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Voices1(3)Nunns

## Te Ara Puoro: The Pathway of Sound

By Richard Nunns [|Author bio & contact info|](#)

*Mihi*

*Ko Ranginui koe te hauora*

*Ko Papatuanuku koe te wai u*

*Ko Tane koe te tai ao*

*Ko Rongo koe te hua*

*Ko Tangaroa koe te rehu tai*

*Ko tu koe o te mauri oho*

*E whakarara e nga matauranga*


*Puoro oro ake e nga reo*

*Tangi ko ake te mapu moteatea*

*Aue!*

*Ue!*

*Taukuri e!*



Richard has agonised for years over his situation, as a Pakeha (white person), in researching, revealing, and talking about the traditional instruments of the Maori. " I have always been a great believer in following obsessions; of following passions; and I suppose I am bound up in this, and the only way that one can allow oneself, or persuade oneself, that the journey is correct is that one attempts, in all humility, to do it as carefully and sensitively as one can. If in fact the journey is right, proper and correct, then the awhi, the tautoko, the support, the cherishing, the holding, the sharing will follow, and that really has been my experience. I cannot explain why I have been..what.. chosen.. why a mantle has been laid on my shoulders..why one acts as a medium or vehicle for something that has been lost for well over a hundred years? And I don't just mean the sounds: I mean the korero, I mean the functions, I mean the knowledge, have, gone, gone, gone."

When speaking of his work with Hirini Melbourne, Richard also paid a special tribute to Brian Flintoff, who, although not a musician, is the creator, the lateral thinker, the genius, behind the construction of the seemingly simple, but in fact hugely sophisticated, taonga puoro - traditional musical instruments. The trio - the red, black and white threads - have passed through many needles, and journeyed from marae to marae, in many canoe areas. "It is a journey that has consumed us," he said. All three have "day jobs", which maintain their households, making it possible for the journey to be a mahi aroha, a gift to the people to whom it belongs, for love.

To set the scene, Richard spoke about several of the orthodoxies that had been "tipped over" during their journey among the people: the young and, in some cases, the extremely old - as much as a century. He stressed how important it was that the journey had been a face-to-face activity, validating the knowledge that had been gained. The main sources of information hitherto have been the works of Best and of Johannes Andersen, which were based on fairly careful observation and presented as accurately as they could, not helped by Best's own admission that he was not well fitted to be observing and commenting on music. Best had the perspective of the Western Victorian gentleman, "...on a pedestal, looking down on people they genuinely loved but thought were vanishing, and trying to scabble down everything that they

possibly could because this was a vanishing race." Also, in the manner of the times, he assumed that Western music was the pinnacle of musical activity, while that of other peoples was regarded as primitive.

Certainly, Best and Andersen acknowledged the Maori were a great vocal people, but saw the instruments as "painful to the ears, simplistic and primitive in construction, and obscenely decorated." They were also, said Best, "few in number." In fact Hirini, Richard and Brian have already uncovered around forty distinctly different instruments, involving many techniques of playing: "...at least as wide and varied a canon of instrumentation as any indigenous people in the world."

Another orthodoxy to be challenged from these extensive journeys is the notion recorded, not only by Best and others who followed him, but also in the meagre references in Cook, D'Urville, and other observers, who naturally saw things from their point of view, that the purpose of music was entertainment, recreation and pastime. Indeed, Best's observations on Maori music are included in the book he entitled *Games and Pastimes of the Maori*. "Our journeys have shown us, in the sharing of these fragments, time and time again, until it becomes indisputable," says Richard, 'that these taonga, and the uses, the functions that they had, and the purposes that they were put to, bear virtually no relationship to entertainment as we understand it, and everything to do with matters to do with the wairua, matters to do with the spirit, and connecting with the spirit world, between he iho tangata and te iho Atua - those two states of being - everything to do with the main movements of life. We know, for instance, that some of these taonga or instruments were involved in conception; we know they were involved in the whare kohanga, at the time of labour and through childbirth, to ease pain; we know they were used throughout the country and canoe areas in a variety of mahi rongoa - ways of healing - and at all other times of human tragedy and trauma, mainly to do with death and the tangi. That is a radically different way of regarding the use of such instruments than Best could have observed.

"Another orthodoxy...is that we have, on occasion, seen kaumatua stand and say that these taonga and their functions and usages have no place in the work of women. We have to be hugely diplomatic in such circumstances, and respect the learning and experience that those people have had, but it does not stack up against what has happened in our journeys over the last twenty-five years." Richard described the frequent experience of arriving, by invitation, at a marae, and having the old people come in, watching carefully and often overtly suspicious, especially of a Pakeha among them, and ready to with-hold support. After ten minutes, though, when the instruments speak, the older women will come forward, "...inevitably women, the older women, who in fact cherish you, hold you, and say, 'I remember my great-grandmother saying...I don't know what it means, but I think it relates to instruments...' and a fragment will be shared among the tears." From these fragments a vast range of partial knowledge has been built up about the use of these instruments in matters pertaining to women. The more that these fragments are thought about and considered, and the more the instruments themselves are explored, the more it appears that about 80 - 90% of the voices are in fact the voices of women, and very few of them are distinctly male voices." Richard referred also to the predominantly female aspects of the shapes of many of the instruments.

"I hit the orthodoxies quite hard, because if you are excited about this session and go to the books, you will be confronted with another reality - totally and absolutely.

"These voices have been lost for a hundred years: we have had one or two players come through to the twentieth century, but to all intents and purposes the weave and fabric of the tradition were lost by about the 1880's. There is a whole complex raft of reasons why the tradition fell away as rapidly as it did. Perhaps it is ungenerous of me, but I think the missionaries played a great part. They were no fools: they were highly energetic and enthusiastic people who came to this country, but they had a real vision of what they wanted, and the voices of these instruments did not fit into that. A lot of them were quite able, intelligent, intuitive, and smart people, and they recognised that the uses of these voices, much as they detested them, were also usages in the domain of the spirit that they, in fact, wanted to occupy. While a lot of areas of tradition fell away, I'm sure that this was one which they saw as a sort of plug, or to use another metaphor, a lynch-pin to a body of knowledge which they could pull out and the whole thing would deflate more rapidly, and this is in fact what happened.

"Joe Malcolm said years ago, and it is still pertinent today, that this area of matauranga Maori, this area of knowledge, of performance skill, of all the bodies and traditions - this area is the only one that he could think of where in fact the thread has been entirely severed. If you take the metaphor that we like to use, of interwoven knowledge as the whariki or the mat, there is a

thread in here, in relation to these instruments, which has been completely broken. Our roles are that we are working towards the reparation of that thread, the restoration of the mat. The metaphor works beautifully too since it is very much a weave - a weave of sound."

Richard then demonstrated and shared some understandings about the kinds of instruments available and their voices.

The hue puru hau, or large gourd, is not always regarded by ethnomusicologists as a musical instrument, but it has an important voice. There were huge gourds, which came out in the great voyaging canoes, and the tohunga would have one, filled and stocked with significant karakia. Perhaps food would be short, or the canoe become becalmed, or a storm arise - particular major events would cause this great hue to be brought out, and the stopper removed, and the hue sounded to summon the aid that was needed for that occasion. It is a resonating, deep-voiced sound, embracing depth of knowledge. The hue has also become a container of knowledge for the group searching out these instruments.

A sliver of pounamu, or greenstone, was demonstrated with a striker. This was not, however, as it was heard: Richard explained that, from the fragmentary knowledge they have, they believe that there would be a number of these fine pieces slung along trestles around the fighting pa, where they would be used as signal, along with the big wooden logs, or pahu. This greenstone is called the pahu pounamu. The significance could well be wider than is known so far; the purpose that is known is to keep your company awake, and let others who might be tempted to besiege you know that the group is on guard. It is not surprising that from the Bay of Plenty to Waikaremoana, through Tuhoë and other Ringatu areas, the bell which rings out for the sacred service sounds much akin to the sound of the pahu pounamu.

"Really, in dealing with percussive types of instruments, the taxonomies that musicologists offer are not very useful. It has taken nearly a century for that particular discipline to ask the people, who can contribute different interpretations and ways of perceiving the sounds. For instance, the Chinese offer taxonomies based on earth, air, fire, and water; others use north, south, east, and west, rather than the Western classifications based on sound-making qualities.

"The hue rara - small, shaped gourds and seedpods for instance, used as shakers and rattlers for movement and dancing, celebrate movement and life. Women would spend hours shaping these so that they could dance to them effectively. Sometimes the seeds would be removed and replaced with other substances like river gravel, to give a wider range of sounds.

"Some of the tokere - small percussive instruments - are almost akin to castanets. Some informants remember women dancing with these in both hands. They were made from wood, or from the base of the flax leaf.

"There is the kukau, or roria, which fell into disuse when the metal Jews' harp came to this country - many Jews' harps formed part of the payments in New Zealand Company purchases. These would set the rhythm to haka, and also people would sing and dance to them. There is just one representative of the string family, known as the ku, which is played with the mouth blowing along its one string, as one sees in New Guinea and South America. It is a very private instrument.

"From the deep south, the Kari Mamoe and Waitaha people, comes the tumutumu, which was not specifically related to healing that I know of, but certainly related to the well-being of any group, for it was the instrument used in the whare purakau, or house of learning, where, from first frost to last frost, the young ones, or those selected, would gather, and stone would ring on stone, the sound echoing all through the night, with a very regular pattern, to keep the pace of their utterances and oral learning." Richard demonstrated to the group the fragments of a creation chant which signalled the arrival of sound in the cosmos, considerable ahead of human thought. This aspect of knowledge is secret and sacred, and to be shared only with respect and caution. It is discreet material.

"It is also an aspect of knowledge which is special to each canoe area. As I have what is in essence the very privileged position of being able to travel freely in all canoe areas, we begin to see over-looping patterns: there is a whole way in which this country is wrapped in sound; there is a whole way in which this country is named in sound. We have a growing list of well over two hundred sound names for places, which are quite largely vanished, all too often losing their integrity and origins under the developers' bulldozers. One instance is the vanishing of burial caves in one area; caves which sounded warnings of death.

"Another instrument, the pakura, is made from flexed bone, which works with chordal chanting and resonations, activated by scraping, and the use of lips and teeth, dancing and changing the timbre in ways that are hugely sophisticated and complex - and none of us can do it!

"Humming and spinning tops, now used mostly for recreation, once had many more significant uses. They were intricately carved and shaped, and were used by tohunga as matakite - foresight and prophecy. Depending on how the top sang and how it gave voice, the tohunga made a judgement - or, in some circumstances, it could be used for the parcelling-out of land.

"Nor should we forget the use of body music, and of the poi, made in the old way where the raupo sheath was dug from the heart of the plant, down in the mud. Many of the old people lament the loss of the sibilant sound of the short poi, made from the raupo, and lament the harsh sound of the high-speed mid-and-long poi made from hard plastic, however skilfully they are used. The raupo poi was made by folding and re-folding the sheath of the plant within the hand. The rhythmic swish of the piu piu is another element in this range of musical sound.

"Another instrument, known in the north as the purerehua, or butterfly or moth, because it flies, is called in the south the hamumu ira garara, or summoner of food as it was used to entice lizards from under rocks, probably for ritual eating. A kuia speaks of it as 'the voice of the mother' and refers to its shape as purely female. It is made from bone, wood or stone, and is swung, creating a powerful roar, implicitly associated with ira atua, the spirit world. Its primary use was the summoning of rain, although in some areas it is associated with the summoning of tears at a tangihanga. Its usage seems to be, throughout the world, only to do with spiritual matters. It seems just as wrong when a cultural voice is employed as a mere sound effect, however remarkable, as occurred with this instrument in, for instance, the film of Once Were Warriors."

Other instruments have to do with the summoning of birds. The ritual taking of the kereru involved an instrument made from a small hollowed gourd, with holes placed on either side and pukeko feathers at the end. These baffled the air and enhanced the sound when the instrument was swung to attract the pigeon. Other calls were produced on stone callers and others made from leaves - tua roria. A wide range of instruments, using bone or wood, were produced so that a skilled hunter could entice the birds with distress or mating calls. Bone was exceptionally good for instruments, as it was versatile and could be carved and hollowed to make kouauau, or flute-like instruments. Dog bone, or kuri, moa, and all albatross and the big seabirds were among those used, and human bone was not unknown.

"One specific healing instrument is made of stone, and designed to relieve pain in backs, joints, and so on. As with any holistic healing process, it involved karakia, manipulation, herbal medications. In this case, the stone is laid on the area of pain, and a tapping takes place to locate the absolute source of the pain. It would seem that these techniques may be comparable to those based on the meridians that are used in acupuncture, where the healer can ponder on the acoustic qualities and possibly relate them to the sound waves in healing."

Another instrument with a specific healing capacity was the porotiti. This was a disc, rotated between the hands by flax threads, which sang as it spun. It could be used to set the pitch for nga moteatea or laments, or for new compositions. But it also set up ultrasonic vibrations, clearly sensed by Richard's audience, which served to clear sinuses. It was spun over the chests of sleeping children who were suffering from colds or influenza, to help loosen the mucus. It was also used by people suffering from rheumatism or arthritis. "The old ones were well on to the powers of ultra-sound long before the present clinics. The disc - in this case of wood - has ears on it, which collect the wind and create that vibration: the frequency of vibrations has an enormous effect on physical systems."

At different times and in different places, all these instruments had their own playing styles, and spoke with their own voices. Using the kouauau, Richard demonstrated a diversity of sounds. Among these were one made of dog-bone, another of toru, or royal albatross, and one of wood, which has a very different sound again. There are many scientific and acoustic reasons and properties, but each instrument and style demands respect and was used in its own way. In different areas, for instance, one hears of the kouauau being used to heal a broken bone, played in a particular way, or to help conception, or to promote the growth of plants, or to ease labour. Each of these functions dictated a different playing style, including one where the player vocalises and plays at the same time. There is some danger that, with the kouauau now being heard in the public media, these special applications and usages will recede even further.

"A new discovery - and that is why this instrument is in bamboo, just a mock-up - is an instrument known as the pumotumotu, which is the Tuhoe word for fontanel. This was played in

a very different way, with a notch, as far as our informant can remember, into the open fontanel of the new baby at the point where it was closed. It was originally made of wood.

"Another different type of flute is the nguru, a small bent shape, that is usually referred to as a nose-flute. There was considerable controversy as to whether it was in fact played with the nose or not: early observers said that there was a nose-flute, but later scholars thought that the early observers had transferred their knowledge of the bamboo nose-flute of other Pacific peoples to the New Zealand setting. However, we work from the position of believing what people tell us, and the people of the Far North, especially, insisted that the old traditions included the playing of the instrument with the nose. It does play well with the mouth, but it is also spectacular with the nose. Indeed, the Northern people, along with others, specifically relate the taking of the airua, the spirit, through the nose. Perhaps, too, we might speculate that you are playing sacred instruments, and your mouth is the utterer of sacred things, and yet you have to defile that every time you want to feed with the most noa element of cooked food, so that every time you want to sustain yourself you must destroy the whole tapu of the mouth... so what excitement there must have been to be able to shift this area of music-making away from that orifice that causes such a dilemma.

"Another thing is that the reaction among the old people from marae to marae has been amazing; they have not seen these instruments in their life, there are tears and all sorts of excitement as the instruments are shown and used, but as soon as you play with the nose, the old people turn to each other and there is a complete change, as they turn to each other and say 'He tangi korero, he tangi korero.' This is a technique where a lead woman, amongst many, both cries and calls out information at the same time. The people are hearing the suppressed crying of the heart - aesthetic and spiritual qualities that they do not hear when it is played with the mouth.

"Trumpets, made of shell, have been written off as brash signalling instruments, but we have learned that baffles, mutes and the heel of the hand were also used to give a whole range of possibilities. Knowing some of the korero about these instruments, one can use different playing methods to convey different moods. The long wooden trumpet, or pukuea, is another we have learned about. The literature described it as a war trumpet, shouting down from the palisades. This is almost certainly true. But around Ruatoki, the edge of Ngati Awa and Tuhoe and so on, we know that the instrument was associated with the most peaceful activity of all - the planting of the kumara. There is always a light and dark side to every story. This instrument, among others, was also never allowed to whistle, because the tohunga considered that this was a way spiritual or god-like information was received. There are certain things you can do with this instrument which are not unrelated to the sounds of the didgeridoo, where one can vocalise and split sound in very strange ways to create all kinds of effects.

"Finally, the last instrument, the putorino. I left this to last because, however strange these instruments may have sounded to you, all appear in some shape or form in other cultures. But this one, we believe, is unique. It is unique because it is a piece of wood, cut into two, carved in particular ways, specialised chamber inside, glued and bound back together, and of course decorated with carving outside. Why is it unique? It has two voices: it has a male voice; it has a female voice. It has a trumpet; it has a flute, each manipulated from the centre.

"The putorino has the urgent call, kokiri o te tane - the voice of the man - to summon people together; the instrument was then turned, with all the finger placements like the manaia, and the voice now becomes te waiata o te wahine - the woman's song - essentially a tangi; the voice which would have accompanied tragedy. This instrument could also be used with the voice, with a sound as if the voice had bubbled up from the stream: a strange, weird, internalised sound.

"I would like to finish with a story, to put in perspective our journey over the last thirty years. We now would play less than 70% of our time to physical human audiences. Instead we are required, or begged, to take these voices back to the land: to return them to the whenua itself, to sacred sites. This seems to be our role for the greater portion of our time. This story relates specifically to Nga Tahu, to the West Coast, and to the kaitiaki, the people who are the guardians of pounamu, of Arahura. We were working in Mawhia, in Greymouth, and came to the end of the workshop. I noticed some older ladies sitting very still and quiet, when a tiny voice asked what I was doing the next day. Needless to say, my earlier plans were set aside, and the next day we went on the Arahura, with waiata, karakia, and other ceremonies. My role was to carry some of these taonga, and to play to the river. We moved on, and again had waiata and karakia. Again we moved, and I played perhaps four or five instruments.

"Then I became aware of some excitement around me, and when I opened my eyes I saw that the animation and tears were because a fish - an exquisite piece of greenstone or pounamu - had swum into the pool to the music itself. The people asked me to wade into the river and bring it out, which I duly did. I passed the fish of pounamu to the people, watching it as it changed colour out of its own element.

"That fish travels now on the journey with the family of instruments, and its story and the pounamu stone itself is passed among the people before restoring it to its kete with the musical taonga.

"On closing, I cannot do better than to echo the sentiments of my fellow traveller, Hirini Melbourne:

*Tihe mauri tu...*

*Anei au te tangata e tu whakamiharo ake nei ki nga rongu o te ao. Me pehea ra taku whakaputa i oku rongu? Kai roto ko nga pukahukahu, te nohonga o te hau o Tawhirimatea. Whakaputahia ake i te waha, i te ihu hoki. Tenei ko taku ate, ko taku uma, te whare o te aroha hai whakaata ake te ngu o taku wairua e. Tenei ko oku ringa hai kapu i nga taonga puoro i waihangahia mai e o tatou matua tipuna. Anei hoki ko oku ngutu hai whakapa ki nga ngutu o nga taonga puoro, kia rarongoa ai ano o ratau reo ki te ao turoa.*

*Tihe mauri ora!*

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## Note

Rattle have recorded Hirini Melbourne and Richard Nunns performing compositions on the traditional instruments described in this article. Available on both CD and tape, the recording is entitled Te Ku Te Whe. CD RAT-D004; chrome tape RAT -C004.

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