Reading the ‘Gold Coast Symphony’ in Thea Astley’s *The Acolyte*

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Abstract

Thea Astley is a figure who is strongly associated with music, both in her life interests and in her writing rhythms and allusions; this article investigates the uses of music in her 1972 novel *The Acolyte*. Drawing on a recent genre of critical musicology that understands music to be a social practice, *The Acolyte* is read in relation to mid-twentieth-century cultural debates around the development of a distinctive Australian classical music. Centring on the blind pianist turned composer Jack Holberg, *The Acolyte* is grounded in the Gold Coast hinterland as an inspiring and generative landscape, in contrast with the desolate outback favoured in national mythologies. Holberg’s ‘Gold Coast Symphony’, arguably the turning point of the novel, imaginatively writes this coastal fringe of urban debauchery into the vernacular of classical music through its performance in conservative 1960s Brisbane. In this article, I read *The Acolyte* as a novel positioned within an Australian musicological history that intersects with the poetics of place, the politics of gender and sexuality, and ongoing national formations through cultural production.

In his essay ‘Musica Practica’, Roland Barthes (1977) proposes that there are two kinds of music: the music that is listened to and the music that is played. He makes an argument for the ‘manual, muscular, kneadingly physical’ praxis of playing classical music (1977: 150) and rues the ‘disappearance’ of amateur playing since its professionalisation around the time of Beethoven. Perhaps there is another music, however: the music we read. We read about music frequently: in reviews, in concert notes and in literature. A renewed interest in music in literature has emerged with the advent of the ‘new’ cultural musicology, which reads music as a social discourse made meaningful through language. This article attends to Thea Astley’s 1972 novel, *The Acolyte*, to begin thinking about the function of classical music in Australian literature. Awarded the prestigious Miles Franklin Award in 1973, Astley’s novel centres on the life and work of a blind pianist composer named Jack Holberg living on Queensland’s Gold Coast during the 1960s. Its climax is arguably the public performance of his work ‘Gold Coast Symphony’ in Brisbane, which is described in pages of detail. I propose that this novel can be read through the

cultural conversations about Australian classical music in the mid-twentieth century.

My approach in this article follows Cristina L. Ruotolo's work on American fiction in the early twentieth century, where she proposes that 'fictional narrative played (and continues to play) a part in shaping musical understanding—in telling us what music is and does, and how it can be used—and that fiction should be considered more toward the centre, than the margins, of music-cultural historiography' (Ruotolo 2013: 4). Ruotolo's work is part of a growing body of literature that situates fictional texts in relation to national understandings of music histories. Her claim that the fiction she examines can tell us 'how Americans made, heard, responded to, and understood music' (2013: 1) is not unusual. Such studies are also marked by proposals like Ruotolo's that 'music played a significant role in shaping this moment in American literature' (2013: 1). Music is not only intrinsic to the development of literature, however; it has also been read through its literary manifestation as formative of subjectivities, socio-political moments and national sensibilities. Gerry Smyth (2008: 3), for example, contends that the 'recurring recourse to music that is discernible throughout British fiction since the eighteenth century represents an important aspect of the nation's socio-political development' and David Deutsch (2015) argues that classical music in British literature can be linked to proliferating twentieth-century cultural discourses around social mobility, education, sexuality and national politics. Christin Hoene (2014: 1–2) interrogates 'the role music plays in the formation of the postcolonial state and the postcolonial subject' in British-South Asian literature. Harry White (2008: 3) argues that 'music is the "sovereign ghost" of the Irish literary imagination'. Such studies and others make an argument for the contribution of music in literary texts to the construction of subjects, states, literature and music history, chiefly through the mediating role of language.

This kind of sociocultural context brought to music in fiction is a relatively recent development combining the literary and musicology fields, in what has been called the new musicology, or cultural musicology. Such studies fundamentally contest music's autonomy as a universal or absolute aesthetic that is shrouded in mystery and awe. Rather, the focus has moved to 'its cultural, social, historical, and political dimensions', in order to read music as a cultural practice (Kramer 2011: 64). In this article, I read *The Acolyte* as a novel positioned within an Australian musicological history that intersects with the poetics of place, the politics of gender and sexuality, and ongoing national formations through cultural production. It is the specifics of place, against the backdrop of the Gold Coast, that significantly redirect the ways in which the social production of music can be read, especially through the public performance of Holberg's 'Gold Coast Symphony'. In these ways, *The Acolyte* intervenes in discourses about nationalism in music to trouble the very idea of an imagined national culture.

Musicscapes of *The Acolyte*

The term 'musiccape' is derived from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1990) use of various 'scapes' to model global flows of people, media, technology, capital, and ideas. 'Musiccape' has been used more loosely to capture layers and scenes of music. Ruotolo (2013: 3) uses the term to refer to the way 'literary representations

of music and musical events inevitably construct and reflect particular historically resonant ways of hearing, seeing, describing, and locating music'. Sara Coen (2012) uses it to refer to music landscapes, bringing together geographical and cultural components, and J.C. Finn (2015: 166) uses it as a shorthand for representational features of 'culture on display'. In referring to the musicscapes of *The Acolyte*, I am particularly interested in the social, the landscape and the historical time of cultural debates about the development of classical music in Australia.

Domestics

The complex social relations of the novel are significant in constructing the domestic world in which music is produced. *The Acolyte* is narrated from the point of view of Paul Vesper, the acolyte of the book's title. Vesper becomes an amanuensis for the blind pianist composer Jack Holberg. Vesper scores Holberg's music, makes his coffee and also sexually satisfies Holberg's wife Hilda while Holberg is off satisfying a violist or a dark-haired cellist or, another time, a contralto. In this sense, Vesper is not an acolyte in relation to Holberg's music, as we would expect, but in relation to his domestic arrangements. Hilda and Vesper were a couple prior to Holberg marrying Hilda. Hilda's sister Ilsa is also 'devoted' to Holberg, as his spurned lover prior to Hilda. Ilsa later has Holberg's child — Jamie — while she is married to Slum. Vesper has also had sexual relations with Ilsa. If this network of sexual relations sounds complicated, it functions in the novel to create a thick network of intimate relations. Vesper's relationship with Holberg is confined to the homosocial: they share bed partners, work and a home. Vesper even thinks he might be 'Holberg's other self, his seeing self' (Astley 1972: 39). As an acolyte, however, he is also aware of his servitude to Holberg when he endures his master's 'tantrums and euphoria' (1972: 67). Characterised in the tradition of the suffering hypersexual and narcissistic male genius, Holberg is a figure of desire for everyone in the novel. His rampant and tangled sexual relationships can be understood as an extension of his musical genius.

Indeed, his characterisation as the focus and proliferation of desire quintessentially yokes Holberg to creativity while also critiquing this social myth. Musicologist Susan McClary (1991: 53) argues that while literature and art are critically discussed in terms of desire, sexuality and gender, classical music 'gives the illusion of operating independently of cultural mediation' because 'few listeners know how to explain how it creates its effect'. This illusion is stripped away in *The Acolyte*, and in this early 1970s novel Astley seems to have anticipated many of the critical debates of the next decade. Musicologists were arguing in the 1980s that music is socially produced and politically inscribed (Leppert and McClary 1987), rather than purely aesthetic or idealised as sacred evocations by its high priests (McClary 1987: 170). At this time, the notion of the godlike and often tortured composer was attributed to the historical division between the artist and craftsman in the late Renaissance, and then the later Romantic idea of the artist paralleled in literary and visual fields (Wolff 1987: 2). The market economy accompanying industrialisation refigured musicians and composers as anchored in social, political and pecuniary worlds, and no longer as transcendent from the social (1987: 3).

While Astley's text distances Holberg from the demands of earning income through the patronage of his wealthy Aunt Sadie, the social circulation of critics,

fans, audiences and even patrons and acolytes positions the composer within a social milieu. Feminist analysis of genius as an historically developed concept of virile male creativity by art historians like Battersby, Wolff, and Parker and Pollock in the 1980s was well over a decade after Astley's fierce satire in *The Acolyte*, where Holberg is constructed as a highly sexualised, volatile, white male narcissist. Through Holberg, Astley makes a grotesque parody of the concert pianist as a highly romanticised male figure (Raykoff 2013). Speaking to Ray Willbanks in the 1980s, Astley said that she 'really wanted to write a book about ... being a subservient character to a great man. I was getting sick of great men. I wanted to see them from the other side of the doormat, you know?' (Willbanks 1991: 33). Concomitantly, the female characters in *The Acolyte* are largely caricatures, servile or despicable, except for wealthy Aunt Sadie, who has the resources to refuse conservative passivity. Hilda and Ilsa are almost interchangeable as objects of desire. Their designation as the goose girls perhaps refers to a German folk tale of mistaken identity in which a princess is sent to tend geese while a servant girl marries a prince, but arguably their difference in this novel is negligible and both are devalued, as when Vesper calls one of them a 'goose of a girl' (Astley 1972: 99). These critical recalibrations of music and genius are evident in *The Acolyte* as Astley fictionally figures the languid landscapes of music and desire in 1960s coastal South-East Queensland.

Landscapes

If Holberg's tangled sexual relations can be understood as an extension of his musical genius, they might also be considered an extension of the landscape of fecund subtropical growth and torpid humidity of South-East Queensland. The geography of the novel extends latitudinally across South-East Queensland and longitudinally along its north-south coastline. To the south-west is Grogbusters, 'a border town ... in the southern part of the State with apple and grape farms plotting its granite ridges' (Astley 1972: 3), rather like Stanthorpe. This is where Vesper attends high school while Holberg is playing piano in clubs, 'tiddling blues'd Bach at the RSL and turning in sonata versions of "Cheek to Cheek" at soirees' (1972: 4). Hilda and Ilsa also live in Grogbusters, and remain there while Vesper goes east to the urban hub of Brisbane to study engineering for five years, coinciding with the duration of World War II. Meanwhile, Holberg leaves to study composition at a conservatorium 'down south' and then, with the patronage of his wealthy Aunt Sadie, takes up a two-year scholarship in Paris before returning to Brisbane to teach composition at the Conservatorium. Brisbane is where music is performed, purchased and critiqued; it is a cultural centre, albeit secondary to 'down south' and Europe. Extending the longitudinal axis further north, Paul's first job takes him north of Brisbane to build a bauxite-loading facility, rather like what was happening around Gladstone in the 1960s. This place, like Grogbusters, is savagely ridiculed for its parochialism and isolation. Vesper returns to Brisbane after Holberg and Hilda marry, but it is Holberg's house on a plateau near Mt Tamborine that is the primary location of the book.

The overwhelming sense of landscape in the book is fertile and chaotic, lush and green: this is the landscape that feeds the story. Nothing happens inland at Grogbusters or up north; the action all emanates from the house on Mt Tamborine.

Sometimes referred to as 'Plateautop' (1972: 69), this is located in the Gold Coast hinterland, looking down from the top of a stretch of the Great Dividing Range, a watershed that looks east to the coast and west to the inland. Trips are made to the coast to Surfers Paradise ('Glitterlights') for supplies and to Brisbane for sex and music, but it is this location on top of the mountain that becomes the central domestic scene of the book. Vesper moves to the house after Holberg damages his hand, and Hilda asks him to help score Holberg's compositions.

The glass house, described as 'a massive set of linked glass boxes set along the plateau rim' (1972: 67) on 6 acres (2.5 hectares), dramatically exposes the inhabitants' emotional scapes, as they weather precarious psychogeographic relations. Vesper describes it as Holberg's 'own monument, a giant mausoleum of a house on the edge of a plateau somewhere near Tamborine. Monastic seclusion to court the muse' (1972: 50). On the very first page is a description of the view seen from the windows of the Tamborine house, where

doric trunks of trees sleeted with green tottered all along the edge of the valley like some massive breakwater heading into the distant scrolls of sea. And there was rain, the continuous speaking drizzle of it spitting on glass, on terrace, on the bird-stained statuary amongst the bushes and the banana clumps. Wherever I looked there was a kind of subtropical smudginess, the reduced emotions blunted by heat and wet that induced mould not only on the contents of the room ... but the tactility, too, of my responses. (1972: 1–2)

This scene is hot, wet and green, languidly lush, sluggish and smudged, but also laced with classical Greek columns, scrolls and statues amongst the plant growth. This mix of classical structures, heat, emotions and verdant landscape sets the scene and the novel's unrelenting tension between structure and chaos, classical sensibilities and sub-tropical intensities.

Reflecting on the English landscape movement, Ann Bermingham (1994: 78) suggests that gardening drawings 'functioned as mediums [sic] through which social dispositions toward order, power, and meaning found expression in techniques for rendering nature', and the same might be said of this primary landscape writ large in *The Acolyte*. Furthermore, W.J.T. Mitchell (1994: 1–2) asserts that landscape 'does not merely signify or symbolise power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power'. This level of meaning could be said to emerge through the scenes of music performance which, in their discursive descriptions, collapse the sexualised domestic scenarios into the Gold Coast landscape. Indeed, the Gold Coast landscape is not only the scene of sexual desire, but also comes to stand in place of those tangled relations through synecdoche.

Performances

If 'Plateautop' is the *mise-en-scène* of Holberg's social landscapes, his development as an Australian composer can be mapped across the novel through the performance of his music. The shift in scale from chamber music to suites and then symphonies evokes a linear progression of scale and grandeur. His initial compositions are written in Europe, where he realises that people are less interested in how he plays than in what he is playing, signalling a transition from performer to composer. Holberg describes his trio music in a letter to Vesper as 'a pastiche of

[Austrian] beer-halls and Grogbusters evenings' (Astley 1972: 20), clearly referencing the impact of time and place on composition. The quartet is a 'beer-stein quartet' dedicated to Vesper out of 'some nostalgic bug' (1972: 20). A suite is later performed at a homecoming recital in Grogbusters, where '[n]o one liked it or understood; what they wanted was wuh-hun enchanted heavening; but they all pretended in their stiff serge and their gathered crepe, for this is a country where there is simply nothing like the home product. Nothing' (1972: 26).

This reference to favouring the local homegrown product may be a register of contemporary cultural debates over Australian music, which will be discussed later, but it also establishes an ongoing distaste in the novel for audiences, who are characterised as parochial, uneducated and culturally conservative. This constructs a separation between audience and performer and (later) composer, akin to Edward W. Said's (1991: 17) formulation of music as an 'extreme performance': a mass public spectacle that relocates it from 'an ordinary, mainly domestic and private passage of time, to an occasional, heightened public experience'. As Holberg's music develops in this novel, however, the domestic and the social are enmeshed into the music, either in programmatic notes or libretto text, in the public space of the 'extreme' performance.

The next composition that ambitiously increases in scope is 'Gold Coast Trip', described as 'a sinfonia for sax and trumpet' (Astley 1972: 51). From the vantage point of the after-party at the Brisbane performance, Vesper describes it as a mix of jazz idiom and dissonance 'imposed over a steady deployment of mournful sea-surge' (1972: 72). His language happily mixes sarcastic colloquialism with serious music terminology, foregrounding the competing idioms in which the writing of this music takes place:

It was written for lady-choirs of violins, clarinet, trumpet, tenor saxophone, tiddly piano and beer glasses. Holberg had employed a compositional device that he liked to call asymmetric growth—parts of the opening material were transposed down a semitone at each successive repetition while other parts were transposed up a semitone and others remained unchanged. The three layers of music symbolised tourists leaving, arriving, and the solid drab fish-smell of town-dwellers; and these three textures themselves involved the use of three different modes, sonorities and rhythms. Programming is a bastard device, but here it had a point. (1972: 72)

Program music has an extra-musical narrative which is imaginatively shaped into musical phrases: in this work, the tourist coast is rendered into musical notation, drawing inspiration from European high philosophy through Goethe's *Ur-plant*, according to Holberg (1972: 72). Such modernist experimentation was understood, again, to be beyond the audience. Astley's biographer Karen Lamb (2015: 91) notes that Astley regularly used classical music to characterise intelligence, and jazz music to signify 'a character's exuberance and refusal to follow convention'. This distinction is reinforced when Holberg tells Vesper that, 'Even if I stick to classical forms for the structure, the whole organism is based on a series of developments through variation' (Astley 1972: 72). Jazz is also a musical language Astley delighted in assuming no one else understood in post-war Australian culture (Lamb 2015: 91), reinforcing the distance between audience and performance.

Following a brief mention of two symphonies written in Brisbane, it is the third — the ‘Gold Coast Symphony’ — that further encodes a relation between music, place and desire. Its premiere performance in 1960s Brisbane is described in a climactic scene that might be considered the turning point of the novel, as it precipitates the disintegration of Holberg’s household and their lurid sexual dependencies. Vesper has been scoring this composition with Holberg, and warns us that he is ‘conscious of hearing Jamie and Ilse and Slum, in *accelerando* domesticities and argument: It’s all there ... a whole set of minor variations crematorium-geared to changes in the old *status quo*’ (Astley 1972: 93–4). Now mashing musical idiom with tangled domestic relations and their emotional outbursts, the narrator prepares us for the volatility of this composition as well as its narcissism.

Again, the concert-going audience is ‘baffled’ by Holberg’s symphony, but as readers we access the full language of larceny, violence, intimacy and geography through Vesper’s commentary from the front row. The following excerpt provides a sense of the detail and idiom used to describe the symphony from Vesper’s point of view sitting in the audience. While it is a long excerpt, it demonstrates the way in which music is understood as a social practice through a discourse that claims a personal attachment to the local landscape through composition, performance and audience:

I detect the undertones of puzzlement when timpani spell out — is it ten bars too long? — the rubber-steel frenzy of trippers (he’s used this before: it shouldn’t puzzle them) in quest moving down to an over-riding sea that swoops continually behind the string-surge and cor anglais gulls; and their polite muffled relief of recognition of spasmodic night-club ribaldry (thank God it was programmed!). My dear, it’s a fun thing! He’s got them boxed with a passacaglia arrangement of ‘Home on the Range’ not entirely recognisable yet irritatingly, abradingly familiar, too clever by half as I warned his arrogant truculence. They wriggle with is-its? Holberg is sinking into limpness as the second movement fades into tall intervals of the cedars backing the glass boxes, backing the town and its canvas ghettos. *Entr’acte* for coughers careful not to clap. And the *larghetto* paddles into the mournfulness of the camping area, the caravanserai with its communal toilet facilities under the dunes as those whores of park-managers have it, with the washing strung between piccolo lines and the strips of kerosene light between the cooking smells and the sea smells and the flute cries of children at dusk after the pipi hunters, the clanking of bait tins and the slur of can-openers in after-dark darkening into the endless sea-wash and stretch of canvas melancholy. (1972: 101–2)

The landscapes of the hinterland and the coast, of tourists and campers and residents, are rendered instrumental here, divided into symphonic sections yet anchored in this everyday geography. Through Holberg’s god-like position at ‘home on the range’, this performance can be read as both a paean to and a caricature of life on the Gold Coast.

The inclusion of an *entr’acte*, which usually fills in time between acts of a play or an opera, suggests the dramatic form of the music, but it is the final movement that consolidates the melodrama through the ‘choral surprise’ (1972: 101). Vesper has not been privy to this last movement, as Holberg has been composing it in secret

'closeted with a librettist' (1972: 98). Watching it unfold through the three voices of a baritone, a counter-tenor and a contralto, Vesper suspects 'some deformed revelation' (1972: 103). When he catches the words, it hits him 'like a bomb blast that it was we three who stood there: Holberg, Hilda, me' (1972: 103). In this choral *ménage à trois* being played out on the public stage, Vesper is mortified to find himself cast as the sexually ambiguous counter-tenor, 'male rotted with female', 'Holberg's eunuch' (1972: 103). The introduction of words explicitly articulates the domestic sexual relations that inform the scene of composition. Vesper's status in the household is reduced to basic functions, services and derivative pleasures that circulate around the musical genius of Holberg: according to the libretto, 'driving to harbours superplazas / storeman mechanic / quill for all occasions / for master servant, / thrust of the quill / writing proxy poems on flesh papyrus / real papyrus / all translations all all all' (1972: 103). The after-party of critics and patrons confirms this reading, with Mrs Shumway hissing, 'Oh, we all got the message, my dear, in the last movement. We got it all right ... Holberg has certainly made mince out of you!' (1972: 105–6). The acolyte is castrated, rendered impotent on Holberg's creative stage. The performance of the 'Gold Coast Symphony' marks the nadir of domestic social relations in the novel, as it incorporates — literally consumes — the domestic and the landscape into musical form.

The sexual life of composers is not normally articulated so explicitly in symphonic form, either in music or in fiction. However, there was a significant event in Australia that brought to the fore the sexuality of a major classical music figure. The renowned conductor and composer Sir Eugene Goossens is remembered for transforming Australian classical music through his term as the first permanent conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from 1947, as well as convincing authorities of the need to build a Sydney Opera House. When pornographic material was found in his airport luggage in 1956, public scandal ensued with salacious reporting of purported sexual practices involving his interest in pantheism and the occult, and his association with reputed Sydney witch Rosaleen Norton (Salter 1996). While Goossens scandalised post-war conservative Sydney, more sympathetic accounts link Goossens' sexuality to his creative practice, an issue taken up by Inez Baranay in her novel *Pagan* (1990), which fictionalises the event.

Australian classical music scenes

While I am not arguing that Goossens was in any way a template for *The Acolyte*, I do propose that *The Acolyte* and its fictional 'Gold Coast Symphony' can be read as participating in cultural conversations about Australian classical music in the mid-twentieth century. In situating these debates, it is important to remember that state symphony orchestras were only formalised as entities in the late 1930s as part of the ambit of the newly established Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Consisting of professional core members supplemented by casual players for concerts, the orchestras played in town halls and at conservatoria (Buttrose 1982; Buzacott 2007) until specifically designed concert halls started to be built for subscription concerts (McNeill 2014). The 'civilising' effect of playing what Rhoderick McNeill (2014: 15) calls 'transplanted European musical cultures' was foremost in this ambitious project, but there was also some interest in developing specifically Australian musical work.

Closely aligned with the ambitions of the Jindyworobak writers of the 1940s and 1950s (Symons 2002) and Australian visual artists like the late nineteenth-century impressionists and inter-war period modernists, the development of an identifiable national Australian aesthetic in music was expected to be closely associated with the land and its Indigenous histories — albeit encountered largely through the imagination or anthropological studies (Covell 2016; McNeill 2014; Symons 2015). Goossens was a champion of such work, performing John Antill's suite from his ballet *Corroboree* in 1946 with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Bruce Clunies Ross (2014) has also noted a distinctive local style to jazz music played in 1940s Melbourne and Adelaide, and its association with the *Angry Penguins* writers' magazine. Peter Sculthorpe's *Irkanda* music (1954–65) established him unquestionably as an 'Australian' composer celebrated for music based in Australian landscapes and soundscapes. As Rachel Campbell (2014: 25) notes, however, 'his conceptualisation of landscape relies on the notion of a desolate outback and indeed many institutionally supported art forms in this period engaged prominently with the old bush mythology'.

Anchored in a telos of national maturity, as a 'coming of age' (Campbell 2014: 17), these cultural manifestations in classical music coincide with the radical nationalist reassessments of the 1890s, with Vance Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* published in 1954 and Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* in 1958. Continuing into the 1960s, there was another surge of publications reassessing a national cultural aesthetic, as Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (2003: 16–17) remind us:

H.M. Green on literature (1961), Bernard Smith on painting (1962), Roger Covell on music (1967), J.M. Freeland on architecture (1968) ... [culminating] in Geoffrey Serle's influential bird's eye view of high culture in Australia, *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (1973).

These cultural formations — what historian Donald Horne (1968) termed the 'new nationalism' — correspond with the timeframe of Holberg's fictional formation as a composer during the 1940s and 1950s and his success in the 1960s, and into which *The Acolyte* writes itself as cultural commentary.

Holberg's compositions in *The Acolyte*, however, contest the kinds of national fictions circulating about a distinctive Australian aesthetic. Rather than celebrating the outback as the iconic mode of Australian landscape, Holberg anchors his work in the sub-tropical entanglements and fertile growth of the Gold Coast hinterland and its beaches. Unlike the national imaginary of the desolate outback, this luscious green landscape and blue seascape is also peopled, and with unlikely subjects for classical music: tourists, night-clubbers, campers, beachcombers and park managers, alongside lovers and acolytes. As an alternative to the uplifting civilising project imagined for classical European music, the performance of the 'Gold Coast Symphony' perversely delights in sexual peccadilloes, gossip and local leisure culture. An Australian music based on an appropriated Indigenous culture and an iconic hot dry landscape is rejected in *The Acolyte* for one based in a local Queensland domestic setting. Also significant in this context are the references in the novel to the way nationalist music is a transnational invention.

Transnationalisms

In an interview (Ross 1986: 266), Astley mentioned that *The Acolyte* was inspired by watching a documentary of the English-born composer Delius, who hired a young man, Eric Fenby, to help with his composing, as 'sort of an acolyte'. The film is most likely to be *Delius: Song of Summer* (1968), directed by Ken Russell and based on a book by Fenby. Like *The Acolyte*, the film's perspective is from the point of view of a young man (Fenby) who becomes an amanuensis. The composer Delius is blind and partially paralysed from syphilis. Delius is one of a group of twentieth-century composers associated with recuperating folk song into orchestral arrangements, as music anchored in the origins of the people and local traditions — although Campbell (2014: 31) reminds us that

musical representations of landscapes and of the cultures of people indigenous to a country are longstanding gestures within classical music ... associated with European nationalism from the eighteenth century and also in the subsequently wider international context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.

This fascination with landscape and folklore is obliquely gestured to in *The Acolyte* through the repeated mention of Vesper's favourite composer, Dag Wirén, a twentieth-century Swedish nationalist composer. Wirén's work seems to have been little known outside of Sweden before his death in 1986, although he wrote in a range of musical forms: symphonies, concertos and chamber music, as well as music for stage, film and even Eurovision in 1965 (Brissenden and Glennon 2010: 217). Interestingly, Wirén wrote the music to a dance suite called 'Bushfire', part of an *Australian Suite*, first performed at the Metropolitan Theatre Sydney in 1955 and also taken overseas to showcase Australian music (2010: 222). If Wirén can write Australian music, then it is no surprise that Australian composer Percy Grainger is renowned for contributions to European nationalist music through folk song revival. Grainger makes an appearance in the film *Song of Summer*, where he is attributed with helping Delius arrange music in their iconic Norwegian cottage in the mountains. Grainger not only arranged Norwegian nationalist music, but was also responsible for the revival of English, Irish and Welsh folk songs, recording them and then arranging enduring tunes like 'Danny Boy' and 'Country Gardens' for orchestra (Clunies Ross 1986; Covell 2016; Gillies and Clunies Ross 1999). An early advocate of music with an Australian sensibility from at least 1906, Grainger is another figure who confounds the idea of nationalist music by participating in the construction of so many nations' music. The transnational production and circulation of this 'distinctive' Australian aesthetic clearly suggests the complex ways in which nationalism is engineered and sold.

The most obvious association with the Scandinavian legacy of nationalist composers is in the naming of Jack Holberg. Grieg's *Holberg Suite* (Op 40, 1884) was originally named *From Holberg's Time*, referring to its eighteenth-century style written to celebrate the bicentennial of the Norwegian playwright and philosopher Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754). If appending 'Jack' to the name Holberg renders it a mongrel term, then the hybridisation of nationalism is also evident in its reconfiguration.

Conclusion

Typical of Astley's literary style, *The Acolyte's* engagement with contemporary debates about Australian composers and music sits precariously between satire and critical intervention. While the cultural scene of classical music performance is savagely satirised, with audiences continually characterised as stupid and critics depicted as 'arty parasites' (Astley 1972: 63), there is also much evidence of the novel's serious critical engagement with these cultural scenes.

I have argued here that *The Acolyte* intervenes in a national milieu of thinking about what it might mean to produce distinctively Australian creative culture. Susan Sheridan (2016: 2) makes a case for Astley's construction of a distinctive literary style grounded in the diverse landscapes of Queensland, suggesting that such strategic provincialism acts 'implicitly to deflate claims of the national'. This claim is borne out in this article, which has sought to position *The Acolyte* in terms of debates and events in classical music in Australia, which Astley realigns through creating a fictional aesthetic of the Gold Coast.

The connections between classical music and literature in Australia can be traced back to the formation of the nation through Federation. As early as 1906, Queensland poet George Essex Evans exclaims in his poem 'An Australian Symphony' that,

NOT as the songs of other lands
Her song shall be
Where dim Her purple shore-line stands
Above the sea!
As erst she stood, she stands alone;
Her inspiration is her own.
From sunlit plains to mangrove strands
Not as the songs of other lands
Her song shall be.

Ironically Essex Evans' solution to an Australian symphony is silence, but there are plenty of novels since then engaged in imagining the music of Australia and its relation to European culture. Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest* (1908) charts the journey of a musician from Australia to Europe, while Elizabeth Jolley's novels often involve European migrant musicians in Australia. Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001) and Zoe Morrison's *Music and Freedom* (2016) are deeply invested in a similar quest about the meaning of 'Australian music' for its white immigrant population. *The Acolyte's* contribution to this genre and its cultural politics is firmly grounded in a Queensland domestic landscape that imbricates the social and the sexual as conditions for the production of music. In *The Acolyte*, music can be read as a social discourse that disrupts the national imaginary, not least through its grounding in Queensland.

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