Listening to the Past

The context for music at Calthorpes’ House

Introduction

The project outcomes in relation to Calthorpes’ House are presented as a 20 minute ‘sound world’ – a distillation in the form of sound-recordings embodying the years in which the home was occupied. The Calthorpes’ House sound world is based on the Sheet Music Collection, the Piano Roll Collection, the Gramophone Record Collection, publications about the house including Dell Waterhouse’s autobiography Chortles, Chores and Chilblains, and books and articles dealing with Canberra’s history, oral history interviews and conversations with Dell and Dawn. There are a wealth of teaching resources relating to Calthorpes’ House, and I am indebted to Julie Rickwood who was Acting Access and Learning Officer for her contribution to providing important information relating to the musical life of Calthorpes’ House.

Description of the Residence

Calthorpes’ House was built and furnished for Harry and Della Calthorpe in 1927 in Red Hill - a suburb intended for wealthier Canberra residents, based on the larger size and higher price of the housing blocks. It was a feature of Canberra’s development that residential development was planned on the basis of the income of various levels of 1920s society.

As with the two other house museums, I wanted to investigate the question of what sounds people occupying different physical spaces, the children, the parents and the maid– could hear ‘spilling’ across these boundaries. For example, did the sound of the pianola carry down to the girls’ bedrooms? Would Mrs Calthorpe hear singing games played by the children? Would the children hear the maid singing? Also, I wanted to record – or at least note down - the different voices of objects, and equipment in the house, such as the individual sound of the back-door closing; the sound of saucepans simmering; the closing and opening of the boot box and the bread delivery door. These particular sounds and the recordings of the piano restoration of the Mugga-Mugga and Lanyon pianos are to be found in separate sound libraries.

The House is a substantial private residence within extensive grounds in comparison with the smaller 2 bedroom cottages of a similar era built in Ainslie for government employees. Calthorpes’ House has 3 bedrooms and a maid’s room, and in addition to the normal utility rooms, it boasts a breakfast room, dining room and servery, sitting room and two sheltered verandahs. Music making by family members took place, formally, in the sitting room and informally throughout all other rooms. Although a well-built house, the sound of music carries between the discrete spaces within the house and the pianola especially can be heard in the front garden and verandahs.

As members of the wealthier middle class, the Calthorpes’ ensured that music was embedded in their well-organised social activities with others of their class and in those of their children. Musical evenings at home were warmly hospitable, as were the entertainments at Mugga-Mugga, but the degree of affluence of the Calthorpes’ differed
greatly from that of the Curley family. The 1920s and 30s consolidated the early practice of home entertainment, modified by the relative abundance and affordability of sheet music and gramophone records for families with some means. In comparison with Lanyon and Mugga-Mugga whose music collections date back to early ballads passed down through oral transmission, the household music repertoire spans a period from the early 1920s up to the 1980s.

The Calthorpe Family in residence

The outstanding feature of Calthorpes’ House is of course that it was built and occupied by the one family for its entire life as a domestic residence. The original furnishings and contents were carefully maintained, and as newer appliances were acquired, the older ones simply moved over a little to make room for them. In this way, eras in the long life of the house are clear to the observer.

In a similar way, the musical life of the house accumulated in albums of sheet music, and the family philosophy was established by Harry Calthorpe, father to Dell and Dawn, who would often quote Hillaire Belloc: ‘It is the best trade to make songs and the second best to sing them’ – adding his own comment – ‘and third best is to hear them.’ ¹ Perhaps we have so much information about the music played and sung by the Calthorpes’ family because it existed as a response to daily life, rather than arising out of a culture of self-made music for survival as the early workers at Lanyon would have experienced.

Harry and Dell Calthorpe established certain songs as their signature family anthems, and these are still sung today by both daughters and granddaughter Jill Waterhouse. Always by Irving Berlin is the Calthorpe ‘theme song’, as it expresses the commitment to life-long love despite trials that might arise. Harry was ‘born with a singing heart’ and the coping strategies he instilled in his family were often expressed in song. For the Calthorpes’ family, popular music – both songs and dance tunes – were woven into daily life and maintained across three generations of their family in a way that mimics the transmission of traditional music. The meaning in the words of each of these key family songs has become layered and complex owing to the added associations of years of memories of the occasions at which the songs were sung. In a very real way, the songs are tribal – they carry the power of memories known only to the family members that sing them, and in the act of singing, the people and the emotions of past experiences are re-called. Of course, these are well-known popular songs, and visitors can join in happily with the singing – but within the context of Calthorpes’ House, when Always and other favourites are sung by family members, they connect the singers with previous times and with other singers who are no longer living.

After returning from the First World War, Harry Calthorpe established himself as a stock and land agent, but he found himself facing a financial battle with the onset of the Great Depression. Dawn recalled this era:

Although it could be much worse, the frugal life is not easy. A small dividend from shares in the Steam Laundry and the petrol Bowser, together with the odd stock and

¹ Chortles, Chores and Chillblains, Dawn Waterhouse, ACT historic Places, Canberra, 2002, p.46
property sale keep the wolf from the door. Pop [Harry Calthorpe] sings ‘Keep the Home Fires Burning’ as he throws on a back log or ‘Happy Days are Here Again,’ if there is the slightest upturn.

Ever hopeful Pop tries his luck with State lottery tickets but when they prove a dead loss he resorts to the old saying, ‘Nothing Lasts forever’ and whistles ‘Look for the Silver Lining’ and I see it.2

Music at Calthorpes' when occupied was divided into:

1. Spontaneous performance on journeys or in everyday life, such as lullabies and Dawn’s ‘music to grill a chop to’ – recorded on a cassette tape and sent to Jill Waterhouse as a present.

2. Formal music instruction – Del played the piano very well and practiced regularly;

3. Organised performances by the children for home entertainment. Concerts included piano solos, recitations, juggling, harmony singing, acrobats and fairy dancing.

4. Imitation of musical stars such as Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin.

5. Re-writing the lyrics of popular songs to reflect a new subject. Eg The Teddy Bear’s Picnic was re-written as:

   We’re having a party at Calthorpes’ House
   Especially for Children’s Day
   We’re Having a Party at Calthorpes’ House
   And everyone’s come to play
   The games that Grandma loved in the past
   Old favorite games that last and last
   Today’s the day her Teddy is having his party.

6. Adult parties – such as the Cathorpes’ housewarming when ‘friends stayed until dawn, singing and dancing round the pianola’ (Calthorpes’ 2002:29).

7. Dance parties such as the Bon Voyage party in the 1950s at which the living room carpet was rolled back and the strip the Willow, the foxtrot and the waltz were danced.

8. Songs round the pianola for the grandchildren: eg Jill Waterhouse recalled singing Peter Rabbit reading the words from a pianola roll that carried black and white images of the rabbits following the perforations. Another ‘Calthorpes’ Anthem’ is the Destiny Waltz, which combines the entertainment of singing along as the bellows are pumped, with lyrics that expressed the dedication of love and marriage valued by the family:

   Life with its pain
   With its toil and its tears
   Has at least one crown

2 Ibid.
That we may wear through all the years
On ours be that crown
Ever love from today
And our dream shall endure
When the morning turns to grey.

So come beloved come
It is the hour of love
The world is at our feet
The dawn of gold above
Love I want you near
Through all life may send
You – that is enough
Loving you to the end.

The W.H. Paling Victor Pianola is central to the musical life of the house. Its capacity to be played manually or mechanically is a symbol of Canberra’s transition from pioneering life to urban prosperity. Victor pianos were heavy and sturdily built instruments often bought by schools and music teaching establishments - sometimes criticized for their harshness of tone, but praised for their resilience after enduring a flood (as several did in St Mary's convent, Lismore, NSW up until the 1980s). A Player Piano enabled enthusiasts of all skill levels to take a turn at providing the accompaniment for a sing-along or dance party, and the Calthorpes’ loved to entertain in this manner.

For Jill Waterhouse, grand-daughter of Harry and Dell, each room in Calthorpes’ house has a musical association. The Master bedroom contains the 1940s hit ‘I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts’, the Rose Room has the chant ‘It’s raining its pouring’ and the songs ‘Yellow Rose of Texas’ and the ‘Tennessee Waltz’. The bathroom echoes with the chant ‘Oh Jemima where’s your Uncle Jim?’ and the dining room holds wartime songs and Deanna Durbin’s hits. ‘Singing in the Rain’ belongs in the breakfast room and, somewhat surprisingly, the living room resonates with Abba’s ‘Fernando’ and ‘Love is the Sweetest Thing’ form the 1930s. Music and memory vibrate together to add a vital dimension to the act of living. When visitors share in these recollections and recreate the household repertoire, they
partake of the house’s particular atmosphere, but singing or listening will also unlock their own personal memories or emotional responses to the music. Music within Calthorpes’ House was made against the background of a mechanized house. The gadgets and ‘mod-cons’ and the attention that could be allocated to housekeeping and household life by a maid, Mrs Calthorpe and the girls is the era that is the precursor of our own in Canberra – the transition from farming life to urban life.

THE CHOICE OF MUSIC TO CREATE THE CALTHORPES’ SOUND WORLD

1. **Always**
   The Calthorpes’ theme song (see notes above) had to be represented and this is recorded as a sing-along around the piano, with Sandy France at the Keyboard. Always was written in 1925 by Irving Berlin as a wedding gift for his wife Ellin McKay. Not only were the lyrics dedicated to her, but the Royalties as well!

2. **On the Good Ship Lollipop**
   Dawn was a great fan of Shirley Temples and her large collection of memorabilia and sheet music is a feature of the Calthorpes’ House collection. The song appeared in the 1934 movie, *Bright Eyes*. It sold over 400,000 copies in sheet music form.

3. **I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts**
   Another fine sing-along item, with its associations for Jill Waterhouse was important to include as the kind of song that would have been popular with young and old at parties of all kinds. It is classed as a novelty song, and was written in 1944 by a collaborative group of composers who went under the pseudonym of Fred Hetherington.

4. **Look for the Silver Lining**
   Another Calthorpes’ family ‘anthem’, this song was a particular favourite of Harry Calthorpes’ as a song whose lyrics he would genuinely believe in whenever times were hard. It has had a long life, written in 1919 for an unsuccessful musical, but reused in the hit show, *Sally*. Judy Garland’s version remains popular.

5. **The Destiny Waltz**
   Composed by the English conductor Sydney Baynes in 1912, the waltz is a classic of the light music genre, and sold over a million copies. The Destiny Waltz has a swing that is very hard to resist for dancers.

6. **Teddy Bear’s Picnic**
   This song and the Destiny Waltz are played on the pianola and so carry the added fun of pedaling smoothly and synchronizing the words printed on the side of the music. Written as a melody by American, John Walter Bratton, the lyrics were penned in 1932 by Irish composer, Jimmy Kennedy.

7. **Wooden Heart**
   Popularised by Elvis Presley, *Wooden Heart* is both a song and an excellent dance tune. It was a favourite with Jill’s grandmother Dell, along with ‘It’s Now or Never’.
8. **Maurice Chevalier- Ananas (my own record in place of the Calthorpes’ Chevalier medley)**

The wind-up gramophone was popular with Dell and Dawn on hot summer days for entertainment, and the Calthorpes’ House record collection has 90 x 78 RPM discs to keep young arms active winding the mechanism and changing the needles. Maurice Chevalier had broad appeal to all ages, and his sense of humour livened up parties and home entertainment sessions from his hey-day in the 1930s and much later. While this recording is not identical to the Calthorpes’ house original, it is safer to play this copy than the original.

*Off to school –Photo provided by the Calthorpe family to the Girls Grammar School 90th Anniversary, https://twitter.com/_cgsS*