“Drawing Artistic Inspiration from the Landscape”,

by Martin Buzacott

Keynote Address: Fraser Island Defenders Organisation Time, Tide and Tourism Conference

University of the Sunshine Coast Sippy Downs

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Checked by Glenn Miller from Butchulla Men’s Business

Thanks John and good morning ladies and gentlemen. Could I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gather, and in particular Briana who’s extended this welcome to us today, and also to the traditional owners of K’gari, especially Glen Miller from Butchulla Men’s Business, who’s not able to be with us today but who very kindly offered me his advice and assistance in the preparation of this paper.

Such a privilege to be here with you this morning and quite disorienting too, given that while I’m speaking to you, I’m simultaneously on air all over the country on ABC Classic FM, presenting my regular Mornings show. This is the advantage of modern technology which gives us the ability to pre-record!

But I guess what I’m feeling most this morning is a sense of intimidation, and maybe even a little awe, given the list of distinguished scientists who’ve preceded me in giving this Keynote Address at the biennial FIDO conference. And I’m all too conscious that I’m the first person from the fields of the creative arts and broadcasting who’s been in this position.

So in working out what I could possibly have to contribute in this role, I decided that the best thing I could do would be to focus on a topic where maybe my different perspective might complement the work of previous keynote speakers and talk a little about how artistic inspiration can be drawn from natural landscapes, like those we have on the Great Sandy Coast.

But more importantly, the topic I really want to focus on is how those artistic representations of the landscape can serve as a vital tool in the perennial battles to *preserve* those landscapes.

And as John has mentioned in his introduction, I speak about this from personal experience. I grew up during the height of the battle for Cooloola when my father Hardie Buzacott used an audio-visual presentation called ‘The Magic of Cooloola’ to influence public opinion in the fight to save Cooloola from sand-mining.

It was a humble presentation but filled with beautiful photographs of the area, with a soundtrack designed to create an emotional engagement within the viewer, and it proved remarkably effective.

In researching this talk today, I was initially upset to realise that Dad’s The Magic of Cooloola presentation is currently lost, so I can’t show it to you today. But then I realised that of course we still have something far better than a *slide-show* to celebrate today. We have Cooloola itself. It’s right there, just to the north of where we are right now, saved for future generations, for anyone to go and photograph and to make documentaries about just like Dad did.

I don’t need to show you some yellowing 35mm transparencies from the 1960s, because ‘The Magic of Cooloola’ has been preserved right there in Cooloola itself.

And while The Magic of Cooloola wasn't the sole determining factor in the successful campaign to create Cooloola as a national park – there were so many great people who contributed to the campaign – what it did demonstrate was the capacity for the creative arts, for photography and the other visual arts, for writing, for music – to affect people in ways that sometimes not even science or politics can achieve.

Because the arts operate in a different way from other forms of communication. Science and political activism can inform and can convince, but the arts do something different. They move people emotionally, and they liberate imaginations. And in doing so, they can be devastatingly effective in changing public opinion.

If you know your classical philosophy, you'll be aware that Plato welcomed politicians and scientists into his ideal Republic, but he banned creative artists. Why? Because art has so strong an ability to move people's emotions, that Plato feared that his ideal state would become ungovernable if the artists were let loose within it, stirring up people's passions and imaginations.

And even today, look around any dictatorship, any unjustly governed state, and you'll see that every single one of them puts bans in place on certain forms of artistic expression. So today when I talk about the arts, I'm talking about a particular type of creative art, something that can change the world, and has, time and time again over the centuries, in battles big and small.

And those kinds of arts, engaging deeply with the social and geographic landscapes from which they emerge, have never been more important than they are now.

Because now, we live in times when people are free to choose their own sources of information, and to create their own reality independent of actual facts. And inevitably that creates division and argument, the us-versus-them mentality that we see shaping politics at the present time, where the loudest voices and the cruellest actions triumph, not because they're right, but because they're more belligerent, more compelling, requiring only acquiescence and a sense of powerlessness on the part of the public.

So in this world beyond facts, it's quite possible for climate-scientists to be shouted down. It's easy to paint green-leaning politics as the lunatic fringe. All you need to do is set your social-media filters in the right direction and you never need hear a conflicting opinion, never need to confront a scientific or political truth, whichever side of the fence you choose to live on.

But as Plato identified, and as the traditional custodians of K'Gari/Fraser Island knew, the arts exist beyond that contested space. The arts exist in realms where people are united by a common heritage, a world of enduring songlines emanating from a collective dreaming shared by all, no matter what their ephemeral distractions within the current moment.

Even in radio we have a modern incarnation of this idea of how to appeal to the collective sense of belonging. There's a saying in radio that all presenters learn and it's this: 'Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may remember. But involve me and I'll understand.' This is a creed not just for radio, but for all the creative arts. As we've seen in the climate change debate, no amount of fact-recitation by highly-credentialled experts is going to convince the sceptics. Showing them melting glaciers in documentaries may grab their attention to an extent. But the challenge is how to *involve* them, so that they can actually experience the reality for themselves, or a simulation of the reality, that makes manifest the awesome beauty and the great fragility of the natural world under threat.

In his own modest way, my father did that with The Magic of Cooloola. While townspeople in Gympie were baying for his blood, he'd do the rounds of the services club and other community groups, speaking to anyone who'd listen, playing to hostile audiences for the most part, simply showing people the reality of Cooloola, its incredible beauty, the preciousness of it.

Strange as it might sound, he wasn't moralising or proselytising the conservationist cause, so much as simply sharing with them the exquisite landscape that their sand-mining was about to destroy.

And he'd frame the photos in such a way that he made the viewer imagine they themselves were part of the scene, making the landscape a place where the viewer could picture themselves being, and where they felt they wanted to be, just as you see in these examples on the screen.

This could be anyone, or their kids in this place, sharing the enthusiasm for it and the life-force of it that Dad himself felt. The figures in the pictures could be the viewer, they could imagine themselves there. So The Magic of Cooloola didn't just show pictures to people. It *involved* them, it shared an emotional connection to place with them, and some were changed by it.

And this is the same cause that creative artists have pursued throughout history. Mention the great names in my own field of endeavour – which is classical music - and so many of the great composers drew their inspiration from the natural beauty of the world around them, and shared it. They created works of national music that were impossible to isolate from their immediate natural environment, and ironically, which became universal in their appeal as a consequence.

There was Edward Elgar, who said that every note he ever composed was written with the feeling of standing amid his beloved Malvern Hills, feeling the wind in his face, this Elgar who used to cycle out to Longdon Marsh in the afternoons to watch the herons fishing in the wetlands.

And there was Sibelius in Finland, who as a child sat on a rock looking out on a lake, playing his violin, and lived in the forest all his life, drawing his aesthetics not from the classical masters of Vienna but as he said, from the pure, crystal-clear mountain streams of his immediate environment.

And then there was Gustav Mahler, who, when the conductor Bruno Walter came to visit his lakeside composing hut and stood open-mouthed at the beauty of the surrounding mountains, was told by Mahler, 'Don't bother looking at it. I've composed all this already.'

I could list literally hundreds of other examples but simply note that not one of these composers ever wrote music inspired by sand mining, by industry, by urban sprawl, by the encroachment of civilisation into natural environments. Their souls, and their art, were uplifted by the natural world.

And so it was with my friend Peter Sculthorpe, Australia's greatest composer, whose entire career was founded on a desire to capture the Australian landscape in music. The titles of Peter's greatest works couldn't be more explicit in this regard, things like Kakadu, Earth Cry, Mangrove, all of them capturing in music the unique Australian environment, making concertgoers aware of the strikingly unique landscapes that we have here in Australia, painting his musical colours in the ochre shades of the Australian earth.

But there's one work in particular by Peter that I want to tell you about today, and it's an orchestral work called Great Sandy Island. Here's just a bit of it.

The Great Sandy Island is of course the place we're celebrating at this Conference, K'gari, Fraser Island. Peter Sculthorpe loved the place. In fact he was awestruck by it.

He'd first become aware of it through the paintings of his friend Sidney Nolan.

So yes, like so many people at the time, he'd first encountered K'Gari not through the place itself but through an artistic representation of it. And he didn't even see Sidney Nolan's Fraser Island paintings in Australia. They were on exhibition in London in 1957 and made a deep impression on him. And they did on the Nobel prize-winning author Patrick White as well.

Soon, both men were planning to write operas based on the Eliza Fraser story, so it made sense that aspiring librettist and composer would be put in contact with one another.

In the end, though, the proposed collaboration between Peter Sculthorpe and Patrick White never eventuated, but both Peter and Patrick ended up writing their own individual works inspired by K'Gari, Patrick White in his masterly novel A Fringe of Leaves.

As for Peter Sculthorpe, he was still adamant that he wanted to write the opera, so after Patrick dropped out, he then enlisted the help of the legendary war correspondent Alan Moorehead and the music critic Roger Covell. And in 1966, the three of them visited K'Gari.

The place made an incredible impression on Peter Sculthorpe, and I'll read you part of the letter that he sent to his mother upon his first encounter:

'Two old fishermen took us across to the island and into a great river there, with mangroves down to the water's edge, and the coast of Australia far on the horizon. The fishermen had an ancient truck and drove us across the island to the Pacific…. There were things that we had never seen before, thousands of ibis wading in lagoons, enormous sea-eagles, and tree-eating trees 200 feet high. And rainforest almost like night but for thin slivers of sunlight, the most incredible and beautiful birdlife, a beach 80 miles long with the Pacific rolling in on it, packs of dingos and wild horses, sands like the Sahara and shining white, rotting ships wrecked on the reefs and driven back to the beach, midden heaps with native stone implements, great salt lagoons all teeming with fish.'

Peter at the time was writing his ground-breaking series of orchestral works called Sun Music – four works explicitly designed to align Australian music with its geographical position within the Asia-Pacific region. And that unique environment of K'Gari seemed to him to encapsulate everything that he was trying to write in music – the landscape unlike anything else on the planet, the plants and wildlife that could only be found right here in this part of Australia, exactly how he wanted his music to be as well, uniquely Australian.

In the end, he composed several pieces inspired by K'Gari - the music theatre work Eliza Fraser Sings, parts of his orchestral masterpiece Mangrove which used material originally sketched for the Patrick White opera, and then finally, in 1998, he wrote his major K'Gari-Fraser Island piece, this orchestral work that I mentioned earlier, Great Sandy Island.

And while it too referenced the Eliza Fraser story, it was clear that the historical tale that had first drawn him to the island was becoming less important to him and the natural environment of the place itself was becoming his main focus.

There were five movements in the work, called, respectively, The Sea Coast, The Boro Ground, The Rainforest, The Garrison, and Dune Dreaming. As a narrative arc, the piece moves from Eliza Fraser's arrival by sea, through her encounters with the Butchulla inhabitants, to her departure back to

European society, but at the end, she remains dreaming of the dunes. The place itself has transformed her, she has been seduced by the magic of K'Gari.

Peter himself was too. The famous Eliza Fraser story had drawn him there from faraway London, but when he left, he took away with him the spirit of the island itself.

And that work, Great Sandy Island, like Sidney Nolan's paintings, like Patrick White's fiction, and like Peter's other Fraser Island pieces, are an enduring testimony to the natural wonders of the place, just as Elgar's Malvern Hills, and Sibelius' snowy Finnish forests, and Mahler's Austrian lakes are to their own environments.

And every time these works are performed, they liberate these natural wonders in the public imagination, not as an activist demanding for one side to win and the other to lose, but as a universal celebration of something that we all share and that's of value to us all, not materially, but culturally.

And that's something that the traditional custodians of K'Gari have always understood, that the landscape exists not as something divorced from culture, but existing as the very essence of it. Indigenous Australians know that the natural landscape isn't something alien to our communal life. It IS communal life, the stories of the culture being written there in all the natural landscape around us, in the stars above, in the creatures of the earth, and of course in the very earth itself.

That's not a scientific perspective and it's not a political one. It's an artistic concept, an artistic way of seeing, and it's so powerful that it has the capacity to sustain entire cultures for millennia, being handed down from generation to generation.

It's something that Peter Sculthorpe also felt, that the land itself was a living narrative, with songlines embedded within its very geography.

In 2002 when I was Artistic Administrator the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, I introduced Peter to another friend of mine, the young didjeridu virtuoso William Barton, and I programmed a concert where we added William's didjeridu to Peter's two masterpieces, Earth Cry and Mangrove.

Peter told me that the experience was like finding the thing that he'd felt had always been missing in his music, which is that grounding in what we call in music 'the pedal note' of the didjeridu. The grounding of his music within the Australian earth.

He immediately began rewriting several of his greatest pieces to incorporate William's didjeridu, and as is now well-known, he and William went onto become close friends and musical collaborators over the last 12 years of Peter's life. And just last month, on ABC Classic FM, William told me this:

WILLIAM [recording]: You know the landscape is always speaking. It's a never-ending story that is to be told. The trees tell a story, the landscape tells a story, the water of the ocean and the rivers tell the story. And that's why music as a living entity is so very special and why it connects with the people in their lives. So working with Sculthorpe in the last ten years of his life before he passed away was very special and I'll always hold it dear to my heart, because his music WAS Australia, it was indigenous, it was cultural, it was aboriginal, it was Torres Strait, it was universal. And it's a universal thing that connects people together. And you know, even though sometimes it might not work out in terms of what politics is, music is the speaker of life, and music was that shared journey between me and Sculthorpe and yourself as well.

Peter Sculthorpe, 'indigenous composer', as you heard William say, because Peter sought to reconcile the landscape and the songlines of the land in which he lived.

This is the legacy of Peter and his collaboration with William. Peter's musical representation of the earth, of the landscape, of the Australian environment, struck such a chord with William, as it has with so many other Australian music-lovers.

I get it in feedback with my own radio program. Whenever I play the music of Peter Sculthorpe, people text or write in speaking of how moved they are by the depiction in music of a distinctly Australian, absolutely unique place, the Australian landscape that is known to all of us.

Just as the old tellers of the Eliza Fraser story inspired Sidney Nolan, and just as Sidney Nolan's paintings brought Peter and Patrick to K'Gari, now Peter and Patrick themselves, long after their deaths, are still creating new awareness of this rare jewel lying off the Queensland coast.

And what it shows is that the creative arts operate on a very long timeframe, much longer than the 24-hour news cycle, but are no less effective, indeed perhaps even more effective, because of it.

More than a century after Mahler, and nearly as long after Elgar and Sibelius wrote their masterpieces, the places they captured in art are now celebrated the world over. And so it will be with Sidney Nolan and Patrick White and Peter Sculthorpe's works about K'Gari/Fraser Island.

Right now we need our high-profile scientists and politicians to fight for the immediate needs of our environment, and inevitably, like my father, they will come and go within the space of a normal lifetime. We need them to fight those battles like Dad's friends John Sinclair and Arthur Harrold and Kathleen McArthur and so many others have fought in the urgent need to take action right now, whenever the bulldozers are literally marshalling at the gates.

But alongside them, we also need our artists, because in the centuries to come, it will be the artists whose works continue to inspire new generations to appreciate our natural heritage.

Because art frees the imagination, speaks of the dreaming, connects with songlines, and lasts for millennia.

And that's why those opportunists who are out for the short-term gain will always try to suppress the artists, because no matter how many casualties it suffers along the way, beauty, like truth, will always triumph in the end.