Scale Variable
New Chamber Music
Concert 1/4

Intermodulations:
Decibel

7 June 2016
Studio Underground
State Theatre Centre
Roger Smalley
Composer and concert pianist Roger Smalley (1943–2015) spent the majority of his adult life in Perth, Western Australia where he taught composition at the University of Western Australia from 1976 until 2007 when he moved to Sydney on his retirement. Before this time, however, he was part of an important electro-acoustic group entitled Intermodulation. This was a composer-performer ensemble inspired by the likes of AMM, Soft Machine, The Who and Cream, Terry Riley’s In C, performances by Cage, Cunningham and Cardew as well as the earliest performances of Stockhausen’s ensemble. Smalley’s involvement with electronic music formed the basis of the concept’s curatorial direction, prepared in consultation with the original performances and materials from Stockhausen’s archive.

Smalley's legacy to Australian music is enormous. Coming direct from the burgeoning European scene, he made significant contributions to WA musical life through his composing, performing, programming and conducting.

Smalley was a tutor and mentor to many Western Australians including several of tonight’s composer/performers – Cat Hope, Lindsay Vickery, Stuart James and Chris Tonkin as well as a major inspiration in the creation of Tura (nee Evos).

Roger Smalley passed away in August 2015. This concert is in his memory.

Decibel
Decibel is not unlike Intermodulation in its make up and intent. Our homage to Smalley is a selection of works that relate most closely to Decibel. Thus the program is dedicated to compositions for acoustic and electronic instruments, mostly written before he arrived in Australia.

Decibel is a world leader in the integration of acoustic instruments and electronics, the interpretation of graphic notations and pioneer digital score formats for composition and performance. The ensemble has collaborated with composers such as Elaine Radigue, Werner Daehldecker, Agostino Di Scoio, Alvin Curran, David Toop, Marina Rosenfield, Lionel Marchetti and Johannes S. Sietsma and worked with iconic Australian composers Jon Rose, Alan Lamb, Ross Bollette, Warren Burt, Eric Griswold and Anthony Pateras. Decibel has also toured and recorded monograph concerts dedicated to Alvin Lucier, John Cage and Giacinto Scelsi.

Decibel has commissioned over 60 new works since their foundation in 2008, has toured Europe and Australia, recorded for ABC Classic FM and SWR German radio, and released five albums to date on Australian and international labels. The ensemble has developed and commercialized the Decibel ScorePlayer iPad app, a score reading device for graphic notations that was recently selected for showcase at the International Classical:NEXT meeting in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

The Decibel Difficult Commission Project
Support Decibel’s commissioning of three new Western Australian works in 2016, that will be featured in Decibel’s 2016–2017 concert programs. decibelnewmusic.com

Program Notes

Didjeridu (1974) for four channel tape
Didjeridu was composed in February–April 1974, whilst Smalley was Composer-in-Residence at the University of Western Australia, during his first visit to Australia. The tape was made in conjunction with John Eaton, the designer of the Electronic Music Studio at the University, during a very hot summer in Perth. It is Smalley’s only tape work, and uses source materials extracted from an LP that is still housed in the UWA library, featuring traditional music from the Mornington Peninsula. Before coming to Australia, Smalley had never heard any didgeridoo playing. He was struck by its extraordinary rhythmic complexity and similarity to electronic techniques. The piece does not use tape splicing at any stage in its creation – all the individual layers were made in real-time, and the final mix was performed with the aid of assistants and a written score.

Transformation (1968 rev71) piano and live electronic modulation
Transformation was commissioned by the City Music Society and completed in the UK in March 1969. It was Smalley’s first work to use live ring-modulation, an electronic process that multiplies the audio signal from the acoustic piano against a sine tone to output the sum and difference tones between their waveforms. Sounds are picked up during the performance by microphones above the piano strings, and transformed simultaneously by a ring modulator and filter. They are then amplified through two loudspeakers, creating a delicate mix of live and transformed sounds. The electronic apparatus is operated by a second performer whose part is precisely notated in the score.

Impulses (1986) sextet for flute, alto trombone, percussion, piano, Yamaha DX7 synthesizer, cello.
This work was realized during Smalley’s tenure as a lecturer at the University of Western Australia. It was premiered by Flederman, an important new music ensemble in Australia at that time. This piece treats ideas from another piece, Pulses (1969) for 15 brass instruments, 5 drummers and live electronics, and explores Smalley’s distinctive attention to rhythmic detail and subdivision, featuring a series of overlapping rhythmic sections in differing tempi with impulses from the piano. The score was inspired by the DX7 synthesizer, a popular new electronic instrument at the time.

Monody (1971-2) for piano with live electronics.
Monody is the first of Smalley’s pieces to feature ring-modulation as structural, rather than colouristic and decorative role. This is achieved by restricting the piano part to a single monodic line throughout, and creating a series of overlapping polyrhythms from the sine wave generator by means of a small keyboard played with the left hand. The resulting frequencies do not necessary conform to equal temperament and sound ‘noisy’ to varying degrees. In addition, two drums and four triangles are also ring-modulated producing noisier and brighter colors to contrasting blocks of musical material. Like ‘Zeitebenen’, the work draws its pitch materials, rhythms and structural proportions from the Fibonacci sequence.

Roger Smalley and Intermodulation
Smalley called the ensemble a “four-person live electronic performer ensemble” and every Intermodulation concert featured at least one piece by a composer in the ensemble. All members were adept with electronics, using VCS3 synthesizers, effects pedals and other instruments to change their instrumental sounds as well as create new ones. After a premiere performance in 1970, the group performed three BBC Promenade Concerts and a European tour that included a performance at WDR’s “7 Tage Elektronische Musik” in June 1972 along with the Stockhausen Group, Terry Riley and La Monte Young. The group performed their last concert in 1976, just before Roger moved to Australia, and Smalley didn’t continue with electronic music for long after that, apart from a few small-scale pieces for instrument and electronics. Smalley didn’t feel this music had a relevance in Australia, stating in an interview with author/composer/broadcaster Andrew Ford: “I had to undergo a fairly severe period of thinking, ‘What am I going to do next?’ If I was going to write something which was going to mean anything to the Australian public, I obviously couldn’t do this sort of music.” Times have changed.

Zeitebenen (1973–75) (Australian Premiere) for five electronic ensemble and tape
Zeitebenen’s (time-levels) is a large-scale work lasting 45 minutes. It was written for and premiered by Smalley’s group ‘Intermodulation’ in Germany in 1973. Commissioned by the West German Radio Studio (WDR), the tape part was realised with the technical assistance of Peter Eotvos and Luz-Estella Santos, in Germany. The tape and instrumental parts were conceived and composed simultaneously, with much of the material being developed in hotels and on airplanes during the recording and European tour of Stockhausen’s ‘Momente’ (1962–69), in which Smalley played the Hammond organ. Smalley saw it as his first attempt to express more political ideas through his music, in particular the problem of the composer’s responsibility to society at large. It shares musical themes with the piano and electronics work Monody. The tape parts are made of all ‘natural’ (not synthesized) sounds, and feature a recording of his then 3 year old son David singing as well as the cries of animals, storms and sounds of warfare that are notated precisely in the score. It is an exciting, intriguing work that brings together a range of Smalley’s inspirations and demonstrates the wide-ranging nature of his imagination.

The works have been prepared with generous assistance from Roger Smalley’s family, friends, collaborators and collecting institutions including The National Library of Australia and the Australian Music Centre. Special thanks to Cathie Trower, Patie Belluco, John Travers, Simon Emmerson, Peter Britton, Reinhold Friedl and Tim Brock. Decibel and Tura also thank WAAPA and ECU for the support of this program.
Tura New Music

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Tura New Music is proudly approaching its 30th year as an internationally recognised organisation for the production and advocacy of groundbreaking programs, works and partnerships in music and the sonic arts.

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Tura New Music

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