

**A musical response to Buna, December 1942 - Horace Perkins' Elegiac Symphony (1952).**

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It is a curious fact that the prominence of both World Wars in Australia's history and national psyche has left little mark on Australia's 'classical' composers. Of the large output of Australian symphonic music for full orchestra composed since 1914, only one piece is directly connected to either world war. This work, the *Elegiac Symphony* of Adelaide composer Horace Perkins (1901-1986), was completed in 1952 and given three performances in Adelaide during November the same year. The *Elegiac symphony* is of especial interest in that Perkins was an active combatant throughout much of World War 2. Although a number of other, younger, Australian composers served in World War 2, including Raymond Hanson, Robert Hughes and James Penberthy, these men did not compose any works in direct response to their war experiences. At the time of his death in 1944, Sydney composer Roy Agnew was planning an 'Anzac' Symphony<sup>1</sup>, but nothing remains of this work.

Despite the unique status of Perkins' symphony as a musical document of the war, it has not been performed or broadcast since 1958. It has never been published or released on any commercial recording. Perkins' name has largely vanished from the chronicles of Australian musical history in recent years. Although briefly mentioned in three significant books about Australian music dating from the 1960s<sup>2</sup>, he escaped notice in the principal sources about Australian music during the 1970s<sup>3</sup>. Later references are limited to three sources<sup>4</sup>. The best of these is Michael Beare's thematic catalogue of Perkins' works, including a short biographical essay (1988). However, this document is not published, and can be found in only two library sites – the Barr Smith Library in Adelaide and the Australian Music Centre. Perkins is not mentioned in either *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* or the *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, and the Australian Music Centre does not list him on their website, despite the hundreds of composers past and present represented there. Is this neglect of Perkins justified? Is the *Elegiac Symphony* an important cultural document worthy of revival?

Horace Perkins was born in Gawler, South Australia on 3 May 1901<sup>5</sup>. During his secondary education at St Peter's College, Adelaide, he studied piano and developed interests in composition and English literature, which became abiding interests for the rest of his life.

Like his contemporaries John Antill (1904-1986) and Clive Douglas (1903-1977), Perkins did not immediately pursue tertiary music studies, but went into full-time employment. For five years he worked in rural South Australia, New South Wales and the Winton district of Queensland as a shearer and wool classer. Following an interview with Perkins in November 1954, Adelaide feature writer Ted Smith wrote as follows:

*...He became quite a character in the sheep country around Winton, Queensland. The only shearer known to spend his days of playing his own compositions on the battered pianos of the Winton Hotel and the local parish hall.<sup>6</sup>*

Between 1923 and 1927, Perkins studied music at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide and obtained his Bachelor of Music degree in 1927. During the 1930s he was Music Master at Scotch College, Adelaide, but also composed orchestral works, including his *Chantyman Suite* which was awarded a major prize in an ABC composition competition in 1933, and began compiling a folio of compositions towards his Doctor of Music thesis at the University of Adelaide. The major work of this period, and the major part of his Doctoral folio was the symphonic cantata *Kubla Khan*. This work was completed during Perkins' first year of war service while he was hospitalized, and examined in England by Sir Percy Buck and Gordon Jacob. Perkins finally was awarded his doctorate in 1943.

In 1940 Perkins enlisted in the 2/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> A.I.F., serving first as a private in the Middle East, then as intelligence sergeant in New Guinea. According to Ted Smith, he subtracted several years from his age at enlistment: four years to be precise according to the online service roll of the Australian War Memorial<sup>7</sup>. He also kept quiet about his musical achievements 'for fear of a bugle sentence'<sup>8</sup>. However, the truth emerged on the troop ship 'Nevassa' on the way home from the Middle East during February/March 1942.

*The quiet, well mannered sergeant had teamed up with Band Sgt. Stan Baldock – later to be killed at Milne Bay – to write a march entitled "Dobbo". It was a somewhat dubious tribute to the battalion's famed crusty "old man" Lieut.-Col. J.G.Dobbs<sup>9</sup>...*

In New Guinea, Perkins served with his Battalion throughout the Milne Bay campaign from August 1942 through to the Buna campaign in December 1942 – early 1943.

*Then the mosquito did what the enemy couldn't, and Sgt Perkins was invalided out with malaria. Later he contracted acute dermatitis and was discharged medically unfit.<sup>10</sup>*

Perkins was upfront about his war service and proudly wore his RSL badge on his lapel<sup>11</sup>. From 1945 to 1966, Perkins was Supervisor of Music in South Australia for the ABC, also

his most prolific period as a composer. Besides revisions of *Kubla Khan* (premiered in Adelaide by baritone Peter Dawson in 1951), Perkins composed three symphonies, concertos for piano (1947) and violin (1955), further cantatas for chorus and orchestra, symphonic poems, chamber music, piano pieces and songs. Owing to his close professional relationship to the South Australian Symphony Orchestra (S.A.S.O.) and its conductor Henry Krips, Perkins secured many performances of his works in Adelaide. Following his retirement in 1966, his works were rarely heard. His interest in composition was largely supplanted by his hobby of growing cacti and succulents.

Fortunately for Perkins, the bulk of his output is preserved in the Barr Smith Library, Special Collections within the University of Adelaide, in the form of music manuscripts, papers and an invaluable set of cassette tapes made from ABC recordings.

The *Elegiac Symphony* is the first, and largest, of Horace Perkins' three symphonies. Completed during 1952, it is not unlikely that Perkins was prompted to compose the work by the 1951 Commonwealth Jubilee Symphony competition which elicited some 36 Australian entries<sup>12</sup>. However, the extant records of the administration of the competition do not mention Perkins, and there are no clues or connections to the *Elegiac Symphony*<sup>13</sup>. Following the completion of the work in June 1952, and preparation of the orchestral parts, the premiere performances were 6, 7 & 8 November, 1952, presented by the South Australian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Henry Krips in Adelaide Town Hall. The first performance was broadcast from 5AN and ABC Regional stations on 6 November 1952.

The autograph ink score of the work consists of 146 pages of 24 stave music paper. According to the composer's note in the score, the estimated duration of the work is 38-41 minutes. The scoring is for conventional symphony orchestra: triple woodwind, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (2 players) and strings.

Perkins pasted in the following program note into the cover sheets of his autograph full score of the symphony. As they are of critical importance in connecting the stimulus of the war to this music, I quote them in full.

*The Elegiac Symphony for Orchestra is in memory of an Infantry Battalion (AD 1942).*

*In August 1942, the first successful land operations against the Japanese commenced from Milne Bay along the Papuan coast, and over the Kokoda trail from Port Moresby.*

*These task forces joined to do battle with the enemy at Cape Enaiadere, Buna and Sanananda, and it was on the Buna airstrip on Christmas Day that the ideas came to the composer to write a tribute to those who had died on the battlefield, and to the homes from whence they came. Perhaps, if there had been time, someone would have played the Last Post while the burial parties were working.*

*It is a memory now, and the Last Post has been played many times for these men since those days . . . but always the call is followed by Reveille. These two calls appear in the Symphony; the first as a sign of the passing glory of the world – the second, a symbol of something greater.*

*The Elegiac Symphony was completed in June 1952, just ten years after the arrival of these Middle East Battalions in Papua.*

*There is no programme or story to the Symphony other than the title, and no literary significance of the motifs except the bugle calls mentioned.*

*The Symphony is in one movement with the interpolation of a Scherzo in the development as a third subject.”*

It is apposite that the symphony is sub headed ‘In memory of an Infantry Battalion’ in that 2/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion suffered huge casualties in the Papua campaign. According to the Australian War Memorial website account of the battalion:

*It arrived in Milne Bay on 12 August and on the night of 27 August was overwhelmed by Japanese marines in a confused battle. The battalion fared even worse in its next engagement – Buna. Between 23 December and 2 January the 2/10<sup>th</sup> lost 113 men killed and 205 wounded in often ill-conceived attacks against Japanese bunkers around the old airstrip. The 2/10ths final engagement in Papua was at Sanananda between 9 and 24 January 1943. It returned home on 12 March 1943.<sup>14</sup>*

Whereas the traditional model of the symphony is for three or four separate movements of music, Perkins conflated the essentials of four movements into one extended, continuous movement. Although this in itself is not unusual in twentieth century symphonies, for example the concise one-movement symphonies by Schoenberg, Sibelius (No.7), Barber (No.1) and Harris (No.3), and the one movement symphonies by Australians Raymond Hanson (1951) and Felix Gethen (1957), Perkins’ symphony has a much more extended time frame. His models are derived from Liszt’s *Sonata in B minor* and some of the Richard Strauss tone poems like *Don Juan*, *Tod und Verklärung*, *Ein Heldenleben* and *Sinfonia Domestica* which insert large episodes within a basic sonata form structure. Perkins’ chosen

form is an ambitious challenge, and although there is some interesting music, the composer encounters severe problems in sustaining musical drive and continuity over 40 minutes (twice the length of the one movement symphonies mentioned above).

In his program note within the autograph full score, Perkins' describes the formal scheme of the work as follows:

*The Symphony is composed as one single movement with the interpolation of a Scherzo in the development as a third subject. But the changing moods of the work seem to divide it into four sections connected and inter-related one with another. The Binary form on which the composition is built exemplifies two subject; the first urgent, strong and martial, the second human and personal. The two subjects are announced early in the exposition "agitato" – the first with the trumpet, woodwind and drums and strings, the second in the form of a student's "song" with clarinet solo.*

*The development of the ideas is interrupted by the Scherzo, ("Scherzo moderato") perhaps reminiscent of a Shakespeare comedy. The return to the development is heralded by the trumpet call of "The Retreat" the traditional order to cease hostilities at evening, which leads to a restatement of the first subject ("Tempo primo (quasi adagio ma molto giusto)"). This section collects other themes: a dirge, and reminiscences of traditional tunes, leading inexorably forward to the Second Tattoo (The Last Post). Then follows the restatement of the second theme which has led just as surely to the Reveille ("The Rouse"). And the Symphony concludes with seven variations ("Piu moto") on the second subject."*

The form of the work could be summarized as follows:

Exposition Subject 1 – Subject 2	Development Part 1	Scherzo	Development Part 2
Recapitulation and Dirge Subject 1	Free fantasia and tattoo		Reveille and Theme and variations Subject 2

The opening exposition consists of 87 bars with two principal musical paragraphs. It opens in turbulent mood, with dissonant, linear part writing which prepares an uneasy backdrop to the main ideas: a trumpet motif, which at first sounds like the beginning of the Last Post, and a hymn-like C minor melody, presented on unison cor anglais, clarinet, bassoon and horn. Perkins described this theme as 'urgent, strong and martial'<sup>15</sup>. A florid piccolo cadenza, which sounds like a sudden disturbing interjection, perhaps a portent of the tragedy to come, forms a transition to the second paragraph.

There are two main melodic ideas in the second subject group. The first, that Perkins described as ‘a student song’ is a poignant solo clarinet idea accompanied by mostly diatonic string harmony. It is then repeated a semitone lower by the strings. Both statements are in periods of 8 bars each. The second idea is a bolder melody for solo trumpet. Bass drum and side drum rolls end the exposition, which is clearly delineated in the score with double bars.

A return to the first subject material opens the first part of the development (162 bars). From this a substantial ‘battle’ section now emerges. Battle clarions blaze out from trumpets and upper winds, while the first main theme appears several times on brass against two-part counterpoint in the strings. Respite comes with a complete statement by the strings of the consolatory second subject, in E major, followed by the trumpet solo. Up to this point, the music has proceeded with a logical sense of continuity. As it fades, a solo violin presents an extensive, dolorous cadenza which serves as a bridge to the following section.

Perkins adopts a sudden and startling change of mood for the scherzo and trio (113 bars) which is now interpolated into the musical proceedings. In his program note mentioned before, he refers to the mood of Shakespeare comedies. Rather, I suspect he is alluding to comic interludes that may occur within the context of tragedy – for instance the gate-keeper’s scene immediately after the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth*. Brash military march music in E flat major, – its tone not unlike Malcolm Arnold’s film music for *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) – presents a portrait of ‘larrikin’, high spirited and dry-humoured diggers. Nostalgia replaces insouciance in the trio dominated by a C major diatonic tune from flügelhorn accompanied by pizzicato strings – an idea which will return later. This is then repeated by the strings. Perkins directs that all of the scherzo and trio up to the end of the flügel horn solo be repeated. Then the second part of the development (52 bars) begins with a climax for full orchestra in march time, cut through with a full quotation of the retreat tattoo<sup>16</sup> on solo trumpet. The first theme of the symphony is developed again, followed by a gradual decrescendo back in the home key of C minor which prepares for the next section.

The new section of the symphony corresponds to the traditional slow movement, which is the longest portion of the entire work (568 bars). In it, Perkins intersperses the restatement of the first subject with a new funeral march idea. Two speeds combine – the slow dirge in long notes, and the faster pace of the opening ideas of the symphony. This part of the work probably corresponds with the burial parties at Buna that Perkins recalls in his notes for the

work. Trumpet, horn, cor anglais and clarinets carry the main dirge tune of this section. This funeral march comes to dominate completely, building to two climaxes of triumphant splendour before returning to C minor gloom. A triumphant, fully harmonized treatment of the work's principal theme then appears in E flat major/ C minor. At bar 129 of this section, Perkins cuts 38 bars of score which develops first subject material more fully. Perhaps he sanctioned the cut during rehearsals as it is noted in all the individual orchestral parts as well, and is heard in the very early recording of the work – so the music was probably never used.

The cut takes us back immediately to the dirge theme in C minor. This time there are 'sarcastic intrusions' (according to Krips's note on the score) from solo clarinet and muted trumpet. The effect sounds like enemy jeers at the Australian burial party. These interjections later come from trombone, and gather strength in upper woodwind and glockenspiel all the time as the dirge continues. The two disparate elements – one chaotic, the other processional – fight for domination and each has a turn at prominence. Then the dirge theme is heard in long, slow notes against a wild jig as the fantasy gets stranger. At this point, the music has a weird 'feverish' feeling of being detached from reality. I wonder (despite Perkins's assertion that the music is not programmatic) whether this is a musical depiction of malaria or of some manic episode. The jig does not succeed in overcoming the dirge despite a new ingredient of chaos being added with crude trombone interjections in parallel tones and semitones. However, the dirge prevails with a tremendous climax for the full orchestra.

Out of this comes an extraordinary passage of sheer anarchy which suggests parallels with American composer Charles Ives, a composer who often explored simultaneous presentation of disassociated musical events. (There is no written record of any direct influence of Ives on Perkins. Ives also liked to make extensive quotations of popular American tunes and hymns in his music.) Eventually the chaos dissipates to a regular side-drum rhythm. Now Perkins starts to quote several traditional tunes of varying styles, as if the composer is thinking of the dead soldiers' homes, their young children (or perhaps the youth of many of the soldiers compared to the then 40-year-old Perkins) and other aspects of military life away from the battlefield. There are bugle calls<sup>17</sup> and camp-fire songs. Another reminiscence of the dirge follows on cellos, leading to fevered remembrances of 'Girls and Boys come out to play'. Superimposed against this nursery rhyme, repeated several times by piccolo, strings and percussion, the 'Last Post' is played behind stage complete on solo bugle *'in the traditional military style and tempo'*<sup>18</sup>. Its effect is quite disembodied. This is followed by another

quotation, this time, *Lilli Bolero*, which in turn is transformed into 'Rock a Bye baby'. The entire slow movement and fantasy section is halted by a sudden and complete statement of *Reveille*, played on trumpet.

The final section of the work (195 bars) follows on without a break. Beginning in C major, a fanfare based on the first phrase of the 'student song' (the second subject theme) is presented on the four horns, greeted with whooping by the brass and woodwind. Strings then present a solemn hymn-like idea of 16 bars, based on the opening motive of the second subject. The hymn melody mostly moves by step and captures an innocent, naïve and serene mood – indeed, a religious tone pervades the work through to the end. Here is the musical counterpart to the 'quasi religious' feel of the Chapel of Remembrance at the National War Memorial in Canberra. Seven variations follow, moving between moods of rapt reflection and apotheosis. The final variation moves inexorably towards a climactic finish – the tone has become heroic and Beethoven-like (in C major mood) – and there are more echoes of bugle-calls. A very weak penultimate chord before the final chord spoils the grand effect of the finish.

A wide range of musical influences appears in this symphony. Some of the climaxes are very fully scored indeed, looking and sounding like thick Richard Strauss. It is possible that the poor sound quality of the recordings I heard made this more marked than would be fair to the composer. Bach and the linear, neo-classical style of Hindemith seem to be important influences on Perkins. Several passages seem like Chorale Preludes in their melody dominated, but contrapuntally accompanied, style. The scherzo begins like a parody of popular military music of the 1940s. From here onwards and especially in the dirge, the music seems like a pot pourri of disparate borrowed melodies – popular songs, military calls and children's lullabies. Often these are woven together in apparent opposition. The 'Last Post' is played intact, but disembodied from its background based on a children's song. The effect is quite moving. I mentioned the collage techniques of Charles Ives in connection with this strange section of Perkins' symphony. Many of the same things that fascinate (or disturb) some listeners about Ives are here – the apparent amateurism of the use of diatonic harmony, the harsh colours, the 'rag bag' of familiar tunes melded together and the sense of two or more simultaneous musical planes. The end of the work is a series of variations on the second subject theme – but the variations are very clearly set apart from each other rather



than continuous. This seems to be a Perkins fingerprint as it is found again in the slow movement of his Symphony No. 2 (1960).

The work received mixed reviews. The Adelaide *Advertiser* reviewer at the premiere, Enid Robertson, described the work as uneven and loose in structure – ‘an extended fantasia’. She noted the various quotations and was impressed by the ‘Last Post’ section. She praised the work’s ‘warm, human appeal’<sup>19</sup>. Following the second and last performance of the symphony in July 1958 as part of the Youth Concert Series of the S.A.S.O. in Adelaide, John Horner of the *Advertiser* made the following apposite comments:

*An elegiac Symphony by Horace Perkins, written in memory of an infantry battalion (AD 1942) was the chief centre of interest at the SA Orchestra’s Youth Concert last night under Henry Krips.*

*Completed in June, 1952, just ten years after the arrival at Milne Bay of the Australian battalions from the Middle East, the symphony is described as having no particular programme. The friends of Dr Perkins would have no difficulty in recognizing it as a musical projection of the composer’s memories and feelings about Australians at war.*

*As such it rings true. In spite of being long and sprawling and a regular medley of musical quotations towards the end, it grew in interest as it dragged on and its truth-to-life became more apparent.*

*The dinkum Aussie soldier, aggressively unsmart and individualist, came to mind very vividly as I listened to this Perkins portrait with its audible memories of scraps of popular tunes and bugle calls<sup>20</sup>.*

It is curious that this symphony has not taken on more prominence considering the importance of Anzac Day and the remembrance rituals in our mainstream culture. However, as we have seen, Perkins’ prominence in Australian musical life was quickly forgotten after his retirement in 1966. Like many symphonic composers active during the 1950s, Perkins’ music remains silent. A major barrier to revival is the work’s length and its quite serious problems in musical continuity. There is a fine line between musical quotation and corniness, and I feel that the fantasy sections detract from the musical ideas of the other parts.

Nevertheless, the use of collage as a musical technique has quite unique associations with radical American composer Charles Ives for an Australian composer of the period, and also looks ahead to similar techniques by American post-modernist composers of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, such as Rochberg, Del Tredici and Zwillich. When Perkins becomes more lyrical in the traditional sense he tends to fall back to standard 8 bar and 16 bar phrasing which seems out of kilter with his attempts to take on a more modern musical persona.

Yet, despite the flaws and the presence of musical ‘kitsch’, the work as an entirety is strangely moving, especially as it comes from a composer who saw active service and who felt deeply about what he had seen and heard. It is a real time capsule in music, and, as we have seen, a unique one on a scale never equalled by any other Australian composer working on this war theme. Standards of Australian orchestral playing have improved greatly since the early 1950s S.A.S.O. recording of the work, as have recording techniques. A good, sympathetic recorded performance of the symphony may present it in a more convincing light than the poorly connected tape transcription of the original and noisy-surfaced 78 RPM discs. Here is a candidate for revival at Anzac Day commemorations. The time capsule should be opened up and heard periodically.

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<sup>1</sup> Moresby, I. 1948, *Australia makes music*, Longmans, Melbourne, p.132

<sup>2</sup> Glennon, J. 1968, *Australian Music and Musicians*, Rigby, Melbourne and Covell, R. 1967, *Australia’s Music: Themes of a new society*, Sun books, Melbourne, p.143. McCredie, A. 1969, *Musical Composition in Australia*, Australian Government Printing Office, Canberra, p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, J. 1972, *Australia’s Contemporary Composers*, Sun Books, Melbourne and Callaway, F. & Tunley, D. 1978, *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Dorum, E. 1997, *Composers of Australia*, Dorum, Melbourne, p.54,

McCredie, A (ed). 1986, *From Colonel Light into the Footlights*, Pagel Books, Norwood

Beare, M, 1988, *Horace James Perkins: Thematic Catalogue of his Works*, University of Adelaide.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the biographical information about Perkins in this paragraph is derived from Beare, M, 1988, *Horace James Perkins: Thematic Catalogue of his Works*, University of Adelaide.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, T. 1954, ‘South Australian Profile No.130, Music – with a dash of humor’, *The News*, Adelaide, Saturday, November 13, 1954, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> World War 2 Nominal Roll, Australian War Museum located at

<http://www.ww3roll.gov.au/script/veteran.asp?ServiceID+A&VeteranID=674095> viewed on 8 July 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Veteran composer Robert Hughes who won second prize in the competition, and who knew Perkins through his own job as Music editor in ABC Melbourne, was fairly sure that Perkins had submitted an entry. Personal interview with the author, 8 February 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Commonwealth Jubilee Symphony Competition papers, 1950-1952 National Archives of Australia.

<sup>14</sup> Australian Military Units, 2/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Australian War Memorial website at:

[http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit\\_11261.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_11261.asp) [viewed on 8 July 2005]

<sup>15</sup> Program note at the beginning of the autograph full score.

<sup>16</sup> No.33 in *Infantry Bugle Sounds*, 1915, Potter & Co. London.

<sup>17</sup> No.6 ‘Buglers and Drummers’ from *Infantry Bugle Sounds*, 1915, Potter & Co. London.

<sup>18</sup> Note in the autograph score by Perkins.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, E. “Performance of new work at concert”, *The Advertiser*, 7 November 1952, Adelaide.

<sup>20</sup> Horner, J. ‘War Memories in Australian Music’, *The Advertiser*, July 1958, Adelaide.