 1974. We weren't actually introduced; he just wandered into the staff room when I was there alone: *Giddy, I'm Martin. Pleased to meet you, Robert. What do you teach? Ahh, music history and theory... I'm a composer, myself.* (Then, changing the subject to what was really on his mind): *You would think that having a full-time salary and the title 'Dr' in front of your name would impress a bank manager when you want a bloody loan to buy a house for your wife and kids. Bloody bank managers are bastards!* From this and many subsequent discussions I discovered that he was a modern-day Ned Kelly: a rebel, a maverick and often mistrustful of authority. I liked him and it was mutual.

We were colleagues on the teaching staff of the Sydney Conservatorium. The Con had over 100 teachers and I was friendly with most of them, but Martin and I really hit it off at a personal level and quickly developed a mateship. He gravitated towards living in the western suburbs - certainly not the north shore or eastern suburbs - and I was also a "lefty-westy". We had in common left-wing politics and the support of the oppressed though Martin was more suspicious of authority than I.

We followed cricket with passion, occasionally playing our own version of the game in the corridors of the Con with a ball of government issue string wrapped with several dozen layers of government issue sticky tape and a big cardboard government issue postal tube for a bat. One day, the Director, Rex Hobcroft came around the corner and caught us just as I was playing an impressive defensive

shot to a very fast Wesley-Smith full toss. We bid him a nervous hello, but Rex simply asked if he could join us and try out a googly he'd been developing. Rex was one of the few bosses Martin admired.

In the 1970s and 80s, Martin and I established the habit of fishing at Long Nose Point (Balmain) on summer evenings: beer and conversation with very few fish. We kept it up, so it must have been the conversation and not the fish that appealed...

We had musical tastes in common. We shared a passion for ancient music techniques like canon, fugue, inversion, augmentation, retrograde inversion and so on. He and I also loved word games particularly Lewis Carroll's word-ladder i.e., gradually transforming one word into another by changing one letter at a time: *cat, cot, dot, dog, hog, hag, bag, bat, pat, cat*. Musical equivalents are common, one musical idea being gradually transformed into something different.

In the 70s and 80s I was, to quote him, his pianist of choice to premiere many of his new works. He told me more than once that he admired the rhythmic accuracy of my playing. I readily agreed with this assertion.

Martin believed in recycling his music: a work written for clarinet and pre-recorded tape could easily be adapted for other instruments such as marimba or violin and piano. Thus, violinist Elizabeth Holowell and I played Martin's *White Knight and Beaver* and *Beta Globin DNA* on an American concert tour in 1989, both these works originally being for other instrumental combinations. He wrote his anti-US *Weapons of Mass Distortion* for clarinettist Ros Dunlop, which I later played on piano in New Zealand in 2013.

In the mid 1980s, after I had left Sydney and moved north to the Newcastle Conservatorium, Martin became a frequent visitor. He came either for performances of his music or to teach the students and sometimes for both. This also happened in New Zealand when I head of school in Auckland and later Christchurch. Students were always fascinated with his music and with what he had to say.

A loyal and supportive colleague and friend, Martin and I shared a strong bond over a very long period; this, together with my growing friendship with his brother, Peter, is what kept bringing me back to Kangaroo Valley and eventually led me to settle here.

Martin Wesley-Smith was one of my closest friends and a much respected colleague; I shall miss him immensely, as will many, many others.

One of the cruel things about Martin's particular form of cancer was that it killed him by slow degrees over ten years. During this time his diminishing energy was spent dealing with his cancer and he was unable to concentrate on composition. He felt this frustration deeply.

For those who want to know more about Martin and his career, I recommend the excellent obituaries in *The Australian*, *Limelight Magazine* and on the ABC website.

There will be a memorial concert to celebrate Martin's life and achievements at 3.00pm on Sunday November 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Kangaroo Valley Community Hall.

Robert Constable

