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a magazine devoted to new Australian contemporary art music



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Decibel peaks at opening of 9th Totally Huge New Music Festival – Suzanne Kosowitz

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The recently formed new music ensemble, Decibel, heralded the opening of the ninth Totally Huge New Music Festival, presented by Tura New Music, with a sonic blast. The concert, entitled “Tape It”, took place at the Music Auditorium at WAAPA on the 10th September 2009, and featured the rare, yet balanced blend of acoustic and electric instruments. The ensemble performed new works by some of its members as well as innovative electro-acoustic pieces that have certainly influenced them. As the musical director of Decibel, Cat Hope, explains the aim of the ensemble is to present the “electronic playback mechanisms as instruments in their own right” just like their acoustic counterparts. In doing so, Decibel opened the minds – and ears – of its audience to the musical possibilities of technology available to the musicians of today.



Members of Decibel, from far left: Stuart James, Rob Muir, Malcolm Riddoch, Lindsay Vickery, Tristan Parr, Cat Hope and Daniel Russell.

One highlight was Decibel’s rendition of Brian Eno’s “Music for Airports 1/1” (1978), a piece that was never intended for live performance. Three large tape loops were set up on stage, to which Cat Hope, Tristan Parr, Dan Russell and Stuart James improvised on their acoustic instruments (flute, cello, violin and piano respectively). This soothing piece clearly shows how “electronic mechanisms” can be considered on par with acoustic instruments as they provided a harmonious blend of sound to the

audience. However, this could also be due to the fact that the pre-recorded tape loops featured the same instruments in the same manner as those performed live, so to the uninformed audience member it would appear that there are simply two pianos, two cellos etc. being heard.

Ernie Althoff's piece "Front Row" (1991) was certainly a crowd favourite. On stage Tristan Parr and Daniel Russell would respond to the 'sound score', music performed on cassette tape players, by playing with various toy instruments. Each piece of music played on the tape player acted as a cue for the two musicians to play with a certain toy, which made for entertaining disarray as Parr and Russell almost patronised each other with the toys. Thus "Front Row" demonstrates how, with the new technology, scoring does not need to be restricted to scripture; it can be aural too.

The concert included new works by Vickery, Hope, as well as Dan Thorne, currently Composer in Residence at WAAPA. His piece "We'll Never Know" (2009), which concluded the concert, worked in a similar way to that of Eno's as live musicians played to a pre-recorded soundtrack. The piece explores the possible journeys the composition could have taken, as the soundtrack diverged from and combined with the live ensemble.

By combining the electronic playback systems of present with that of traditional, live acoustic instruments, Decibel presented a rich, homogenous blend of music that reflects where music has come to.

Decibel's next concert, "Somacoustica", will be on 18th November 2009 at the Callaway Auditorium, UWA, at 8pm.

For more information on Decibel, visit:

<http://decibel.waapamusic.com/>

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