

ROGER SMALLEY: a remembrance of sorts from the period 1980-97  
Cathie Travers, August 2015

After finishing highschool in 1975 I had been a working musician for a few years, playing keyboards, guitar and vocals in cover bands, and working as a soloist around Perth metro hotels and clubs. My favoured listening was repertoire known as Progressive Rock, Symphonic Rock and Art Rock - bands like ELP, Yes, Pink Floyd and Premiata Forneria Marconi [PFM]. I'd also taken a liking to Tomita's album *Snowflakes are Dancing*, which was arrangements of Debussy piano scores realised on Moog synths. ELP did several tracks which were essentially arrangements of works by early 20th century art-music composers Mussorgsky, Bartok and Copland. At the time I wasn't familiar with the original versions of any of these works.

My first encounter with Roger was a UWA lunchtime performance, in 1979 with David Bollard, of Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* for two pianos. This event was one of two clinching factors that led me to apply for a place at UWA.

From day one of my first year as a student in the School of Music in 1980, Roger stood out from other faculty members: for his mode of dress [borderline hippie], his manner of speaking [slightly British plummy and a tiny bit formal - at odds with his clothing], the obvious curiosity with which he observed a roomfull of new undergraduates, and quite simply the way he occupied his own space [a relaxed confidence]. I was notified, during this orientation session, that Roger was to be my piano teacher.

As it turned out, Roger was clued up about the music I'd been listening to for the previous few years, but within a couple of weeks he made it clear that I needed to step up to the plate as far as commitment and preparation went if I was to become a good musician. I took his advice; he pushed me at every turn. Everything was examined, analysed, chewed over, experimented with. Imagination was allowed and encouraged, so long as it was subjected to scrutiny afterwards. There was a single-minded focus on the score...on the structural elements that constitute the journey through the music. During that first year I studied piano scores by Bartok, Ravel, Messiaen, Haydn, Schumann, Beethoven and many others besides.

Roger was not an especially good 'piano' teacher in the sense of helping to develop an advanced instrumental technique. But he was a great teacher about music. His sight-reading skills were fab. At the piano Roger automatically started collecting and collating information on the elements of the score and the way the musical structure hung together [or failed to do so, as the case may be]... his hands responded to the flood of musical information pouring out of his brain, and his fast physical responses meant his read-throughs of complex scores were astoundingly accurate. He tended to drive a car in a similar manner: information in and quick response reactions out; it could be a bit harrowing in the passenger seat of the car though. Many people have remarked on Roger's seemingly extraordinary sight-reading ability. And it was very good indeed. I believe it was a function of his obsession with musical form...the many many hours he spent poring over musical scores by other composers from all historical periods...exactly what young composers are encouraged to do by their mentors! During my time with Roger we had a number of composers stay with us at our home[s], and likewise we stayed with some of them. Three of them are also standouts for sightreading facility and the capacity for grasping [very quickly] the fundamentals of a score. All three of them also, like Roger, have an encyclopaedic knowledge of a few hundred years of western art music: John White [UK], George Crumb [USA] and Tim Souster [UK].

John White was considered by Roger to be one of his most significant mentors - only a few years older than Roger [John is now 79 years of age], I believe John was a junior tutor at the

Royal College during R's student years, and they ended up sharing a flat for awhile in London. John stayed with us at our home on a large bush block in Mt Helena during 1997; My studio down near the shed hadn't been completed and so my piano was still in the house... the three of us must have time-shared on the keys. John had several small electronic-music gadgets with him which I salivated over! He gave me a cassette tape of his band 'Live Batts' who made music solely on battery-operated electronica. Unfortunately I wore the tape out long ago. Roger made a disc for NMC of many of John's [miniature] Piano Sonatas, in the early 90's - for which I was credited as producer. I spent a few good late night sessions with James [beam-me-up-scottie] Hewgill - doing all the editing, and thus got to engage close-hand with another great mind!

Roger and I met George Crumb as a direct result of WA composer/pianist Stuart Hille, who had studied at UWA with Roger during the mid 70's and then went to the USA as a post-grad student of Crumb. Stuart provided the contact with UWA and George accepted an invitation to be Artist in Residence for nearly a month in 1984. George and his wife Liz lived in one of the residential flats near the UWA campus during that month and we spent a lot of time with them, both professionally and socially. They were kind enough to have Roger and I stay with them in their home near Philadelphia for about a week in 1986. It was on this occasion I had the pleasure of sitting in on some piano duet and two-piano score-reading sessions by George and Roger together...late afternoons and evenings with a glass of scotch and gin, respectively. Great experience for a young muso to witness. I'm almost 100% certain it was George who gave us the piano duet score of the very tongue-in-cheek Faure/Messager 16-bar paraphrases of themes from The Ring - which presumably were thrown together by the two composers during an evening of red-wine [or similar] appreciation. Roger and I performed them a few times; always difficult to keep a straight face.

For me, Tim Souster was a truly extraordinary musician. He was an early comrade-in-arms of Roger: they had formed [in the late 60's or early 70's] the electronic music group *Intermodulation*, which included Robin Thompson and Pete Britton [I think there was another member prior to Pete - might have been Andy Powell?]. Anyway, throughout his life Tim continued to work with electronica as well as acoustic instruments. He also did significant work in the commercial field, making soundtracks for radio and TV, winning a BAFTA for one of his soundtracks. Tim's work with both acoustic and electronic environments was sophisticated and wide-ranging, interesting, and tasty too. He was a good viola player and extremely nifty keyboard player. And fantastic chef! Both Roger's and my cooking was/is functional at best; it was friggin' fantastic having Tim to stay!! I particularly enjoyed Tim's and John White's company because Roger had lost interest in electronica sometime before our paths crossed; it was cool, exciting and informative for me to chat a bit with two senior musicians about some of their work in that area. Sadly Tim passed in 1994.

From my perspective as a music student during the early 80's Roger was a bit of a guru. Not because he provided all the answers, but precisely because he was an agent of stimulation. And also because he seemed to embody many of the skills I longed to acquire myself.

Towards the end of 1980 we did our first duo gig together: the piano duet version of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* which Roger had programmed to perform with his long-time friend and colleague Stephen Savage, for a UWA Music Society subscription concert. Stephen fell ill two weeks before his proposed arrival in Australia, and so I was offered the gig. It was a prestigious gig for a first-year undergrad and provided an opportunity to work closely with Roger, a musician who I held in high esteem. The 'Rite' is around thirty minutes in length and contains some fiendishly difficult passages, as well as many 'choreographic' difficulties presented by the issue of two players sharing one instrument. When he asked me to do the concert Roger made it abundantly clear that it would be the most difficult thing I had yet

attempted, but he thought I could pull it off if I committed to a lot of hard work for the next 20 days. He suggested I take a week to go away and start learning the score, then we rehearsed on alternate days over a period of two weeks. Roger was relentless in his demands for progressing our work each day - and rightly so. I'd committed to doing the gig; failing to deliver the goods wasn't an option. Without doubt the process of learning, rehearsing and performing the duet of 'the Rite' was an intense and instructional apprenticeship with Roger; I picked up fundamental tools for life as a professional musician.

By early 1981 Roger and I had formed an intimate relationship, which became a live-in partnership, continuing in varying states of on and off-ness until 1997. During those years Roger was my professional colleague on many projects. We performed and recorded duo works by Faure, Chabrier, Mozart, Schubert, Busoni, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Grieg, Rachmaninoff, Dvorak, Saint Saens, Linley Evans, Satie, Respighi, and Roger's own arrangements for two pianos and piano-duet of works by Alkan. I gave performances of Roger's early *Piano Pieces I-IV*, and his solo work *Monody* for piano, percussion and ring-modulator, was pianist in performances of his sextet *Ceremony II* and song cycle *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. With Nova Ensemble we did several performances of chamber works by George Crumb and Steve Reich which included two pianos. I was also pianist in many performances where Roger was ensemble conductor - in works by Charles Ives, Morton Feldman, Andrew Ford, Vincent Plush, Roberto Gerhard, Arvo Part, Bartok, Thomas Ades, and Michael Torke. I'm fairly certain there were also works by Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Schnittke, Ligeti, Henze, and probably more - but without searching through my chaotic collection of 'archives' I can't say this is definitively so. If you take from this last paragraph that Roger was wide-ranging in the repertoire he tackled and the resources he used you would be correct. But remember these are just the projects I happened to work with him on. As a pianist he did many concerts over a period of years with violinist Geoffrey Michaels [complete sonatas by Beethoven, Brahms and Busoni; works by Bartok and Webern], several programs with soprano Jane Manning, and he accompanied a wide variety of artists visiting Perth for UWA and Festival of Perth engagements. Additionally there were various solo and concerto recitals. You should by now understand that Roger was master of the discipline required for learning and performing a score, and could quickly acquire an insider's view of any piece of repertoire. If you're interested to get a look at what occupied Roger's mind when thinking about music and musicians take a look at this article he wrote on Alkan's cadenza to Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, published in an old bulletin of the Alkan Society and [available online here](#) [you'll need to scroll down to page 3].

As a matter of interest, Roger chose this cadenza for his performance of the concerto, as I recall sometime around 1983 or '84.

If I were to single out one event in Roger's output that has stayed with me it would be a duo improvisation with visiting Hungarian pianist Erzsebet Tusa in 1981 or possibly '82 ...a terrific example of two musicians opening doors on and exploring a stream of consciousness informed by their extensive repertoire knowledge and formidable pianism.

Just as comedians are not necessarily funny when they're not on the job, Roger was not given to having music as a constant background soundscape. Mostly, recorded music was listened to just like a concert: giving his full attention he would sit in the lounge with the stereo cranked up and usually following a music score - unless the piece was so new that he didn't have access to a score.

Towards the end of 1989 Roger was invited for a month-long lecture-recital tour across Canada with violinist Geoffrey Michaels, who was resident in Vancouver at that time. Their final tour stop was UBC, where Geoffrey was teaching and where I joined Roger for his final week of work before we took off on a journey onto Vancouver Island...Roger driving [!!!!] at

dusk in a rainstorm on winding mountainous roads, with seemingly bottomless gullies to alternate sides as we made our way around one hairpin bend after another. It was a bit tense - oops, I'm getting ahead of myself. The Museum of Anthropology at UBC had many collections of historical and contemporary works from the North-West Indian cultures, including a collection of log-drums [which attracted my interest as I wandered around campus during Roger's working hours], and an outdoor Totem Pole Collection and Preservation Project. This is very strong, powerful artwork; artists like Bill Reid and Robert Davidson... Roger bought some of their print pieces... I think this might have been the beginnings of what became a steadily growing collection of artwork over several years. As well as the North West Coast artworks we both loved the soapstone carvings and stonecut prints of many of the older Inuit artists we saw, mainly at Spirit Wrestler gallery.

My last collaborations with Roger were on a couple of occasions during 2002 and '03 shortly after I took up accordion as my principal instrument and invited Roger to be pianist in a tango sextet to perform works by Astor Piazzolla.

When I started to write this recollection I put on the Messiaen/Loriod recording of 'the Amens' - it struck me that the first movement *Amen de la Création* is a fitting soundtrack for a human life: emerging from almost nothing, seemingly endless cycles, repetitions, variations of the independent parts within themselves and in their temporal placement and subsequent intertwining against one another, the conglomeration of those cells and lines, and finally - the rather abrupt ending. Amen - so be it.

My best wishes and love to Rachel, Davey, Sarah and Pete.

**CONCERT: October 10** King's College Cambridge