



Michael Atherton

**Musical Instruments and
Sound-Producing Objects
of Oceania**

The collections of
the Australian Museum

In 1993 I was artist-in-residence at the Australian Museum (AM), where I developed and led public events featuring musical instruments from the collections of the Museum and, where appropriate, submitted initial findings to the Anthropology Department. The aim was to bring the public into contact with the music of Oceania. I had an idea about hands-on experience to bring the public closer to the use of found objects as instruments. So, thinking of the Pacific Islands and the widespread use of shells – in jewellery, as artefacts, as tools, as drinking vessels, and shells as rattles and trumpets (the conch), even as currency; I wanted to use shells for percussion and to surprise people. I asked the Museum to provide me with a large number of shells from an offsite repository. These shells had no specific provenance and were unlikely to be displayed.

I acquired northern baler shells (*Melo amphora*) of different sizes and pitch when struck with rubber covered mallets made from dowel; and I was able also to devise several shell percussion idiophones. In addition, the Museum provided twenty large conch shells (*Charonia tritonis*). I adapted these for blowing by making embouchure holes according to specifications from Polynesian conch shells in the Pacific collections. To augment this instrumentarium, I made panpipes from seasoned bamboo, as well as transverse and end blown flutes. The instruments were featured in improvisation sessions that I devised for Museum visitors, assisted on different occasions by friends and colleagues, Victor Monasterio, an Andean music specialist, and Rodney Berry, a sound artist. The performances were interspersed with brief explanations of specially chosen items from the collections. Most of these were for viewing only, and therefore were handled carefully, according to AM conservation protocol, using white cotton gloves.

In addition to presenting public events, I spent time documenting aspects of the collections. It was then I came into contact with several collections: Indigenous Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities), South East Asia, the Pacific Islands and Africa. As a result of this investigation I noticed that minimal scholarly attention had been given to music making, and that the extent of the collection and details of its contents remained unpublished. This provided the impetus to assist the Australian Museum. Fortunately, I was destined to return to the Museum in March 1998 to continue my investigation, with the award of a fellowship donated by the widow of the late collector and benefactor, Leo Fleischmann. My aim during this residency was to research the collections and gather data for the AM and its communities, focusing on Oceanic musical instruments and sound-producing objects.