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Fingal's Cave

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is Senior Lecturer in the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand. A member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network and the New Zealand Society of Authors, Gail has also been the curator for the Readers and Writers section of the Hamilton Gardens Festival of the Arts since 2010. She is currently an advisory editor for *TEXT* journal and a founding co-editor of *Meniscus* literary magazine, having also been a member of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs executive committee since 2004. Gail's research interests include writing poetry, reading and reviewing contemporary fiction, and writing for radio. She has edited several anthologies of student writing, and a historical collection of writings associated with gardens, *Writers in the gardens* as well as regularly writing papers and articles for *TEXT* and *Great writing* journals on the history and teaching of writing.

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Few sounds give such an air of respectability to a neighbourhood as bagpipes. The lone warbling of even the most excruciating beginner cast an air of dependability over the most derelict of streets. The presence of the Merton Piper's Hall, up a dowdy cul-de-sac at one edge of the trotting track, and behind a main thoroughfare of car yards and funeral parlours, lent comfort to the many pensioners and single-income families that seemed to congregate there.

This Piper's Hall, a grey, prefabricated building of modest, even bashful, proportions, burped up from a plain of asphalt, its steep concrete steps jutting suddenly up to lead to a glass and wooden door that gave a vicious kick-back action. The doorway was so narrow and well swung that pipe bands had ceased to march through it in training, preferring the safety of pounding the perimeter of the inner hall, or stepping and turning on the bare dusty car parking space, once all the cars had been removed to a safe distance.

The hall was rarely unoccupied. There were the pipers, naturally, who trained on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, for beginners and advanced pipers, respectively. Before special occasions, such as Caledonian Society Ceilidh's, Christmas parades or competition times, they practised on Saturday mornings, even parading down one or other of the secretive suburban roads, and collecting an audience of amused onlookers. Most weekdays, the hall was taken up with community activities – jumble sales, old-folks' morning teas and concerts, local playgroup mornings, League of Mothers' bring-and-buy stalls, Brownie and Scout packs. In fact, the hall was the centre of life in this treeless yet shady end of town.

Once a month, on a Wednesday, the first Wednesday in each month, the respectability of the Pipers' Hall was graced with the charm of art. The august British Music Society, or rather the local branch, in the persons of the Misses Sinclair, teachers of violin and piano respectively, and Mr Allen D'Arcy, Head of Music at the High School and Director of the Male Voice Choir, would arrange an evening of musical performance for their small, but devoted, membership.

The iron-framed piano would be wrenched out from the wings of the wooden stage, and the backdrop with its crossed swords, tartans and thistles, would be artfully hidden behind thick black curtains. The stage would be enshrined with dangerous-looking vases of tall gladioli, lilies and agapanthus. A final touch of decadence was the addition of a standard lamp from the home of the Misses Sinclair, which was reverently placed near the piano or planted between the music stands of other performers. A rigid, simple wooden pole with a conical linen shade, this standard lamp was the most complicated part of the evenings' arrangements, requiring Mr D'Arcy to take two trips to the Piper's Hall; one with the Misses Sinclair who had never learned to drive, and another with the standard lamp which was so inflexible as to take up most of his car, on the diagonal.

Mr D'Arcy drove a 1951 Wolsey, even in 1974. His suit was tweed, his shoes had leather uppers, downers and inners. His accent was brisk, his manner clipped. He had been born in Kaitangata but his parents, upbringing and education had collaborated to make him forget this fact. He smoked a pipe. To be truthful, he was so busy that he rarely lit the pipe, but was so often seen packing, stuffing, stroking and sucking at it

that it seemed a natural appendage to his face and hands. When he placed the unlit pipe in his mouth there was a satisfying completion about the way the tobacco curling out of the pipe strained upwards towards the hairs curling out of his nose, then upwards and outwards towards those curling from his brow.

The Misses Sinclair respectively loved and feared Mr D'Arcy. Adelaide, the younger, taught violin. She still practiced fervently, although her only performances these days were to correct the positions and fingerings of her students or at the Society's Christmas concert. There, the sisters would perform from their shrinking repertoire; perhaps arrangements of the Liszt 'Hungarian Rhapsody' or the lighter 'In A Monastery Garden'. After one spirited rendition of the Liszt, Mr D'Arcy had once remarked to Adelaide that her playing betrayed the fire of gypsy blood. That was why she loved him.

Alexandra, the elder Sinclair, who, unlike her sibling, had not been born en route for New Zealand, but rather, sedately, in Sussex, was more timid than her wild colonial sister. She was content to accompany Adelaide and any other performers who needed her services. The combination of hesitancy in manner and refinement in technique made her a most sensitive, unobtrusive accompanist, and she was very highly regarded.

If she was a modest performer, Miss Alexandra Sinclair was a formidable teacher. She expected absolute commitment of her pupils, drilling them assiduously in scales, arpeggios and aural training. Each new piece was introduced with an historical account, the pupil taking notes. To her select pupils, Miss Sinclair seemed to know everything about music. But then, she only selected for them music that she knew.

Miss Sinclair was a snob. That was why she feared Mr D'Arcy. His brusque British-ness was suspect, his energy phenomenal, his virility unquestionable. In his shaggy, tobacco-stained way, he did not seem to her to embody the qualities she associated with the idea of being 'musical'. Furthermore, there was an alarming tendency in his programming of concerts towards modernism. A tide of Bolsheviks seemed to be encroaching upon the small millpond in which she flourished. Liadev, Prokofiev, Scriabin, Stravinsky; she loathed their atonality and feared the percussive vigour in their rhythms. There was no charm, no 'music' in their scores, she would tell her pupils, dissuading them from any interest.

One of Miss Sinclair's senior piano pupils was a Piper's Hall local girl. Karen McKenzie had been virtually reared there, having attended playgroup, Brownies, and First Aid classes. Her father, Jim, played side drum for the Centennial Pipe Band in his spare time and worked as foreman in a mechanics yard on the main road. Her mother, Annie, attended League of Mothers, League of Mercy and assisted with various charitable mornings for the Old Folks' Society and the Crippled, Maimed Association.

The McKenzies lived just along from the hall, a convenience for Karen's attendance at British Music Society evenings, or soirees, as they preferred to call them. As a beginner she had performed the bass part of a duet of Tchaikovsky's 'Marche Slav', ('The only MUSICAL Russian!, Miss Sinclair senior had sighed). Karen progressed to solos – 'Fur Elise', 'Alla Turca', even a little Bach – preludes but not fugues.

While most of Miss Sinclair's clientele were the offspring of professional fathers and society mothers, Karen had maintained a niche in their circle for her diligence and sensitivity as a student performer. She cycled every Wednesday from school across town to the hilly, tree-lined suburb and large old wooden house where old Mr Sinclair had finally reposed with his books, collection of early keyboards, flutes, violins and, of course, his daughters. A retired musicologist and a widower, Mr Sinclair had needed his girls to administer his correspondence and domestic needs. They, devotees and daughters to the muses, had complied long after his death and well into middle-age.

Karen, now a plump, bland sixteen, loved the dark quietness of the Sinclair museum with its oak panelling and hallway filled with long glass-topped cases of musical ephemera. To visit was a privilege, to breathe was to absorb not only atmosphere, but history. Best of all, she loved to wait in the front study while Miss Sinclair's previous lesson was finishing. She would move between the crammed-in keyboards – a faded red harpsichord, the low, square piano, a family of uprights, shelves of boxed clavichords and spinets, closed up like coffins of tiny children. There was even a Pianola, which Miss Sinclair had once demonstrated during a keyboard history lesson. A few bars of the 'Maple Leaf Rag' had sounded, jeering loudly against the sedate and highly-strung instruments, before Miss Sinclair stopped the scroll as if in shock that her father might have collected such a sound.

The green darkness of the house with its acreage of soft rugs and carpets was alien to Karen's experience. Her own barren suburban upbringing had not equipped her for the barrage to sensibilities that the Sinclair place created and, over the years, awe changing to affection, she had come to recognise this as the centre of a world of ideals. She saw the meanness of her home surroundings, the lack of poetry in her father's occupation, the lowliness of her mother's charitable acts. She came to loathe pipe bands and popular music, and lost interest in discussing music with them. A clever girl and hardworking; as long as she was doing well they were prepared not to worry. It was probably just a phase in a 'time of change', which was Annie McKenzie's useful term for puberty, the menopause and all passages in-between.

Karen was changing. But this cycle of change had not ended. So well drilled was she by her teacher's regime, she had begun to outgrow her tutelage. Practising reading at sight had led her to reach beyond the scores of long dead composers into the twentieth century for new challenges. Admittedly a few latter day composers had slipped over Miss Sinclair's undefined but rigid musical picket fence; Debussy had 'atmosphere', Hubert Parry had 'tradition'. Karen could only surmise that her teacher did not mind a little discord, so long as it was resolved. Quickly. Back to the dominant key.

The problem was that Karen had begun to enjoy the ingenuity and complexity of the moderns. This new enjoyment had been nourished by Mr D'Arcy's music classes at the high school which had introduced Karen and her classmates to the 'Rite of Spring' and the thrum of new rhythms and impulses. Furthermore, she was achieving new popularity as a pianist, playing requests for her school friends in the lunch hours – they had only to hum to her or give her the music and she could play it for them immediately. Musicality was taking on new meanings.

What with Miss Sinclair's inflexibility and Karen's 'time of change', it was inevitable they should come to a passage of discord where Karen would not wish to revert to the dominant key.

They clashed over 'Fingal's Cave'.

It was Karen's final year at school. Soon she would be leaving home, the town of Merton and Miss Sinclair, for Teacher's College. It had been a busy year preparing for school exams and passing her piano examinations with distinction. As a relaxing treat, Miss Sinclair had selected Mendelssohn's 'Fingal's Cave' as a final study piece.

'This is a piano arrangement of the famous tone poem by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. The piano stands in for a vast symphonic orchestra, recreating all the passion of the sea upon a wild and desolate coast in the Hebrides', quoted Miss Sinclair, from her memory bank of musical anecdotes.

Karen had no quarrel with the piece itself; it was an adequate arrangement and in later years she was to enjoy a recording of the full orchestral score. But 'Fingal's Cave' came to epitomise for her the very limitations of her teacher's outlook. It was comfortably 'musical'. It was sonorous. It was soft, then it was loud, then it was soft again. It could be imagined all too easily. It was unquestionably a British Music Society piece – one which, as a final gesture of gratitude to Miss Sinclair and the Society, Karen was expected to perform for the November concert. She had tried to suggest an alternative – a dizzy 'Perpetual Motion' by Poulenc, but it was dismissed as a 'nasty modern clashing piece' and 'Fingal's Cave' prevailed.

Karen worked dutifully to achieve the many atmospheric effects required. One week before the concert she was playing superbly and Miss Sinclair triumphantly telephoned Mr D'Arcy to confirm her place in the programme.

Karen was quiet all the next week. On the day of the concert she was not happy with herself. She had never been a rebel, but she didn't want to be slotted in between precocious kids performing arrangements of 'Autumn Leaves' and the 'Moonlight Sonata'. She couldn't bear to hear another adolescent voice grappling with German songs about pain or French songs about birds. Suddenly the Piper's Hall, which had been like a temple all her life, seemed little more than a shed. And the British Music Society no more poetic than the clubs and charities her parents supported.

'Selfish snobs, that's what they are …', she muttered to herself as she cycled to her lesson, past the hall, up the busy main road with its funeral parlour and car cemeteries made even more drab by November rain.

Hopelessly, she rehearsed ways she could get out of her obligation without offending Miss Sinclair. She knew she was too cowardly to create an accident and she was not prepared to lie. She wasn't even aware of devising a plan as she arrived at the Sinclair's front lawn and rested her bike against the huge sycamore tree that blocked the sun from the house and cast its green shade through the hall along the creeping rugs. She pushed the bell and let herself in, thinking for the thousandth time how like entering a doctor's or dentist's surgery it was.

Karen was in the keyboard graveyard when an idea so simple brushed across her mind that she scarcely had time to frame it into words before Miss Sinclair appeared magically out of the carpet and swept her into the Music Room.

She moved woodenly to the Steinway and began to adjust the piano stool. This had to be done quickly; Miss Sinclair had settled into her listening chair. It was a ritual at each lesson; Karen would enter and play, without warm-ups or scales, as if in concert.

She opened the music, breathed in and began the opening bars.

'Too loud dear', called Miss Sinclair from behind and Karen gained confidence.

She committed an unforgivable sin. She stopped and started again. She heard an intake of breath. It goaded her to greater sacrilege. She muffled a running passage to the treble, repeating the bar, tapping her feet noisily. She pointed her elbows out, flailing her fingers wildly at a cluster of notes and got them right. She repeated the bar and the motion and this time got them wrong.

'Child, what is the matter with you?', wailed Miss Sinclair from behind her hands.

The storm built up. Karen played it with all the vulgarity and pretended feeling that she knew Miss Sinclair to despise. She waved her head about, ecstatically, playing with the time with such recklessness that the main theme stretched and twanged like a game of cat's cradle.

'Stop! I can't stand any more!'

Karen stopped, frightened. In three years, Miss Sinclair had never interrupted her first performance of the day. She froze, afraid to speak in case she apologised.

'You can't possibly represent me in public tonight'.

Miss Sinclair was marching down the hall as she spoke.

To Karen's amazement, she heard her teacher telephone Mr D'Arcy and withdraw her name from the programme, giving as a reason, 'Tonight isn't suitable. It's an unfortunate clash.'

She did not hear the rest of the tight tirade as she quietly closed the musical score and reverently left it on top of the piano. Then, torn between elation and dismay, Karen cycled back to her home.

That evening, just as Mr D'Arcy was unloading the standard lamp from his Wolsley, Karen explained to her parents that she wouldn't be needed for the British Music Society concert down the road at the Piper's Hall, after all.

She told them she was going to practice, then told them what she was going to play, finally explaining a little of the background to 'Fingal's Cave' and its geographical inspiration in the Western Hebrides, just off the coast of Scotland, and Jim's ancestral lands of Argyll.

Then, she went into the front room and began to play, without the score.

Any latecomers to the Hall passing the McKenzie house would have stopped mid-stride, with appreciation. Karen played 'Fingal's Cave' more brilliantly than ever before.

In the open plan living room, where Annie was ironing and Jim was polishing his side drums, they turned off the television to listen to their daughter play.

In the middle of a Hebridean storm, Annie looked up from a leg of Jim's overall and sighed, 'It's almost like being there!'

Endnote

1. Fingal's Cave was given its name in 1772, by Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist who accompanied Captain James Cook in his voyages of discovery to the southern hemisphere in which this story is set. Banks named the cave after the eponymous hero of an epic poem by Macpherson, and attributed to a Celtic bard, 'Ossian'. The cave also gives its name to a piece of orchestral music by Mendelssohn, from his *Hebrides Suite*, of 1830, Opus 26, inspired by a visit to the cave in 1829.

Research statement

Research background

As a teenager, I had every intention of becoming a concert pianist. How to write about a world of music in detail, yet making it entertaining for the reader, was one of the research challenges of this story. My examination of the writings of one of New Zealand's most significant authors, Katherine Mansfield, provided me insight into ways of managing the blend of domestic interiors, growing social awareness, and the use of irony in the narrative voice. It experiments with ways of updating the theme and tone of several of Mansfield's 'Garden Party' stories: in particular 'At the Bay', 'A doll's house' and 'Her first ball'. Set in the 1970s in small-town New Zealand, the story also references elements of New Zealand's cultural life; its characters are based on musicians, collectors and musicologists who lived in Wellington and Christchurch in this era.

Research contribution

Felix Mendelssohn's music emerges out of an adolescent sensibility, and is still often used by those working with troubled teenagers because it reflects something of the growing rebellion and social awareness of young people at this transition point. This story explores ways of combining musical and narrative expression in ways that exploit the comic, resisting how the more conventional serious tone used in 'growth' or maturation stories.

Research significance

This work's significance lies in its aims to assert gentle socially comic writing as a valuable literary tool, and to unite caricature and social realism with detail and knowledge of the classical musical repertoire. It has been accepted for publication in a leading creative writing journal in an issue focused on creative writing as research.

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