

“This is the first in a projected series of musical ‘snapshots’ of composers in unfamiliar situations and circumstances. I have long been a history buff, but not in the conventional sense of the scholar who distances himself from the things he researches by burying himself in the musty libraries of academe. As a travel enthusiast and writer, I have re-traced the footsteps of a number of my composer-subjects in my own travels, particularly during the eighteen years that I lived in North America (1981-1999).

One such episode of sleuthing originated in Seattle, the last of my American homes. In the archives of the University of Washington was a fascinating folder of correspondence between Professor Carl Paige Wood, an early Director of the University’s School of Music, and the composer Bela Bartok.

The forty-six-year-old Bartok had made his first visit to Seattle in 1928, when the city itself had barely reached its sixtieth anniversary. At the time, Bartok was a respected but not particularly well-known pianist and teacher, an unequalled scholar of the folk music of his native Hungary, and generally unrecognized as a composer. He returned to the city thirteen years later where he played a piano recital of Bartok-Kodaly.

At that time, in early 1941, Bartok had every reason to be anxious about his future. His appointment as a researcher at Columbia University was temporary and he had refused several offers to teach composition, a discipline he viewed as ‘unteachable.’ With the onset of war, performances and royalties were drying up. And then, in May 1941, he received a letter from Professor Wood suggesting that the University of Washington could offer him an appointment as visiting lecturer there, affording him ‘the opportunity for research and creative work which might be shared with any advanced students capable of profiting by it.’

Bartok responded enthusiastically, particularly as he had already had the chance to speak with Professor Melville Jacobs about the University’s extensive collection of Native American recordings in its Anthropology Department. Perhaps, they thought, mindful of Bartok’s excellent transcriptions of Hungarian and Rumanian music, he could turn his attention to the twenty-five thousand or so recorded examples of this music.

The folder of correspondence makes for sad reading. The Columbia University appointment dragged on longer than anticipated, the war intervened preventing further staff expansion and Bartok’s health began to deteriorate. The handwriting in Bartok’s letters mirror this disintegration: they begin with his immaculate calligraphy and slowly dissolve into a series of barely decipherable scrawls. A nice idea, yes, one that might have saved Bartok for several more decades beyond the age of sixty-four when he died, virtually penniless, in New York on 26 September 1945.

What if Bartok had transcribed this music, I wondered, would it have given a new direction to American music? But even the most cursory listening to a very few samples of the recorded collection was enough to suggest that, although it would have provided him with physical security for several more years, at least, it may have provided little inspiration for further creative growth, such is the very basic nature of the drum patterns and chants.

So, this little movement imagines what might have happened had Bartok processed some of that music into a work for, say, that very ‘New World’ combination of instruments—clarinet, violin and piano—which convene in his *Contrasts*, written for Benny Goodman in 1940. In a sense, the three instruments debate the subject matter and attack the task at hand—Bartok working with two graduate assistants, perhaps.

After a series of false starts, the ensemble examines a series of modal melodies, a heated discussion which yields a cadenza for the clarinet, perhaps the assertive voice of Bartok himself. Then, the drumming begins in the lower registers of the piano, over which we hear a terraced dialogue for the two melody instruments. The discussion ends unresolved.

Further episodes in this series may take George Gershwin to Charleston, South Carolina, and may follow Dvorak to the wilds of Iowa, and eavesdrop on Ravel as he charms the lurching ladies of Houston.

These pieces were written for and commissioned by the Verdehr Trio and are dedicated to two good friends in Washington, D.C., Mark and Kathleen Carrington. My thanks to all five, patient souls all."

—Vincent Plush

Vincent Plush (born 1950, Adelaide, Australia) completed a Bachelor of Music degree in composition and music education at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Further study through a Harkness Fellowship was undertaken at Yale University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of California at San Diego.

Following his undergraduate degree, he moved to Sydney where he worked as a concert and radio planner for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and taught composition and music history at the Sydney Conservatorium and the Australian Film School. At Sydney University in 1976, he founded the Seymour Group, which is the longest surviving contemporary music ensemble in Australia.

A deep interest in New World cultures and the music of Charles Ives brought Plush to the United States from 1981 to 1999. During that time, he taught at several institutions, all the while composing, researching, and working in broadcasting and journalism. He contributed over two hundred interviews with American composers for the Yale Oral History Project and oversaw the Australian music presence in North America at the Atlanta Cultural Olympiad in 1996.

Upon returning to Australia, Plush was engaged as the MacGeorge Professor at the University of Melbourne and Visiting Professor at Southern Cross University in Lismore. He moved to Brisbane in 2000 and joined the faculty of the Queensland Conservatorium of Griffith University. Additionally he became the voice of ABC Classic FM broadcasts and a music commentator and correspondent for several national and international publications. In 2002, he directed *Mini^max*, the world's first festival of post-minimalist music. In 2004, he produced the *Voices* series of Australian music concerts for the Brisbane Writers Festival and directed the first of the *Encounters* series of *Meetings in Australian Music* for the Queensland Conservatorium. For both these enterprises, he received awards from the Australian Music Center.

Plush moved to Canberra in 2007 to become Manager of the Recorded Sound branch of the National Film and Sound Archive. The same year, he was responsible for curating the three hundred events associated with the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Queensland Conservatorium. Subsequently, he was named Head of National Cultural Programmes at NFSA and Director of Research and Development.

As a composer, Plush has written over two hundred works in most forms and mediums, ranging from a series of works for multiples of solo instruments to specific pieces *d'occasion*, such as the ceremonial music created for the British Commonwealth Institute in London. Much of his music is animated by his interests in the byways of music history, especially shared elements in Australian and American histories, and historical figures and events. It also reflects his typically antipodean right-angled sense of humor and shows evidence of his extensive experience as a conductor and writer, broadcaster, and educator. His orchestral work *Pacifica* (1986) elicited the comment from Gyorgy Ligeti that "in time, *Pacifica* will be seen as one of the most important orchestral works of the late 20th century." John Rockwell of the *New York Times* described Plush as "possibly one of the most interesting composers and musical figures of his generation, anywhere."

Additional information is available at [www.vincentplush.com](http://www.vincentplush.com).