Music historiography in New Zealand faces a number of special challenges, and the paucity of comprehensive music history writing in the country prompts investigation. Significant contributing factors to the current situation turn out to lie in the unique social, political and cultural history of the nation, and certain limitations of narrative music history writing techniques in the Western tradition also play a role.

According to the current consensus of scholarly opinion, New Zealand was the last significant land mass on the planet to be settled by humans. The country consists mainly of two large islands, which have a combined land area approximately the same as that of the United Kingdom or Japan. The first settlers on the islands today known as New Zealand arrived from Polynesia, probably in the 3rd century C.E. For the following four hundred years they appear to have lived in isolation, gradually evolving the culture today known as Maori. The word “maori” in fact means “ordinary” or “plain”, and it was adopted by the Polynesian settlers to distinguish themselves from the new and different people who began to arrive in large numbers in the mid-19th century. These were Europeans, whom the natives called Pakeha, a word of uncertain origin. Certainly the Maori first speculated that the white beings who appeared in tall sailing ships with billowing sails and cannons were completely out of the ordinary, definitely not “maori”. In some quarters they initially were considered to be supernatural.

For a musician, an enduringly fascinating thing about the relationship between Maori and European is the fact that the very first meeting and interchange between the two peoples was a musical one. A detailed record of this encounter was entered in the journal written by explorer Abel Tasman, captain of the Dutch ship Heemskerk...
which sailed the South Pacific with its companion ship the Zeehaen in the 1640s. On 13 December 1642, Tasman first spotted the coasts of New Zealand and in succeeding days drew closer, seeking a safe anchorage. On 16 December contact was made with the inhabitants of the new land. Tasman reports:

We saw a number of lights on shore, and four boats close inshore, two of which came towards us ... the men in the two prows [of the canoes] began to call out to us in a rough hollow voice, but we could not understand a word of what they said. We, however, called out to them in answer, upon which they repeated their cries ... they also blew several times on an instrument of which the sound was like that of a Moorish trumpet; we then ordered one of our sailors (who had some knowledge of trumpet-blowing) to play them some tunes in answer. Those on board the “Zeehaen” ordered their second mate ... to do the same; after this had been repeated several times on both sides, and, as it was getting more and more dark, those in the Native prows at last ceased, and paddled off.7

So the first interchange between men from these two cultures, previously completely unknown to each other, was a sustained exchange of music, which continued until it grew too dark. This surely remains one of history’s most extraordinary musical encounters, and it was depicted by Isaac Gilsemans, a navigator and map-maker travelling with Tasman’s expedition.

7 Robert McNab, Historical records of New Zealand (Wellington: John MacKay Government Printer, 1914) vol. 2, 21. McNab states he has reproduced “the official translation ... published in Amsterdam in 1898”, although the translator is not named.
However, this amazing, improvised concert was soon to provide bloody evidence that music is not a universal language. On 19 December the Dutch launched a small rowing boat with seven unarmed sailors in it. Immediately the Maori sent two canoes towards it. The Maori attacked the Europeans and four sailors were killed; the other three were able to swim to the mother ship and safety. The Dutch then fired their guns at the Maori and drove them off, apparently without causing much damage. The genesis of this violent end to the first encounter between Maori and European lies in a musical misunderstanding. The perceived “rough voices” of the Maori probably were performing a haka, a ritualized chant of challenge. When the Maori sounded their “Moorish trumpet”, what Tasman heard was almost certainly a putatara, a musical and signalling instrument made by fixing a wooden mouthpiece to a large spiral sea shell. One of the putatara’s uses was to challenge strangers. The Maori trumpeting in this case was the music of war, an invitation to fight. On the other hand the Dutch trumpets played a variety of tunes intended to be welcoming. Neither side comprehended the meaning of the other’s music, a fatal misunderstanding.

A hundred and thirty years would pass before the next encounter between Maori and Europeans, when James Cook arrived, leading his remarkable series of scientific voyages in the Pacific. His 1773 expedition included the highly knowledgeable English musician James Burney (1726–1814), son of the famed music historian Dr. Charles Burney. James Burney recorded numerous details of Maori music in his journal and collected musical instruments. From this point in the late 18th century on there exists a more or less continuous documentary record of musical matters in New Zealand, although the sources are not uniformly easy to locate or access.

Why then, over the three hundred and sixty years since Tasman first put pen to paper, has so little been written about the history of New Zealand music? Even today, apart from the country entry in The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians, there is only one general history: John Mansfield Thomson’s pioneering single volume Oxford history of New Zealand music published in Auckland as recently as 1991. Beyond that landmark effort, there are a handful of more specialized music books, virtually all published within the last thirty years. Some of these are on Maori music, a few on famous performers such as the opera stars Donald MacIntyre and Kiri te Kanawa, plus a small number on popular music topics.

Why has there been so little historical writing? In the first instance, it would be reasonable to wonder if there is anything worth writing about. The outstanding music historian John Mansfield Thomson sifted painstakingly through the evidence and had no doubts. The result of his research was the Oxford history, supplemented by its companion volume, Thomson’s Biographical dictionary of New Zealand composers. Yet, despite Thomson’s groundbreaking work and vindication of the subject matter, subsequent writing and publishing on New Zealand music history have been minimal. The question remains: why?

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8 King, The Penguin history, 97.
Although New Zealand born and educated, John Mansfield Thomson (1926–99) spent most of his working life as a musicologist, editor, and music commentator in London, where he accumulated a deep reservoir of experience, not least from founding and editing the journal Early music for the Oxford University Press, and editing a number of influential books, including Charles Rosen’s The classical style. In his 1994 article “Reflections on writing music history” Thomson identified some of the yawning gaps in existing historical research and writing on New Zealand music history, which he encountered when he was preparing his Oxford history. Apart from a few immediately obvious historical features of the preceding musical three and a half centuries of music, Thomson perceptively discerned:

There were other, then scarcely visible, but nevertheless important themes, of an anthropological nature. How had an English (and European) early-19th-century musical culture adapted itself to an entirely different environment? How had it related to an ancient Maori musical tradition, whose closest affinities lay with the Polynesian islands of the eastern Pacific? The Maori had imbued the land with a mythology intricately bound up with music but not immediately accessible.3

Here are two key issues which can help explain why potential music historians may have found it so hard to deal with the subject matter. Firstly, the transmogrification of 19th-century Western musical culture in a New Zealand environment is alone a challenging musicological topic to work on: an ongoing “indigenising” process has been complicated by the increasing globalisation of culture, a trend which has rocketed in pace since the advent of fast communications and the electronic mass media in the second half of the 20th century. The issue of decolonisation and indigenising is, of course, inextricably bound up with the old chestnut of cultural identity.4 In the case of New Zealand, that in turn is far from simple, because the nation has not had a monocultural identity for over 200 years now.

Furthermore, over the last 20 years popular culture studies—including in music—have flourished in universities and have been accompanied by a tranche of postmodern theory. This has exposed further complexities in any consideration of musical historiography.

As Thomson also notes, the place, the status and the accessibility of Maori music in New Zealand’s evolution as a nation has been a complex matter—and this has always been recognised by commentators. Symptomatically, there is not even a word in the Maori language which translates precisely into the English word “music”, so different is the view of music and its function in traditional Maori society. There is also a history of suppression of certain aspects of traditional Maori music, particularly by early Christian missionaries, because of the music’s very close ties with spiritual values on the one hand and sexuality on the other.5

Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht has observed that

both the concept and the substance of historiography as an autonomous science, with its critical use of sources, its study of method, and its fusion of historical research and

14 A general discussion of this issue may be found in David Novitz and Bill Willmott, eds., Culture and identity in New Zealand (Wellington: GP Books, 1989).
historical theory, are of European origin and correspond to a European concept of music: a concept both verging on and implicated with the scientific. Even the concept of a universal history of music is essentially a Western one.\(^6\)

Eggebrecht’s observation is highly germane to the situation in New Zealand. It is undeniable that music in the West is indeed scientific in many regards. On the other hand, Maori music is not. It is posited on an entirely different paradigm, and is culturally explicable only in terms of the Polynesian cosmology. Brian Flintoff, a leading maker of traditional Maori instruments, puts it thus:

All the different types of Maori song stem from the emotions displayed by the [Maori] gods during the creation aeons. There are songs of sorrow, anger and lament; of loneliness, desire and joy; of peace and love. The voices of the [Maori musical] instruments and the movements of the dance support and embellish the songs.\(^7\)

How is a musicologist to reconcile these two radically different musical paradigms in a historical viewpoint which is truthful to the roots of each musical culture, when the very idea of such a history is confined to just one them, namely the Western one? Unlike in the Western tradition, Maori music never became separated from direct interaction with the world of nature. It was never a stand-alone discipline. This was hard for early Europeans to understand, and by and large still is. As part of his influential studies in Maori culture published in the 1920s, the ethnographer Elsdon Best seems to have been aware of the problem but still did not know where to categorize music, and ended up including most of his writings on it—quite inappropriately—in a volume called Games and pastimes of the Maori.\(^8\) On the current political level, there is the added complication that the idea of writing history, being a European concept as Eggebrecht notes, is unavoidably connected with the process of colonization by the dominant culture. Why would the colonised culture want to participate in such a process, which could be seen as further extending European intellectual hegemony? The question of the autonomy of music and musical works is not new to historiography, and the relationship between historical objects and the scholar is neither static nor simple, as Leo Treitler reiterated,\(^9\) but in New Zealand it has a particularly sharp, public and politicised edge.

Probably the single most important factor in explaining the dearth of historical writings about New Zealand music at any kind of comprehensive level has been the absence of a broadly convincing historiographical method which is both aesthetically relevant to the New Zealand situation and politically acceptable. History writing of any kind in New Zealand continues to be a highly charged and politically loaded subject. An indication of this is the fact that the biggest selling, and most discussed, book published in New Zealand in 2004 was Michael King’s Penguin history of New Zealand. This book was remarkable not so much for its subject matter, as for its approach, which is even-handed, tolerant and free of overt political bias. The urgency and topicality of history


\(^{7}\) Flintoff, Taonga puoro, 12

\(^{8}\) Elsdon Best, Games and pastimes of the Maori: An account of the various exercises, games and pastimes of the natives of New Zealand, as practised in former times, including some information concerning their vocal and instrumental music (Wellington: Board of Maori Ethnological Research for the Dominion Museum, 1925).

writing had been noted nearly thirty years earlier, when Ian Wards wrote in 1978: “History [in New Zealand] is becoming a sort of contemporary reporting.” In music, the lack of an acceptable historiographic method for music has meant that there is no grand narrative or meta-narrative of the art form in New Zealand.

Some other factors which may have contributed to the conspicuous shortage of historical writings on New Zealand music history include the late development of a strong sense of nationhood; a long-standing attitude of anti-intellectualism in the country’s cultural make-up; the hugely dominating status of a single figure in art music composition; and the ephemeral nature of performed music and longstanding unavailability of source materials.

Before the coming of Europeans, Maori had no word for the country as a whole, their perspective was regional and tribal. The popular Maori name for New Zealand, Aotearoa, only became common in the early 20th century. Interestingly, 19th century British colonial settlements tended to continue the Maori pattern of regionalism, with even the famous politician Julius Vogel recommending in the 1860s in parliament that the two main islands become separate states. With such a late-developing political identity of nationhood, it is not surprising that a clear collective cultural identity has been slow to become distinctive.

A number of cultural commentators, such as the noted author on architecture and design Peter Shaw, have noted a persistent strand of anti-intellectualism in the New Zealand national character. Further, it can be argued that a continuing aversion to identifying patterns in artistic history betrays both an underlying insecurity and unexamined cult of originality. Such attitudes certainly have been present regarding New Zealand music in the past. An originality fetish holds powerful sway in many quarters, although “originality” is never defined. Even official arts council documentation includes written approval and encouragement of “innovation”, that is, originality, whatever that may be. The rising confidence of New Zealand music during the course of the 20th century happened to coincide with the rise of global modernism, which, especially after World War II, created a totemic fetish of innovation and originality—at least in name. This seems to have found a fertile host soil in a certain strand of New Zealand artistic individualism and confused isolationism.

Attempting to address this issue in light of his experience in writing the Oxford history of New Zealand music, John Thomson wrote of the fight by New Zealand composers in the mid 20th century to “dismantle the sterile apparatus of university music departments whose teaching was based on the tedious intricacy and current prohibitions of English theoreticians such as Ebenezer Prout”. Thomson went on to note that “One probable consequence of these struggles is that some of those who fought such battles remained suspicious of all overseas influences and erected in turn a defensive barrier against the outside world which became a sort of New Zealand provincial protectionism.” That attitude of defensive inwardness allowed some artists to maintain an anti-intellectual creative fiction of originality. In the case of music, post-

21 King, The Penguin history, 228.
22 Peter Shaw, Private communication with the author in February 2005.
World War II European modernist radicalism concerning the past could, in some cases, further mandate such a posture.

For the potential music historian, creating an all-embracing historical account which is interpretative and narrative, yet which includes such attitudes, becomes extremely delicate, to say the least. The actual result has been that, other than Thomson, no-one has been courageous enough to attempt it so far.

But even if a Lyotardian “grand narrative” is impossible, one might expect it to be feasible at least to create histories of particular genres of New Zealand music, especially within the familiar Western art music strands of song, symphony, concerto, string quartet, opera, and so on. A difficulty in doing even that has been the extraordinary and towering dominance of just one composer, namely Douglas Lilburn (1915–2001). Lilburn’s influence, while benign, is enormous, and not enough time has yet passed to allow his historical position to be placed in perspective. Symptomatically, in Thomson’s Oxford History of the second half of the book is broken into three sections: (1) “Forerunners”; (2) Douglas Lilburn; (3) “Composers since Lilburn”. In other words, the country’s whole field of composition in the 20th century is seen in terms of one person: Douglas Lilburn. It must be said that Thomson’s view reflects, and was completely in step with, general attitudes in the 1970s and 1980s when the book was written. So in the field of classical art music, until Lilburn’s shadow can be traced more dispassionately and viewed through the correcting perspective of historical distance, it may not be feasible to write a balanced account.2

A difficulty besetting anyone who might have thought of attempting anything approaching a complete history of New Zealand music has been, until very recently, the basic but crippling difficulty of accessing source materials. Music is, of course, intrinsically ephemeral and really exists primarily as sounds passing in time. In the cases of both Maori music and New Zealand folk music with European roots, the traditions are primarily aural, so there are few written primary sources, although for the period since about 1900 there exist some documentary sound recordings. But in New Zealand, even Western art music compositions have been difficult to track down, since, until quite recently, publication has been limited and recordings few. Live performances of new music in the majority of cases tend to be limited to a premiere—then the scores go off to lie silently on storage shelves. Even reasonably accessible and popular orchestral works in New Zealand would be lucky to receive three or four live, professional performances in a decade. Until the establishment of the New Zealand Music Archive at Wellington’s Alexander Turnbull Library in the 1980s (a specialist archival library funded directly by the government) it was extremely hard to locate and access a wide range of historical musical materials in any useful way, or even to find out what might exist. And it was not until the 1990s that the Centre for New Zealand Music opened and began to provide a centralised resource for research into contemporary music.

Although many of the basic resources for research have become available in the past twenty years or so, there is yet to emerge an acceptable historiographic tool for the music historian in contemporary New Zealand. What is needed is a procedure which can combine the familiar cultural-historical approach, begun by Thomson, with meaningful style analysis, in what is now an officially bicultural, but in fact increasingly

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2 The only significant genre study in New Zealand music history to have been published to date is John Dix, Stranded in paradise: New Zealand rock and roll—1955 to the modern era (2nd edition, Auckland: Penguin 2005).
multicultural, nation. In his author’s introduction to the *Oxford history*, John Mansfield Thomson summarised his aim in writing the book:

I have seen my prime task as that of recovering as much of the buried history of music in New Zealand as possible to provide a perspective and restore the continuity of the tradition.25

For the reasons cited above, it was beyond the human ability of any person to achieve that noble goal completely at the time. But Thomson was able to signal both to the public and to musical and scholarly communities, that substantial repertoires and traditions of music did exist in the country. He, more than anyone, was acutely aware of his book’s limitations, particularly in its final form after it had been savagely edited against his wishes. Yet the project was magnificent in conception and represents a powerful start. To date no scholar has been brave enough to take up the challenge and continue the historical project.

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