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Innovating in Australia

MARK SAUL

COMPOSER and piper Mark Saul, growing up in Melbourne, Australia, decided at 11 years of age that he wanted to learn a musical instrument... but it had to be "something unusual".

So it might have been expected that the path he would take with the instrument of his choice, the great Highland bagpipe, would also be somewhat unconventional.

His affinity for the instrument was immediate. "I practised every day and quite early reached the point at which it 'clicked over' from feeling like practice to entertaining myself."

And it was to entertain himself that, by the time he was 14, he was writing tunes. "I couldn't stop it happening," he said.

When he first took up the pipes, he said, he'd had no idea that bagpipers went to competitions. "I was doing it for the music. I used to, and still do, get very nervous going into solo competitions." Nevertheless, Mark Saul began winning solo events, sometimes with his own compositions.

"But I can perform on stage a lot more easily than playing in a solo competition," he said. "I never liked it, but I'm forcing myself to play in competitions all this year — for the first time in 10 years or more."

Mark Saul lectures in web-based and print design at RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) University in Melbourne, writes commercial music for television advertisements and film, and teaches piping at Scotch College, one of Melbourne's oldest schools, and at the Presbyterian Ladies College.

"I have about 20 students going in the solos competitions this year and, seeing I'm making my students do it, I feel I should do it too," he said. "I know in retrospect that it's a great way to improve your playing. When I was learning, it forced me to put in the hours and get good."

"My main personal reason for doing it now is to get over caring about winning or losing and be happy with just playing the music. My aim is to at some point be able to go out there and play for the enjoyment of it, and play well without the baggage that gets associated with it."

Mark Saul always found pipe band competitions much more enjoyable. "I love the sound of a pipe band," he said, "and it's an amazing experience to play with a good band."

"Within Australia a lot of bands are isolated," he said. "The scene in Melbourne and Victoria is such a long way from Queensland, or New South Wales or Perth that it's almost a regional thing. Bands compete against each other all the time, but the Australian championships were only held once every two years and that's when you hear what other areas are doing."

"As a kid, I found one of the things that the band was great for was that I got to do a bit of travelling. Every couple of years we would go to a different state because they move the Australian Championships around."

But Mark Saul's enjoyment of pipe band competition has long been compromised by his own musical restlessness.

From the time he was 15, Mark Saul had also been playing folk music on tin whistle, then wooden Irish flute and bagpipes... "and I really enjoyed that experience of playing with other musicians," he said.

"That's when I started playing natural Cs and things like that which I'd learned from fiddle and bouzouki players, and playing Irish reels. Then I discovered that wasn't a 'good thing' to do around other pipers. Irish music at that point (in the mid-1980s) wasn't being played on Highland bagpipes much."

His folk music friends had him playing Bulgarian music — and I thought it was all great, another adventure. It was only several years later that I discovered other people must have been having similar experiences on the other side of the world. When I heard their CDs, I discovered people like Gordon Duncan were playing the same sorts of music as I was. It was funny to hear tunes played by these guys that I'd learned from fiddle players and Planxty albums. It was all confirmed for me when I heard these other pipers doing it too."

In 1989, Mark Saul was invited to join the Victoria Police Pipe Band as a civilian member, and he set to in earnest, playing and

composing new music for the band's competition repertoire.

"At the time, I was playing with the Nunawading Pipe Band, then a grade 2 band — that's where I learned and had been writing music," he said. "I was 19, I'd had my first tunes published the year before by Michael Grey in his first book; I'd just finished high school and taken a trip to Canada, to the 78th Fraser Highlanders in Ontario, then went with the Frasers to the World Pipe Band Championships as a spectator."

"I joined Victoria Police because I wanted the experience of playing in a grade 1 band. It was mutually beneficial: Victoria Police wanted tunes and I needed to be in a good band if I wanted to get my music out there. I had all these tunes ready to go and I wanted to hear what my music would sound like played by a really good band."

When the band released its first album in 1991, it included performances of Mark Saul's *Hel Bound Train* and the suite, *Murray's Fancy*. Its popular *Live Concert in Ireland* album the following year featured no fewer than 20 of his tunes, and the CDs were taking his work further to widening international audiences. His two-volume collection of compositions was published in 1993 by Isa Music (Lismor Recordings) in Scotland.

Mark Saul's musical tastes were broad and continuing to widen — electronic music, classical and rock — and, by that time, he had begun to experiment with dance-folk music fusion.

"I've always had interests in other sorts of music," he said. "I felt the need to get into something that was more free and expressive than straight pipe band repertoire, something like dancing and enjoying myself rather than standing around getting nervous in that competition circle. I was obsessed with folk music in my teens but my broader streams of interest eventually led into electronic dance music as well as rock and popular music."

"In the late 1980s, some definite progression was going on in the pipe band scene around the world. People were taking chances, and into the 1990s there were definite developments and innovations. But it seems the progression has slowed down. Maybe it's because bands started thinking more keenly about winning and became more conservative."

"I came to find the restrictions of the traditional bagpipe scene very frustrating. I'd

had no idea it was going to be so restrictive and kept butting up against this backlash against new ideas and things like that. I wasn't doing anything all that radical, just things you'd expect another musician would do."

During his time with the Victoria Police Pipe Band, Mark Saul was also writing electronic art music.

"I was going to parties and seeing what was out there, playing keyboards and doing a lot of stuff with computers, analogue synthesisers, drum machines, pretty much anything I could get my hands on.

"I was spending a lot of money buying equipment and educating myself about how to write for those sorts of instruments but, strangely enough, I'd go to parties, listen to the music and hear similarities between what I was playing on the bagpipes and some of the riffs and electronic tunes that were being played at these parties... I felt sure I could put a bagpipe in there.

"I started combining the two, did a few live gigs and people got into it. Then I went the other way so, when the Police did a concert, I brought a bit of the electronics in there."

Having gained a Diploma in audio engineering, Mark Saul formed a gigging band, One, with two other musicians.

"The plan was just to play dance music but because two of us played bagpipes they became an integral part of it," he said, "so we were constantly trying new stuff and it was a melting pot of different styles.

The band was a four-year success story, playing at big dance parties, raves, university events and music festivals.

In 1999, he formed a second band, Mumonkan, with previous members of One and a rock guitarist added to the line-up. It was launched with live performances at large New Year's Eve public events.

"I was exposed to jazz by the drummer and rock by the guitarist, and we were all trying to play techno. It was most educational, something where you're constantly learning."

I'm constantly trying to broaden my horizons as far as appreciation of different sorts of music goes," he said. "It's an ongoing process; I always trying to bring influences in from other sorts of music because I find it's a good way create new bagpipe music: to really try to treat the bagpipe as an instrument for music, rather than purely 'bagpipe music.'" And the influences are not wholly from the musical domain.



"One thing I have learned from being a graphic designer is about restraint in visual composition. That kind of minimalism has come out into my music. I'm constantly refining my music to get the most music out of the fewest number of notes — clearing away the clutter — it's something you'd do visually."

Mark Saul's signing on with the West Australian Police pipe corps for this year's World Pipe Band Championships comes after a nine-year absence from the scene. And returns to it

with mixed feelings.

"The last time I played with the Victoria Police was in 1995," he said. "I felt I was trying to do something that people weren't appreciating at the time.

"I've watched certain problems grow in the bagpipe scene, rather than get resolved. Some things I think have got worse in the band and the competitions scene. I'd like to see all that shaken up a bit. The frustration is that these things always take much longer to evolve than you'd like.

"In the past, we usually just tried to fit in with what the other people were doing; recently, pipers have made it all about the bagpipes, and had other people accompany them. This new confidence has something to do with greater music knowledge,".

"There are good things happening: the piping festivals now are a great thing. One of the amazing things that have happened is that, when I started playing, Highland pipers had no knowledge of other sorts of bagpipes.

"These days you have festivals where you see all sorts of bagpipes and people are starting to get interested in them. There's an opening up of awareness of other cultures, other musics and other instruments, and where we fit into the scheme of things."

It was Mark Saul's experience in Australia's rather scattered pipe band scene that Australian pipers constantly looked overseas, to Scotland or Canada, for musical leadership.

"No-one assumed that we could be world leaders in any way," he said. "For a long time, there was this attitude of always looking back: 'they' know how to do it. We were always waiting for the next CD of the World Pipe Band Championships or the next pipe band album, or for someone to come over and tell us what to do.

"At the same time, though, there's a definite rebellious streak in Australians," he said. "People started to realise, 'hang on a minute, we're not that bad and we can do things too'. Interestingly, a lot of the technical innovations have come from Australia in the last few years, things like synthetic bags and reeds from people like Geoff Ross. That type of thinking is typically Australian but it's always had to fight against the other typical way of thinking, which is a lack of self confidence and the lack of a secure Australian identity.

"The Australian pipe band scene is quite small but one of the things about Australian thinking is that people are quite happy to be breaking rules. So some grade 1 bands were playing some interesting stuff in the mid to late 1980s.

"I've come back to bagpipes because I love

the instrument and want to contribute to its development and what I'm doing I feel is important."

His own album, *Mixolydian*, produced by Murray Blair and launched late last year, is due for re-release in Scotland through a licensing arrangement with Greentrax Recordings, Edinburgh.

It is music that Mark Saul would love to present live in Scotland and Europe. "It's a matter of logistics really: I'd like to get over to Europe and do some festivals," he said. But Australia is a long way from Lorient.

"None of the tunes (on the album) fall into the traditional categories but they are bagpipe tunes," he said. "The way I arranged the tunes is that, at some point, a bagpipe has to come in to complete the tune. Though the arrangement involves other instruments, the force that holds it together is a bagpipe, and the music revolves around the particular things a bagpipe can do.

"I write music for bagpipers that is intricate in a way that only bagpipers would be aware of, but I also try to create music for non-bagpiping audiences. *Mixolydian* is music with the bagpipes in it, consciously as the lead instrument."

Mark Saul said it was his perception that pipers had only recently begun to gain the self esteem to see themselves as the centre of attention in ensembles. "In the past, we usually just tried to fit in with what the other people were doing; recently, pipers have made it all about the bagpipes, and had other people accompany them.

"This new confidence has something to do with greater music knowledge," he said.

"It's been something that's been missing for a long time with most pipers. But I can tell that most of the newer music that's being put out by these younger players like Chris Armstrong, Finlay MacDonald, Fraser Fifield,

Simon McKerrell and others incorporates much more musical knowledge than pipers have generally had in the past.

"It's becoming more common for pipers to play other instruments, and it's playing other instruments that educated me. It seems to be one of the common experiences of the younger innovators, and the music they are creating probably couldn't be created without that kind of knowledge.

"When I started writing bagpipe music I really looked at the compositions of Donald MacLeod, G. S. MacLellan and others: compositions that are technically perfect in their musical theory. They knew what they were doing — you can't just fluke that. You can't beat theory. It's an essential weapon in your musical arsenal."

Mark Saul insists that what he and other innovators are doing should not be seen as something that falls "outside" the tradition.

"The only way for a tradition to grow and flourish is for people to take the instrument out there and play new music on it.

"That can then become assimilated into what is considered the bagpipe realm," he said.

"It's interesting what we see as 'traditional bagpipe music' and I'm amazed at how quickly something can become 'traditional'. If you play something over a number of years then, out of habit, it becomes tradition. The problem I have with that is that the idea of a tradition tends to lead to rigid thinking and a fear of change.

"There can be development up to a point but, as soon as that point becomes 'tradition', lots of people feel it can no longer be changed; it gets set in stone... which is a big problem.

"I think we all need to relax. Plenty of people are doing new things with bagpipes, and it's not going to mean the death of what we already have; it's only going to enrich it.

"We've already seen it happen. Light music hasn't killed off piobaireachd, and the mainstream is playing new tunes that once defied the earlier tradition. Marches, strathspeys and reels — they weren't traditional at some point, but now they are. Nor has the advent of the medley meant the end of the MSR.

"It's foolish to believe that whatever new people are trying to do with bagpipes now is bad for the tradition. It's an evolutionary thing: it has to happen for the life of the instrument, and for the instrument to continue to develop.

"And there is a lot further that the bagpipes can be taken."