Publishing an archive: a meta-narrative of (be)longing


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Abstract

Tura New Music is one of a handful of arts organisations in Western Australia that has been contributing to that State’s arts environment for over 25 years, beginning in 1987. The organisation is headed by its charismatic Artistic Director and CEO, Tos Mahoney, whose life’s work in this field is encapsulated in Tura New Music, and in its quarter-century-old archive. This paper addresses Mahoney’s experiences of, and reflections upon, the processes of digitising Tura’s archive and positioning it in readiness for public access. When Jacques Derrida deconstructed the notion of the archive (1996), he said that it was akin to memory, that it was a trustworthy source of identity. But it is more than an assemblage of things past, it anticipates a future to come. The archive is imagined and established for the researchers and users of the future, who will discover within it items that inform them about the coming into the present of their own time. The archive looks back upon history to bring a future identity into being. In a real sense, it is a machine for producing meaning, a cybernetic resource because it can (and should) take on its shape in the eyes and minds of its different users, assuming different identities according to their needs. Archives produce identity through the different arrangements and connections between their elements, as seen and experienced by the people who rely upon them. But what of the person/organisation whose vision initially gave the archive form? What questions and issues arise when contemplating sharing a life’s work and passion with people who might simply construct it as ‘a resource’, with all kinds of caveats and concerns around accessibility, technical performance etc., and without any necessary appreciation of the history which would have led to the archive’s existence. An acknowledged component of the construction of an archive, as opposed to a collection, is the imposition of order and operating principles according to the requirements of specific repositories. These matters are generally delegated to professional archivists, but the (re)construction of the collection as the archive is the beginning of a process of loss for the collector, as other actors reposition and remodel key materials in ways which make them searchable within a hierarchical or networked frame. Similarly, according to the archivist’s organising principles, various materials will necessarily be included and excluded from the archive as it is developed. As these professional decisions are made so the archive may feel less as if it belongs to its creator and the longing to protect and preserve the originating vision may grow stronger. This paper is based on the guided reflections of Artistic Director and CEO of Tura New Music, Tos Mahoney’s experience of progressing the priceless Tura New Music archive upon a journey from private collection to public resource. It considers issues arising, including some which remain unresolved. It examines the impetus to return to an artistic community the heritage that belongs to it, and which arises from it, while at the same time acknowledging a longing to retain the original vision that made the collection possible.

Keywords: Collection, Archive, New music, Community of practice, Cultural entrepreneur
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Background and introduction

This paper takes the form of a “guided reflection” interview, in which “guided reflection is a process of self-enquiry to enable the practitioner to realise desirable and effective practice within a reflexive spiral of being and becoming […] reflecting upon our own wisdom as practitioners, giving voice to our personal knowing, ideas and opinions” (Johns 2002: 3). More usually applied to the “caring-healing tradition of health care” (Johns 2002: 3), the process can be used to support a deepening engagement with other aspects of life and experience. In his 2010 second edition, which also went from being an authored text to an edited one thus acknowledging the agency of his guided ‘reflectors’, Johns now positions guided reflection within narrative traditions and prefers to talk about “a journey of being and becoming, not as a process, as if it were being manufactured” (2010: digital).

In the case of this paper, the guided reflection occurred within the context of an interview addressing the experience of an individual artist, collector and cultural entrepreneur, Tos Mahoney. A co-author, Mahoney’s journey has taken him from foundational work as a musician, practitioner and performer of avant garde music and sound art, emerging from a community of practice in Western Australia, to create an organisation – Tura New Music – that brought into being an extraordinary collection which has become the foundation of the Western Australian New Music Archive (WANMA). WANMA is a digital archive of Western Australian new music and a spur to the creation, performance, archiving and accessing of established and new work (see also Hope et al. 2013a; Hope et al. 2013b). The creation of the archive is part of a project involving Edith Cowan University, the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Grant program, and a range of industry partners comprising Tura New Music, ABC Classic FM, the State Library of Western Australia and the National Library of Australia.

Definitions of terms used in this paper
Five terms have been identified as key concepts which provide the foundation for the case study (Yin 2009) examined in this paper. These are: new music, the archive, the collection, community of practice and cultural entrepreneur. The conceptual frameworks underpinning this work are drawn from scholarship in the creative industries and new media arts; and from narratology, case study methods and qualitative research.

‘New music’ is a term used by the Australian Music Centre, among others, to refer to exploratory, experimental music and sound art. It has been defined as “composition in sound […] in real-time or by means of prolonged elaboration and definition including the following: Notated composition; Electroacoustic music; Improvised music, including contemporary jazz; Electronica; Sound art; Installation sound; Multimedia, web and film sound and music; Related genres and techniques” (Australian Music Centre, n.d.). With WANMA, the new music involved will comprise (since this is a work in progress) a curated archive of new music associated with compositions emerging from, or geographically based in, a community of practice located in Western Australia.

Derrida’s (1996) deconstruction of the notion of the archive compares it to memory, in that it constitutes a trustworthy source of identity. According to this perspective, the archive is more than a collection of goods or objects, since it anticipates a future to come. It is imagined, created and established for researchers and other users in the future, who will discover within it items that inform them about the coming into the present of the users’ own time. Archives produce identity through the different arrangements and connections between their elements, as experienced and constructed by the people who rely upon them. In looking back upon history to bring a future identity into being, the archive is constructed as a machine for producing meaning. Effectively, it constitutes a cybernetic resource because it can (and should) take on its shape in the eyes and minds of its different users, assuming different identities according to their needs.

A collection differs from an archive in that a collector might have a range of different motivations in establishing their collection, whereas an archive is created with a user in mind. Other than collecting for enjoyment, and opportunistic or accidental collecting, some collections emerge from a desire to cement the reputation, of self or others (Belk 1995: 68, McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004: 93). The act of collection can be constructed as
arising out of practices of consuming events and experiences (Belk 1995), but a collector has to be discerning in the items they collect or retain (Belk 1995: 66–67), and there is consequently a sense of selection. In particular, collectors are often motivated by a desire to create a ‘complete’ collection, and to ensure that it is of the best possible quality (Belk 1995: 66, 90). A collection will often require some degree of searching with the aim of making the set complete (Belk 1995: 67), whereas the construction of an archive creates a future-directed activity and may imply the option of continuing growth through use.

A group of people who are “informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” may constitute ‘a community of practice’, note Wenger and Snyder (2000: 139), adding that people in such communities “share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems” (2000: 140). In the case of WANMA, contributors share a passion for creating and/or consuming new music. Both core and peripheral members can be located within a community of practice, with Lave and Wenger suggesting the important contribution of “legitimate peripheral participation”. They note (1991: 36) that “the ambiguous potentialities of legitimate peripherality […] provide] access to a nexus of relations otherwise not perceived as connected,” and suggest that this dynamic raises issues of “the place of knowledge in practice, the importance of access to the learning potential of given settings, the uses of language in learning-in-practice and the way in which knowledge takes on value for the learner in the fashioning of identities of full participation” (Lave & Wenger 1991: 42–3).

‘Cultural entrepreneurs’ have been defined as “those directly involved in the production of goods and services: products whose principal value is symbolic, derived from their function as carriers of meaning – in images, symbols, signs and sounds” (Banks et al. 2000: 453). Banks et al. note that cultural entrepreneurs use the city “and especially the city centre and city fringe” as a “complex set of resources” to create economic and symbolic goods, services and value through the ways in which they utilise “their everyday working lives” and their “pursuit of leisure and pleasure” (Banks et al. 2000: 453).

The paper goes on to address methodological issues and the role of WANMA as reflective of a meta-narrative of both longing and belonging.
Method and approach

Data underlying this paper were originally collected in the form of an interview, structured as a guided reflection. A range of key terms were identified as having particular relevance for the narrative arising out of the reflection, and these have been defined above. Key terms indicate the conceptual frameworks and discourses which provide appropriate underpinnings for the case study as a whole. The emerging draft was reviewed by the authors for accuracy and completeness within the context of the project as it currently exists, and the confines of a refereed paper. Because of the joint nature of this process, there are no passages of direct quotation from any one of the participants, even though the ‘primary voice’ is that which expresses the perspective of Tos Mahoney, speaking as cultural entrepreneur, Artistic Director and CEO of Tura New Music. The layer of meta-narrative – of the narrative about the narrative, and what this says about longing and belonging – was added as a discussion. The draft was submitted for peer review and the finished paper also responds to this input.

Although this paper particularly focuses upon the perspective of the collector and the cultural entrepreneur, in celebrating the continuing work of Mahoney and Tura New Music it also captures the perspectives of: the archivist; the practitioner within the broader community of practice of Western Australian new music production; and the qualitative researcher whose work includes discourse analysis and narrative theory. It is written as a narrative case study, rather than as a sequence of verbatim phrases. This is partly to assist in the work of constructing a meta-narrative, and partly to reflect the collaborative nature of the retelling of this version of events while creating a sense of a whole picture.

The inception of Tura and the development of new music in Western Australia

Tura New Music was formed in 1987, but it has a pre-history in Mahoney’s role as an artist/practitioner and member of a broad collective of people whose practice was doing avante garde, innovative sound composition and ‘music’. He was one of a group of people who played and created together and found that there wasn’t really any outlet for
the artistic work in which they were collaborating in terms of sound production / music performance. This sense of a lack of opportunity for expression and recognition led to Mahoney, in his late teens, organising concerts featuring the kinds of music in which he was a collaborating artist. These performances generally seemed to fit better within the context of the art gallery than conventional music venues. Their success led in 1984 to the Perth Festival of Improvised Music, and in 1985 to the Fremantle new music series. Through the interest of academic connections in the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), and the University of Western Australia, Mahoney become involved in discussions around new music practice in Western Australia (WA). There was little in the way of funds and resources but a small group of people set up a Board and established Tura New Music as a limited company with a remit to produce this kind of music. It was always intended that the focus of Tura would be a broad conception of practice: inclusive and evolving. Some critics have identified this as a potential weakness, and accused Tura of aiming to be all things to all people. As a teenager, Mahoney loved gathering people together ‘with meaning’: above and beyond a casual collaboration and with a driving purpose. Sound and music were always the focus, and his fascination was with their vibrant capacity to transport the practitioner and the audience in to new spiritual, academic, intellectual, complex and sophisticated levels. These events led to shared experiences and opened up new possibilities. Asked ‘Has it always been easy?’ Mahoney’s response is: ‘Has it ever been easy?!?’ Quite to the contrary, working in the new music arena has always constituted a struggle. It has led to absolutely amazing events and experiences but it is always a battle to find the resources to achieve what Tura was set up to do. New music is conceived by many arts funding organisations as ‘even more esoteric’ than the extreme peripheries of the art sector. Even so, while it has always been difficult there have also always been a significant number of people who have lessened the struggle, supporting the cause. This has been especially true over the past ten years where Tura has expanded its activities with a growing emphasis upon, and engagement with, work in remote and regional WA. The Tura New Music collection was a deliberate strategy from the early days of the Perth Festival of Improvised Music (1984) onwards, before Tura came into existence as an organisation. Mahoney was acutely aware that improvisation doesn’t get repeated, and
that much new music production is grounded in improvisation and in spontaneous composition. Whereas some people might ask ‘Why document it?’, the answer lies in the desire to distill the essence of those moments where the practitioner and audience are transported, trying to capture this for the future, and for those who couldn’t be there. It is when Mahoney thinks of the things that Tura was unable to document that he feels torn with regret: the events and performances lost along the way. He feels so strongly about that. It is one of the things that most leads to his sense of longing when contemplating the Tura collection and the archive that is based upon it.

Given that the motivation has always been to bring people together, the new digital milieu means that this becomes practicable virtually, as well as physically. It introduces an expanded horizon of inclusion. The technology allows such work to be readily disseminated, thus providing even more reasons why it is important and why Tura should do it. Further, the need remains pressing, including the need implicit in the tricky mire of definition.

When Tura first started there wasn’t an understanding of the art form which is now termed new music. There was ‘old music’, which gets played reasonably regularly to established audiences, and then there is the ghetto, which can be construed as the ‘new music’. The construction of new music might be seen as a heroic activity, the making of new work on a daily basis, but it’s not what orchestras play. It’s not establishment. This is one reason why it is so important that the establishment recognises the work. Tura and new music have a powerful ally in ABC Classic FM, but in the current economic and political climate even the artistic establishment is under threat. As an organisation supporting new music and its creators, TURA provided advocacy, a platform for performance and a means for documenting the outputs. But it also had a value beyond this since its existence pointed to a body of work which had been generally invisible and unrecognised prior to Tura’s existence.

This is not to say that Perth can claim to be a hot-spot of new music. Mahoney has recently taken leave to gain ‘objectivity’ and to look at what’s happening elsewhere. There’s plenty of new music creation in Sydney and Melbourne and elsewhere on Australia’s eastern seaboard. There are practitioners everywhere, including Perth people who got their start through Tura. Arguably, the level of activity is greater in Sydney and
Melbourne, partly reflecting the geographical location of the ABC, major festivals and other structures. But those states desperately need their own Tura-like institutions.

In WA, if Tura hadn’t happened, there would be a lot less new music being made and it wouldn’t be as salient. Practitioners have developed an individual language with its own voice which blurs the boundaries between practice, collaboration and creation; offering programs which mix things up, that make new connections between disparate perspectives and get people together, working collaboratively in ways that don’t necessarily happen elsewhere. In other states, a great deal may be happening in terms of practitioner outputs, but Tura’s success has been in creating awareness and in creating and collaborating with new audiences.

Some of the most important and hugely successful developing relationships are those with regional and remote areas and organisations. Kimberley and Pilbara outcomes include a range of highlights, such as the placing of artists in residence in remote Aboriginal communities, working with Indigenous artists and communities via arts centres in those areas. Associate Professor Philip Samartzis from RMIT is a key component of this work in remote and regional WA, supported by Tura. His work responds in a collaborative context to the work of senior Indigenous artists who include him in fieldtrips, enabling him to record soundscapes which can provide a contextual surround for their work. There is no narrative as such, but there is a story and place, and both are focused within the atmospheric sounds and the music that the landscape inspires and creates. Technically, the practice of new music making and of senior Indigenous artists is miles apart, and yet there is great understanding between them.

Tura’s remote and regional program has gathered momentum over the past decade and is a very powerful success. The Indigenous community has a sonic documentation/artwork of their environment, but their practice is also reaching out across nations and cultures, touring around the world: the senior artists’ paintings plus the sound installation. This could not have been imagined even ten years ago. It is almost an obsession for Mahoney: the celebration and showcasing of Indigenous culture per se, including Indigenous music, plus contemporary western sound practice. It facilitates new understandings of belonging. Mahoney has no concerns around making the collection public, or about sharing it with people and audiences who may not understand (or appreciate) it. When the Tura
collection was first digitised, to form the basis for the archive that will emerge into WANMA, his basic feeling was one of huge relief. While the years went on, 25 years of archives, 26, and the vaults got bigger, there was a continuously present anxiety that the Tura collection might get lost, or disappear. This is no longer possible. The digitised collection is now stored in three separate locations including one in a bank. While quantities of material remain that need to be updated, and recalibrated, and there is a huge amount left to do, Mahoney has faith that Tura’s work, and WA’s new music heritage, is recoverable and useable.

This milestone gives rise to the basic question ‘What comes next?’ WANMA is part of the answer to that. It was great that the grant proposal was acceptable and funded, and that a range of partnerships are in place that include Tura. That’s all a fantastic response to the primary driver: to have documented new music works accessible to as many people as possible. That achievement is so much greater than any remaining questions to be addressed and issues to be resolved around such questions as ‘What are the legal and moral obligations of the archive to the creators, performers and documenters/recording artists of the archive’s artworks?’ Mahoney believes that niggles about these legal and moral issues will be sorted as part of the research underpinning the creation of the archive, and making it accessible. He is confident that the community of practice supporting Tura and its audience appreciate that everything had been done for the greater good, and with the promotion of their art form at centre stage. In his experience, most artists jump at the opportunity to see their work recorded and made available to the public, working with Tura to enable it to do more. Mahoney’s view is that the community does not perceive the archive as a ‘commercial output’: they can tell the difference between a ‘record company’, ‘exploitation’ and ‘research/resources’. Tura, Mahoney and the community of practice, however, all share concerns around how to move the archive forward. In addition to these unresolved matters is a range of opportunities that may yet arise from the archive and which are yet to be explored. One of these is: ‘Are there commercial opportunities for the artists (and for Tura)?’ Mahoney believes not, but the existence of an archive enables a new range of entrepreneurial possibilities that may currently be unimaginable.
As for the capacity of an archive to crystallise loss and longing, the painful aspects of this chiefly concern video. He looks at video recordings of some events and feels incredible frustration, which is especially painful since commissioning a video recording of an event costs so much. It is so difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible, to make a video which can capture the essence of the experience: even photographically, let alone in movement and in focusing attention. The response is so often a wish to go back and do it all again, but the event cannot be recreated, any more than the video can. It’s so hard. Visual data is an ocean of loss and longing; it’s the video and photographic representations that are most challenging.

Audio can be mastered comparatively simply, but operators can’t do that with video. It’s not just the technical issues, nor simply a matter that the video artists need a better understanding of new music as a practice, although both of these areas may be relevant. The issue is that even full-length recordings fail to capture the event; they can’t focus attention upon the points which fascinate the audience and participants. There is a loss of documentation, an absence of the essence of the experience. Videos generally don’t convey the experience of being transported by the sound and the music, shared among those who are present. Even when video artists have produced good raw material, it is still hard to edit that into something meaningful and valuable: both difficult and expensive to achieve.

The future archive, WANMA, is the tip of the iceberg in an ocean of new music material. The hope is that someone will make something of it: Mahoney has faith that they will. It represents, at best, a sample of 26 years of content and continues to grow and accumulate materials. Tura’s success in archiving material varies from year to year: essentially, its activity levels reflect the organisation’s funding and the resources made available to it. The ‘output to resources’ ratio has been out of kilter for so long, it burns out people and organisations. The Artwork keeps going, it keeps growing, but the ratio gets worse, the resources often go down. The result is unsustainable. The human factor in the equation is the part that experiences the greatest strain. The resources have to grow, and output levels have to come down: that is the core challenge of creating a sustainable organisation. Tura can’t keep going as it is.
Plans are put in place to foster a succession strategy, for example. Mahoney had hoped to have an Associate Director at this point in Tura’s life, after a quarter century, but finds that he can’t achieve that financially. Yet it is required if the organisation is to become healthy enough to thrive into the future. It’s a political challenge in this climate of recurrent cuts, gaining both support and resources. There’s another matter, too, which is to maintain Tura as an organisation that is worth sustaining, and that achieves the ends that practitioners, audiences and the community of practice want it to realise. Tura needs both to be still achieving this for the community and encouraging the next generations to step up and grasp the challenge. Mahoney’s perception is that he needs to achieve some critical distance if Tura is to move onto the next stage in its development.

The Tura Board has a range of very personal relationships with university academics. It’s not so much ‘theory and practice’ as a series of formative collaborative relationships. When Mahoney thinks back to his work with Professor Roger Smalley (UWA), he feels that he learned so much from him that underpins Tura and its mission. Current associations include work with Associate Professor Cat Hope and Dr Lindsay Vickery (both from WAAPA, Edith Cowan University), and both of these are crucial peer relationships. The academics that have been involved in new music, though, have always been primarily creative practitioners – engaged in a co-exploration of a blend of creative and academic activities. The strong experience of Tura out in the wider world beyond academia is one of a positive relationship and experience. Practitioners in the new music community know, and have an impact upon, educators and influencers across the board, right down to primary student teachers. Unfortunately the increasing bureaucracy in education makes such relationships more difficult but the power of music and sound composition to transport its audiences and open new vistas of experience continue to win through in the end. Capturing and communicating theses essential moments is what is and remains the vision for WANMA.

**Discussion**

The original vision for this paper was to explore the impact upon a collector of the ‘loss’ of the private collection through the creation of the public archive. It was hypothesised
that a collection which had taken shape for over a quarter century, reflecting the passion and commitment of the collector who created it, would leave behind a sense of longing as it moved towards being the responsibility of others. The case study through which this hypothesis was explored is the particular one of the Tura new music collection, now a foundational element of WANMA.

Case studies are not suited to generalisable findings (Yin 2009). Being specific as to context and circumstances, the case study serves to illuminate particular aspects of practice and process that might in themselves represent wider experiences without necessarily being predictive of these across a range of situations. In this case, there were a range of longings and losses felt by the collector as a result of the creation of the archive, but these losses reside in areas other than that of ownership. The losses identified reflect the individual as well as the organisation and the specifics of the archive, but also indicate broader tendencies which can potentially be explored in similar circumstances.

The bringing-into-being of the archive crystallises the awareness of what has not been captured: the elements that are missing. These can be regretted privately in a collection but may be made more evident and felt more keenly once a collection is translated to form part of a public repository and resource. In the WANMA case, two kinds of loss are especially felt. The first is that of events and performances which were never captured; the second is that of the failure to capture the absolute essence of an event, the moments in the experience when the art transports the participants. In some cases these losses and longings relate to technical failure and the failure of resources to secure the technical skills and equipment that would have made such capture possible. In other cases the loss is the incapacity of existing skills and technology to capture the essence of human experience and communicate this to others in a distant time and/or place.

The case study also sought to identify forms of belonging supported by WANMA and to which the archive subscribes. Here the Tura collection has been more successful. WANMA has made visible the community of practice supporting the creation and curation of new music in WA, and engaged with state and national cultural institutions such as libraries and the primary public broadcaster. It has succeeded in focusing attention upon a particular range of art forms. Further, the archive offers an opportunity to showcase particular successes such as, in WANMA and Tura’s case, the organisation’s
support for engagement with remote and regional WA, and Indigenous communities from these areas, in the co-creation of artistic work. Works resulting have attracted international interest, moving beyond national borders and into the wider global cultural arena.

The creation of WANMA has served as something of a punctum (Barthes 1981), in that it acts as a punctuation and a puncture point in the life of Tura New Music, prompting Mahoney (as the cultural entrepreneur who founded and energises the organisation) to pause and take stock. This opens awareness to both longing and belonging. Engaging with the successes of the organisation, WANMA makes clear to Mahoney what has been achieved in the previous 26 years, and how far recognition of new music has come. There is a real sense of belonging at the heart of this art practice in Western Australia. The bittersweet flip side to this realisation, however, is the cost exacted by the effort required of these achievements of Mahoney as an individual and Tura as an organisation. There is an expressed longing to be confident that future success might be both sustainable and driven through the expenditure of time, energy and other complementary resources by other people coming forward to share the load.

At the same time, the top-of-mind response to the creation of the archive is one of relief. The collection, while it was private, was experienced as a responsibility and a burden. It represented the outputs of a community of practice spanning decades of growth, development and innovation. It was both unique and irreplaceable. The consequences of catastrophic loss were unthinkable. Its move into the public domain and into safe archival storage ensures both accessibility for members of the community whose labours and creativity underwrite its existence, and the archive’s preservation and continued existence. It enables and embodies an abiding achievement and encapsulates the huge satisfaction which results from witnessing and being able to support the development of individual Western Australian artists’ work and careers over a considerable period of time including Ross Bolleter, Cat Hope, Alan Lamb, James Ledger, David Pye and Lindsay Vickery.

References


