

provoking exhibition. It's important to remember that no paintings were harmed in the making of 'Soundscapes'.

Georgia Rodgers

Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music (BIFEM) 2015

Each September, contemporary music enthusiasts, composers, scholars and performers from around Australia migrate toward the Victorian regional city of Bendigo for BIFEM, a remarkable music festival now in its third year. The festival has established itself as an annual event of unparalleled significance in Australia – not only as a forum for the presentation of exciting and little-heard music, but as a gathering of like-minded peers. A high proportion of the audience consists of musicians and composers, so informal conversations between concerts are almost as stimulating as the programmed forums and workshops that take place during the festival. In 2015, over the weekend 4–6 September, almost every work in the programme was an Australian premiere, which gives some further evidence of the importance of the festival to the nation's cultural ecology.

Bendigo is a very beautiful town. It was the centre of one of the great gold rushes, and during the later decades of the nineteenth century the city's founders spent their wealth lavishly on grand public buildings. One of these, the splendid Capital Theatre, serves as the main home of BIFEM – but the festival makes good use of other excellent venues around the town. This tradition of building for the community continues today, and in 2015 several BIFEM concerts took place in the newly completed Ulumbarra Theatre, a beautifully designed contemporary sister to the venerable Capital.

The idea of 'exploratory music' suggests a broad range of possibilities. For example, the festival is not only presenting radically experimental music, and neither is it limited to the strictly contemporary, although there is a tendency towards both of these in the programme. What is being explored varies – it might be musical or abstract sonic materials, it might be the nature of an instrument, or it might be the capabilities and limitations of a certain technology. Equally vulnerable to explorations are the performers themselves, the spaces in which they perform, and the varying tolerances of the audience. Part of what makes a festival such as this so stimulating is the sense that we are collectively exploring and

being explored in manifold ways over a uniquely intense, brief period of time.

This year, the weekend was punctuated by trumpet fanfares. Opening the festival on Friday, *Flayed Identities – Forlorn Remix* (2014), a work by Australian composer Thomas Reiner for trumpet and flugelhorn, was played at sunset from the dizzying heights of the Poppet Head mineshaft tower, an industrial relic of the gold rush era that looms over the town just behind the Capital Theatre. Shortly after, Stravinsky's *Fanfare for a New Theatre* (composed for the 1964 opening of the Lincoln Centre) sanctified the foyer of the new Ulumbarra Theatre. The audience drew a collective gasp of delight as this tiny, jewel-like piece ended, and the performers responded by playing it again. The third of these fanfares, at sunset on Saturday evening in the cavernous Sacred Heart Cathedral, was ... *à Reims* (2010), a work for an orchestra of trumpets by Argentinean Daniel D'Adamo. This is a beautiful work, and the performance made use of many local trumpeters, tapping into the strong band tradition of Bendigo. The great clouds of radiant overtones, ringing out in the golden heights of the cathedral, had a visibly uplifting effect on the audience and left a lingering memory in the mind's ear.

The festival is aptly described as international, not only for the range of composers presented (albeit with a strongly European rather than North American sensibility), but also in terms of the performers. Each year, the mix of Australian and international performers has been a key aspect of the festival, and while previous years have each featured excellent performances, in 2015 the quality of playing was consistently extraordinary. The Paris-based ensemble Soundinitiative, for example, gave superlative performances of recent European music, including Clara Iannotta's gorgeous *D'après* (2012) and a major new work by Bernhard Lang, *The Exhausted* (2015). Lang's hour-long piece, taking its title from Deleuze's writing on Beckett, is by turns puzzling, amusing, and profound – arguably, rather like the works of both these writers. The ensemble's total commitment to the performance in both music and choreography made it a compelling experience, with mezzo-soprano Fabienne Séveillac's contribution a tour-de-force of music theatre (even, at one point, singing upside down).

Central to the festival programme was the resident Argonaut Ensemble, a flexible group mostly of Australian and expatriate Australian instrumentalists. The Argonauts' performance of Boulez's *Sur Incises* (1996/98) on Saturday

evening was a disciplined realisation of this problematic score, directed by the young American conductor Eric Dudley. Among the most impressive performances of the festival was a Sunday afternoon recital by the Argonaut String Quartet, led by renowned violinist Graeme Jennings (formerly of the Arditti Quartet). This was a concert of jaw-dropping virtuosity and deep integrity, culminating in a powerful performance of a fascinatingly complex and poetic work by Stefano Gervasoni, *Six lettres à l'obscurité (und zwei Nachrichten)* (2005–06).

So much remarkable music was heard during the festival – representing the work of 61 composers and 62 performers – that I reached the point of saturation. Nevertheless, some things stood out as being of particular interest, or left a stronger impression. Among these was a recital of viola music played by the young virtuoso Phoebe Green, who gave an intense performance of Pierluigi Billone's *ITE KE MI* (1995) for solo viola – a work that would be insufferably tedious in lesser hands, built as it is from a limited palette of sounds at the scratchy-noise end of the sonic spectrum. Under Green's commanding presence, however, the work seemed to grow into something almost romantic, like a ghostly Mahlerian *lied* filtered by short-wave radio distortion. Joined by percussionist Leah Scholes, Green also gave a beautiful performance of a witty and moving piece by British composer Juliana Hodkinson, *Harriet's Song* (2001).

Australian composer-pianist Erik Griswold stunned the audience with his fast and loud hour-long work for prepared piano, *Wallpaper Music* (2006). It's a convincing example of the one-idea piece, brutal in its conceptual focus, and tapping into that lineage of experimental minimalism that owes more to the freakier music of the 1960s and '70s than to the sanitised concert-hall minimalism of the 1980s and '90s. The work comes across as much more dynamic than the title suggests, like a homemade piano-powered spacecraft hurtling at breakneck speed off the edge of the universe. Not everything, of course, was so successful. Billone's *Mani Gonxha* (2012) for two Tibetan bowls is a dull piece even in the gifted hands of clarinetist and performance artist Aviva Endean. Wojtek Blecharz's *Counter-Earth* (2015), receiving its first performance, suffered from similar faults: while the opening section for dismembered clarinet was interesting, the work succumbed to structural uncertainty and a lack of compelling sound-materials (while the accompanying recitation of excerpts from the Wikipedia entry on Syria seemed artistically and politically facile).

A highlight among the discussions and forums this year was a lecture by singer Jessica Aszodi about her preparation of Israeli composer Ori Talmon's new work for solo voice, *Three Visits to Meun* (2015). Aszodi spoke eloquently about her endeavours in terms of absorbing the piece into her own body and detailed her work with a physiotherapist to solve some of the physical demands of the piece, which requires an extreme virtuosity of the voice. The work itself, premiered here, was both interesting and beautiful – thoughtful, intricate music built from counterpoints of noise, speech and song, that in its closing section achieves an affecting apotheosis.

Many of the works presented at this year's festival featured tightly integrated electronics that were realised to a consistently high standard in performance. The Melbourne-based group The Amplified Elephants, in their colourful and atmospheric new piece *Select Naturalis* (2014–15) took this a step further with custom-built interfaces and visually attractive, interactive software creating a unique space for listening, improvisation and reflection.

Peter Ablinger's *Book of Returns*, played by the formidable Finnish group Defunensemble late on the Saturday night, was one of the more radical works at BIFEM 2015. Built from 40-second modules of material, which included musical sounds, spoken words, street noise and even audience applause, this is a large-scale piece that proved its worth by polarising the audience. Ablinger's questioning of fundamental assumptions about the nature of music and performance has a genuine poetry of its own, but this was not something that everyone found easy to enjoy. Defunensemble also closed the festival with a concert of music by Finnish composers, of which the highlight was Sami Klemola's *Feed* (2013), a high-energy work for electric guitar and ensemble inhabiting the field of composition that successfully fuses noise-art and music. It's a strong piece, with moments of delicacy and elegance; an ideal end to the weekend.

The continuing success of BIFEM is a validation of the vision of its founder and artistic director, the Australian composer David Chisholm, who has created something miraculous. In 2015, building upon the strength of the previous two festivals, the event has become vital to the musical life of Australia but also, more specifically, a weekend of greatly appreciated creative and intellectual inspiration for those who attend.

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