Recontextualising a singing treasure: Eve De Castro-Robinson's *Clarion*

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This paper is partially presented as a personal narrative or piece of autoethnography.[i] What follows is an account of how I came to commission a new trumpet concerto by leading New Zealand composer Eve De Castro-Robinson's for trumpet and pūtātara (name given to a conch shell adapted with a wooden mouthpiece by the Māori people). Over the past four decades traditional Māori instruments from New Zealand (called taonga pūoro or 'singing treasures') have had a major revival in the hands of musicians, scholars and instrument makers. The writing considers what I feel to be the ethical considerations of playing a pūtātara when I myself am Pākehā (of European descent).

I moved from New Zealand to Scotland in 2003 to study trumpet at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Not long after moving here, my parents sent me a book on *taonga pūoro*.[ii] I did not think much of the book at the time, though became increasingly drawn to it as my homesickness grew stronger. Since moving to Scotland in 2003 I have seldom missed a day of news headlines from the New Zealand Herald. I listen to Radio New Zealand on my daily commute to St Andrews. My home is decorated with New Zealand icons and art; indeed I consciously exert the influence of New Zealand on many if not all parts of my life. I know that this obsession with New Zealand is at times misplaced nostalgia for a place that never was or at least is no longer, and that if I were to move there that I would be equally homesick for Scotland.

What is a Pūtātara?

Credit: Augustus Hamilton Collection of Te Papa. Purchased 1914.

Pūtātara are a conch shell with a wooden mouthpiece, and one of three lip reed instruments of the Māori people. Conch shells are used as lip reed instruments by many cultures throughout the world, with the earliest examples known to be 20,000 years old.[iii] Many cultures apply a mouthpiece to the end as it allows for greater comfort and expands the sonic potentials of a side blown adaption:

Side-blown *Charonia tritonis* conch from the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea. Montagu Collection, IX 212.

Wooden mouthpiece added to a *Charonia tritonis* conch. Credit: Augustus Hamilton Collection of Te Papa. Purchased 1914

The Māori people's addition of a mouthpiece exemplifies their wood working skills. In Māori mythology the wood is from Tane Mahuta (God of the forest) and the shell is from Tangaroa (God of the sea). The marriage of the two Gods results in no two instruments being the same: each will have its own harmonic series and its own distinct sound. Triton conch shells are not found in waters close to New Zealand, so it is thought that Polynesian settlers brought them from warmer waters in the Pacific. The sound of each Pūtātara was an aural signature of a tribe and be known by other tribes. Their uses were not only for battle: they were also used to announce births and deaths, and to summon people for learning. These symbolisms and uses are found in many other cultures – the twisting and spiralling of the shell outwards is a visual analogy of growth. That the instruments are also played with the lips (used in speaking) and played with the breath (important in the understanding of *mana*[iv]) is also of symbolic significance.

I first played a conch shell in 2009 when I had the opportunity to lead a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Aus den sieben Tagen* (From the Seven Days). The piece is a collection of 15 texts without specific instrumentation. Though I had an ensemble of nine musicians assembled for the performances in Glasgow and Edinburgh I played the first text titled *Richtige Dauern* (Right Durations) as a conch solo with electronics. At the time I had no understanding of pūtātara: I was playing a conch shell even if I had added a pūtātara inspired mouthpiece to the shell. In 2016 I had the great pleasure of working with the Dutch trumpeter Marco Blaauw. He brought to St Andrews an exceptional piece which used tuned conch shells, you can listen to an excerpt of it here.

What you hear there is six players spread around the Younger Hall of St Andrews all playing a notated but still partially improvised section of a 40-minute longer piece. Hearing these sounds had a profound effect on me. I didn't grow up hearing the sound of conch shells whilst at school or at home, so it wasn't the sound of the instruments having some type of nostalgic effect on me – it was the sonic possibilities of the shells in the hands of Marco and other skilled brass players. My forays in 2009 had been

infantile, and I wished to learn more about conch shell playing. I returned to the book that my parents gave me when I first moved to Scotland and begun to try and catch up on the important debates and developments about the use of taonga pūoro that had been ongoing since I moved to Scotland. Since the publication of Flintoff's book and since I moved to Scotland, taonga pūoro arguably moved from being in a state of revival to a fully-fledged and established musical 'scene'. SOUNZ, The Centre for New Zealand Music, now has an extensive archive of pieces of composed concert music that incorporate taonga pūoro and run workshops about understanding the musical and cultural significance of the instruments. There are now swaths of publications on them.

But there were very subtle and important aspects of taonga pūoro making and playing that I had not picked up on or wilfully ignored when in 2018 I made my own pūtātara. On 7 April 2018 I reached out to New Zealand composer Eve De Castro Robinson to write a concerto for me. We exchanged emails and some months later I suggested she might write for my pūtātara:

> *Please just ignore this suggestion if it doesn't appeal, but what do you think about using a conch shell/ pūtātara? I have recently made my own with a wooden mouthpiece and it does sound rather good. I recently did a project with Dutch trumpeter Marco Blaauw from Muskifabrik with some tuned conch shells and this led to my connecting with the taongo pūoro revival. There is something about the idea of 'calling' which is inescapable as a trumpeter.*

I received the following reply:

> *Regarding the conch/ pūtātara idea, it's a really good one, but I've always baulked a bit at any use/appropriation of taonga pūoro. It just doesn't sit easily for me. It's a strong idea, but there's a hint of the ticking of a box as well*

My reply to Eve was as follows:

> *And noted too about taonga pūoro! I was partly prompted to thinking of it because it would tick a box, and that's never good. I'll stick to blowing conches in distant lands… I get why it is a bit of a cliché in NZ, and hopefully when we meet in not too long we could talk about that as I teach NZ music on an ethnomusicology module here. From my perspective it is very fascinating looking in on composition in NZ right now…*

Eve did eventually come around to the idea when its use in the concerto fulfilled a function beyond box ticking. The pūtātara came to be symbolic of issues around climate change. Eve called the concerto *Clarion* – it was to be a 'musical call across oceans for us to wake up to climate change and rising sea levels', (Eve's previous work had dealt with similar issues[v]). The pūtātara was from the sea and was literally calling across oceans: the performances planned were in St Andrews (St Andrews New Music Ensemble conducted John Wallace), Auckland (Auckland Chamber Orchestra conducted Peter Scholes) and New York, though the New York performance was cancelled due to the pandemic. The layered growth of a conch shell can also be analysed to show the rising carbon levels of our environment: Eve took this aspect of the shell as a structuring device in the piece, it builds towards a 'cataclysmic climax'. A video of Eve talking about this idea is here: it is a wholly new context for a pūtātara, though after the St Andrews premiere and before the concert in New Zealand, I

became doubtful as to whether I was playing a pūtātara at all, and whether I had any right to suggest a new context for taonga pūoro .

Any frequent listener of Radio New Zealand such as I will regularly hear reports and extended radio documentaries which both statistically and anecdotally portray a country which has not made peace with its past. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi set New Zealand on a collision course with many of its most challenging problems today. Inequality between Māori and those of European decent makes for very concerning statistics about Māori health, justice, academic attainment and social mobility.[vi] When I went to school in New Zealand, there was nothing in the curriculum about key historical events in my nation's history such as the New Zealand Wars in which the most gruesome Colonial victories were won: these indignities were written out of history until recently. New historical narratives such as *The Aotearoa History Show*[vii] haven't shied away from the true extent of New Zealand's bloodened past. The societal forces that have systemically forced Māori into poorer outcomes on nearly all scales are the same forces that resulted in taonga pūoro becoming close to extinct. The aural histories of taonga pūoro which were so important in the revival were very nearly lost.

With the support of my colleague Emma Sutton from the University of St Andrews I was in September 2019 able to spend time with visiting Samoan musicians at the Marchial Museum in Aberdeen and the National Museum of Scotland in Aberdeen handling and in some cases playing their shell trumpet collections, none of which were specifically a pūtātara though many were side blown *charonia tritonis* conches. Emma's project was to support these visiting Samoan musicians and academics to start a project that might recover their own traditional instrumental music by using the taonga pūoro revival as a model. These interactions with Pacific musicians were most constructive and were important in developing a critical perspective of my own pūtātara project. The visiting Samoan musicians spoke of their desire to know more about the significance of the sounds of the instruments, how they were played, and by whom they were played. These are the type of questions that underpin much of the field of ethnomusicology and music archaeology, though they were questions I had ignored because I had told myself that I was simply exploring the 'sonic potentials' of the instruments and in that particular domain my knowledge as a trained trumpeter would exceed that of any taonga pūoro players. If there was a pivotal moment in which this thinking changed it was likely the moment I saw the advertising for the concert in New Zealand:

I was billed as playing trumpet and pūtātara. Something about this – to use the same word that Eve had in our email correspondence – made me baulk. I didn't know why. I spoke to Eve about it, she said that whenever she had done projects with taonga pūoro in the past (she has done a number of them) that they were collaborative pieces with musicians immersed in Māori culture and customs, if not Māori themselves, so the issue of playing taonga pūoro as a Pākehā had never really been an issue. She spoke of the process of asking for permission from an elder, not necessarily a tribal elder, but someone with knowledge and status. In a recorded interview following the premiere in St Andrews Eve said she would ask for advice on the issue. I had always held a view similar to that of author Michael King: 'Pakeha New Zealanders who are committed to this land and its people are no less "indigenous" than Māori.'[viii] As a 'committed Kiwi' I thought I had as much right to cherry pick any aspect of Māori culture I like, but this view really is nothing short of cultural appropriation.

For some time, I thought there were a number of reasons as to why I might 'claim' to be able to play the pūtātara. I told myself that there was some authenticity in my pursuit because I made the instrument myself from a shell that my parents had brought from Fiji in the 1970s. Indeed, I actually made a total of three instruments that were played by myself and the brass players in the orchestra. I spent many hours blowing them to understand what notes they could play and adapting the mouthpiece so that they could play with tuned orchestral instruments. The instruments I made are sonically very interesting and capable, and I discovered a number of techniques of over-blowing them and using techniques from modern trumpet playing to create new sounds. The problem with this is that in doing so I applied an aesthetic developed from contemporary European music,and thinking of sound as being separate to ceremony. This said, players of ancient instruments (for example the Carnyx, an Iron Age Celtic horn) often cite that it would be disrespectful to consider that if they can make a particular sound on an instrument that a similar sound would not have been discovered by those playing them 1000s of years ago. This principle of letting the instrument 'tell us' what it can do is consistent with the methods of researching historical instrument performance more generally. One very simple problem with my 'claiming the right' to play pūtātara because I made them is that the quality of my wood working leaves a great deal to be desired: I am no *tohunga whakairo rakau* (woodcarver). The instruments I made use a refashioned IKEA curtain poll – the native hardwood I sourced from New Zealand was just too difficult to work with the tools I had to hand.

After the performance in New Zealand, I had a very honest and open conversation with the composer, performer and Māori composer Mere Boynton. Mere's answer to my doubts were very simple, she asked what taonga pūoro players I had been in touch with or visited. I had of course been in touch with none, and as such had no collections of aural histories or encounters of my own which I could pass on. Mere gracefully made no further comment, but it was certain what she was implying. I came to want to play pūtātara essentially because of being homesick, even if my home is Scotland. I also entered into the world of taonga pūoro primarily if not wholly from the view of playing the pūtātara for entertainment or art. Taonga pūoro were certainly used for entertainment and art traditionally, and esteemed players such as Puoro Jereme have commented that their journey as taonga pūoro practitioners started with exploring these uses before developing a quest for a deeper understanding about ceremonial uses. [ix] Perhaps the most significant aspect of taonga pūoro is not their sonic world which attracted me to them, but their spiritual and ceremonial worlds through which knowledge deepens and grows. For as long as my desire to play a pūtātara is about learning and understanding, then perhaps when I pick up my shell with an IKEA curtain poll it is indeed a pūtātara – a marriage between the Gods of the sea and the forest, and something which I blow as a signal of my being and not a form of cultural appropriation. Without a quest for learning, my playing may just be of a conch shell *fashioned as* a pūtātara, and I marginal to the world of taonga pūoro. That what is otherwise essentially just a shell has drawn me to mount a major international commission with premieres in distant lands is, for me at least, enough to consider that if not right now, then at some point in the future the spiritual qualities which are so important to the significance of taonga pūoro may one day inhabit my own playing of them.

Click here to listen to the movement of *Clarion* which uses three pūtātara (or conch shells fashioned as pūtātara).

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[i] This method is now well defended, with some of the earliest assertions of its value going back to Banks, S.P., & Banks, A. (2000). Reading 'The Critical Life': Autoethnography as pedagogy. *Communication Education*, *49*(3), 233-238.
[ii] Flintoff, B., Melbourne, H., & Nunns, R. (2004). *Taonga pūor* . Craig Potton Publishing.
[iii] Montagu, J. (2018). *The Conch Horn Shell Trumpets of the World from Prehistory to Today*. Hataf Segol Publications.
[iv] For more on this term, see https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-meaning-of-mana/
[v]https://www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/musicalive/audio/2018635734/eve-de-castro-robinson-tipping-point
[vi] https://www.stats.govt.nz/topics/Māori
[vii] https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/the-aotearoa-history-show
[viii] King, M. (2013). *Being pakeha now*. Penguin Random House New Zealand Limited.
[ix] https://news.sounz.org.nz/introduction-to-taonga-puoro-q-a-session-with-jerome-kavanagh/