



## DECIBEL 'SOMACOUSTICA'

VELVET UNDERGROUND ANDERSON CAGE HOPE

LINZ BANDT LUCIER OLIVEROS VICKERY OLLEMEN

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 18, 2009 - 8PM

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Image: Cat Hope, artistic director of Decibel

These two reviews by our WA contributors Kelly Curran and Ben Hamblin bring us up-to-date about one of the latest developments of new music in Western Australia: the exciting new ensemble Decibel.

## **Pulse - Pulsation - Sensation (18 November 2009)**

By Kelly Curran

What an amazing evening! From the moment the audience was immersed in darkness at the onset of the concert, until the click of a stylus being removed from a record at its conclusion, Decibel had me completely enthralled. This exciting, new chamber ensemble, based in Perth, is directed by [Cat Hope](#), head of composition and electronic music at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. The ensemble seeks to present works which combine acoustic and electronic instruments, incorporating innovative and varied uses of the performance space itself. These approaches worked very successfully tonight, as the audience fed off the energy and enthusiasm of the performers who demonstrated the versatility of both forms of instrument, in isolation and in combination.

This, the second concert by Decibel, was comprised of works written from 1960 to 2009, encompassing a wide range of notation, scored traditionally, graphically, literally and electronically. The performance space operated somewhat like an extra member of the ensemble, in the way in which it was maximised and toyed with, and this added to the audience's feeling of involvement. Because of the open nature of many of the works, this specific concert can never be identically repeated, which also increased the audience's appreciation of a unique, live, performance event such as this.

In darkness, a black-suited violinist appeared through a door to the rear left of stage. Lit from below by a dim spotlight, his image was silhouetted in large, ghoulish form on the wooden panels behind. Here, the scene was set for the opening piece, Laurie Anderson's *Duet for violin and doorjamb* (1976). As Dan Russell played his electric violin in the doorway, the tip of the bow began to bang into the doorjamb, which had been fitted with contact microphones. The frog of the bow soon also joined in the fun, as it too commenced its battle with the doorjamb. Russell then incorporated the percussive doorjamb strikes into his rhythmic violin playing, obviously enjoying the moment. From time to time, he opened the door behind him with his foot and/or back to reveal an added depth of sound, as a speaker lay just beyond. When he decided it was time to finish, he simply ceased playing and walked casually back through the door to signify the work's conclusion. This light-hearted piece demonstrated the creativity and wit of both the composer and the performer, and was one of the highlights of the night.

Listeners were then led on a very different path, with the world premiere of *Antibody* (2009). This latest offering by Perth composer, woodwind player and Decibel member, Lindsay Vickery, was written specifically for this event, and utilised all Decibel performers - the composer himself (clarinet), Cat Hope (alto flute), Tristen Parr (cello), Dan Russell (violin), Stuart James (keyboard) and Malcolm Riddoch (electronics). Whilst the score is traditionally notated, it was presented to the performers on laptops. The work consists of five sections of varied tempi, each made up of nine bars (twenty-seven beats) of

alternating metre. Variety and order of metre are the same in each section, enabling for interchange of bars between sections. To begin, each instrument played the entire score together, commencing with a chorale texture, followed by various short melodic motifs, flurries and extended techniques. Things then got more interesting for performers and listeners, as laptops showed only nine bars at a time, which could be made up of a mixture of bars from any of the five sections. Each new set of nine bars was randomly determined using MaxMSP software, while earpiece click tracks gave performers a basic tempo. MaxMSP was also used to sample, process and mix each instrument, with this electronic bed becoming increasingly pervasive. Focussing on interpenetration and mutation of musical phrases, Vickery succeeded in demonstrating his intentions, as his work took listeners on an unpredictable journey through luscious, evolving textures and intriguing colours.

After the stage was again darkened, Vickery walked to a music stand, turned on its light and began playing his first part on clarinet. For Rainer Linz's *Walk on Parts* (1980) one performer played a series of parts, in random order, one after the other, at different music stands, using different reed instruments. Parts were each recorded and played back with other parts to produce the 'ensemble' effect. It was most entertaining and amusing, watching Vickery turn off a light on a music stand, stroll to another, located on stage, outside, or behind the audience, and play each new instrument. This demonstrated the performer's skill across a wide range of clarinets from contrabass to E flat and also showed his jovial and creative spirit. The strength of this piece tonight definitely lay in its unique presentation.

All acoustic performers returned to the stage for the first and only piece of the evening to contain no electronic devices, *Four + Five* (1979). This minimalist composition by Ros Bandt can be played by any instrumental combination - tonight it featured alto flute, contrabass clarinet, cello, violin and grand piano. The work, consisting of twenty bars of varying metre, to be repeated and revisited at performers' will, maintained a very steady pulse, despite contrasting and conflicting rhythms. It moved along at a lively and bouncy pace, with dynamics gradually changing, directed by the group as a whole. Excellent communication between players was clearly evident, as the ensemble sounded like one being, right up to the final unison note - a mesmerising and exquisite performance.

For those who had not yet read the program notes, the next work by Cat Hope would have come as quite a surprise. *Abe Sada: Sada Abe 1936* (2006) was performed entirely underneath the audience who sat on raked seating. Focussing on bass frequencies, the piece could be experienced by the whole body, not just the ears. Bass guitars, electric cello and contrabass clarinet sent vibrations and sensations through the whole seating structure and room. A variety of low rumblings could be felt and heard, as audience members were completely surrounded and immersed. Personally I felt like I was in a hulking spaceship in a galactic battle - it was fantastic!

After interval, the physical properties of sound itself were explored through Alvin Lucier's *Still and Moving Lines of Silence In Families Of Hyperbolas* (1972). Out of a series of works for different instruments and sine tone generators, Decibel presented *Part 3, No.12*, for violin, and *Part 1, No.3*, for flute. In the first example, the two sine tone generators each played a frequency either side of F, and the violin moved between them. Slight distinctions and differences could be identified as the sounds interacted so minutely. The physical movement and position of the listener also affected the tone in this exercise in auditory perception. The second example for flute operated in a similar fashion, but utilised a lower pitch - this piece seemed slightly more varied and organic than the first, perhaps due to the nature of the instrument, and due to the way the smallest change in breath control and embouchure can impact on its tone. The two pieces were separated by a contrasting work, which was a good decision, enabling listeners to focus on both equally, whilst maintaining overall forward momentum of the concert.

The work bookended by the Lucier sonic explorations was a composition for ensemble by Pauline Oliveros - *Antiphonal Meditation* (1979). As with the earlier Bandt composition, this piece required

heightened awareness and communication between players, but this score is comprised purely of written instructions and a diagram, as opposed to conventional music notation. Two groups of instrumentalists (or singers), in this case a) violin and cello, and b) flute and contrabass clarinet, face each other on stage. The first group is asked to 'spontaneously ... make a sound together,' which the other group should then echo or imitate. This was another delightfully unpredictable work. The alternated playing between the two groups produced a wide range of colour and effects, which were constantly transforming and developing, underpinned by manipulated samples on the laptop. In open ensemble works such as this, one of the challenges is when and how to conclude. Again demonstrating their well-honed communication between each other, the two groups began overlapping and ended together in a wild, unison flurry.

Grandfather of chance music and non-standard use of musical instruments, John Cage, applied many of his conceptual ideologies to the next work, *Cartridge Music* (1960). Here, the only instrument is the cartridge on the arm of a record player. Before the audience there were some tables in a semi-circular arrangement, behind which stood Hope, Riddoch and James. On the tables lay an assortment of objects, including the graphic score. Hope and Riddoch had a ball, using cartridges in as many ways as they could... except to play records. The cartridges and arms were connected by leads to individual speakers, so every noise was amplified. Some of the more outrageous and amusing uses were combing hair, brushing teeth and positioning a slinky into the cartridge. The performers couldn't help showing their enjoyment, with grins and smirks, which helped to connect to the audience, who were also highly entertained.

All six performers returned to the stage for the concluding work, a version of the Velvet Underground's *The Gift* (1968), reworked by Decibel for live ensemble and turntable. John Cale's narration of a short story, written by Lou Reed, from the original recording, began playing on the turntable. While not attempting to pick up every word and meaning of this spoken text, I was more appreciating its sonic contribution to the overall texture. The cello set up a bass riff, joined by small drum kit, then the piano commenced repeated quavers. Violin soon joined the mix, adding a few variations to its ostinato. Finally, Vickery added his alto saxophone to the established groove, interjecting with some very high, sustained and squeaky notes imitating the electronic feedback from the original. The ensemble continued to maintain a tight, steady pulse until the end of the spoken voice on record, as the evening concluded with an understated click.

Suited up in black and white, a la *Reservoir Dogs*, the cool characters of Decibel presented a stimulating, mind-expanding program that will not be soon forgotten. The choice and order of repertoire was a particular strength of the concert, performed to world-class standard. Instruments were played and played with; listeners' pre-conceived notions of music were put to the test; works were experienced with more than just the ears. This was a concert which succeeded in being challenging, without being inaccessible. I only hope that this was not a one-off, and that Decibel bring the *Somacoustica* program to more audiences near and far. I am most eager to attend the next concert offering by this ensemble in 2010.

## **Tape It (10 September 2009)**

By Ben Hamblin

There was something alluring about sitting in a classical music auditorium scattered with amplifiers, studio monitors, leads, projectors, cables, and, best of all, reel-to-reel tape players; it gave that feeling of anticipation about what the newly formed ensemble, Decibel would produce. Composer Cat Hope directs and performs in the ensemble that is made up of a great range of Perth talent, including Dr Malcolm Riddoch, Lindsay Vickery, Stuart James, Tristen Parr, Rob Muir and Dan Russell; a combination of great

instrumental performers and intuitive electronic musicians.

The Ensemble's inaugural performance also corresponded with the opening night of the Totally Huge New Music Festival, run by Tura New Music - a ten-day new music festival featuring works of various artists from around the world. Decibel seemed to sum up the festival, with an auspicious mix of music from new music pioneers, through to local works, including a commissioned work by WAAPA composer in residence, Daniel Thorne.

The concert kicked off with a modern interpretation of William Burroughs, *Electronic Revolution*. Following the idea by Burroughs, Decibel cut up TV news reports from a current affairs program. With the video of the news report playing on a small TV without any visual manipulation, the accompanying audio gradually degraded, from audible news reports about the swine flu epidemic into a dense layering of conventional electronic manipulation.

Spatial aesthetic was tested in Warren Burt's *Another Noisy Lullaby*, a work written especially for Decibel. With Tristan Parr on cello positioned to the side of the audience, and Lindsay Vickery perched up behind the audience on bass clarinet, the performance also included Cat Hope (flute) and Dan Russell (violin), with no one as the central focus of the work in spatial performance array. Each player was equipped with a tape player, playing faint electronic sounds on cassette tapes. The minimal lighting of the music stand lights alone aided the audience's attention to sound, which heightened the delicate piece. The timbral qualities of the four instruments at extremely quiet dynamics made for a really alternate atmosphere. Often new music falls into a situation of loudness, whereas in this case, Burt has used restrained dynamics to create a wonderful sensation of spatial delicacy.

A recurring theme of the night, possibly not intended as a focal theme, was the projection of scores onto a screen. Often acting as a master score for the players to follow, the projections allowed the audience to (attempt to) follow the players. However, in many cases, graphic scores proved difficult to follow from an audience perspective and seemed to deter from the incredible improvising from the ensemble. The first piece to benefit from the projected score was ensemble director, Cat Hope's new work *In The Cut*. With a score that outlined a steady decline as its macro-structure, microstructurally it included some wonderfully subtle interaction between performers. With a variety of acoustic instruments, as well as a bass guitar, and turntable, the piece successfully narrates a seemingly basic structure that is transformed into the piece's conceptual idea, degradation.

Mauricio Kagel's piece *Prima Vista* was another projected score piece, with the ensemble split into two groups of three. Perhaps the most complex score of the night to follow, the piece featured two separate scores for each ensemble, with numerous instructions sprawled across the scores. The piece was written for 'slide pictures and undefined sound sources' and Decibel modernised it into a self-automated score projection. Sonically, the piece was intriguing, with a seemingly indeterminate structure making for an ever-progressing, shifting structure.

I'm not sure how many exact interpretations of Brian Eno's music for airports have been attempted since tape machines have slowly been phased out, but Decibel not only attempted it, they pulled it off marvellously. Returning from the interval to see three tape loops stretched across the entire stage gave a sense of nostalgia, and for those who knew the piece, a sense of interest to see how Decibel could perform a live interpretation of a studio project by Eno. *Music for Airports* was composed as a piece of unobtrusive music, designed as a soothing, low-volume work. Decibel transformed the work into a live scenario, and added a live trio to the tape loop recordings of that same group. As the tape machines cranked into action, the warm, gentle sounds of the tape reels washed through the auditorium, as the three tapes rustled their way around the reels. The trio were careful not to overpower the loops as they subtly interacted with their own tape loop recordings. The ensemble performance was as 'tape-esque'

as it could be, and created a beautiful melding of tape and instruments that sent the audience into a meditative state, only broken with the clunk of the stop button to halt the tape reels at the conclusion of the performance

*Transit of Venus*, a new work by Lindsay Vickery, composed for three acoustic instruments and electronics was another excursion into the world of indeterminacy; a piece with a self-automated score and a click track. For the night, it was for alto flute, violin and cello. With the players having to follow exact instructions on a projected score, being chosen at random by the laptop, the piece formed its own performance-unique structure. As John Cage insisted, nothing is silence, and (even if unexpectedly) Vickery's piece briefly passed through passages of silence that acted as subtle additions to overall structure. Cat Hope, Tristen Parr and Dan Russell performed this piece with amazing detail, adhering to the projected instructions with such passion that gave the piece a fascinating shape.

The penultimate piece almost turned into a bit of a comedy routine between Dan Russell and Tristen Parr. The piece by Ernie Althoff, *Front Row* is an interesting investigation into alternate methods of 'scoring' a piece. The performance saw Cat Hope, Malcolm Riddoch and Stuart James sitting in the audience with individual tape players that acted as audio-cues for the performers on stage. Dan and Tristen were equipped with a series of musical toys and percussion instruments that were to be played upon cue from the tape players. The interaction reached two levels, the interaction between tape and performance, and the interaction between the two performers.

Dan Thorne's new work *We'll Never Know* was an exploratory look into the combination of live performance with pre-manipulated recordings. With the live trio receiving input through headphones to stay in time, Dan managed to juxtapose processed samples of instruments against a live version of themselves. The work digressed beautifully into a wash of complex timbre between the live ensemble and the backing track. With auditory similarities to the works of Steve Reich and Michael Nyman, Thorne created a wonderfully crafted electro-acoustic work that capped off a delightful night, exploring the possibilities of acoustic instruments and electronics.

## Event details

Decibel: SomAcoustica

Works by Vickery, Bandt, Hope, Linz, Lucier, Anderson, Cage, Oliveiros, The Velvet Underground  
presented by Tura New Music

Callaway Music Auditorium, Crawley, WA

18 November 2009

[More details](#) in the AMC Calendar

Decibel: Tape It

Works by Vickery, Althoff, Burt, Hope, Thorne

presented by Totally Huge New Music Festival & Tura New Music

WAAPA Music Auditorium, Perth, WA

10 September 2009

[More details](#) in the AMC Calendar

## Further links

Decibel (<http://decibel.waapamusic.com/>)

Tura New Music ([www.tura.com.au/](http://www.tura.com.au/))

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## Subjects discussed by this article:

- [Decibel](#)
  - [Walk on parts](#) by [Rainer Linz](#)
  - [Four + Five](#) by [Ros Bandt](#)
  - [Another noisy lullaby](#) by [Warren Burt](#)
  - [Front row](#) by [Ernie Althoff](#)
  - [Antibody](#) by [Lindsay Vickery](#)
- 

**Kelly Curran** has recently completed her Bachelor of Music (Hons) at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, majoring in composition. Several of her chamber works have been performed around Perth, and she has also composed for dance and film. She was recently nominated for a West Australian Screen Award for best score for the short film *Silent Beauty*. She is currently researching postmodern approaches to chamber music.

**Ben Hamblin** is an electronic musician and composer from Perth, WA. He is currently in his last year of the Bachelor Of Music (Music Technology) course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. He composes spatial, atmospheric, electroacoustic music, either in live performance or non-realtime production. Ben is interested in the idea of using limited sound sources to create pieces of vast depth and obscurity; testing the inaudible structure of a sound.

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# feedback

## DECIBEL

*Callaway Auditorium, Crawley*

19/11/09

For a classical ensemble, **Decibel** are pretty rock'n'roll. Of course their artistic director Cat Hope frequented the Perth rock scene for ages, electronics man Malcolm Riddoch plays in noise outfit Abe Sada, and cellist Tristan Parr is part of Schvendes and Fall Electric, so it makes sense that, although they perform contemporary avant-garde classical works, there's also a streak of anarchic energy about them too. The *Somacoustica* recital was a fitting display of this multi-modality, both beginning and ending with pieces by artists that, despite or regardless of their experimental nature, also operate within the popular. Laurie Anderson's *Duet For Violin And Doorjamb* began the evening on a suitably conceptual, note. The overall concept behind *Somacoustica* was the exploration of sound within space, and by amplifying a doorway and having a violinist stand within it so that his bow hit its sides, this concept was given both an engaging and

humorous introduction. Lindsay Vickery's *Antibody* saw the whole ensemble processed and reassembled through live electronics, whilst Vickery himself performed Rainer Linz' *Walk On Parts*, playing four different reed instruments and again through electronic intervention, soloing with himself. Ros Bandt's *Four + Five* added melody and musical structure in the form of short pulsing parts that overlapped each other in a gorgeous invocation of rhythm, whilst Hope's *Abe Sada: Sada Abe 1936* ended the first half in a visceral climax whereby the ensemble played beneath the raked seating, with bass tones offering the most physical invocation of *Somacoustica*'s concept. The second half began with Alvin Lucier's *Still And Moving Lines Of Silence In Families Of Hyperbolas*, whereby sine tones were bent and warped through the introduction of violin and flute. Incredibly minimal in nature, both ably exemplified the physical phenomena that occur through sound. These were interspersed around Pauline Oliveros' *Antiphonal Meditation*, whereby two groups improvised in tandem, whilst John Cage's *Cartridge Music* saw Hope and Riddoch invoke an almighty ruckus through turntable stylus' placed in contact with all manner of sonic ephemera, including their own bodies. Finally, the Velvet Underground's *The Gift*, whereby a single stereo image of John Cale's infamous monologue was underscored by a gorgeous rendition of the original, truly brought the night and the concept together. It was a fitting close to a recital that, though steeped in the form and ritual of classical music, certainly displayed its share of edge and attitude.

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