

The Well Weathered Piano



Ross Bolleter

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for Antoinette Carrier

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Chapter one: About the Ruined Piano ...

A piano is said to be Ruined (rather than Neglected or Devastated) when it has been abandoned to all weathers and has become a decaying box of unpredictable dongs, clicks and dedoomps, with not a single note (perhaps excepting “D”) sounding like one from an even-tempered upright piano. Sometimes you push down one key, and five or six others companionably go down with it, making for a surprise cluster, and swathes of harmonics singing forever. The notes that don’t work – clicks, doks and tonks – are at least as interesting as those that do.

Each Ruined Piano is utterly unique with respect to action and tuning (if we can talk of tuning at all). “F#”, one-and-a-half octaves above “middle C” on a West Australian Ruined Piano in a semi-desert environment, differs radically from the same note on a flooded Petrov Grand Piano in a studio four-floors below pavement level in Prague.

A Ruined Piano has its frame and cabinet more or less intact (even though the soundboard is cracked wide open, with the blue sky shining through) so that it can be played in the ordinary way. By contrast, a Devastated Piano is usually played in a crouched or lying position.

All this raises the question, “What is a piano?”

Nallan Void

I discovered my first ruined piano in June 1987 when I went on holiday with my wife and children to Nallan Sheep Station, just north of the old gold-mining town of Cue, 670 kms north east of Perth, Western Australia. On our arrival, the owners of the sheep station, April and David Peterson told me that they had a piano in one of the sheds. I wasn't interested. This was meant to be time with family. And I was tired of pianos.

However, on the third day I succumbed, and found a piano that was totally done for. I tried to record it, but the sounds were so strange I thought the batteries in my recorder were flat. The batteries turned out to be fine, but the sheep station generator was so loud that recording was impossible. I asked April if she could turn off the generator. She replied, "You have to be kidding. We've got a ton of meat in those fridges!" – but then relented, saying, "Well you've got an hour." That hour gifted me with the entire album *Ruined Piano at Cue* (1988) – including the piece widely known as "Nallan Void" (later re-titled "Unfinished Business").

During the eighties I had been preparing pianos – altering the sound of them by inserting objects between their strings. This one, however, without the familiar festoon of guitar jacks, rubbers, coins and pegs, was "prepared" beyond any piano I had

ever played or heard. Prepared by weather and neglect – prepared by the radiant earth, and by how far off the stars are:

I respectfully approached the Ruined Piano in the tractor shed. When I took hold of the fall to lift it, it was so rotten that it came away in my hands. I shoved batteries into my Marantz recorder and slung a pair of microphones over the dusty rafters. As I played, white ants journeyed in concentric circles on the front panel of the Jefferson (Chicago '26). Golden haired Emmy, the eight-year-old daughter of the sheep station owners, April and David Petersen, came in out of the majestic heat and stood watching me from the cool floor of the shed. I knelt, pulled back the bass strings and released them, like firing off huge arrows. The piano roared and groaned.

After a time, April appeared and muffled her daughter's ringleted head in her huge flowered dress, as though shielding her from an atrocity. I knew that April wanted to speak, was about to speak. I pointed frantically up to the Nanyo and the Sanyo microphones with my right hand, while trying to finish the performance with my left. Finally, she broke in – "Have you finished?" And I had.¹

I played with birds singing, roosters crowing, generators starting up, and the sheep station owners complaining about the drought – in short, everyone and everything having their say. The recording turned out to be a lusty union of the environment and the ancient roaring song of that decaying hulk.²

Before its life in the shed, the Ruined Piano had spent a year on the sheep station tennis court, where it had been exposed

to searing heat and a flash flood. When I examined the inside of it, I found a mud map left by the rising waters.

Forty years before the flood, it had been the bar piano in the hotel in the nearby goldmining town of Big Bell, 27 kms west of Cue. The Big Bell gold mine closed in 1955, and there is almost nothing left of the town except its 1940s art deco hotel, which in its heyday had sported the longest bar in Australia. The hotel is now derelict—a ruin in the middle of nowhere—fireplaces half way up walls, the floors collapsed, the Ladies' Lounge open to the harsh blue sky.

The only unchanging law is the law of change. Ruins are what remain. All that fine nineteenth-century European craftsmanship, all the damp and unrequited loves of Schumann, Brahms and Chopin dry out and degrade to a heap of rotten wood and rusting wire. The piano returns to aboriginality, goes back to the earth, where the chirrup of its loose wires blown about by the desert easterly is almost indistinguishable from the cicadas' long electric blurt

When those arch symbols of European musical culture and cultural imperialism linger as ruined pianos, they sing of transience, failure and loss. They sing of all that we loved that will never come again: the loss of home, the fading away of prestige and glory. They sing the chaos at the heart of the

colonial enterprise, an Australian expression of the dark heart
howling its cracked anthems.

Death comes to every piano. And dead, they sing a
different kind of song.

Chapter two: WARPS & the early years of ruined piano

WARPS—*The World Association for Ruined Piano Studies*³—was formed in 1991 by Stephen Scott, Professor of Music at Colorado College, and myself. Steve suggested the catchy acronym. The organization has worldwide membership, has never held an Annual General Meeting, and tends to move into action only from whim, or from a rush of blood. WARPS has devoted energy to giving old pianos a good home, which can certainly mean adequate sunshine and rain – or even snow. In *When the Anzac Body Blossoms and Blooms* (April 25 1991, Colorado College) I played three ruined pianos that had been prepared, even ruined, by rain and snow. That performance was made possible by Stephen's students drying out the pianos with twenty-three hair dryers over three long nights. If it hadn't been for their efforts, the pianos would have been inarticulate.

As part of the creation of *When the Anzac Body Blossoms and Blooms*, Nathan Crotty, in Western Australia, performed with me synchronously “the night before.” In his filmed performance he set fire to his washing as it spun around on the rotary hoist in the backyard of the house he was renting in the Perth suburb of Victoria Park.

In 1984 I released a cassette *Temple of Joyous Bones* which featuring my improvisations on prepared piano, in particular. I had been inspired to prepare my lounge room grand

when I started improvising with Polish avant-garde double bassist Ryszard Ratajczak, who came to Western Australia in the early 1980s. When I met him he was playing with the Arts Orchestra (in his words – “falling asleep between the bar-lines”). Each Tuesday evening I would pick up Ryszard and his double bass in my yellow Suzuki van, and bring them back to my family home in Mt Lawley, where we would improvise into the night. These explorations would be followed by Ryszard, over a number of beers, criticizing my playing. I was impressed by the array of sounds he could get out of his double-bass by employing mallets and various accompanying devices, such as a rubber ducky. I was driven to prepare my grand piano to match his timbral extravaganzas. In this, I was certainly inspired by John Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, and Richard Bunker Evans’s book *The Well-Prepared Piano* (1973), but I aimed for a more flexible approach—for instance, playing on top of the preparations with a variety of mallets, and changing the preparations about inside the piano while playing on the keys. I wanted my prepared piano to sound as raucous and over-the-top as Australian birdsong, and was at pains to avoid the silvery but deadened metallic timbre of so much prepared piano.

After I discovered and recorded my first ruined piano at Nallan Sheep Station in 1987, as noted earlier, I released a cassette of that recording, entitled *Ruined Piano at Cue* in 1988,

which included “Nallan Void”—the defining piece for the early years of the ruined piano enterprise, and a long-time hit on Mid-Western radio stations. The ABC played “Nallan Void” as a joke piece between classical performances in the 1988 Sydney International Piano Competition. Ryzsard Ratajczak rang up the ABC and abused them, saying that “Nallan Void” was “better music by far than any of the classical stuff they were broadcasting.”

In terms of classical influences, the early ruined piano pieces—“held together mainly by hiss” (Anthony Cormican)—remind me of an early recording by Artur Schnabel of the Beethoven *Piano Sonata Op. 101*—especially the concluding movement, which he plays at such speed that whole new contours, imperceptible at slower tempos, emerge – with fragments seeming to fly off altogether. All the while, the tone of the piano is so plangy and green, as well as being utterly wild with hiss and crackle (courtesy of my beer ruined disc) —so that Beethoven, per medium of Schnabel, is one of the grand precursors of Ruined Piano.

The WARPS Taxonomy of Ruin

neglected (including veranda pianos)

abandoned (including shed pianos)

weathered

decayed

ruined

devastated

decomposed

annihilated – as having been blown up by a landmine
planted in it by German soldiers retreating northwards
through Italy in 1945.



Ruined piano at Wambyn Piano Sanctuary

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Chapter three: A Cultural History of Ruined Piano in Western and Central Australia

I do not believe there is a country in the world where music is more widespread than in Australia. Certainly there is none that has more pianos per head of population. 700,000 instruments have been sent from Europe to Australia since the vast territory (of some three million people) became a centre of white settlement. Everywhere here the piano is considered to be a necessary piece of furniture. Rather than not have one of these sonorous instruments in the drawing room ... they would go without a bed. Custom demands that there be at least one piano in every Australian home; even in the most distant shacks, away from any centre of population, the humblest farmer will have the inescapable piano.

Way out in the outback they are not so expert in music, and the piano that adorns the humble dwelling will be cheap and nasty pieces of poor workmanship poured onto the world by Germany; they are constantly going wrong, but the main thing is that they look like a piano, with vulgar moulding and ostentatious double candle-brackets; they make a noise when you strike the keyboard, and often that is all that is required. (Oscar Comettant) ⁴

The piano on the beach has become a defining image of the early days of white settlement in Western Australia. It anticipates by some 160 years the piano on the beach in Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) where—presumably to protect the asinine score—the beached piano is almost in

tuneafter its immersion: hard to believe, considering the sea change it must have undergone. The tuning and structural outcomes for beached pianos in Western Australia in the 1830s would surely have been more disastrous, and a good deal more engrossing.

The piano was the bearer of European musical culture and the status that went with it. It was a treasured source of entertainment and edification – evenings of Schubert songs, and selections from *Don Giovanni* mixed with popular sentimental songs of the day. No wonder immigrants to New Holland clung to their pianos.

“One story we heard at dinner concerned a ship in trouble at sea whose captain ordered the thirteen pianos on board with much of the cargo to be thrown into the sea—and there was almost a riot on the ship as the owners tried to prevent him and were shouted down by the other passengers, fearing for their lives.” ⁵

I imagine that Aboriginal people may well have been the first to play these thirteen pianos. And that these strange arrivals on the beach—their soundings lost—would have been a source of much convivial music making. Importantly too, these encounters would have been some of the first Ruined Piano performances in New Holland:

the invasion begins

aboriginal kids hammer

on pianos pushed from ships
in desperate straits

morning surf thumps
these jangling mysteries
onto the beach

a child kneels strokes
the icy strings lost
in their booming cave

her friend swings his heels
down onto the cold soaked keys –

clinkclinank... ⁶

Many of the early settlers lived in tents on the beach between Cottesloe and North Fremantle. Some had their furniture, including their piano, on the beach with them. The piano, rather than providing an occasion for convivial music making, would have been forced to serve as an inadequate windbreak. Often the early settlers' tents were blown away in the gales, and—like some of their owners—pianos, especially those on the beaches, were destroyed by the harsh climatic conditions of Western Australia.

Back in 1989, when I was working late one night at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, I decided on a midnight coffee in Northbridge. I came back to find I had left the door open and in the dark auditorium an old Aboriginal man, wearing a Salvation Army great coat, was coaxing a shivery plangy tune from the Ruined Piano at the lonely centre of the auditorium. Immediately, security and the police (in competition as to who got there first) burst in through

the open door. “Do you wish to prefer charges sir?” they asked. “No,” I replied. “Best piano improv I’ve heard this year.” The old guy gave me a grin and shuffled out, a Schweppes bottle sticking out of his left coat pocket.⁷

Ruined Pianos in the Red Centre

The finest ruined pianos I’ve encountered have been in outback West Australia and in the Red Centre. The extremes of drought and flood produce great roaring hulks. Also, as elsewhere, pedigree is important. The brand names of those pampered aristocrats of the piano world: *Bechstein*, *Ronisch*, *Steinway*, *Lipp* appear regularly on the best ruined pianos.

At the Old Telegraph Station in Alice Springs I discovered the Camel Piano – reputedly the first piano in Centralia. It was a mid-nineteenth century *Globe* (*Royal London Model*), *Ralph Allison* made by Wardour and Sons, Soho. Innocent in appearance—a so-called boudoir piano with a sulky expression—it has a chintzy orange cloth under fine elaborate fretwork on the front panel. The top register sounds Chinese, the bass sounds like someone ripping up a kerosene tin with secateurs – heart stopping.

The story goes that this *Globe* piano was brought from the railhead at Oodnadatta to Alice Springs on the back of a camel. It occupied one side of the camel’s hump, while a drum of water occupied the other. This was shortly after the telegraph line went through from Adelaide to Alice Springs. Although it’s only

a short upright piano, this was certainly an arduous, even heroic journey for the camel.

In 2002, when I was recording the Camel Piano, a tourist couple from the United States, thinking that I was a piano tuner (I occasionally usurp this role to gain access to ruined pianos in stately mansions, where otherwise I would be unwelcome) – reassured me that I would be able to tune and repair this piano beautifully. Then the man asked, “Where’s the camel?”

Some 170 years after the Camel Piano arrived in Alice Springs, I encountered a Schwechten Piano at Hermannsburg Cultural Precinct, about 100kms from Alice Springs. Before it became the Cultural Precinct it had been the Hermannsburg Mission, and home to the celebrated Aboriginal landscape artist Albert Namatjira. As to the piano, it had spent fifteen years in the dressing room behind a stage where theatricals were mounted. While old codgers—their heavy guts bursting out of their pink tutus and tights—danced for the delight of the missionaries, their charges, the Aboriginal kids, would invade the dressing room and jump from the top of the piano onto the keys, creating unheard of clusters and undermining the pantomime up front. Subsequently, this piano was sent down for a season or two in the cattle yards.

Radio announcer and producer, Dave Richards, told the following story of this Schwechten piano as part of a radio

program he produced for the ABC in Alice Springs. His Schwechten piano (serial no. 35846) was made in Berlin in 1907 (the company had begun production in 1853). In the story which follows, Dave tells the story of the Schwechten piano in the Northern Territory, and its transformation into a ruined piano:

“As far as I know it came from Mataranka which is in the top end. Somehow it ended up in Central Australia in about 1983. It was advertised in the paper as a beautiful upright piano – walnut finish with candelabras, all that. It cost \$1500, which was a fortune in those days, but I was utterly convinced of the beauty of the piano. You know the saying about a fool and his money.

I guess from there on it was a story of ruin. I quickly realized that the piano was going to need to be tuned every month or two. It was at that time I engaged the services of Roberto Marchesi, who travelled throughout regional Australia transforming pianos with problems into beautiful instruments that would last forever, or so he told me. A gorgeous Mauritian woman who always wore floral dresses was his constant companion. Roberto charged me a sum of money commensurate with what I had paid for the piano, to restore it to its former grandeur. He assured me that after the necessary repairs my piano would sound beautiful, and would be trouble free for some decades. The next time I saw Mr Marchesi was on an episode of ‘The Investigators’, the ABC Consumer Watchdog program that exposed scams.

I kept going with the piano and not long after that I had the good fortune, or rather misfortune, to come across Roger Woodward’s piano tuner. Roger was doing one of his early concerts in Alice Springs. I met his tuner at a party and asked him to come back to my place afterwards to have a look at my beautiful piano. He took one look at it and said, “The sounding board’s cracked. I advise you to take it to the dump immediately.”

The cruel shock of this expert opinion was quickly followed by denial. I found a less fussy piano tuner, a visiting American called Chuck, who also dabbled in hand writing analysis. For several years he kept my piano alive using a mysterious technique that no other piano tuner seemed to know about.

Meanwhile my girlfriend and I were living a gypsy existence, moving from house to house, caretaking other peoples' homes. So that the piano was always somewhere else. I had to borrow keys and play it in lunch hours when kindly carers were at work. After moving it several times, reality began to bite. It was needing more and more frequent attention; mice were chewing the action, and Chuck was leaving town.

When I heard the Ntaria Council at Hermannsburg was restoring the original precinct created by German missionaries in the late Nineteenth Century, I persuaded Council President Gus Williams that my 1907 Schwechten piano would be the perfect ornament. The last time I had seen the piano had been on the back of a big truck heading for the mission home of Carl Strehlow, where Ross Bolleter and I now stood. I had the feeling then that it had some other destiny awaiting it. Perhaps it was this: to be played as a ruined piano."

Mice eat the felts of pianos regardless of their pedigree. It's common to find bright little red and green felt nests inside pianos where mice rested up between snacks, and gave birth to their babies.

I asked the two young girls whose school-of-the-air room housed Dave's ruined Schwechten, how come there were dead mice in the bottom of their piano. Caitlin replied, "The piano was their mansion, and they died there." Celina, her sister continued, "They were walking over the bridge, then - aaaaaaaaaah!"

I found a piano scattered over the dirt floor of an upland shed overlooking the Southern Ocean. It lay in a chaos of chook feathers, oil drums and the bones of dead sheep. Its keys were

stained yellow, chipped and broken, and shockingly long, like the teeth of the dead.

Kerryn Goldsworthy writes in her story 1843:

Perhaps all over this terrifying country there are Dead Pianos - left on beaches - abandoned on tracks - pushed over cliffs - rotting in ruined huts and cabins - making peculiar homes for birds and mice and spiders playing witches' music among the strings and fretwork, and the silk all gone to rags'.⁸

If the piano during the early settlement was a principle of order and a source of religious comfort in a hostile environment, the ruined piano with its heaps of broken keys poignantly reveals another story. In the wail of their ringing-forever tones I hear the grief of indigenous people killed in massacres, and through transmitted diseases. In that wailing I feel the pain of separation of aboriginal children stolen from their parents.

Chapter four: An Invitation to the Ruined Piano

It's good to approach each Ruined Piano as a new occasion for learning –letting go of last year's Sonata for the chaos, frustration and joyous confusion that's there under your fingers. It's good to start afresh with the Ruined Piano each time you wish to perform on it. What was a sweet-swelling long ringer on Tuesday can be the merest plink by Thursday. Knowing in part is best. Over-learning can shut the performer off from the intoxication of improvisation, from being guided by what lies so richly to hand. *Not knowing* allows for surprises, and opens up the alluring possibilities of bewilderment and failure.

The ruined piano may become increasingly derelict as you play it. Even if you are reluctant to commit to improvisation, you may well be driven to it, because the mechanism is falling away under your fingers.

How you improvise will vary from piano to piano, and is dictated to an extent by the condition of the piano. A ruined piano can be played in the conventional way, but may also be played seated on the ground. This gives easy access to the strings, as well as to the keys. It's good to remember that plucking the bass strings on an ancient weathered piano whose

sound board is cracked wide open can produce astonishing pitch bends, then cataclysmic shuddering. Being seated on the ground can also be a convenient position for playing multiple ruined pianos, because the strings of the various pianos can then be played simultaneously, creating intoxicating effects – especially when the sustaining pedals of the assorted pianos are jammed down with erasers.

A note on the Ruined Piano ... is open at the edges. It happily admits the barking dog, the truck starting up, and the sheep station owner complaining about the drought. Like this it differs from a note played on a conventional piano, where the song of the bird in the rafters bounces off its hard glassy surfaces.

A note on the Ruined Piano readily admits the engulfing roar of a lorry pulling into an industrial unit stuffed with contraband, or the sounds of four ruined pianos played simultaneously in a piano warehouse, with the pedals of the nearby resident Steinways jammed down with erasers, so that those shining monsters—hearses stalled in the depths of 3am—can mourn along.

Further notes on the ruined piano –

When I examine my ruined piano I find that what we would conventionally regard as “middle C” is a *long ringer* – a note that sings on uncontrollably after you’ve left it.

“A”, a sixth above middle C, is a *dead ringer* – a note that rings brightly and then abruptly stops.

“E”, two octaves and a sixth below middle C, is splendidly rich in sub harmonics – a *yum*.

“G”, “B” and “F” have become, respectively – an *after shudderer*, a *sweet ringer*, and a *ghost tone*...

On any Ruined Piano, there are a number of *non-workers*. This isn’t a cause for dismay. In the first place, those notes “don’t work” in significantly different ways. Some are booms, others dooms, some click, some buzz...Others don’t go down at all, and when you hit against their resistance they emit a resonant *doonk*. *Non-workers* in their infinite variety and manifest laziness create the “negative space” in which the more pushy and industrious tones can shine.

In the ruined piano realm, sounds which would be suppressed in conventional performance can be given full rein.

Hints for playing the Ruined Piano

When plucking the strings, *wait and listen*. The best sounds—pitch bending, and a vibrant shuddering—often come right at the end of a low plucked bass note. This is rather like when you wait for someone to finish a sentence, and find that their subtler feeling has become apparent. Rushing to make your next point can obscure this.

Short pianos – “boudoir pianos” – can be turned on their sides and the castors removed. Placed next to each other, they can be played vertically like a piano accordion.

When playing ruined pianolas the mechanism can be manipulated to create the effect of air being puffed through bellows. This is another way to turn the piano into an asthmatic accordion. The broken pianola mechanism can also provide a variety of metallic percussive effects.

When keys don’t work, the hammers can be made to contact the strings with the fingers. Also, your hands can be turned palms up—as for juggling—with your fingers operating the mechanism to activate the hammers.

The metal flap under the keyboards of some ancient pianos can be plucked to create the sound of a goat in heat.

“Smudging the stars” (Van Gogh) is a technique whereby the thumb is slid basswards (leftwards) down the lower strings,

without the use of the sustaining pedal. This is normally an intensifying move in an improvisation.

The unvoiced pedals on a Ruined Piano give off an array of squeaks, squawks and grinding sounds.

Partly depressing some keys gives you access to a range of mousy squeaks and rustling sounds. To reliably elicit these sounds, you need to touch the keys delicately.

A ruined stool can give a penetrating shriek when you turn from ruined keyboard to keyboard. As noted earlier, all such sounds—which would be suppressed in conventional performance—can be given full rein when performing on the Ruined Piano.

There is no need to introduce extraneous percussion like drum sticks, mallets or brushes into your performance. Simply use parts of the piano that have broken off, instead, to strike or stroke the strings. This is termed “The Principle of Limitation,” whereby you use only the elements of a particular ruined piano to create the astonishing array of sounds desirable for a full-fledged ruined piano composition.

On writing for Ruined Piano

For *Left Hand of the Universe* I wrote a fugue, a march, and a waltz so that when the Slovak and Moravian musicians played the score—they didn’t—I would know, for instance,

what middle C sounded like on a Slovak Ruined Piano. In this way, the score, rather than being created on the conventional presumption that pianos in different parts of the world are identical with respect to pitch and mechanism – was created so that I could elicit and expose the *differences* between (ruined) pianos. In that way I could find out what “F#”—an octave and a half above “middle C”—sounded like on a Slovak ruined piano in Bratislava, as distinct from the “same note” on a West Australian ruined piano

Chapter five: Care and Maintenance of your Ruined Piano

I decided to bring my ruined pianos out of storage in Rob Isles's Slipstream industrial unit, and place them in the warmth of my kitchen. This made eating-in difficult, but given that in Perth it's possible to eat out of doors most of the year, I began to have my meals on my front and back verandas – or, because I've never established any cooking routines, at my local café. The five (now six) Ruined Pianos have thrived in my kitchen, where they move about and talk at night. House rules: no food or drink on the pianos.

Transporting a ruined piano

Rob Isles, the former proprietor of Slipstream Pianos, charges “mate's rates” to transport a Ruined Piano. However, he always instructs his assistants to treat “these old ladies” just as if each of them was a Steinway Concert Grand. When my ruined pianos were stowed in his piano showrooms in the midst of the funereal Steinway grands—all of them brand-new—I asked him, “Don't these ruined pianos undermine your business? Aren't people put off by them?” He replied, “No. I just say to my customers, “This is what happens when you don't maintain your new piano ...’ ”

The following stories indicate the need for piano care, and, as such, are cautionary tales:

I loaned my Yamaha Grand Piano to a New Age aficionado of John Cage. He wanted to create a piece where several hundred bees would be encouraged to take up brief residence in the piano – fifteen minutes, no more. As they blundered into the strings they would create a resonant hive. The audience would have to lean forward, straining for the faint far off sounds of their suffering. Two days after the performance, effectively a memorial service for the sound poet Jas Duke who had died that day, I got a phone call from the artist to say that no-one could get the bees out. They'd put bowls of water inside the piano and rocked it from side to side, but so far had only dislodged two or three infuriated bees. Humiliated and enraged, I threatened the Technical Producer, who deftly hand balled the responsibility back to the hapless artist. My distrust burned down into slit-eyed fury, and I threatened to sue the Institute for the replacement value of the piano, if it was ruined. Panicked, they smoked the bees out. Swarms of them crossed the railway line, flying straight down Wellington Street towards the Indian Ocean. A hundred or so remained to die in the dark sticky catacombs that would have become honeycomb given time. I brushed out their dry sticky bodies that whispered and crackled. My daughter

Amanda cleaned the sticky brown puddles from the polished pine soundboard with a worn-out toothbrush. The tone sounded very sweet and rough, at the same time.⁹

* **

Although the white Merc's under cover, the piano's abandoned on the edge of the drive, under the dripping trees. A little girl appears between the rough dark stumps (they've cut down the gums) to say, "It's ours, but it's too big to fit through our door." Would she play?' She would – "Memories" from the musical *Cats*, sweetly tentative in C. (Years ago after I'd hammered out clusters for hour after hour, with the neighbours slamming their windows shut, my daughter Amanda just home from school would push up the Yamaha's lid and play to soothe the furious day – "Memories" from *Cats* – windows thrown open to the adoring street.)

She's Charlotte. The wind blows her recital to all who sleep and season on the hill.

"I must go in. We're having tea."

Delicate rain stars the walnut cabinet going black.¹⁰

** *

Virtue

Being ‘accomplished’ generally was judged to render a girl a more valuable prize in the marriage gamble; her little singing and piano playing was not only an amorous lure...it was a way of confirming her family’s gentility. Arthur Loesser ¹¹

Many pianos that would now be considered unequivocally ruined probably expired under the fingers of young girls practising those Czerny studies and Clementi Sonatinas that were considered indispensable for the mastery of the piano. (“You’ve delighted us long enough Mary.”)

Over the years I’ve encountered many such pianos. They arrive sounding beaten and subdued at the Wambyn Ruined Piano Sanctuary. After a few weeks of sunshine and even a little rain in the upland paddocks, they shake off their educational shackles and emerge into the vivid life of ruin ... *blang, blaang, blaaaaang*

Chapter six: Piano Labyrinth

In early 2005, Tos Mahoney, the artistic director of Tura New Music, suggested that I gather ruined pianos from throughout Western Australia and create an installation for the Totally Huge New Music Festival's *Ruined Piano Convergence* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). I travelled throughout the wheat belt and the Perth metropolitan area gathering pianos, recording some of them, and talking with their owners to learn the piano's history. I found pianos in garages and on verandas, as well as in the open. People were happy to see their piano go, but they invariably wanted it to have a good home. Understanding that their piano would be part of an installation was seen as fulfilling that—"It's good that you can find a use for it. Better than it ending up at the dump."

I ended up by creating a curving labyrinth of some seventeen pianos in the main hall at PICA, and called it simply *Piano Labyrinth*. People could walk through the labyrinth, playing the pianos as they went, and starting and finishing anywhere they liked. It was gratifying to see how confidently people improvised on these ruined pianos once they realized they weren't in a piano lesson. Usually they would timidly play the opening of "Für Elise" or "The Moonlight Sonata" or "Blue Moon" which, apart from the basic rhythms and musical gestures, were unrecognizable. Knowing this, people started to improvise quite freely, exploring the readily accessible sounds

of the piano keyboard, and the slightly less accessible sounds of
the strings.



Piano Labyrinth at PICA, Totally Huge Festival, 2005

Photograph by Ross Bolleter

Each piano had an account of its history printed and placed on it, so that people could also read their way through the installation. The installation could thus be played, or explored through story, by any number of people at the same time.

Absent pianos

Sometimes the condition of the piano was such that it couldn't be moved without it breaking apart. In *Piano Labyrinth* such pianos were acknowledged with a photograph, together with their story, positioned within the curve of pianos.

One such piano was owned by Ian Clarke, a farmer whose property is just out of Goomalling, about two hours east of Perth. His piano lives on top of a hill in one of his paddocks. You can see it as you drive onto his property—strange and lonely against the clouding and unclouding skies. Ian told me the story of how it came to its final resting place:

We had inherited a piano that sat around for years, without anyone playing it. Finally my wife said, "Could you get rid of it, so we can put a dresser in." So I put it on the front-end loader and drove it slowly up the hill. When I looked back toward the house I could see my wife watching, astonished, from the kitchen window. I drove on to the top of the hill, where I placed the piano. Now we call that hill, "Piano Hill". The piano's been there four years now – returning to the earth from which it came. Now there are lupins growing up around it. When there were sheep in this paddock they used to congregate around it. Maybe it was a talking point for them.

Late afternoon: the piano is casting long shadows. It darkens in the rain, then dries back to light grey when the sunshine resumes. It is shedding its casing. Its pedals are below ground level, and there are caterpillars, spiders, wood lice and ants living in it. As the wind blows through the purple sea of lupins, the piano emits its song, but you have to lean in close to hear it. The keys— heaped up on each other—are like pink scree glimpsed through mallee scrub.



Ian Clarke and Ross Bolleter discuss his ruined piano on Piano Hill

Photograph by Vivienne Robertson

Chapter seven: Ruined Piano Sanctuaries

On Friday October 21, 2005, pianos from the *Piano Labyrinth* at PICA were taken to Kim Hack's and Penny Mossop's olive farm "Wambyn" near York, 80kms east of Perth. Kim and Penny produce organic olive oil of the highest quality. They also grow lavender, which is used in soap they make. Both Wambyn olive oil and soap are sold at local markets around Perth and Fremantle.



Bolleter with a devastated piano at the Wambyn Ruined Piano Sanctuary

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Wambyn is also home to the first Ruined Piano Sanctuary in the world. I vividly remember on that first morning, Kim driving a tractor with a crane on front with seven pianos

suspended off it, placing the pianos under trees, on rocks, in the bends of streams, on a shed roof, in a dam—where they continue to degrade at their own rate, and in their own way to this day.



Kim Hack transports ruined pianos to points on his property

Photograph by Vivienne Robertson

To play the pianos you have to find them spread out over the 160 acres of Kim and Penny’s olive farm. It takes a practised eye to spot a ruined piano at a distance amidst a fringe of mallee, or amongst rocks. This is somewhat akin to trying to make out guerrilla fighters in hostile country, their camp fires dead, their pannikins scattered through the prickly undergrowth.

At the launch of the Wambyn Ruined Piano Sanctuary on November 18, 2006, Kim Hack and I conducted a guided tour for a hundred or so people, enabling them to encounter a number of the ruined pianos, and leaving them to discover and explore the remainder for themselves.

Kim is the curator of ruined pianos in the Sanctuary. His curatorial tasks entail a delicate balance between allowing the pianos to degrade unchecked, and intervening to do such repairs as are necessary to avoid the more precipitous forms of ruin. He is presently engaged in creating shelters for several pianos to break their fall into annihilation.

A recent cursory inspection of the Sanctuary revealed: a nineteenth century British Challen piano engulfed by white ants that have transformed its insides into a gothic cathedral of ingested wood (note: within a few weeks from reporting this, the piano had disappeared entirely); a Blakely and Thomas (also British) which is occupied by rats who've built their nest in the top, and are no doubt enjoying the resulting high rise living afforded by this unique location, and a German Lindal piano which resides in a dam, and has been occupied by frogs. If you listen at night, you can hear them jumping about on the strings creating weirdly subtle accompaniments to their own croaking.



Grand on the Rocks

Photograph by Vivienne Robertson

The Victorian Ruined Piano Sanctuary After I had employed a half-dozen-or-so Tasmanian ruined pianos in a concert at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM) in August 2009, Kim Hack transported them to Jason Cotter's property "Barrymore" in Tuerong, on the Mornington Peninsula, a little over an hour's drive from Melbourne. This placement of some six pianos on the 160 acres at Barrymore established the second Ruined Piano Sanctuary in Australia. Jason has located pianos destined for ruin in the vineyard, on an island in the dam, in the messmate and peppermint gum forest on top of Tuerong Hill (overlooking a bright sliver of Port Phillip Bay far out on the horizon). He has also placed a piano in an open paddock

among the Hereford and Angus cattle, and another one in the rushes alongside Devilbend Creek. Jason has learned the Sanctuary curator's art under the generous tutelage of Kim Hack.

The First Urban Ruined Piano Sanctuary

The first Urban Ruined Piano Sanctuary was established by Antoinette Carrier at Bedford (a suburb of Perth, Western Australia) in November 2013. The centrepiece of the Sanctuary is a white Ritmuller grand piano filled with rainwater in her front garden. This grand in its wobbly wrecked splendour was an art object with woven keyboards hanging out of it in her exhibition PIANO at the Moores Building in Fremantle in October 2013.



Ritmuller grand piano in situ in the Urban Piano Sanctuary

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Four upright pianos adjoin the pavement at the front of her house, one sits on the side of the house and the grand piano sits in a garden bed. Another six pianos (most of which also figured in Antoinette's installation of ruined and ruining pianos from her exhibition "Piano") wait in her garage. The Sanctuary's pianos are mainly German, a significant fact given that 2014 was the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. In the garden, they comprise a Ritmuller (Gottingen), a Richard Lipp&Sohn (Stuttgart), an O. Lobl (Berlin), a Blüthner (Leipzig), an Ed. Seiler (Liegnitz) and a Broadwood (London). In the garage there is a Carl Wagner (Berlin), a Carl Ecke (Berlin), which is a woven piano, a Neumeyer (Berlin) – a player piano, an A. Grand (Berlin), a Hamilton (London) and one piano whose brand is unknown.

After two years in the garden, only one of the original pianos is playable. This is the Blüthner which produces some beautiful ruined sounds – a testament to its fine pedigree. The other pianos still respond to their strings being plucked but the keys are silent.



Ruined Piano Sanctuary, Bedford

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Antoinette has been regularly recording the deterioration of her latest garden piano, a Broadwood, since it arrived in working condition at the end of March 2015. Antoinette has made recordings through the changing weather of the last six months, during which time a marked deterioration occurred. Since October 2015, the Broadwood is being recorded once a month as it has now reached a beautiful state of ruin without being devastated.

A Ruined Piano as a long-running composition

Each ruined piano is a long-running composition, created as that instrument moves into ever-deepening entropy. Certain notes stop working altogether, while others change their qualities. In small measure, this consideration is true for all pianos, but it is a good deal more marked with ruining pianos.

The creation of ruined piano sanctuaries forms the ground, and provides the opportunity for many such long-running compositions—each tending inexorably to silence.

Chapter seven: Ruined in Tasmania

The Tasmanian Ruined Piano Hunt and the installation and performances that followed it were part of a project called *RUINED*, which went up in the 10 Days on the Island Festival of 2009. *The Tasmanian Ruined Piano Hunt* was by order of the Hon. Peter Underwood AC, the Governor of Tasmania, and was inspired by Tos Mahoney's "Become part of history, dob in a Ruined Piano" from Tura New Music's 2005 *Ruined Piano Convergence*.

I feared that Tasmanian ruined pianos would be damper than their West Australian and Northern Territory cousins, and would therefore play less readily, their swollen keys jammed together. But my fears turned out to be groundless, possibly because central Tasmania had unfortunately been locked in a severe drought for a long time.

As a result of the assiduous organization and networking skills of Teresa Beck-Swindale (Tasmanian Regional Arts Regional Touring Officer), I ended up with an astonishing eighty-eight offers of pianos. From the eighty-eight, I selected seventeen—including one from social club at the Cadbury's Chocolate Factory in Claremont, and another that was merely an unidentified frame and strings—for the installation *Ruined Piano Labyrinth*, which had a season in the Bond Store of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart between March

and May 2009 as part of the 10 Days on the Island Festival. I am grateful to Mark Colgrave, the Tasmanian cricketer who got the pianos into position, and who lit the installation with such care and subtlety. Thousands of people of all ages came to play the pianos, and to read their stories:

Ruined Piano Labyrinth

The Bond Sore of the Tasmanian Museum, Hobart, 2009

Seventeen pianos barely occupy the space.

Worms might have eaten out their hearts
but Schwechten, Renardi and Waldemar
keep up appearances. Bord (Paris, 1850)
is sporty in chintzy red.

Visitors pause, let their eyes adjust,
gingerly make an approach. Those who've known
enforced hours at the family's black box of guilt
enter with care ... try a fragment ...Für Elise or Blue Moon.
Not quite recognising it they dreamily repeat.

Their children who've never known piano fear
pluck the strings from below or thump the ivories.
From the arms of her mother playing Moonlight Sonata
a naked baby crawls the keys – such toe clusters belly clusters –
soft chaos that blooms and blurs.

In the 1820s the Derwent's waters lapped the eastern wall.
An unearthed map shows a finger-wharf pointing
to the basement, its doors and windows stopped with earth.
They kept the grog concealed there, but hauled up flour, beef
and even these pianos – lost to tune before they left the Thames.

Convict women were confined to the floor above.
Not an eye-of-the-needle's chance they ever got to sit
and play their cloth-eared mistresses' vain acquisitions
from Paris or Berlin – if they'd had a say I guess
they'd have preferred an air sung broken mouthed
with a Cockney twang.¹³

I gave six concerts as part of the *RUINED* project, in the Bond Store during which I told the stories of the pianos in the installation, and improvised on them. Elizabeth Walsh, Artistic Director of 10 Days on the Island, said that she deserved an award for mounting the only contemporary music event in Australian history where people were banging on the doors to get in.

Eileen Joyce

In the Tasmanian west coast mining town of Zeehan I encountered a piano that had been played by renowned Australian concert pianist, Eileen Joyce, when she returned to her hometown in 1948. She is reputed to have played Liszt's "Liebestraum No. 1"—her mother's favourite piece—on this Görs & Kallman piano.

On the pasteboard shrine at Zeehan's Gaiety Theatre I read newspaper clippings that told of how Eileen was born in a tent a few hundred metres from the Gaiety Theatre, in 1912. When she was two her family moved to Boulder in the West Australian goldfields, where her pianistic gifts were recognized by the nuns. Subsequently, she went on to study with Wilhelm Backhaus and Artur Schnabel, and had a right royal career in the 1940s and 50s, living at an exclusive London address, as well as owning a Rolls Royce and a country estate. She was one of the

finest pianists of her time. Her shrine is highlighted by a gold and white dress made for her by a celebrated 1950's couturier.

Duet with Eileen

Zeehan, Tasmania, 2008

In the Gaiety Theatre your *Testament* CD
plays to the empty auditorium.

From the pasteboard shrine I learn that
you were born in a miner's tent nearby –
“another mouth to feed.”

Shoes off, I cross the glossy boards, grope
through the unrestored kitchen's dark
while my eyes make their slow adjustment –

*a dusty radiogram, a dental chair
enveloped by the collapsed ceiling, the piano
strewn with its own mechanism.*

I sit on an ancient sugar bag, bleakly twang
the strings. They call to you shimmering from
one hundred feet and half a century away,
as a little song begins – “*You'll never be
poor again Eileen, you'll never be poor again.*”¹⁴

The Görs & Kallman piano from Zeehan—strewn with its own mechanism—became part of the *RUINED* installation at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and was one of the pianos that I played in the concerts there, shouting out the colours of the different gowns that Eileen wore when she was performing – *blue* for Beethoven, *red and gold* for Schumann, *red* for Tchaikovsky, *green and spangled* for Debussy and *black* for Bach. As I shouted out each colour I played a fragment of a

work by the relevant composer—recognizable enough it seemed from the audience’s laughter, even though the Görs and Kallman hadn’t been tuned since 1948.

The piano at Bakers Beach (as told by Teresa Beck-Swindale, with a photograph by her)

This may well be the most ruined piano in existence, or certainly for this project! A Hölling and Spangenberg, it has been left to deteriorate in an old shed at Bakers Beach, near Narawntapu National Park in Tasmania’s northern coastal area.

Owner Lindsay

Addison explained that it has been in the shed since 1973 when he bought the property “Brentwood” on which he now runs cattle. I looked at it on a grey rainy day in December and jotted down these few notes to send Ross who was ecstatic at its discovery:



“Way beyond the poppy fields, over the Rubicon River and down the Bakers Beach road lurks a piano, which may well be the most ruined in the Ruined piano project. It sits, sinking on one castor patiently in the corner of the shed, keeping watch over bundles of old fence posts and rusty wire. The floor is precarious, the views sublime, its timber veneer crusted with bird poo. A spider scuttles up the bottom key to the sanctuary of the backboard. Hammers chewed; keys stopped, many showing the wooden bones underneath, ivories stripped, pitted with borer holes. It needs a long rest.”

Robert Tucker, the piano tuner and removalist, who plays a mean “Lady Madonna” with a full-on octave bass line, kept this Hölling and Spangenberg together as he moved it to Stanley for the first performance of the 10 Days on the Island Festival of 2009; this, despite the fact that the piano had actually split apart.

Robert performed virtuoso lifting and transportation of ruined pianos all over Tasmania. One tour de force was to take four ruined pianos from Hobart to South Melbourne via Bass Strait, for my performances at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM) in August 2009. I’m grateful to Robert for his efforts on behalf of *RUINED*, and my subsequent ruined piano concert and presentation of my composition *Secret Sandhills* at ANAM. There I met Australian pianist Michael Kieran Harvey who generously supervised the unloading of the pianos, and told me that Ruined Piano would be an inspiration for students at the Academy, because formal classical piano performance was a dead art. He quoted R. Murray Schafer’s reference to the piano as “an over-decorated hearse,” before going on to give a stunning performance of the final movement of the Bartok Piano Sonata on the following Saturday morning.

Across Tasmania, I noticed that there was a preponderance of Bord pianos that had been made in Paris in the mid nineteenth century. Apparently the Bord family sold them on hire purchase, the first time that this had been done in the history of the piano.

They were made of light cheap timber, which made them ideal for transport up those vertiginous staircases to Parisian apartments and garrets. Being cheaper, Bord pianos must have provided serious competition to Pleyel and Erard, their more classy competitors.

Bizet was broke when he composed *Carmen*, and I got to wondering whether he composed it on a Bord piano, with his habitual cat in his lap to keep him warm and inspire his deathless melodies.



Wendy Cunningham watches as I explore the Bord piano in her shed

Photograph by Teresa Beck-Swindale

RUINED on King Island

King Island lies in Bass Strait off the northwestern tip of Tasmania, about half way between Tasmania and Victoria, and at almost exactly 40 degrees south it's exposed year-round to the westerly winds known as the Roaring Forties. The island's population is approximately 1,750. King Island is known for its dairy produce, notably its Roaring Forties Blue Cheese. Kelp and crayfish are also valuable exports.

As the King Island community was keen to be involved in *RUINED*, I made a three-day visit there in November 2008 to meet people and hear the stories of their pianos, as well as of the pianos on the island generally. Teresa Beck-Swindale co-ordinated my visit, and Sally Marsden from the Cultural Centre in Currie liaised with people on the island to set up meetings with me, and to create events.

I made recordings on two of the pianos offered to the project—one in a farm shed and the other on a cliff top by the beach—as part of a concert on the cliffs. The latter piano figures in the next photo.



Cliff-top Concert, King Island

Photograph by Teresa Beck-Swindale

This Thürmer piano arrived ashore near Surprise Bay having travelled to King Island on a sailing ship in the late 1800's with its owner, Mrs Bowling. It has remained on the island ever since, housed in various places and played by many, including one time owner Mrs Olive Holyhan. It spent 15 years in Robyn Eades' "Pink Shed", with an owl for company, finally ending up in the Men's Shed on Currie Wharf. From there it was transported to the cliff top for my performance, which was cling-on-for-dear-life arduous (hunched over the keys in the photo.) I was freezing cold in the buffeting wind, and whatever sounds I got from the Thürmer —and I gave a highly theatrical performance—were torn to shreds by the gale. Some of the

crowd watched impassively from various rocks far down the cliff-face. After the concert the Thürmer was returned to Alison Milsom's property near Currie.

A documentary film of my concert on the cliffs was made by King Island resident, Jan van Ruiswyk. It runs for 4½ minutes. This film was played as part of the Ruined Piano Labyrinth in the Bond Store of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, to represent the absent pianos of King Island. Once pianos arrive on King Island, they very rarely leave, as freight costs to remove them are substantial.

Chapter eight: Ivory

Ivory tusks were taken from freshly killed elephants. Dead ivory, or ivory that was found on the ground was of inferior quality and very brittle, and thus was not used in the production of ivory piano keys. Ivory is of two types: hard and soft. The hard ivory came from India. Soft ivory, which was used for making piano keys, came from Africa. The latter was exported to the United States where Pratt, Read and Co. of Ivoryton was the largest buyer. In 1884, three quarters of the ivory exported from Zanzibar was sent to Deep River and Essex in the USA, where it was used primarily for keyboard manufacture. It has been estimated that 30,000 elephants were killed between 1905 and 1912 to supply those factories. A 70-pound tusk would supply ivory for about 45 keyboards. Since about 1958, plastics have been used instead of ivory for the manufacture of piano keys.¹⁵

I was moved to read these horrific statistics, and went on to wrote a poem about the slaughter of elephants for their tusks. The poem refers to the work of jazz pianist and composer, Thelonious Monk, who my old accordion teacher, Harry Bluck used to refer to as “melodious thunk” (or felonious thunk” – he didn’t have much time for him.) The poem is called “Tonk” (which is also the brand name of my laundry piano):

Tonk

(Crepuscle for Monk)

Don't say *tinkling*
I never tinkle the ivories
ortickle them either –
At least say *tonks*, as in
He tonks away all the strange
grey day for elephants slain
mutilated, left to rot –
How many tusks did it take
to make my keyboard smirk?

They lumber through, they drop
their smoking dung – I do
the melodious thunk among
their pile driving hooves.

Their breath pongs,
Their trunks scythe
the dusk. A rumbling felt
not heard firms to a howl,
and herds begin to cross miles
of savannah under the red spout
of sundown, the raw plink of the stars. ¹⁶

David Helfgott performs "The Rack Three"

"I wrote that piece for elephants"... Rachmaninoff

Quite at odds with Scott Hicks and Jane Scott's film *Shine*, David Helfgott, the West Australian virtuoso pianist who broke down in his early twenties, and came back from hell in his forties, was taught by the illustrious Hungarian pianist and teacher, Alice Carrard, right here in Perth, Western Australia. This is true of both the teenage years before David went to study in London, and of the long sentence in the asylum and the sheltered workshops that followed his breakdown. During the

late seventies when I was studying classical piano with Alice Carrard (“Madame”), my lesson followed his. Feeling like a little dog pursuing an elephant, I’d arrive twenty minutes early so that I could hear him play. Invariably he’d be dressed in a dark suit, and his black shoes were shined to a high gloss. He was pale and shaky, yet his playing was canals filled with bright red and yellow pleasure craft, kids hanging off them—and of those barges: luxurious and calm, gliding funereally down waters smooth and black as vitrolite. Madame Carrard worked ever so gently with him, correcting him only when she had to.

Whenever she did, he would cave in, saying over and over again, “Sorry Madame, Sorry Madame”. Then, because he was close to tears, she would have to help him embark, once again.¹⁷

Who could forget that jaw-dropping scene in the film *Shine*, when David Helfgott (as played by Noah Taylor) takes on “the Rack Three” with the orchestra. It’s the outcome of months of exhausting, exhaustive practice, and we sense that it might be beyond young David’s resources. But he captures us with his first solo entry and confidently holds his own as the challenges mount into an intensifying wall, which he keeps on climbing. Suddenly he’s there – frail, sweat running off him, riding that thundering elephant. Then something snaps – and there’s only the *thoomp-da-thoomp* of the piano keys going down. Everything else is silent. For an unending moment – *thoomp-da thoomp-da-doomp* – then the “Rack Three” comes

roaring back, and he brings it triumphantly home, all of us weeping with relief.

Yet in that momentary abyss was the Ruined Piano, broken backed, giving its all – *thoomp thoomp ... thoomp da doomp*. But it's never enough. The corrugated iron kitchen wavers through the tears of a child, saddled with such monstrous love.

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Chapter nine: The Left Hand of the Universe

Ruined piano is the left hand of the piano world. It is “left hand” too, in the sense of derelict, abandoned, weak, declining, sad, quirky, crumbling. The English word “left” comes from the Celtic *lyft*, which means “weak” or “broken.” The Latin for “left” is *sinistra* from which the English word “sinister” derives. The French for “left” is *gauche*, which gives us the English “gawky”, meaning “awkward” or “uncoordinated.” In Romany, the word for “left” is *bongo*, which also means “evil.”

The entire 73’00” of my *Left Hand of the Universe* is played with left hands only. I conceived and devised it as a composition for up to seven performers, playing left-handed on any number of ruined pianos on three continents, simultaneously at:

Samorin Synagogue (near Bratislava) Slovakia, at 8.00pm,
15 September 1997. Performers: Michal Murin,
ZdenekPlachy, MilanAdamciak.

Colorado College, Colorado Springs, USA, at 12.00 midday, 15 September 1997. Performers: Dan Wiencek, Stephen Scott, and members of the Colorado College New Music Ensemble.

In a living room in North Fremantle, Western Australia, at 2.00am, 16 September 1997 during the lunar eclipse. Performers: Nathan Crotty & Ross Bolleter.

This was the first of three realizations of *Left Hand of the Universe*, and the only one released. It is in three sections:

Piano Archeologico 29'42"

Widdershins 21'47"

Synchronomania 22'31"

A definition of Synchronicity

Jung defined Synchronicity as “the meaningful co-incidence of similar or identical thoughts, dreams, or other events occurring at the same time in different places.” *Left Hand of the Universe* was set up to test for the presence of synchronistic musical events, when musicians were improvising at a distance, and unable to hear each other.

Devising pieces like LHU where musicians are widely separated in space, but are playing together in the same time interval, proceeded quite naturally from my experience of group improvisation. My earlier experiences of group improvisation were highly convergent: that is to say, the musicians listened

closely to each other and focussed on staying together, as for example in jazz in its closed song forms, or open modal forms. As I got more involved in free improvisation, I discovered more divergent approaches, including the limit case where none of the musicians listen to each other, but instead resolutely pursue their own paths. When I listened back to recordings of free improvisation I discovered that what seemed chaotic when I was performing in a free-improvising group was unexpectedly ordered when I listened back, and that all sorts of interconnections were occurring between the players, that I was unaware of during the improvisation itself.

From this I was led to consider the possibility that similar interconnections might exist, even if the players could not hear each other at all, for instance when they were playing in geographically distinct locations. I thought of these interconnections, if they occurred at all, as being, at least potentially, synchronistic.

Stephen Scott: Synchronicity and the Left Hand of the Universe

When I flew to the US with my son Julian in 1987 to undertake a journey from San Francisco to Seattle to Iowa City (where we celebrated his 11th birthday with an ice cream cake in the midst of deep midwinter snow), and finally to New York. I went shopping for cassettes in the Haight-Ashbury region of San Francisco, and picked up a cassette simply entitled *The*

Colorado Bowed Piano Ensemble. As I recollect, the cassette didn't have the composer's name on it. Well, I listened to this cassette incessantly, and couldn't believe how wildly unprecedented the sounds were. I remember flying over Colorado and looking down and seeing it covered in snow, with the highways like markings on an Indian blanket—and thinking “Whoever created this music lives down there.” After Julian and I returned to Western Australia, I received a phone call from Stephen Scott, who turned out to be the composer of the bowed piano music and the director of the Colorado ensemble, saying that he had heard my “Nallan Void” from my cassette *Ruined Piano at Cue*, and loved it. Steve subsequently flew to Western Australia, where we listened to the remainder of *Ruined Piano at Cue*, talked about “aesthetic wholes” and had fish and chips on Bathers Beach, Fremantle. Steve released my “Nallan Void” on the CD *Austral Voices* ¹⁹, and we went on to create a trans-Pacific synchronous piece called “Transglobal Musings” in October 1989. It included an eerie crossover of me playing in a fairly open style of jazz piano just as Steve was tuning into a radio station broadcasting a jazz program with an Australian announcer.

Later, Steve brought the Colorado Bowed Piano Ensemble to Western Australia and gave some fine concerts here under the auspices of Tura New Music. I went to Colorado and created

When the Anzac Body Blossoms and Blooms on April 25 1991 at Colorado College.

Michal Murin speaks of his involvement in Left Hand of the Universe

After not being in contact with Ross Bolleter for more than five years, suddenly somebody rang me up before my children even woke up. I hate such moments - but I enjoyed this telephone call from Ross in November 1998, inviting me to join the 'Left Hand of the Universe'. I knew the principle of simultaneous improvisation from an earlier project with Ross on May 1 (Mayday) 1989, which was before the Velvet Revolution in former Czechoslovakia.²⁰

I remember this synchronous improvisation—"May Day"—between Michal and his performance collective improvising on the various floors of an apartment block in Bratislava, at the same time as I was improvising on a piano in my back shed in suburban Mt Lawley, Western Australia. There was no score: so no guidance as to the style or content of the performance specified in advance. The Bratislava apartment block sound world was wildly exuberant and exceptionally reverberant. A feature of "May Day" was the elevator going up and down. When the door opened, people performing on the various floors were given a piece of the Czechoslovakian flag that had been cut up by one of the artists. I was proud to receive my strip of the flag through the post from Michal.

The left hand concept interested me too, but what convinced me was Ruined Pianos. I was immediately inspired to write a text about using pianos in contemporary visual art, about colour pianos, about the piano in the age of the computer. This study got me to think about a sound object exhibition where all exhibited art works use a piano or part of a piano – an idea that evolved into 'Piano Hotel.'²¹

Here is Michal's account of (a) Piano Hotel, a notion that evokes the idea of a ruined piano sanctuary:

“Just as we need homes for abandoned dogs, there was sensed the need to establish a hotel for abandoned, lost, damaged and demolished pianos. The Guild for Protection and for Freedom of Pianos through its hotel, or rather asylum, offers to musical instruments resuscitation services by their artistic appropriation and reinterpretation. The work of artists in this process is resurrected for the spectator-listener; not condemned to age in some forgotten institutions, establishments, stores or lofts. And so 'Piano Hotel' - part of the third annual international musical - creative project SOUND OFF '97 of the not-for-profit organisation SUM.

I found an older brother of 'Piano Hotel' here in Slovakia - the Museum of Keyboard Musical Instruments in Markušovce, in which all the instruments are ruined according to WARPS' typology. Here are exhibited 200 years old, and they are really beautiful. The most interesting for me was the piano for travelling - it looks like a little table, with legs that can be taken off... In the Museum I started to think about Ross's instructions for the performance of 'Left Hand of the Universe', and to find a balance between what he wanted and my own imagination.²²

The three performances that form LHU happen within a time interval of 73'00”, which constitutes a single, simultaneous “take” of one group of musicians improvising on a region of the earth that is in light, together with two other groups of musicians improvising in places on the earth that are in darkness. The three improvisations—one in light, two in darkness—are thus captured at the same “earth moment”—this, rather than in a time-span defined as, say, “from 2.00pm until 3.13pm in the afternoon, all over the world, ”where each and every performance would likely be in afternoon light.

So the 73'00" time interval of LHU synchronously includes: the sun shining on the contemporary music class improvising with whirlies and a pyrophone, together with Dan Wiencek playing a ruined piano in the middle of them all, in the forecourt of Colorado College at 12.00 midday on September the 15th, 1997. (Later in the film of the performance we will see Stephen Scott repeatedly backing his pick-up truck into the frame of a piano with the strings still attached). Synchronously — at 8.00pm that night, and still on September the 15th—Michal Murin, Zdenek Plachý and Milan Adamčiak are playing ruined pianos in the Samorin synagogue, with a dog barking furiously in the darkness. Milan Adamciak—the father of experimental music in Slovakia—had to be forcibly dragged from the pub to participate. Throughout the performance, he repeatedly attacked the grand piano with an axe. Finally—and still synchronously—at 2.00am on September 16, in the midst of a lunar eclipse, Nathan Crotty and Ross Bolleter performed their end of LHU on two ruined pianos in a living room in North Fremantle. This was only metres from where Western Australian musicians had performed Michal Murin's *Visual Composition* on Dog Beach, amidst the rusting remains of the undersea telephone cable that once connected Western Australia to Europe.

Ed Baxter writes in his review in "The Wire" of the resulting CD *Left Hand of the Universe* (WARPS W02, 1997):

This epic work is a simultaneous blind improvisation designed to reveal the pleasures of synchronicity. Bolleter is strict about what he's after: the piano has to be ruined rather than neglected (such as you find in the back rooms of pubs or your parents' garage) or devastated (such as you might find in a war zone or after an earthquake). The Romantic associations are emphasised in the realisation of the composition, whereby the addition of a human figure to the ruin completes the picture. Local colour is incidental: the deposits of 1000 pigeons, the scent of the blood of 200 slaughtered sheep, the division of an entire country - each provides a distant background hum of endless metaleptic potential which is obscurely undercut by the ruin itself. So too Bolleter's insistence on only left handed performance emphasises the digressive and dreamlike, and lays claim to magical powers by which failure is valorised as universal, a sinister shadow cast across the ages.²³

Left hand stories:

During the performances the musicians told “left hand stories” (as in “back handed compliments”). The following can serve as an example:

I'd unsuccessfully searched the Czech Republic for ruined pianos to record. On the point of leaving for Germany, I mentioned this to my host who told me that, far beneath the art gallery that he owned in central Prague, he had a grand piano that had spent time under water after a pipe had burst in a nearby room.

I descended to the drowned studio, then squelched through its darkness (one boot sole was letting in freezing water) to confront by torchlight the Petrov Grand – rank from its immersion. Petrov's defence turned out to have been no defence at all.

I shivered. My hands and arms were splashed with mud. The keys were so swollen, I had to lever them up, the ivories coming away under my tugging hands like finger nails off a soft drowned corpse. I had to lift each key then push down as hard as I could. All that effort for the tiniest bing plinking starlit note.

From the abyss of the arcade above came a blur of furious Gypsy music. I stopped, let it pour, then went on lifting, pumping ... The battery died on my muddied DAT recorder. My full bowels ached. I stumbled up flight after flight of agonized stairs to the toilet at Michal's Hungarian Restaurant. I pushed past a dark girl hunched near the door, and burst in on a wet haired gypsy, preening himself before a brown skinned mirror. He blocked my way to the cubicle, and whispered,

“Want to have sex?”

“No, oh no, I'm straight...”

“No, no,” – he smoothed the air with his hands, shaping it in explanatory curves. And at that moment I realized that he was selling the girl, cold and famished inside her blue canvas jacket, her ear against the door.²⁴

Such stories have some kinship with jokes, but perhaps even more with the blue black music of chance, fate, failure and dream.²⁵ Left hand stories are also kin to synchronicity.

Left Hand of the Universe opens a field in which synchronistic events can occur, hopefully encouraged by its dabbling in left-handedness and ruin. Ed Baxter reports one such experience:

Synchronicity, the psychic manifestation of the doubling effect, allows for unnerving moments of lucidity in the flux of relativity, suggestive of a spatial collapse that further informs Bolleter's ruins. I'm rereading an anecdote in the sleeve notes of another of Bolleter's CDs, *Crow Country* (a selection of his best work over the last 11 years), to ensure I'm not mixing up his solo works with the transglobal 'Left Hand', when his voice on *Left Hand* starts reading aloud the selfsame anecdote about secretly playing a pianola in the bush. Time collapses in on itself like an imploding star.¹⁰

In conclusion: Michal and his friends spent time restoring the synagogue at Samorin. During the Second World War the Nazis, together with the Slovakian puppet government they had installed, liquidated a large percentage of the Jewish population of Slovakia. I understand that the synagogue at Samorin was employed as an ammunition dump, and that after the war it was used to house livestock. A mountain of dung had to be removed before the space could be used for the Bratislava end of *Left Hand of the Universe*. Since then the synagogue has been restored as a precious historical site, and named the “At Home Gallery”: a center for contemporary art and cultural dialogue that attracts artists, musicians and other figures from around the world. When I visited Slovakia in 1998, I remember performing some Klezmer music for Michal on a Weltmeister accordion, which I had borrowed for a concert that I gave in Nové Zámky. I didn’t understand at the time why such music was so moving for him, and why it was so important that it be played—in this instance, in a church.

Chapter Ten: Secret Sandhills

(to the memory of Timmy Payungka Tjapangati (c.1940– 2000))

I began the creation of *Secret Sandhills* in 2000. This work—central to my output—was inspired by Timmy Payungka Tjapangati's painting *Secret Sandhills*, which I encountered in an exhibition called *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. I was sad that Timmy Tjapangati had died that year, as I would have liked to have met him, and if possible spoken with him about his work. I was determined that if I finished the piece, I would dedicate it to him.

Timmy Tjapangati was a founding artist in the group of Papunya artists that initiated the Western Desert art movement.²⁷ He was born at Parayirpilynga, west of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) in the Gibson Desert, just inside the West Australian border with the Northern Territory. He was an important ceremonial leader and the key custodian of the important ceremonial site of Parrayingi and for the Lake Hazlett area.

In his later years Timmy Payungka Tjapangati was obliged to live in Alice Springs for regular dialysis treatment. It is a tribute to his courage and his devotion to his art that, living and

working in the most adverse conditions and battling with illness, he continued to paint until his death in 2000.

Timmy Tjapangati painted *Secret Sandhills* in the oppressive, desolate and poverty-stricken conditions of the government settlement at Papunya, 250 miles west of Alice Springs, in 1972. The artist used synthetic polymer powder paint on a piece of irregularly shaped masonite (particle board), picked up in the Papunya rubbish dump. It also seems that he painted over a previous painting.

In the early nineties the painting was still untitled. When Peter Fannin—who was appointed as an art coordinator to Papunya in 1973—asked Timmy Tjapangati about the significance of the painting, the artist didn't wish to say much – only that “it represented fireweed.” He didn't want to suggest a title either, so Peter suggested “*Secret Sandhills*”. The artist approved. It gives nothing away.

When I saw *Secret Sandhills* I was completely caught up in its power, and began to sketch musical impressions before I left the art gallery. I became obsessed by the painting, and pasted up reproductions of it throughout my house. I lived with that painting.

The musical composition doesn't draw on the painting as a visual score, but rather as a force field of luminous power—a

matrix of the timeful and the timeless—created out of its own inner necessity.

A construction of ruins ...

Regarding the six ruined pianos on which I improvised elements of *Secret Sandhills*, four are from Alice Springs, which is to the east of Timmy Tjapangati's country, and two ruined pianos are from the Murchison goldfields of Western Australia – far to the south west of his country. These two aggregations of ruined pianos flank, from opposite sides of the desert, Timmy Tjapangati's country of birth and childhood.

Dramatis Personae – Ruined Pianos in Secret Sandhills

Globe (Royal London Model), Ralph Allison, Wardour St, Soho
Resides at the Old Telegraph Station, Alice Springs, Northern Territory – “The Camel Piano.”

Bord Piano(Paris, 1878) Resides near the Camel Piano at the Old Telegraph Station, and is a source of shining clusters.

*Georg Schwechten(1907)*Resides at Hermannsburg Cultural Precinct, Ntaria, Northern Territory.

Albert FahrZeit No trace remains of this piano. It formerly resided at the Toy Library Kindy, Diarama Village, Alice Springs.

Jefferson (Chicago, 1926). Originally the bar piano from the Big Bell Hotel, and subsequently the Ruined Piano at Nallan Sheep Station, in the Murchison district, near Cue, 670kms NE of Perth, Western Australia.

Ronisch Three Crown(Dresden, 1901) from the Sandstone Hotel, 750 km NE of Perth, Western Australia.

I brought the field recordings (“the precarious recordings”) of these pianos into Anthony Cormican's *Frontear Studios* and

edited, assembled and shaped them with Anthony, who operated ProTools. Anthony's creative use of ProTools pushed *Secret Sandhills* into unheard of realms of murmuring warmth, and even a subsonic abyss. All this, and so much more.

Anthony's generosity, immense care and unfailing encouragement, made *Secret Sandhills* possible. Anthony: "We have the technology." And I'd add—the nous, skill and the intuition to use it to the full.

The creation of *Secret Sandhills* took some six years. In its making I drew inspiration from Greg Goodman's 1982 CD *The Construction of Ruins(the Australian Site)*—both its title, as well as his solo piano improvisation, *The Nullabor is Not Flat*—where the strings of the piano were loaded up with 2 Emu beer cans, 7 cardboard coasters, 2 bars railway soap, 1 time and location schedule, 1 packet railway coffee, and much, much more...all gathered from Goodman's four day journey on the Indian Pacific rail service from Sydney to Perth. Greg Goodman's construction site was Berkeley, San Francisco and Perth.²⁸

Chapter eleven: Nathan Crotty & the car park ruins

That car park was built in the early 50s just north of the Barrack St Bridge in Perth. Its concrete was waterstain brown. It glowered balefully over acres of rusting iron roofs. It had been owned by a dancing school instructor who drowned himself in his swimming pool after the consortium building the car park went bust. With its twisted spiral of rough-cast concrete, the car park was never completed. Its rusting metal rods poked up into the ever-changing skies. Because it had concrete cancer, it rained destruction on cars parked below. The Perth City Council erected a barrier around the top to minimize that danger, and to prevent desperate folk—distraught in love, sunk in debt—leaping to their death on the slick hissing roads below. Canterbury Court sported a dancehall, a Hungarian Restaurant, a printers, as well as a late night café—“Scheherazade—in its decrepit, filthy arcade. It was finally imploded, and for years the land lay vacant. Finally a Myers Megamart was built there— “Beamed in from another planet.” (Nathan).

Nathan Crotty is a pioneer of the Ruined Piano in Western Australia. Apart from his early works for the medium which he recorded on cassette in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he made several super 8 films, including *Sheep Station Follies*, which features the original ruined piano at Nallan Sheep Station.

Nathan turned up for his second piano lesson with me, carrying a broken violin. The first lesson had already been abandoned to free improvisation. And improvisation it remained through ensuing months and years. Nathan always referred to such sessions as “piano lessons.”

We hoisted the Gulbransen piano that his mother had bought him from the Salvation Army, up onto the back of a ute and drove it past the oblivious security guard and onto the roof of Canterbury Court car park, exposing it to wind and rain. We played unprecedented duets for businessmen who momentarily noticed, but couldn't take it in. They went straight back to their working concerns – to being worked by their concerns. It was as though what was truly monstrous was not happening at all.

When Cook's ships sailed into Sydney Cove, Aboriginal people looked up, saw what was happening, but apparently went immediately back to their ordinary tasks and concerns. Cook flew the Union Jack. We secured a red gold and blue blanket with gaffer tape to the low guard rail to announce our occupation...and the beginning of our Rooftops Project. Nathan did a number of ruined piano improvisations on the roof, which he recorded, as well as filming the performances on 8mm film. As part of the Rooftops Project I did some of the early experiments in testing for the occurrence of synchronistic musical events in improvisations at a distance (in this instance, across the metropolitan area) with Nathan and Phil Kakulas.

The educational implications of the Rooftops Project weren't neglected either. Young students would arrive at my home in the élite suburb of Mt Lawley for their piano lesson. "Jump in the car," I would say, and I would drive them to that

nightmare monster shedding death. I would take them up to the roof in a shuddering lift smelling of urine. We'd only just make it to the roof. (This was the era before litigation became rife in Western Australia.) Staggering around, swiped by the cold wind, we would finally settle down to entertain acres of rusting roofs and obscured advertising hoardings—including an advertisement for spectacles that no one could see from the ground. Also the odd seagull, hopelessly off course. Occasionally we would see a steeplejack trying to fix the wooden barrier, risking his life.

The Gulbransen weathered a winter on the roof. Water leaked through its canvas cover, and it shed its casing in long strips and coils. One frozen morning I tugged back the tarpaulin and disturbed a young Aboriginal boy, curled up in the dead leaves in the bottom of the piano, asleep. He woke up as the wind got in. We stared at each other. Neither of us could speak. Behind me someone coughed. I turned to see an Aboriginal girl, maybe eighteen years old. I couldn't avert my stare of alarm as her hacking cough went on and on, and her face soaked over. She swallowed, tried to speak, then finally got it out, "Hey man – watch me spit man"—as the little guy took off down the stairs.

Chapter twelve: Rob Castiglione, film maker and recordist

The old goldmining town of Cue—now almost a ghost town—was rightly dubbed the Queen of the Murchison for during the gold rush of the 1890s she was full of gracious hotels and ballrooms, where you could dance the Lobster Quadrille or listen to excerpts from Mozart, Chopin or Verdi any night of the week. Impresarios, actors, virtuoso pianists, forgers, murderers—all of high society—floated in on the expectation of gold, and its brief reality.

I decided to show filmmaker Rob Castiglione the abandoned Cue Masonic Hall, which in its time had been the largest pressed iron building in the Southern Hemisphere. Perhaps it still is. When we arrived we found that it had been boarded up and the doors were nailed shut. We circled the building, but the only points of entry were broken windows with treacherous shards and sagging sashes. The second time around Rob noticed a hole in the foundation and squeezed through. Being much larger I followed with difficulty. When we staggered into the lower hall we found that the only piece of furniture in it was a piano that turned out to be almost as ruined as the original Ruined Jefferson from Nallan Sheep station, 10 kms up the road. We spent three days and nights with me improvising on the piano, and Rob filming and recording it all. It was one of the most intense creative experiences of my life.

Our tumult went up just across the road from the Cue police station, and we were lucky not to be apprehended, as our work went on into the night. When we finally finished recording and filming we went, exhausted, to get a meal at the local Roadhouse. I was driving Rob's car, and on our approach to the Roadhouse, I failed to register the approach of a road train, which had to swerve to avoid us. The owner of the Roadhouse ran towards me, threatening me, and claiming that I was ruining his business. Rob, who is a lawyer, stepped in front of him, and said, "How dare you threaten my friend like that. Keep that up and I'll see you in court on Monday." The guy desisted.

We were still trying to record birdsong for Rob's film, *An Invitation to Ruin*. At the Masonic Hall we failed to record much birdsong, even though swallows darted in and out of the broken windows, as well as through the rose that had come loose from the ceiling in the centre of the upstairs hall. In our quest for birdsong ("and no birds sing"), and for Rob to be able to continue filming, we visited Big Bell, the abandoned gold mining town, 27 km west of Cue. Big Bell is surrounded by olive and khaki mallee scrub, and out there the sun is hot and heavy, even at dawn. Once a flourishing goldmining town, all that now remains of Big Bell is its hotel—an Art deco ruin in the middle of nowhere. What was once a convivial bar—the longest in Australia at the time— is now a hole in the ground, filled with rubble. On a crumbling wall overlooking the hole is

the faded sign—*Ladies Bar*. The old fireplace is stranded half way up the wall. When you look up there is no roof. It collapsed long ago. Now there are only rotten rafters and perilous bearers, with the vast blue sky staring through. The staircase ascends to nowhere.

After the gold ran out, the town of Big Bell was dismantled and taken to Yalgoo. The Jefferson, which had been the bar piano in the hotel, ended up at Nallan Sheep Station, 10 kms north of Cue, where it spent a year on the tennis court, exposed to searing heat and a flash flood. You can still see the mud marks inside the piano.

Chapter thirteen: David Peterson

Back in 1989, I visited Nallan Sheep Station with the young musician and artist Nathan Crotty. It was in the worst of the long drought. Because it was viciously hot during the days, I recorded on the ruined piano at night. I'd hide in the freezing iron shed waiting for Dave, the sheep station owner to go to bed. Straight after he'd stumbled up the homestead steps, I would drag up an oil drum, feel the broken teeth of the Jefferson under my fingers, then play *con bravura con passione* for the applause of millions of cicadas through the shivery shuddering graveyard shift. When the week was up I paid my friend Nathan's and my accommodation. Dave, having shot two hundred sheep that morning, with hundreds more dying out at remote windmills, was so drunk I could see through to the inside back of his skull. "That mad bastard you brought with you. The other night I was going to bed. I heard thunder, rushed out onto the veranda. The sky was clear full of fucking stars. You should shoot that maniac piano thumping bastard."

In 1997 Dave died of pancreatic cancer. I wrote the following poem to his memory:

The photo in April's kitchen shows you
the year the drought broke, 1992 – you're up there
proud astride your big red Kawasaki motorbike, flushed among

purple mulla mulla and pink and yellow everlastings burst overnight
from the broken water pipe of the drought to cross garter your front wheel
stall you in flower heaven

Old bastard your belt's hung with tinnies
big cartridges of joy that flash like desert stars.
Your hands are bouquets held up for the camera –
“One to remember,” you seem to be saying, not knowing
a thing – just that you'd ridden in as far and as hard as you could
so that all you could do – your face polished crimson by beer and joy –
was to breathe out and shine ²⁹

I knew that April wanted to sell the sheep station, and I feared that the Jefferson would be torched on the runway. So I bought it for \$500, and Thomas Falke helped me to transport it on a 4-wheel trailer to my home in Bayswater. This Ur-Ruin now resides with four more recently discovered ruined pianos in my kitchen, which is also known as WARPS Studios.

Rob Castiglione and I stayed at Nallan Sheep Station in 2008, the year we discovered the ruined Ronisch in the Masonic Hall. Rob photographed the moon, and I strained to hear birdsong through the unrelenting chug of the generator. Finally I figured that, given its name, there must be water at Milly's Soak, and where there was water, there must certainly be birds.

Rob and I drove the 6 kms there. When we arrived, we found that the well was dry, and the birdsong faint. I read the tourist sign informing us that Milly's Soak had been a favourite

picnic spot during the times when gold was flush, and that people had cycled the 17 kms or so from Cue to swim and socialize there.

Drowsy, I wandered into the bush and found the graves of three men who had died of typhoid fever in the 1890s. It took me a moment to register that one of these graves was much more recent –

*In Loving Memory of
David Edward Crewe Kiffin-Petersen
1942-1997*

*Much loved husband of April
Father of Edwina and Emma*

*Peacefully resting on Nallan Station
in the country that he loved.*

I sat for a while, trying to take it in. In the evening Rob and I drove back to the Masonic Hall, where I improvised an elegy for Dave – ”Time and fevers burn away ...”³⁰

Chapter fourteen: personal stories and testimonials

Il Trovatore- David Kotlowy

My first ruined piano, a small, Mignon upright, arrived by way of a local piano repairer and showroom. I phoned them in early 1998 to inform them that I was on the lookout for an abandoned instrument, and they rang back, a month or so later. They had been given a piano they couldn't repair, and were about to throw out. Of course I'd take it! Unfortunately, between their rush to get rid of it, and my eagerness to accept it, I neglected to ask its history, so I have to say it has come from "an anonymous donor". I happily paid the bemused removalists \$20 to deliver and then place it against the shed, in the shade of a young Eucalyptus Scoparia. It remained there until Easter 2001, when I cleaned the shed to make room for it inside. The piano was now very unstable, as its base and one side had rotted. It was evolving into a Devastated Piano; although it sounded wonderful, I didn't want it falling on me. Plus, it had company; a large, heavy, Morel player piano. This instrument spent many years at the Windsor Hotel (in a north-eastern Adelaide suburb). The custodian of the piano, the daughter of the now-retired publican, did not wish to pay the substantial costs of its restoration (at the above-mentioned repairers) and so offered it to me in June 2000. Old raffle tickets and tobacco littered the interior base. Its flagging bellows valiantly pumped Verdi's 'Il Trovatore' (like a very ill troubadour) and other frayed rolls around the crowded shed until an afternoon with my eager nephews finally muted them. It has now replaced the Mignon beneath the spreading branches of the now established Eucalyptus.

David Kotlowy is one of the most interesting of Australian contemporary composers. He makes extensive use of gamelan in his work, and his recent song-cycle, *Koibitotachi* (The Lovers) for guitar and voice is an extraordinarily beautiful evocation of love, loss, and passion. David and I have worked together on several ruined piano projects, including the creation of *Vault*: a 2012 CD album of pieces for Shakuhachi and Ruined Piano. I vividly remember playing David's Morel and Mignon ruined

pianos in his shed in Unley, a suburb of Adelaide, South Australia.

A selection of e-mails from Martin Seddon

Ross,

I heard your rooted piano music on RTRFM - I loved it and would like to buy a CD if possible. I once bought an old piano from a pub in England. brought it back in a horse box. It had candle holders and a burl veneer. I 'played' it for hours on end. I lived in the country - noone heard so it didn't matter I couldn't play and it wasn't tunable. it made great sounds with your ear pressed to the soundboard.

Best wishes,
Martin

that old piano I had must have been a fine old piece - straight strung (strings didn't cross) made in London end of last century, the Landlord had brought it down from Edinburgh to Lincoln - well it finally made it home again - my ex wife kept on about it and I let her have it, one day a huge pantechnican came down the track and that was the last I saw of it.

I had one more rooted piano - in a back to back in Leeds - my next wife got conned out of 60 quid for it when I was offshore on the rigs - she wanted the kids to learn to play on it. well they didn't but I still had the feeling. It was far too big for that place with the front door opening onto the street but the wife wouldn't let it go for a tenner so it stayed there.

other piano stories? - well going back to when I was at grammar school (very strict) I remember some lads put drawing pins in all the hammers of the school piano before Speech Day. It came out honky tonk and everyone risked death and laughed - the wrath that followed still stays with me.

Anyway thanks very much - the week before when I heard you do that French piece it took me back to a small left bank hotel when my only wish in life was to be Henry Miller - stayed there with my 1st wife still to be – faded chintz and sudden dawning when the concierge called up to see if she was all right it was a discrete whore house.

Could I possible ask for one CD more? perhaps Country of Here Below if I got that right - even better if you choose for me – doesn't have to be same price. hope I can make it to come and see you play live.

martin

Martin Seddon builds horn speakers. His Azurahorns are the ideal means to listen to ruined piano recordings. They accommodate and make splendid those almost subsonic bass notes which palpitate in the range where elephants sing. Martin has also recorded me playing ruined pianos on a variety of reel-to-reel tape recorders. Martin's enthusiasm for my work kept me at it during a long dry spell, and he has a large collection of reel-to-reel tapes that he has catalogued, and which we have begun to explore. I sense that much "new" work may be lying within Martin's vast collection.

Martin creates and records his own ruined piano compositions under the rubric of *Dangerous Amateurs*, which also involves us extemporizing duets, where he plays soprano and alto sax (two 1930s Bueschers on the edge of ruin) and I play ruined piano. Martin's "Birdcage Studio" is named after the birdcage action of the 1920s Steinbach (imported from Turin) that Martin rescued from oblivion at the Wambyn Ruined Piano Sanctuary. Evenings at Birdcage Studio are affectionately called "poker nights."

Milan Adamčiak's Piano - as told by Michal Murin

The Piano from English Embassy

Destiny of the Piano, which duplicates the destiny of its owner: the devastation of the piano of a socially ruined violoncellist and musicologist.

The originally appointed piano for the musical project LEFT HAND OF THE UNIVERSE was the property of the composer, musicologist, performer and important figure of Slovak improvised music, Milan Adamčiak. But his piano had gotten inadvertently into such a state of ruin, that the use of this piano is entirely out of the question. After Adamčiak's moved into his old bachelor's flat, following his second divorce, his piano fell into custody of a Slovak designer, whose name is not worth mentioning. After three years, when we arrived to take the piano, he informed us that the wooden parts no longer exist. His wife added, I am quoting: "We are glad that we managed to incinerate them." I can imagine how the wooden parts defended themselves against the fire, most probably by spitting. Only the armour with strings and the upper resonance plate remained to be found in Adamčiak's flat.

The piano, which in the 1930s belonged to the British Embassy in Bratislava, was acquired by Adamčiak through marriage. Even though there was not sufficient space in his flat, he accepted the offer to realise together with Hugh Davies the bio-acoustic installation for a botanical garden. From the piano's corpus, a tree should grow, and above the keyboard, a rock garden should be planted. They did not succeed to realize this flowerpot, because the armour, while leaning against the wall, fell down on Adamčiak's thighs. Prostrate, Milan struggled to reach the phone, and he called emergency and they saved him from his position beneath the piano. The injury required six weeks of convalescence and he is today here among us along with the parts of his piano.³¹

Stories of Milan Adamčiak

Milan Adamčiak—the Father of Experimental Music in Slovakia—had to be pulled from the pub to play in the first performance of my *Left Hand of the Universe*. Nightmarishly drunk on the shadowy stage, he repeatedly attacked the grand piano with an axe.

When I finally got to meet him, I was shocked to find that his arms were thinner than a child's, and that his body was pitifully emaciated. A blonde beard, completely out of control, grew over his mouth. Yet after that first moment of recoil, I registered only his blue green eyes, showing their pleasure as if a little breeze was blowing across a clear deep lake. He squeezed my left hand and said in uncertain English,

“Good ---good – doing something together.”

Under a West umbrella in central Bratislava we talked for five hours, chasing black coffee with black coffee, with never a beer. He told me many stories, but this is the one I remember best.

“When I was twenty one I strapped my cello to my back and climbed a couple of thousand feet up onto a ridge in the high Tatras. It was just dawn. I unstrapped my cello, sat on a rock and played my lowest “C”—soft and long. And the birds stopped their song – utterly. You could have heard a leaf move.”

The hairs stand up in electrified attention along his arm.

“When I found the courage to play on at last, the birds shyly joined in, so that after a time, I couldn’t say how long, I was a bird.”

I brush the hair on his arm – yes.

Chapter fifteen: Anthony Cormican, ProTools and Ruin

I began working with musician, composer and producer Anthony Cormican in 2000, when he was 26 and I was 54. When I first met Anthony at Loop Studios I told him (rather arrogantly now it feels): “I have three studio rules: an endless supply of coffee; we never skip lunch for any reason; and there are to be no mobile phones in the studio.” He immediately picked up his mobile and threw it across the studio into the rubbish bin, then made us coffees, and after a couple of hours of work we headed out for lunch. And so it continued over the next fourteen years, in a collaboration to die for, one so rich in music and friendship that it is hard to take it all in.

Our work unites the ultra low-tech world of ruined piano with the ultra high tech world of ProTools, with its dazzling resources for digital editing and unheard of realms of digital sound. Anthony’s skills at editing, multi-tracking and mixing have made possible many of my recent pieces. The “digital bonanza” (to use his phrase) is mostly there to preserve the plangy bangy world of the ruined pianos, but from time to time he transforms those pristine resources into splendid, and unheard-of sound realms. On our co-composed CD *Spring in Iraq* (2003, 2011), the digital resources provided by ProTools are, in Anthony’s hands, an important compositional element, and the opening and closing tracks depend on those resources –

the concluding track, almost exclusively.

The compositional process for Spring in Iraq, track 01 “Manhattan” – for upright lounge room piano and ProTools.

I performed “Manhattan”—the 1925 Rodgers & Hart song—on solo piano. Anthony describes the digital process as follows:

This piece consists of the original piano track and five clones existing simultaneously. As the piece progresses, the clone tracks subtly degrade by making use of the inaccuracies of the time and pitch algorithms within ProTools. These artefacts shift more and more into focus, in effect slowly devouring the original piece, leaving only the unwanted digital remnants.

In this way the piano track is gradually, but unpredictably devastated. The piece is quiet, but in its understated way, thanks to the digital process that Anthony devised, conveys something of the horror of 9/11 without dramatics, or loud noise.

The compositional process for Spring in Iraq, track 05 “Shades” – for digital sampler, ProTools, ruined pianos, and accordion. “Shades” is expressive of “terrorist mind”—a study in nihilism. In Anthony’s words:

Shades is a sonic journey through a palette of silences and is a representation of the sound that is present when we listen inwardly. An E-Mu ES1-4000 digital sampler was used as a workhorse for most of the samples in this piece. All the samples and effects were

compiled within ProTools and treated with a variety of degrading plug-ins, in order to silence-ify them.

In *Secret Sandhills* (2002, 2006) Anthony had used ProTools to take “choirs” of decrepit pianos into unheard-of sound worlds, creating, among other effects, a subsonic abyss, as well as “a murmuring warmth.” The latter arose in the following circumstances:

The night before this particular studio session I had played at Pompadour’s, an East Perth restaurant. Too late for the last bus, at midnight, I crossed the railway tracks – an unfamiliar route. Adrift, I stumbled from one dark uneven path to another, till, on the edge of panic, I knew that I was lost, and that I was among aboriginal people talking in low voices around fires in old rusted kerosene tins and cut-down forty-four gallon drums. I experienced this as a murmuring warmth spreading far back in all directions.

The next morning in the studio, Anthony and I were working on *Secret Sandhills* in its earlier (2002) edition. I told Anthony what had happened the night before, and asked him if he could create the effect of “murmuring warmth”. In order not to be breathing down his neck as he worked, I went off to make coffee. When I returned some fifteen minutes later he had

created this remarkable effect – truly “a murmuring warmth spreading far back in all directions”.

Anthony mixed several of my pieces for ruined piano into 5.1 Surround. These works can be heard to advantage on the DVD *Five by Five* (WARPSW11, 2009). They are:

Dominion

Intimate Ruins (a forerunner to *Terra Nullius*)

Secret Sandhills

Morgan’s Country

Five Bells (an early version that I subsequently rejected)

At Tura’s Totally Huge New Music’s “Ruined Piano Convergence” in 2005 Anthony and I presented *Secret Sandhills* in 5.1 Surround. The room at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) was small, but extremely resonant, and the effect of *Secret Sandhills* in surround was overwhelming. In particular, “the subsonic abyss” – an effect created by very slowly dropping the pitch of the piece – was so visceral it felt like what entering hell might feel like.

Anthony and I collaborated on *Songs from the Third Watch* (WARPS W18, 2013). On this CD, in addition to being producer, Anthony was vocalist, arranger and guitarist. I had been impressed by Anthony’s skills as a guitarist, as well as by his arranging skills on my song “You don’t always get what you

want ...” from my *Café Sophia* CD, so I wrote more than a dozen “third watch” songs with lyrics drawn primarily from my own poetry, for Anthony to sing, and to arrange. I also set the poem “May” by John Shaw Nielsen and “Notes on the Death of Noella Slessor” by Kenneth Slessor. Anthony did a beautiful recreation of Billy Strayhorn’s “Lush Life,” keeping the vocal line intact but placing the piece—appropriately in terms of the lyrics—in Paris. His Parisian soundscape is so atmospheric and inventive, that his version of “Lush Life” is worthy to rate, in its own very unique way, with Johnny Hartmann’s exemplary 1963 version with the John Coltrane Quartet.

The album *Songs from the Third Watch* enabled Anthony and I to finally bring home my setting of Kenneth Slessor’s 1937 poem “Five Bells.” “Five Bells” is reckoned by many to be the greatest of all Australian poems. I created a vocal line which hugs the subtle, ever-shifting rhythms of Slessor’s poem. To accompany the vocal line, which Anthony sang with great skill, I made use of bandoneon (my only recorded use of this instrument which can be so acrid and nautical away from its traditional tango context) in combination with ruined and conventional pianos, digitally altered by Anthony to become “drowned pianos.” In the concluding phases of the creation of *Five Bells*, Anthony added string parts – subtly recolouring this dark piece that we developed over more than ten years.

By contrast, during the closing stages of our work on *Songs from the Third Watch*, Anthony and I worked on *High Rise Piano* (WARPS W19, 2013) – an hour-long piece which is a tribute to my first accordion teacher and mentor Harry Bluck (1915-1991). Harry Bluck was a well-known musician, teacher, band-leader, as well as being a musicians’ union secretary in Perth for many years. He gave prodigious energy and encouragement to the training of generations of young musicians, as well as helping to establish, among other institutions, the West Australian Conservatorium of Music, and the Musicians Benevolent Fund. *High Rise Piano* inhabits the sound world of Bon Marché Buildings which housed Harry Bluck’s music teaching studios both before and after the Second World War, through to the 1960s. *High Rise Piano* is inspired by the pandemonium created by students and teachers playing in different rooms on different floors of the buildings, all at the same time. It draws on multiple genres—jazz, 1930s and 40s popular and classical music, as well as free improvisation on ruined piano— as well as nearly the whole history of recording. Along with an opera company rehearsing we had jazz musicians playing swing tunes and ballads, as well as a free-improvising saxophonist, pianist & trombonist—unexpected, perhaps, but historically apt, for surely there must have been musicians in Perth who knew the free jazz that was developing in New York in the late fifties and early sixties.

Harry told the lion's share of the stories, but I contributed a few. Anthony drew these disparate strands together by means of ProTools, resolving the multiple technical issues involved to create work of intimacy, subtlety and warmth. He also played a cameo guitar solo—"Djangling"—that out-Djangos Django!

Ruined pianos also find their home in *High Rise Piano*, evoking history & the elapsing of time, for they carry the past in their ancient sound, and are agents of dream and memory. In this regard *High Rise Piano* is "total piano." The various approaches to the piano – as defined under the WARPS (World Association for Ruined Piano Studies) Taxonomy of Ruin, include: neglected, and out of tune pianos (including veranda pianos); abandoned pianos (including shed pianos); as well as weathered, decayed, ruined and devastated pianos. Pianos answering to these descriptions were recorded and overlayed to represent musical times, heard simultaneously – a kind of "Piano Archeologico." Such a creation would have been inconceivable without Anthony's virtuosity with ProTools.

High Rise Piano, unlike almost all of my other works which have been tortuous in the making, proceeded with unexpected ease, and Anthony and I enjoyed creating the hijinks and many musical jokes littered throughout.

Chapter sixteen: Interweaving the musical and the visual: the work of Antoinette Carrier

Antoinette Carrier's work as a visual artist during the 1990s and 2000s was characterized by a preoccupation with the piano. During those years she was living in Bayswater and Bedford, very near to where I was living, and where I still live. Each of us was creating works around the theme of the piano, without ever knowing of the work of the other. Now that the connection is established we recognize how much there has been in common over the last twenty or so years. Much has followed from this discovery. I have released some of Antoinette's compositions from the 1970s on the CD *Nothing as a Thing* (WARPS W17, 2012). Antoinette created her exhibition PIANO in the Southern Spring of 2013, which included an installation of ruined pianos together with a labyrinth of other ruined and prepared piano ideas woven through her photographs, tapestry and painting.



Ritmuller grand piano in situ at Antoinette Carrier's PIANO exhibition

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Various of these interweavings are explored below. Recently Antoinette established the First Suburban Ruined Piano Sanctuary in her front yard with a white Rittmuller Grand as its centrepiece declining into deeper ruin as it fills with water. She has twelve pianos at her Sanctuary, and a number of them are ruined.

Antoinette Carrier: composer and artist

Antoinette Carrier started learning the piano as a child, and began her creative career as a composer, working with

fragmented and spliced magnetic tape and electronic synthesizers to produce layered work with fragmented sounds and live instruments. She later trained as a tapestry artist, and undertook the many challenges of establishing the practice of community tapestry in Western Australia. She has been responsible for at least six community tapestry projects, and the mentoring of a new generation of tapestry weavers in Western Australia. Tapestries designed by Antoinette Carrier hang in King Edward, Princess Margaret and Armadale Hospitals, the Shire of Kalamunda and the City of Melville.) Antoinette is also a painter (she holds a BA in Visual Art from Edith Cowan University, with a major in textiles and a minor in painting). She also has a Masters of Fine Art from UWA. Antoinette's tapestries reference the piano with wire warps and weft consisting of fragmented music scores. Some of these scores are copies of her own musical compositions.

Antoinette Carrier writes of her experience of the piano

My grandmother's piano was a large, black upright with yellowing keys & a wonderful "out-of-tune-ness" – a blight of pianos in the Tropics created through fluctuations of heat and humidity. Picking out the tunes of nursery rhymes and later more complex pieces, I developed a lifelong love of the instrument. The piano has always had a place in my heart. Our piano witnessed my mother's composer cousin expounding his latest compositions & renditions of jazz favourites after late

night gigs, my mother accompanying herself & her siblings in popular songs of the day & my own struggles with Burgmuller, Czerny and myriad composers.

Composition studies broadened my approach to the instrument. The dissonances of Stravinsky & the Serialists contrasted with Debussy, Mozart & Beethoven. John Cage unveiled my ears to the excitement of prepared pianos & Silence.

In 1992 she wrote:

Caught between cultures, between creative fields. Music & art. 'Bilingual' in both in childhood. Now there are vestiges of both in my life as a result of changes of circumstances. Seeds of creativity lie dormant, sprouting in various guises whenever it suits. I dare not put myself in league with Kandinsky, Klee, Schoenberg or Cage, but this duality has existed from time immemorial. Naïvely I try yet again to marry the two as my creative process remains constant – fragmentation, chance, whimsy.

My later training as a visual artist did not dim my love affair with the piano. As a tapestry artist, it is natural for me to consider the notion of piano as weaving loom. Weaving music scores through piano strings creates a new score & a different

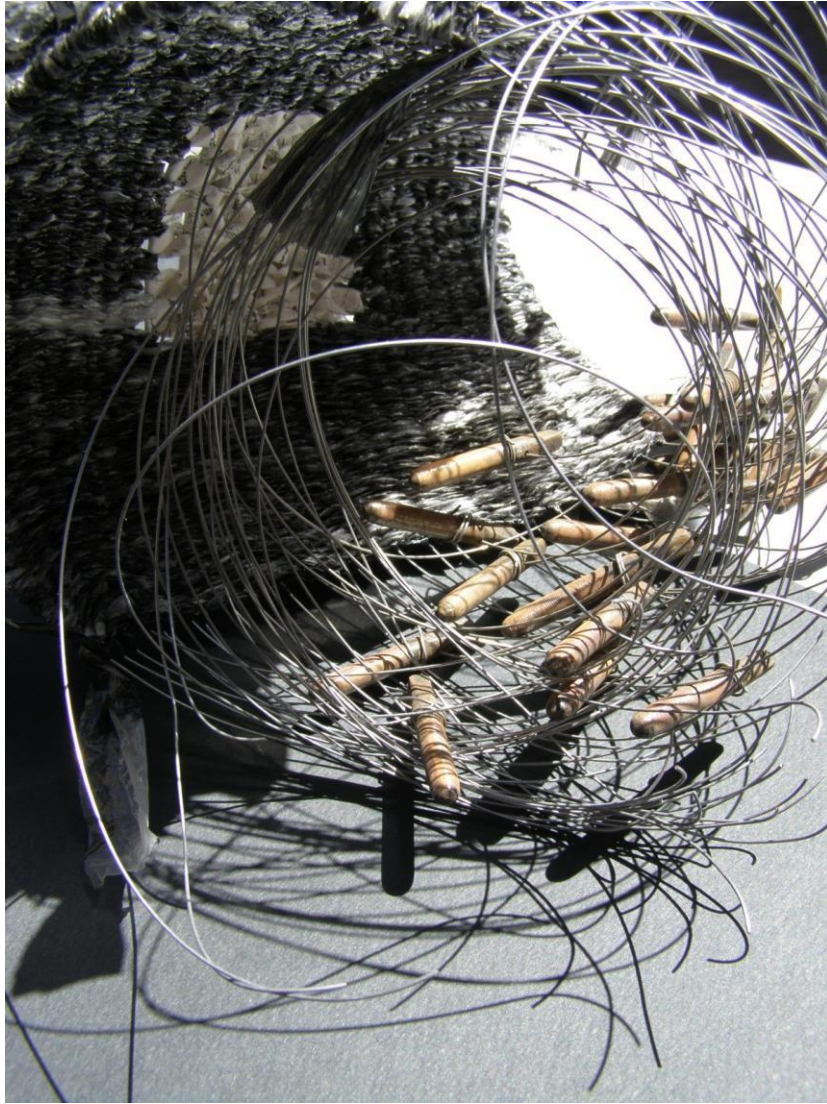
kind of prepared piano. The following seven photographs are by Antoinette Carrier, and are copyright to her.



Woven Piano - piano strings woven with strips of music

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Extending the concept of piano & weaving, loose wires are warped on a loom & woven with strips of copies of my own scores. Off the loom, these tapestries become sculptures due to the natural fall of the wires. With wires coiled around piano pegs, these sculptures are also delicate percussion instruments & three dimensional scores



Eye Music 2 – a tapestry sculpture by Antoinette Carrier

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

Magnetic tape is another music related material that I weave in to pianos. This conduit of master performances of the Great Masters, no longer playable is silent, but visually creates a shiny, crisp weft.



Tapestry woven with string, magnetic tape & piano pieces

Photograph by Antoinette Carrier

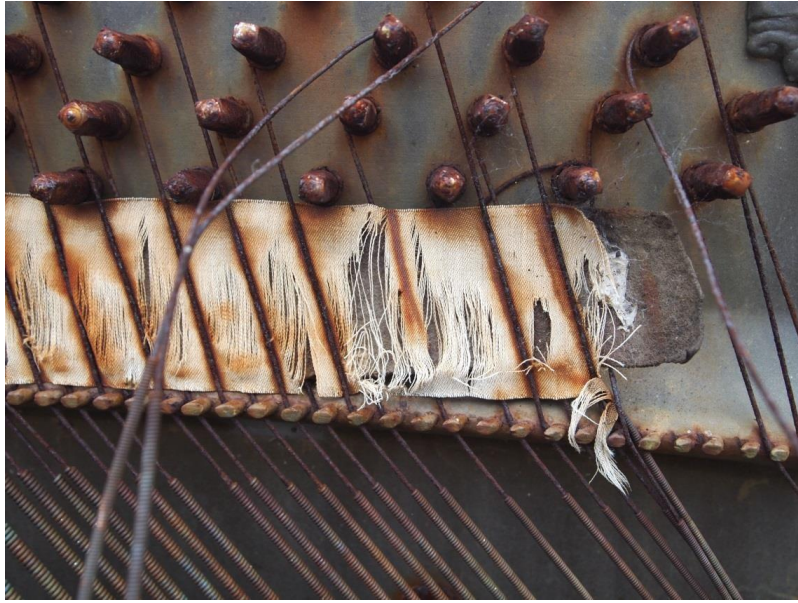
Recording the process of weaving pianos unveils a range of sounds – plucked strings & wires, rustling paper & magnetic tape, knocks, bumps & reverberations of piano strings. These sounds are the basis of new compositions & improvisations, realized using new technology.

Playable ruined pianos are as Australian as vegemite and lamingtons. They decay in the dry climate of the outback and, in the expert hands of Ross Bolleter, expose a wonderful array of improvisations that are sonically unique and exceptional. Visually, ruined pianos are stunning subjects for photography. Their constantly changing states of deterioration provide years

of interest right through to the ultimate condition of crumbled wood, felt and rust.







Images of ruined pianos at Wambyn Piano Sanctuary

Photographs by Antoinette Carrier

(Antoinette Carrier, August 2014)

A creative life as a composer, tapestry artist & painter led Antoinette Carrier to produce a body of work that integrates

those art forms. In PIANO, her exhibition at the Moores Building Fremantle, launched on Friday October 25, 2013, Antoinette used the piano as a loom, weaving into the strings to form sonic as well as visual artworks. The strings of the pianos formed the warp of these tapestry pianos, which were woven with strips of scores and magnetic tape resulting in a series of prepared pianos. There were ten pianos in this installation, and they were formed into a semi-circle. Ross Bolleter, Carl Erbrich and Martin Seddon improvised on these pianos – five of them ruined – at the launch, and they were joined by dozens of people from the audience who created an improvisation which surged and receded over the succeeding hour.

PIANO was a first-of-its-kind exhibition where the piano is simultaneously an artwork and a working musical instrument. It set a precedent for performance on woven pianos in Australia. It also showed the art of tapestry undergoing experimentation, and its boundaries stretched – with the warp becoming a strung piano and the weft, printed music and magnetic tape. Accompanying the woven pianos were a number of photographs taken by the artist of ruined pianos in various states of disintegration at locations such as Wambyn Ruined Piano Sanctuary and Wogarno Sheep Station in Western Australia. These photographic studies, which were printed on canvas, explored aspects of the piano in detail. Seen altogether, these photographs showed the piano in a contrasting light to the

woven/prepared pianos in the installation. PIANO appealed to visual artists, textile artists, students, photographers, musicians, as well as the general public.

The close up photographs of the pianos related visually to a series of “rhythm paintings.” The body develops its own rhythm during the repetitive action of placing brush marks on canvas, and Antoinette Carrier explored that rhythm in this series of works which evoked, in their regularity, the image of piano keys, as well as that of weaving itself. A film of the exhibition has been made by Antoinette. It can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/124091652>

Chapter seventeen: Shakuhachi and Ruined Piano: the creation of the CD Vault.

The shakuhachi and ruined piano are kindred spirits. Just as with a note on the ruined piano, a shakuhachi note is open at the edges and readily admits the world. Creating *Vault* fulfilled a dream of getting these unlikely musical companions to sing their ancient song together. It also fulfilled my desire to create an album with David Kotlowy, a dear friend, and collaborator on a great variety of musical projects—including the synchronous composition *Shadow Bodies* with Carolyn Connors—and a fellow pilgrim on the Zen path since 1992.

More formally, David Kotlowy is a South Australian-based composer, performer and improviser who has studied honkyoku shakuhachi intensively in Japan with Kakizakai Kaoru and Okuda Atsuya. In David's words:

The shakuhachi is an end-blown flute, fashioned in a single piece from the root-end of Madake bamboo. The honkyoku repertoire has long been associated with Japanese Zen through its application as a spiritual tool. All sounds produced on the instrument are included in its music. Three instruments of varying lengths are played on this recording; a 1.8 crafted by Miura (tracks 1, 5, & 10), and two jinashi (unlacquered bore) shakuhachi, a 2.4 and 2.5 (all other tracks). The jinashi instruments were harvested by David and crafted by Okuda in 2009. The natural state of the bore produces hushed, but wonderfully complex, sounds.

The CD *Vault* (a WARPS MyoOn Co-Production, 2012) was recorded October 1-3, 2011 at WARPS Studios, Bayswater, West Australia. The sound engineer was Rob Castiglione. The album was produced by Rob Castiglione, David Kotlowy & Ross Bolleter at New Edition Film and Sound Studios, Fremantle, West Australia, January 20-22 & June 23-24, 2012. *Vault* was mastered by Max Duncan at Adelaide Tape Duplicators, Adelaide, South Australia, August 10, 2012.

In *Vault*, the understanding between David and I is uncanny at times. This intimacy was no doubt enhanced, even created, by the fact that David and I recorded the album immediately following a 7-day *Sesshin*, which is to say, an intensive 7-day Zen meditation retreat.

Chapter eighteen: The Music of Chance: 2nd Edition (2014)

Improvisers:

Rebecca White (violin)

Katherine Corecig (viola)

Melanie Robinson (cello)

Peter Jeavons (double bass)

Ross Bolleter (WARPS kitchen ruined pianos) on track 02.

Conceived and devised by Ross Bolleter. Produced by Anthony Cormican at Crank Recording, Perth, West Australia, 2010-2011, and WARPS Studios, Bayswater and Frontear Studios, Iluka, West Australia, 2013-2014.

In these two Chance Ensembles, four string players improvise to a ruined piano track composed by myself. I enjoy and draw energy from working with younger musicians. Their open-minded and often innovative angle on musical reality fuels my own. While none of the players who collaborated with me on *The Music of Chance* was a professional free-improviser, each of the them brought to the project a freshness of approach often missing in the sometimes hide-bound approach of professional improvisers who have an established musical language which they tend to display, regardless of the musical situation in which they find themselves.

I am grateful to Anthony Cormican who set up the studio protocols for this work, and communicated my guidelines so clearly to the improvisers. Responding in the moment to 30'00" of ruined piano presented considerable challenges, and Anthony's combination of decisiveness and good humour worked its wonders.

Track 01: *Blind Summits: a chance quartet* (30'53")

In the first phase, the string players—one at a time—improvised freely in response to a thirty minute ruined piano track, composed by myself. There was no pre-hearing of the pre-recorded ruined piano track, and the players had no knowledge of how the others were responding. The only guideline, on the understanding that this was a “quartet” – was for each player to leave space. The resulting four recorded string tracks were combined using ProTools to create a “quartet”, comprised of the players' responses to the original ruined piano track. This track remains as a “silent partner”—a yet-to-be-discovered planet exerting its influence on the quartet of “audible” planets.

Track 02 *Shenanigans: a chance decet* (26'26")

In the first recording session in 2011, after the players had responded to the ruined piano track, they were invited to improvise for a further thirty minutes, responding to the original ruined piano track (which wasn't played back) – as best as they

remembered it. This was a challenging, even impossible, task, which in fact freed them up to improvise freely. They really had no option.

The original ruined piano track—which the players didn’t hear at all in this phase of “playing from memory”—was restored to counterpoint the strings, and raise the stakes. The resulting piece was called “Aleatory 2.” That was in 2011. In 2013 I added a further five tracks consisting of recordings of my kitchen and laundry ruined pianos. Each of these recordings was made without me hearing either “Aleatory 2,” or indeed any of the other four ruined piano tracks recorded in those 2013 WARPS studio sessions. Each of the five ruined piano tracks was recorded completely “deaf to past and present circumstance.” The result was, and is, *Shenanigans*.

Music of Chance offered the opportunity for the improvisers to play with increasing entropy—either through the use of increasingly inferior instruments (making this a study in gathering ruin)—or through techniques that increasingly obscure ordinary musical functions. These could include, for instance: wearing gloves ranging from relatively skin-tight, all the way to boxing gloves. The players were also welcome to devise their own techniques of ruin – which several of them did.

Chapter nineteen: Accordion and Ruined Piano

Accordion was my first instrument, and thus I learned the fundamentals of music on it: reading skills, harmonic knowledge, playing by ear, as well as some beginning improvisation. The reader is referred to *Coda: My early musical life in story*, below, for a richer account of my childhood experience of this close-to-the-heart instrument that breathes the breath of the dying.

When I was playing in free-impro groups in the 80s and 90s, everyone wanted to play piano, so I found myself playing accordion in those groups, and enjoying it immensely. I also played a lot of accordion, and also Hammond organ as a session musician, as well as in groups such as The Black Eyed Susans and Martha's Vineyard. I also played accordion in Klezmer and Balkan bands with saxophonist Mark Cain, in particular, and the tangos of Astor Piazzolla, with the Baraaka Trio – which consisted of violinist Anya Tait on violin, Andrew Tait on double bass, and myself on accordion. I think that we were the first ensemble to perform Piazzolla's tangos in Perth.

In 1994 I recorded the CD *The Country of Here Below* (Tall Poppies TP045, Sydney, 1994) and made extensive use of bass accordion, as well as conventional Stradella accordions – in combination with ruined piano. This album features the piece “Labyrinth” which includes excerpts from Jorge Luis Borges's

essay “A New Refutation of Time” (*Nueva refutación del tiempo*), read in Spanish by Lina and Florian Brodalka, and in English by myself. The album opens with “The Complete History of a Minute” for accordion and reader, with me performing my own text. For many years this 1’00” piece—devised to break up the boredom of the radio day—was my calling card.

I improvised on accordion and prepared piano—simultaneously—in my 2004 piece called “Going to war without the French is like going to war without an accordion.” (H. Ross Perot’s comment on Franco-U.S. relations during the second Gulf War.) This piece is for Giulietti free-bass accordion and a piano (with no brand name visible) that I prepared with a sheep’s skull, a crank shaft off a Willy’s Overlander, postcards of heavy haulage road trains, broken glass, gravel, bottle tops, ping-pong balls and gaffer tape. “Going to War ...” was recorded by David Pye on a hand-held minidisk in the Wooden Hall at the monastery in New Norcia, Western Australia. “Going to War ...” was released on *Secret Sandhills and satellites* (Emanem 4128 London, 2006).

The Night Moves on Little Feet: Accordion Lives – Eulogies and Wakes (with Rob Muir) WARPS W03 (1989, 1999)

On the CD *The Night Moves on Little Feet*, which I co-created with sound artist Rob Muir, I conducted interviews with old Italian accordion players around Perth. They frequently sang

or talked about their favourite pieces and this provided many musical opportunities. Simply playing the pieces they mentioned, or accompanying them singing songs that they loved was further enriched with their overlapping stories. Andrew Ford wrote: “Many of the anecdotes and fragments of anecdotes thrown up by Bolleter and Muir's oral history approach to their subjects are humorous, and yet ultimately the CD, like *Crow Country*, is profoundly moving.”³²

The Night Moves on Little Feet consists of three tracks: “The Night Moves on Little Feet” (*dedicated to the memory of Tony Steffanoni*) I composed this piece for my old friend and accordion tuner and repairer Tony Steffanoni. Essentially a eulogy (Tony died in 1988), it draws together stories of his life as well as some of his favourite accordion solos, to which I added composed elements of my own.

“Fisarmonica” (*dedicated to the memory of Peter Piccini Sr.*) The spine of “Fisarmonica” is a live interview with Peter Piccini Sr., a fine accordionist who played, taught, and sold accordions in Perth for many years. His story of how he came to discover the accordion and learn it, and his moving childhood memories are accompanied by comments by other Perth accordionists on topics such as “love of the accordion,” “selling accordions,” “playing the Prelude to Act 1 of Verdi’s *La Traviata* in the depths of a gold mine – (“three-thousand feet

below ground” (Victor Mestichelli))” “playing the accordion at parties,” “playing the accordion for money,” and of course, “memories of the accordion.” I asked Rob Muir to assemble the stories we got from our oral history recordings and to cut together on tape the accordionists’ stories under the thematic headings above. I played all of the music in this work, including accompanying Peter Piccini Sr when he sings a fragment of “Rimpianto” (Toselli’s “Serenata”). I also created and performed my original score for this piece.

“Enigmata” was dedicated to the memory of my first accordion teacher, Harry Bluck. In this piece, I tell stories of growing up in the decayed macho world of accordion in Western Australia in the late 1950s, and early 1960s. “Enigmata” was first performed in a 35’00” “live” form in the Adelaide Festival of 1998 (“The Festival of the Accordion”). The notorious 1998 Festival poster featured the Virgin Mary playing an accordion. The Artistic Director, Robyn Archer, reviewing “Enigmata” for the “Adelaide Advertiser”, wrote – “One of the most moving and exciting events of the Festival.”

On the CD *Songs from the Third Watch* (WARPS W18, 2013) on which I collaborated with vocalist, guitarist and producer Anthony Cormican, I created a setting of Kenneth Slessor’s 1937 poem “Five Bells.” I employed bandoneon — which, like the accordion, is a member of the aerophone family

—in combination with conventional and ruined pianos, digitally altered by Anthony to become “drowned pianos.” Anthony also sang the complex vocal part most beautifully. The completion of “Five Bells”—arguably the first major piece of vocal music to draw on the resources of ruined piano(This was the era before litigation became rife in Western Australia.)—brought me much satisfaction. The process of its creation over many years was a difficult one, and it was Anthony’s enthusiasm for the work, which ensured that it finally came home.

Ruined accordion

I explored ruined accordion on my CD *Gust* (WARPS W15, 2011). Perhaps the most extreme piece—especially in terms of its pitch-bending—is “Elegy for a Dead Kangaroo,” recorded in the presence of its stinking corpse outside the ruined Big Bell Hotel in the Murchison outback in 2011. I recorded this elegy my favourite ruined accordion—a Ficosecco (“dried fig”) accordion made in Castelfidardo, Italy in the 1930s. It sounds entirely beautiful on—and only on—its musette setting, which I’ve employed to record a variety of tangos, waltzes & jazz tunes – especially jazz ballads. I call it my \$300 string section. In this capacity, it features particularly on my CDs *Paradise Café* & *Café Sophia*. The rest of the Ficosecco’s registration is entirely ruined. There are a variety of air leaks which vary in pitch and timbre, as well as considerable out-of-tuneness, not to

speaking of split registers, and notes that don't work at all = or only in a stifled way. I made full use of the Ficosecco's qualities in "Elegy for a Dead Kangaroo."

My Ficosecco was originally owned by tuner-repairer Tony Steffanoni, who worked in a warren of musicians' studios on the top floor of the old Bon Marché Buildings, just north of the Town Hall in Barrack Street, Perth. During the late fifties when I was learning the piano accordion from Harry Bluck, you could hear three or four young accordionists blazing away at the same time in different studios. And there was Tony, his studio reeking of parmigiano and blackboy gum, repairing our accordions in the middle of this cacophony.

I'd visit him to try and wheedle him into letting me play his ancient Ficosecco ("dried fig") accordion. If he'd let me play it, I'd attempt to dazzle him with the 'BelViso' polka. His old miner's fingers couldn't go the slick paths of my eleven year old fingers.

Because he was, as he put it, 'short of words', he'd correct me by grunt and gesture. When that didn't work, he'd show me how by playing a shuddery reel to reel tape of Lunardi, the blind coloratura accordionist from Castelfidardo, playing a Scandalli Super 6 accordion with his left hand, and an electric organ with his right.

Each time the hissing tape ran out, torn flap flapping from the spool, Tony would say, "You can't beat the blind." ³³

Tony painted the reed-blocks of the Ficosecco with a mixture of blackboy gum and varnish to improve the tone, although his claim remains controversial to this day. When you open up the accordions of older players around town you can see Tony's gory trade-mark smeared within. I bought the Ficosecco from Tony in the 1980s for \$300. He told his wife Rina that he was going to use the money to pay for his new dentures, but in fact he used the money to pay his gambling debts.

Accordion also features on my CD *High Rise Piano* (WARPS W19, 2013) – a tribute to Harry Bluck, my first accordion teacher. At one point late in this hour-long piece a patch of plangy ruined piano grows out of a recording of Pietro Diero's "Trieste Overture" that I made at the 6PR radio studios in 1961, when I was fifteen. It lifts my heart to hear its bright high-heartedness, and how it gathers in my youth and middle years.

Chapter twenty: Ruined Piano and the Weave of Poetry and Story

I was once asked in a radio interview “What is the connection between words and music in your work?” I said that the words were what were left after the music stopped. Perhaps the reverse is true as well. I write most of the text that I use in my work, including the lyrics for the songs I compose (my setting of Kenneth Slessor’s great poem *Five Bells* being a highly notable exception.) I have devised a genre, which I call “left hand stories” – that is to say, stories which draw on the shadowy, the fleeting, and the corner-of-the-eye connections between things. Needless to say, left hand stories are an ideal vehicle for conveying a sense of ruin – perhaps especially ruined piano. My recent book *Average Human Heart* opens with a collection of more than sixty of these left hand stories, several only a sentence in length.

Sometimes I write a poem to celebrate a ruined piano. The following poem pays tribute to the Piano on the Hill on Ian Clarke’s Goomalling property: a piano we met earlier as an “absent piano”:

On Piano Hill (Goomalling Western Australia, 2005

the piano announces itself against clouding and unclouding skies

rain darkens it sun bleaches it

wind ploughs the lupins, the piano sways, eases its joints – moans
settles its pedals deeper under grass and earth, entrenches itself against
the gales

this morning I touch its heaped-up keys finger the cold blue
indentations dug by ham left hands punching out the beat, shaking
loose those saturday night gypsy-two-steps, barn dances and Irene's
Last Goodnight

the floor is rubble the fireplace is half way up the wall and the Road to
Gundagai goes under water³⁴

One wide-ranging text that I've set amidst a variety of ruined pianos is my poem *Track Me Down*³⁵, which gets entangled with aboriginality, as much of my ruined piano work does. In *Track Me Down* there are plenty of misunderstandings between the races in what is understood to be a time of dawning reconciliation. This poem gave me the opportunities to add more than 40 tracks of ruined piano improvisation – such a weave of texture and timbre. As a result of these complicated initial conditions, it took more than a decade for *Track Me Down* to reach its final form. See appendix 4 for the text of the poem *Track Me Down*.

Regarding other pieces on *Piano Dreaming*, I used the Jefferson ruined piano from Nallan Sheep Station to provide the backing for Francis Webb's *Morgan's Country*. The dry textures of the ruined Jefferson suited Webb's great poem about the delusional mind states of the bushranger Frank Morgan. Webb

himself suffered from schizophrenia, and the poem shows how well he knew the country of madness.

In Baudelaire's *L'Invitation au Voyage*, I used a piano tuned in just intonation, which gives the necessary plangency to Claudine Lhost's reading of Baudelaire's celebrated poem which she delivered in her best bedroom voice. Because of my neighbour's yapping dogs I was reduced to recording the piano backing track in one minute grabs.

Southpaw consists of left hand stories accompanied by anything from one to four left hands on two lounge room pianos. One of these, a Gulbransen, was for thirty years the house piano at the Fremantle Club. For *Southpaw*, this piano was also tuned in just intonation. The ruined piano from Cue provided a two-handed commentary on the shenanigans. All the pianos used in this piece were played with a somewhat ruined attitude.

Ruined pianos featured in Black Swan Theatre's production of Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (late 1993) where PICA was filled with red dirt and five ruined pianos were stationed at various points throughout. The music for the play consisted of me playing those pianos together with a soundscape created by Rob Muir. I also composed a hymn and devised a rural Anzac Day ceremony where the actors sang a ruined version of Kipling's "Recessional" to a somewhat compromised accompaniment.

Stories in live performance

Over the years I've given many performances where I improvise on ruined pianos, and intersperse these improvisations with stories. Most recently I gave two concerts on 5 ruined Pianos at the Round House, Fremantle, as part of the Fremantle Festival in Spring 2013. I interspersed stories among the ruined piano improvisations.

Video of concert: Antoinette Carrier. Sound recording: Anthony Cormican, assisted by Dave Johnston. <http://vimeo.com/92599609>

Coda: My early musical life in story

What follows is a weave of stories – some of them “left-handed” concerning my early musical life from *High Rise Piano*: a tribute to my first accordion teacher, Harry Bluck. They also provide a coda to this book.

My family was unable to afford a piano, for the world of piano was the world of “the upper-ups.” My mother did washing and ironing for immigrant Greeks making their fortunes from fish. I remember the reek of ammonia in the shark she brought home from their mansions rising on the western hill. My father worked at the Metters factory testing stoves in that fiercely-hot-in-summer iron shed covering acres of the eastern hill. Here and

there a bare bulb shone in the unending hot darkness, or in the freezing dark of midwinter.

So my parents brought me piano accordion for my eleventh birthday. This was as a result of hearing three accordionists on the radio: Tony Marcella, who played Scottish airs, and Harry Bluck, whose 55-60 Show on radio 6PR they listened to each Sunday morning. They also heard Reg Smirke, whose accordion playing they loved.

My mother approached Tony Marcella and Harry Bluck, and asked them what they guaranteed to teach. Tony Marcella said, "I guarantee to teach him one tune in eleven weeks – by ear." My mother replied that that didn't seem good enough for the pounds they were outlaying. She gave me my first lessons, with me crying salty tears into the bellows. After that I was sent, carrying my yellow mother of pearl 48-bass Hohner in its strange pentagonal case to the top floor of Bon Marche Buildings.

After the crash of its grille, sealed in, I rose in the shuddering black iron lift to my 3d floor lesson. I learned the accordion from the gifted young virtuoso Giuseppe de Sondrio. He'd sit at his big black desk, looking out over rusting rooftops to the Town Hall clock, which would finally chime out the end of my lesson. Meanwhile he laboured at his arrangement of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for accordion and

orchestra, filling up the close-printed orchestral score with his bold elegant notation. As I stubbornly tried to play Schubert's "Serenade", *Rhapsody in Blue* piled towards completion on the left side of his desk. No matter how badly I played the serenade, I could never disturb his perfect concentration.

I made unsteady progress. I loved the melodies, the rasp, the breath, the dark, the close to the heart accordion. On the floor below Reg Smirke had his studio. He was a fine accordion player and noted womanizer who blew his right hand off while duck shooting. He learned to play the accordion left handed, upside down. His student wore thick glasses and a hearing aid.

The bellows of my Hohner leaked, so that as I push pulled with all my eleven year old might, it blew the breath of love in my face. Later I taught it to smoke by gluing a burning Rothman's cork-tipped cigarette to its bellows.

On the rainy July morning of my eleventh birthday I was playing my accordion in the darkened lounge room. The doorbell announced sobbing voices. From behind their screen door my parents oh-noed as my aunt and uncle told their story, not quite drowned out by the rain's roaring. I kept playing the tango to show I wasn't listening, and to silence what I could hear too well. My tango protected the entire family. It tried not to hear of the death of my cousin.

Throughout, that big black box of guilt, the piano was offside to my life. I first heard “music in the modern manner,” and I disliked its strut and stride. Even though I was very young, I would mumble to myself “Get off the stride. Someone, put him off his stride. Ah good, he’s lost his stride” – as frequently happened. However, in time and with good fortune I got to hear Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Chopin’s waltzes and nocturnes, as well as Thelonious Monk, (“Melodious thunk”) tonking away on his *Underground* LP – and Lennie Tristano who knew his Bach. During this time, I remember the catastrophic fire at Musgroves Music Store. I stood transfixed in the street below as blazing grand pianos plummeted from the top floor, down through successive smouldering floors and into the inferno at street-level.

When I was school-teaching in the country, I discovered a taste for playing bossa nova on the piano, and taped my Antonio Carlos Jobim “covers” over the school’s recording of *Macbeth*. As a consequence, I found myself playing restaurant piano in a group five nights a week at Perth’s Parmelia Hilton—although there’s hardly anything that I can recall of those five years (“the formative years”)—maybe only that night when a businessman, after rummaging noisily for something in the inside breast pocket of his suit coat, tumbled backwards off his chair, and lay there on the deep red thick pile carpet, his eyes rolled back towards me.

Ray, the guitarist and bandleader, with a good feeling for form said, "Just keep playing." As the waiters rushed in an entirely inadequate shoji to screen off the body, the drunken head wine waiter gave it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Patrons no more than three feet from the body, affecting not to notice, burrowed deeper into their lobster mornays. We played on and on as customers departed, until at last the ambulance men arrived.

As we were leaving the stage the burned-out old bass player, who at seventeen had been a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain when the chop rate was at its highest, remarked, "We really killed'm that set.'

Even today I wonder what was the last tune the businessman heard in this life. Was it "More," or was it "Cabaret"?

I'll never forget the last long look he gave me.

Appendix one: Early ruined piano recordings

After I discovered and recorded my first ruined piano at Nallan Sheep Station in 1987, I released a cassette of that recording: *Ruined Piano at Cue* (1988), which was launched by Tos Mahoney, artistic director of Evos Music at “The SEDJ – a multi-media dreamscape” which went up at PICA on November 19, 1988. *Ruined Piano at Cue* includes my improvisation “Nallan Void” which became the defining piece for the early years of the ruined piano enterprise. Stephen Scott included “Nallan Void” in his collection of works by contemporary Australian composers, released by Foster Reed on his New Albion label as *Austral Voices* (NA028CD, San Francisco, USA, 1990). It then appeared on my CD *Crow Country* which was released by Al Margolis on his Pogus label (New York, P21021-2, 1999) as “Unfinished Business.” *Crow Country* was nominated as one of the 10 best albums of 1999 by Cadence Magazine (New York), and represents the best of my work between 1988 & 1999.

In due course, “Unfinished Business” (formerly “Nallan Void”) served as an inspiration for Andrew Ford’s essay “Things fall apart in the music of Ross Bolleter” which in turn became a chapter in his book *In Defence of Classical Music* (ABC Books, Sydney, 2005).

In 1994, Tall Poppies (Sydney) released my first CD *The Country of Here Below* on which I combined accordion(s) with a variety of ruined pianos, and made use of texts by Borges and by myself. This album concluded the first phase of the ruined piano project.

Appendix 2

The Synchronicity Project: a background to Left Hand of the Universe

During my stint as composer-in-residence at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) from July to November 1989, I conceived the Synchronicity Project: the creation of intuitive pieces by musicians improvising at the same time in different places in Australia, as well as transglobally. These pieces were set up to test for the presence of synchronistic musical events, and can be understood as forerunners to the *Left Hand of the Universe*. As noted above, synchronicity is the meaningful co-incidence of similar or identical thoughts, dreams, or other events occurring at the same time in different places. Combinations of musical events that might be considered synchronistic included melodic, rhythmic or harmonic elements that were in common, simultaneous silences, or moments in the piece where the musicians pick up the threads of a development together—these, beyond the possibility of causation, or mere coincidence. Regardless of whether synchronistic events were present, or not, the project produced several significant radiophonic works. However, *Left Hand of the Universe* was not one of these, because it was too difficult to establish a three-way radio hook-up.

The first of the radiophonic works was *Simulplay 1* (September 14, 1989) in which Jim Denley played flute to a live audience at the Brucknerhaus in the Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, while I played piano & accordion together with work experience student Carol Henning who played plastic trombone in the ABC radio studios, Perth. Mostly, Jim and I couldn't hear each other, but occasionally, in the interactive windows, I would suddenly hear him & try to respond, only to have him disappear almost immediately. I got a vivid sense of the audience at the evening concert in the Brucknerhaus, while, by contrast, the ABC studio at 7.00am was cold, dank, musty & very quiet. As Jim noted, the *Simulplay* pieces were as much a study in space, as much as they were about time.

The second radiophonic work of the PICA Spring was *That Time/Simulplay 2* (November 26, 1989): an intuitive piece for two musicians on opposite sides of a continent, playing at precisely the same time but unable to hear each other, while the radio audience hears both of them. Specifically, Ryszard Ratajczak played double bass in Studio 210 of ABC FM Sydney from 11.00 to 11.27pm on the night of October 9, 1989, while I played a prepared grand piano, as well as a conventional grand piano, in ABC FM's Studio 621, between 9.00pm and 9.27pm on the same night. Ratajczak's performance came via landline, and mine via the University of Western Australia radio station 6UVS FM to two radios in a space at the Perth Institute of

Contemporary Arts (PICA) where an audience of some thirty people had gathered as part of the 1989 Artrage Festival.

Simultaneously, my performance was being sent by satellite to Sydney ABC FM and went live-to-air on ABC FM's program *The Listening Room* in Eastern Australia at 11.00pm, and two hours later, on delay, in Western Australia. Like this, the performance of *That Time (Simulplay 2)* at PICA ("unencumbered by musicians") was unique to that audience and venue. The live "radio performance" was given conceptual power and focus by Rob Muir's installation of two radios spot-lit on plinths covered with black cloth.

As noted above, synchronicity is the meaningful coincidence of similar or identical thoughts, dreams, or other events occurring at the same time in different places. *That Time/Simulplay 2* cast its net for synchronistic events, which abounded. I got young composer Rowan Hammond to analyse the 28'00" recording for musical synchronicities and we produced an article: "Improvising with synchronistic experiences" ³⁶ which was published in NMA (New Music Articles 9 (Melbourne, 1991)). The editor and publisher of NMA, Rainer Linz, used to say that NMA stood for "enema" – "up theirs" – stressing the vigorously anti-establishment thrust of the magazine. *That Time/Simulplay 2* was released on the CD *Crow Country*, Pogus (New York, P21021-2, New York, 1999).

I devised a later radiophonic piece *Pocket Sky* (October 21, 1991). It is a live-to-air piece for six performers linked through six radio stations on two continents. While the radio audience could hear everything throughout, for the most part the players heard less and less of each other as the piece proceeded, and their musical relations became necessarily more intuitive. The musician in the first performance of *Pocket Sky* on October 21, 1991, were:

Jim Denley (flutes and voice) Radio ORF Vienna

Stevie Wishart (hurdy gurdy and violin) BBC London

David Moss (percussion and voice) Radio SFR Berlin

Jon Rose (violin and voice) ABC Sydney

Simone de Haan (trombone and voice) ABC Melbourne,

Ross Bolleter (piano and piano accordion) ABC Perth

The network of interaction between the performers in Europe and Australia was co-ordinated by Andrew McLennan, Roz Cheney and the technical staff of The Listening Room, through ABC FM, Sydney. In negotiating the labyrinth of incoming and outgoing signals they were assisted by a SSL computerized mixer, for which I wrote a “score” which indicated who should play, and when. I had a lot of fun pitting the three “Australians” against the three “Europeans”, as well as

setting up mixed doubles, and various hard-fought singles encounters.

In Perth, *Pocket Sky* was organized by Evos Music as part of the 1991 Artrage Festival at PICA. It went up as a live radio broadcast in the middle of an installation by Rob Muir consisting of a traditional washing line on which were hung radios of varying age, colour and quality. Tony Osborne reader) and I performed *Labyrinth Tango* – a ceremonial prelude to encourage the occurrence of synchronistic events in *Pocket Sky*, and to foreshadow its labyrinth of time themes. The spine of *Labyrinth Tango* was a lecture – which I wrote – and which Tony delivered, on the nature of synchronicity, which I interrupted with shards of tango, Bach inventions, and other less identifiable mayhem on the accordion. Because of the 2 hour time difference between Sydney and Perth, I could perform my part in *Pocket Sky*, and still perform the prelude to its “live-to-air” presentation, with Tony Osborne. *Pocket Sky* is available on WARPS W08, (2004).

To bring this account full circle, *Left Hand of the Universe* (WARPS W02, 1997) combined aspects of the Ruined Piano enterprise with the Synchronicity Project: which is to say that the musicians were all playing ruined instruments, or were in the process of ruining them, even as they were playing synchronously in Slovakia, Colorado and Western Australia.

***Appendix 3: The poetic text for Track Me Down, Piano
Dreaming (2nd edition) (2011) W12***

Track Me Down

1

To find Wilgemia proceed up the fence line
about two-hundred yards, past the ripple-iron
run-through. Watch for the weather-beaten sign
pointing at the ground, with “wilgemiah” scrawled
on it – almost rotted away. Then take a bead on that
low hill that looks like a broken open coal. Bump over
the stones towards it. The approach road is rough but passable.
Watch out for your axle.

Poor kangaroo, in the Dream Time the warrior Moondong
drove a spear through you. With the pain and the shock
you bounded clean over the Weld Range where you died
convulsively scooping a chasm, your blood caking into red ochre,
your bile into coils of yellow and green.

“Wilgemia” – “ochre camp”, “ochre home” – and many
got red from clambering into you, burrowing into your
intestines with digging sticks, bagging the lode.
When their eyes got too drenched by maroon to see,
they looked up and there were the green and the yellow snakes
dreaming, blessing.

They climbed out of your baking mouth
with your precious blood powder in woven bags
and having wiped out their footprints with leaves,
so Moondong, the devil who lives in your bowels,
couldn’t track them, they set out to trade the warm
ten pound ball from hand to hand across the desert
to Uluru, and as far up as Aurukun.

This went on for thousands of years –
till Vanderburg, the wily Dutchman
with the crook back, saw with that clear
uncluttered businessman’s eye, how slow,
and how hard it was to climb down, then
back out of the cave lugging a sack of ochre.

Why not drive an *adit*— a horizontal shaft — through
the hill's bottom, straight into the blood dark bowels,
then trolley the choking oxide straight out into the back
of the sputtering truck.

II

After the break-in, nothing surfaced from the police report —
not even suspects. As the insurance company replaced
the second-hand video, the CD player, and my answer-machine,
I forgot about the break-in, till in cold torrential July, I got a call
from Liz at the Souvlaki Bar, informing me that some of my CDs
had turned up in a backpack left there.

Carla May, your life arrived in my lap in a torn khaki backpack —
two syringes, Vicks Vaporub, your diary written in many hands,
including your poem written in a teenage slope —

*Anger burns through useless tears.
Tired passions grip at self-control.
Moments pass, and each breathes slower,
then sanity surely reappears.*

Drug rehabilitation appointment at Rivervale Clinic.
February 11th — appointment with your probation officer:
Community Corrections Division. Other flint hard facts.

*January 26th — happy ninth birthday kiddo,
me and Maureen are thinking of you. We love you
so very much — in a nine-year-old's script.*

*Luke got back from the Leuwin trip. Went to Freo to meet him,
but he'd left. I'm very pissed off. I had a great surprise. Looked
in Northbridge for him, but he wasn't around. Don't know
if he's gone to his bank, or if he's at home. I'm on the train now,
and I hope he's at home. God, I'm pissed, and I had such wonderful
surprises too.*

When I arrived at the Souvlaki Bar, Liz unzipped the backpack.
There were my dinner-suit trousers, a Grandway white shirt
with a light grease-mark, coasters in the style of Hundertwasser,

various CDs, including my *Piano Dreaming*, and Ivan Zar's *Track me Down*.

Liz told me you'd been in with Maureen, your youngest child, six years old, but already beautiful. Later that winter I heard you were back in the slammer on a count of grievous bodily harm. You'd laid out one of your boyfriends, a fifty year old shearer with a gammy back. You king hit him, kicked him in the balls till he passed out, and finally drove a screwdriver through his hand. I guess Maureen was back in care.

So how should I approach you, if you should appear? A reporter sidling up for an interview? Liz: "Not in here. I don't want any trouble here. Take her next door to the Plaka Shishkebab, and I'll check on you there." My son quite reasonably dissuades me. "Dad, you've got a good story. Why not leave it at that? Why do you need to take it further?"

Why indeed? – and yet I'm sure it was you, imperious in a tight bright-red T-shirt, screaming at a half dozen middle-aged guys surrounding you like retainers as you passed through the barren concrete heart of the Cultural Centre. They were bent over. They were like shaking grass under the gale of your abuse. You were trembling, sweating, trapped in bushfires of irritation, which no amount of beer or red wine could cool or soothe.

I consult the *I Ching* – "Which way to go?" "How to connect with you?" It gives me back "Biting Through" – much concerned with justice, changing to a more compassionate "Corners of the Mouth." There's no way I want to press charges. This isn't some kind of embattled compassion – no way. I'm warmed by serendipity. My eyes are going round with it. My heart leaps about. My head's rolling this way and that, with the pull and power of our story.

I'm carting you around, carrying your torn khaki backpack, full of the raw scraps and shreds of your life in the boot of my ruined Alfa – yearning to meet you, wanting to talk down your fears, to hear and to hold your life. But wouldn't you run, or worse, set Luke your six-foot-four pimp onto me?

I imagine you travelling south to Fremantle to meet him, On the train you doze – great eyefuls of the Indian Ocean going in and out of focus. You awake as the Westrail express rumbles and crashes over the Fremantle traffic bridge, in time

to see the sheep ships bound for Saudi Arabia like office blocks
swaying in the harbour's blue steel waters, cut by two tiny red tugs
heading towards the open ocean like sperm.

Tracking you down. Biting through to bestow care.

III

Midnight, I crossed the railway tracks –
an unfamiliar route. Adrift, I stumbled from
one dark uneven path to another, till, on the edge
of panic, I knew that I was lost, and that I was among
aboriginal people talking in low voices around fires
in old rusted kerosene tins and cut-down
forty-four gallon drums – a murmuring warmth
spreading far back in all directions.

Before sunrise I came to an old park. Its orange lights blared
through the grey piccaninny dawn. Aboriginal people were asleep
on the frozen grass, so tangled up with each other, so tousled,
I couldn't tell women from men, or the living from the dead –
or only when two white men, swaying and staggering, bore
one of them on a stretcher like a battering ram towards
the ambulance that howled – reddening the fig tree
and the road.

IV

I dream I'm sitting at an ancient jarrah table
with aboriginal people. Through smoke
there's an old guy opposite – weathered
survivor of many a brawl – cock-eyed, humorous
in a dignified contained way, wearing a battered
grey-green hat criss-crossed with the slime trails of snails.

On my right is an old woman. She turns towards me –
We look at each other, like children, like lovers, laying
our faces on the table – eyes vertical, noses horizontal.

At the end of the day, asleep on our feet, the design
of the soul cheerful, as before bed, anyone tracking us down
would have no trouble finding us—kimonos, amulets
scattered over the darkened plateau—the unmarked grave pushing
its splintered elbow up.

Appendix 4: Ross Bolleter's launch speech for Antoinette Carrier's exhibition PIANO, October 25, 2013

Welcome to Antoinette Carrier's PIANO Exhibition.

Antoinette Carrier is a consummate visual artist whose work spans many genres. Antoinette was trained as a composer in the 1970s. She was first woman composer of Asian descent in Australia. Her work won many prizes, including the J. Hodges prize for Composition and most prizes in the Young Composers competition adjudicated by Don Banks which she won under the name "Fred Fiddlesticks." Such was the state of the Australian contemporary music scene in the 1970s.

This exhibition has a conundrum at its heart. Is it visual art? Is it music? It angles beautifully between those forms. We feel the presence of music so strongly in the visual works: the wonderful rhythm paintings, the patterning of the tapestries, the shawls of knitted cassette tape interwoven to envelope a piano.

Antoinette is a superb tapestry artist, and this is tapestry as it has not been seen or conceived before. She uses the piano as a loom, and weaves magnetic tape and sheet music between the strings. As a musician it is moving to recognize the music: Strauss waltzes, Melody in F by Rubinstein. These weavings change the sounds of the pianos. They become "prepared" pianos, a strategy devised by John Cage, who in 1940 pioneered the prepared piano with his piece *Bacchanale* when he wedged screws, nuts, small coins and rubber stripping between the strings of the piano, thereby completely altering the pitch, timbre and dynamic of the instrument and in the process, creating his own percussion orchestra.*Antoinette extends the ideas of prepared piano in unheard of directions in PIANO.

Her CD *Nothing as a Thing*, released on the WARPS label in 2012 as WARPS W17, features her compositions from the 1970s. Its title and the text of "Mushroom Music" (track 01) is

taken from Cage's "45' for a Speaker" which is described in his book *Silence* (M.I.T., 1961).

Antoinette Carrier's work is cyclic: tapestry becoming music becoming tapestry. It is thought-provoking and immensely enjoyable. It proceeds from and thrives on a great sense of fun. I hope that you will enjoy it. I now declare Antoinette Carrier's exhibition PIANO launched!

Appendix Five: Zen and Ruined Piano

This brief reflection has its origins in a talk I gave at the Sydney Zendo in the Winter of 1992. I asked Nathan Crotty to record a cassette of widely-spaced, very long bass notes played on a Jackson Ruined Piano to accompany my talk. Each time that one of these low explosions occurred I stopped speaking until it had died away. After a while a thunderstorm came up so that no one, myself included, could tell what was storm, what was piano, what was my beating heart.

The reader may wish to imagine these low booming interruptions to the text that follows, but in any case, the fantasias and arias of boiling kettles, car alarms, and protesting children will do just as well.

As the sound board of the piano opens wider to show the cloudless sky, and a dusty wisteria clammers over its broken hammers outside the machine shed on an upland farm overlooking the Southern Ocean, I remember the ancient koan of the monk who asked Zhaozhou, “What is Zhaozhou?” (Zhaozhou being the name of the teacher and the town where he lived). Zhaozhou answered “East Gate, West Gate, North Gate South Gate,” and the undefended piano that is no longer a piano is so open at the edges that everything and everyone can come through, can come in. And they do – yapping sheep-dogs, trucks revving up, sheep-station owners complaining about the drought, roosters crowing in some out-of-joint time, all singing the 108,000 tongues of the Buddha through the empty dilapidated windows of one reverberating bass string of the Ruined Piano.

Notes

¹ Ross Bolleter, *All the Iron Night* (Smokebush Press, Mt Hawthorn, Western Australia, 2004), p.34

² Hear “Unfinished Business” – track 01 on *Crow Country* (Pogus Productions, 7 6034-21021-2, New York, 1999)

³ For members of WARPS and their bios, see my ruined piano website: www.warpsmusic.com

⁴ Oscar Comettant [1890], *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines. A Frenchman's view of Australia in 1888*, trans. Judith Armstrong (Adelaide: Rigby, 1980), pp. 136-137

⁵ Kerry Goldsworthy, “14th of October 1843,” in Carmel Bird, ed., *Red Hot Notes* (Brisbane, Queensland UP, 1996), p. 89.

⁶ Ross Bolleter, *Piano Hill* (Fremantle Press, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2009), p.38

⁷ Ross Bolleter, *Average Human Heart*, (unpublished manuscript of poems and left hand stories), p.13

⁸ Kerry Goldsworthy, *ibid*

⁹ Ross Bolleter, *All the Iron Night*, (Smokebush Press, Mt Hawthorn, Western Australia, 2004), p.37

¹⁰ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.33 (the poem, rather than the prose version in this book)

¹¹ Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: a Social History*, Dover Publications, New York, 1954, p.88

¹² See Jason Cotter's essay, “Sanctuary of Ruin: Touring West Australia's Piano Graveyard” at <http://www.terrain.org/articles/27/cotter.htm>. An account of the Ruined Piano Sanctuary at Kim Hack's and Penny Mossop's Wambyn Olive Farm

¹³ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, pp. 44-45

¹⁴ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.42

¹⁵ “*From Zanzibar to Ivoryton*” - Ivoryton Library Association ivoryton.com/ivoryand.htm

¹⁶ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.10

¹⁷ Bolleter, *All the Iron Night*, p.38

¹⁸ Bolleter, *Average Human Heart*, p.19

¹⁹ Stephen Scott included my “Nallan Void” in his collection of works by contemporary Australian composers, released by Foster Reed on his New Albion label as *Austral Voices* (NA028CD, San Francisco, USA, 1990).

²⁰ Liner notes to the CD *Left Hand of the Universe* (1997) WARPS W02

²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid*

²³ Ed Baxter, *Broken Musics*, The Wire Magazine, March 2000.

²⁴ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.49

²⁵ Susan Murphy, liner notes to *Left Hand of the Universe*

²⁶ Ed Baxter, *ibid*

²⁷ See Geoffrey with James Bardon, *PAPUNYA - A Place Made After the Story. The Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement* (The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2004)

²⁸ Greg Goodman (‘The Beak Doctor’) is a free improvising pianist from Berkeley, California. Back in 1982, after he had performed in the Festival of Perth, he came to my home, drank a gallon of coffee and turned it on for all comers through the long summer afternoon. He played the blues for my children, and encouraged me to get beyond the occasional duck dive in my improvisations. On the matter of the descent into the maelstrom he said, “It helps us all to breathe a little more deeply.” On Greg’s Construction of Ruins, see www.oart.org/history/Improv/Goodman.html

²⁹ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.55

³⁰ “Time and fevers burn away ...” can be heard on my *Frontier Piano* (2014) WARPS W 20

³¹ This story was published in:

PIANO HOTEL - CD-ROM, ed. by Michal Murin for Society for Non-conventional Music - SNEH, No SNEH CD 002, 1999, Bratislava,

Slovakia. web pages of sound art exhibition PIANO HOTEL:
<http://www.radioart.sk/doc/soundoff97/1>

³² Review by Andrew Ford in: “ABC 24 Hours”, August 1999

³³ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.49

³⁴ Bolleter, *Piano Hill*, p.41

³⁵ Bolleter, *Average Human Heart*, p.40. See also Appendix 3 in this current work for the text of “Track Me Down.”

³⁶ See the article by Ross Bolleter and Rowan Hammond: “Improvising with synchronistic experiences” in NMA 9 (New Music Articles 9) (Melbourne, 1991).

Discography: CDs

Night Kitchen, Emanem 5008 (2002-9), London, 2010.
Secret Sandhills and satellites, Emanem 4128 London, 2006
Crow Country, Pogus, New York, P21021-2, 2000
The Country of Here Below, Tall Poppies TP045, Sydney, 1994

Pianos lost to time (2016) – WARPS W23
While my coffee cools (2015) –W22
Music of Chance (2nd edition) (2014) W 21
Frontier Piano (2014) WARPS W20
High Rise Piano (2013) WARPS W19
Ross Bolleter & Anthony Cormican, *Songs from the Third Watch* (2013) W18
Antoinette Carrier *Nothing as a Thing* (2012) W17
Music of Chance (1st edition) (2011) W16
Gust (2011) W15
Solitary Light (2011) W14
Ross Bolleter & Anthony Cormican *Spring in Iraq* (2nd edition) (2011) W13
Piano Dreaming (2nd edition) (2011) W12
Five by Five (2009) W11 DVD of 5 pieces in 5.1 Surround.
Intimate Ruins (2009) W10
Pocket Sky (2004, 1991) W08
Satellites (2002) W06
Secret Sandhills (1st edition, 2002) W05
The Night Moves on Little Feet: Accordion Lives – Eulogies and Wakes
(with Rob Muir) W03 (1989, 1999)
Left Hand of the Universe (1997) W02
Ross Bolleter & Anthony Cormican *Concertino Latino* (2012) Sunset Ostrich SO3
(Includes *Alone Together* by Bolleter, performed by Tos Mahoney & Ross Bolleter)
Café Sophia Sunset Ostrich S02, 2008
Paradise Café Sunset Ostrich S01, 2004

Collaborations & Compilations

“Hymn to Ruin” composed for Margaret Leng Tan & performed by her on her CD
She Herself Alone, Mode Records 221, New York, 2010
“Nallan Void” was released the CD *Austral Voices* (New Albion NA028CD , San Francisco, 1990.)

Works on Cassette – a selection

Jinx (with Ryszard Ratajczak) 1990
Jamais (with Rob Muir) 1989
Sky Burial (with Nathan Crotty) (wasit music, wmr 01) (1989)
Ruined Piano at Cue (1988)
Openings (with Tos Mahoney) *Alone Together* 1982, 1986
Temple of Joyous Bones 1984
Open Sky (with Tos Mahoney) 1983

Books by Ross Bolleter

The Five Ranks of Dongshan: Keys to Enlightenment (Wisdom Books, Massachusetts, May, 2014).

Piano Hill (Fremantle Press, 2008) Includes poems inspired by pianos, ruined and otherwise.

All the Iron Night (Smokebush Press, 2004) Poems of love, sex and death.

Ruin (2013) Text for Antoinette Carrier's booklet of photographs of Ruined Pianos. We are planning a more extensive book exploring the themes of ruin through photographs and text.

Track me Down (2016): Selected Poems

Average Human Heart (2016): sixty odd left hand stories

Fostering Creative Improvisation at the Keyboard: a handbook for Piano Teachers (1979)

Writings on Ruined Piano

Andrew Ford, "Things fall apart in the music of Ross Bolleter," in *A Defence of Classical Music* (ABC Books, 2005) pp. 143-151

Interview de Ross Bolleter par Guillaume Belhomme (2007) – Le son du grisly.

grisly.canalblog.com/archives/2007/01/15/5825300.html

Andy Hamilton, Bolleter, Ross, "Rescue Operation," about the Australian pianist who specializes in playing "ruined pianos," "International Piano" Mar/Apr 2011, p.54-57.

Jason Cotter's essay, "Sanctuary of Ruin: Touring West Australia's Piano Graveyard" at <http://www.terrain.org/articles/27/cotter.htm>. An account of the Ruined Piano Sanctuary at Kim Hack's and Penny Mossop's Wambyn Olive Farm

Film and video

An Invitation to Ruin – a film on my work with ruined pianos by Rob Castiglione. Premiered at the Totally Huge New Music Festival in May 2015 to a large and enthusiastic audience.

Ross Bolleter performs on five ruined pianos and tells stories at the Round House–<http://vimeo.com/92599609>

This video by Antoinette Carrier is an edited version of Ross Bolleter's two concerts on 5 ruined Pianos at the Round House, Fremantle, as part of the Fremantle Festival on October 26 & 27, 2013. West Australian stories which have as their theme the piano – ruined or otherwise –are interspersed with ruined piano improvisations.

Filmed by Antoinette Carrier.

Sound recording: Anthony Cormican

Edited: Antoinette Carrier

Website for ruined activity

www.warpsmusic.com

Photographic credits for The Well Weathered Piano

Cover photo by Antoinette Carrier.

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