



The second in a series of three concerts by Perth new music ensemble Decibel at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), *Pretty Things* put a focus on works by Western Australian composers utilizing the electronic mutation of acoustic instruments, unusual objects as musical instruments and objects that could be considered 'pretty things' in their own right.

The hall at PICA was an undeniably apt choice for a concert called *Pretty Things* – not only for its architecture, but also its acoustics. As with the first concert of the series, the sound engineering was superbly done: each instrument could be clearly distinguished, but the space combined and blurred the ensemble into a cohesive whole. The volume was unusually quiet, but refreshingly so: it was at the perfect balance between being audible yet not so loud as to introduce obvious resonances or distortion.

The first and the last pieces were the exceptions to the program's focus on WA composers. The concert started without introduction, the five members of Decibel walking on into the centre aisle to perform John Cage's "Radio Music". The piece was performed on five old home radio sets with analogue tuning, amplified only through the speakers on the sets themselves. The performers followed a projected Max/MSP score, the patch designed by Lindsay Vickery, which randomly chose durations for the original frequencies notated by John Cage in 1956. During the intermission, several audience members suggested to the reviewer that the way the performers were positioned (in a straight line down the centre aisle) made it hard to hear all five parts, but this reviewer's opinion was that starting the concert in this way created a sense of intimacy and anticipation, right from the outset. The

positioning of the projected score on the left wall meant that the performers were turned towards the left for the entire piece, which seemed to isolate the right side of the room. Projecting onto the wall behind the stage would have fixed this and it would have been more effective with everyone in the room facing forward. Interestingly, the piece will become unperformable (or at least, very implausible) when analogue radio is replaced by digital; the work relies on a glissando between frequencies and on the sound of frequencies between those being broadcast on.

Two pieces in particular – "Hunting Pack" by Lindsay Vickery, and "Kuklinski's Dream" by Cat Hope – lent themselves to programmatic interpretations. Vickery's piece deliberately eschews what he considers typical hunting music – "triumphant, even pompous in its celebration of 'the thrill of the chase'" – in favor of a reflection on the experience of the hunting pack and its simultaneously wild and unified nature. Worth noting is the piece's use of an independent click track for each player, allowing for multiple tempi simultaneously, as well as the offset of beats among the players by tiny time intervals.

"Kuklinski's Dream" tells the story of Richard 'The Iceman' Kuklinski, a particularly callous New York mafia hitman, and uses bowed carving knives (in direct reference to his methods) and traditional musical instruments alongside each other to attempt to describe musically the last thoughts and moments of his victims. The scrolling electronic score uses parts of Kuklinski's signature as notation. The work was fantastically scary for one who researched the subject before the concert.

Ross Bolleter and Stuart James both presented works within the theme of 'ruin'. Bolleter, who is known for the ruined pianos he has collected and improvised on during the last ten years, presented

"Deviance", which uses ruined piano improvisation as a 'sonic score' for the improvisation of the rest of the ensemble. The work featured acoustic spatialisation, with performers walking around the mezzanine that borders the hall before exiting the hall, walking down the stairs and into the main area. The ensemble then gathered around the piano, but it was uncertain what was happening from halfway back in the audience. Some performers appeared to be (somewhat half-heartedly) playing the piano itself, others their own instruments. The piece did not leave a significant impression on the reviewer, but if it were shorter in duration that may have been different; indeed, several audience members suggested to the reviewer that the piece simply went for too long. The final section of the piece alone seemed to last at least ten minutes, with little development or change in material.

James' piece "Particle 1", which he performed solo, is a work for ruined cymbals and laptop processing that takes the rich harmonic spectrum of the cymbal and processes it with controlled evolutionary spectral processing, granularisation and spatial elements. The piece will change according to microphone placement, as different parts of the spectrum are made prominent. The piece was at the same time conceptually grounded and sonically beautiful. There were certain moments when the resonant frequencies of the room resulted in the hall being filled with a directionless, heavy sine tone, which seemed to press down from all sides.

Ruined and altered vinyl is the basis for Christopher de Groot's work, "Agerasia" (a term that refers to youthful appearance in elderly people), and the sections of the piece are marked by vinyl prepared ('ruined') using different methods. De Groot's work had a markedly different sonic character



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to the other pieces on the program, with the vinyl delicately adding depth and variety to the live acoustic instruments. The focus on vinyl as a sound source rather than a medium for transmitting audio highlighted the incidental sounds that make up vinyl's much loved qualities.

Thomas Meadowcroft's "Pretty Lightweight" is fascinating, in that it employs a laughter track without the intention of making people laugh. The laughter track, which is played alongside conventional instruments, raises thoughts about Acousmatic listening practices and questions whether it is possible to ignore the obvious sources of sound to focus on what one is hearing instead. The reviewer looked around the room to see a few audience members laughing with the track, but most were either simply listening, or perhaps trying their best to conceal the urge to laugh. As with all the pieces, the acoustic and sound levels were perfect, the laughter track resembling a low textural rumble at times.

An imagined dream sequence is the basis for Scott Walker's "Clara (Benito's Dream)", in which Mussolini considers his wife's decision to be executed by his side, rather than freed by their captors. Walker's music is at a halfway point between songwriting and new music – low and high art, the combination of which is a key interest of Decibel director Cat Hope. Decibel's performance of "Clara" was both excellent and lacking. Lacking, because they replaced the sung lyrics of the original with a bass clarinet solo, and excellent in every other way. The program stated that the removal of the lyrics was in direct reference to Walker's approach, where he would "withhold his singing parts from performers during recordings of new works". However, it seems that removing the carefully crafted lyrics (which were provided in the program, but were too small in the darkened hall to read) removed a vital part – indeed, the heart – of the work. That said, the music itself more than made up for this omission.

A halved pig carcass was hung by rope from the mezzanine floor and punched, an instrument in its own right and a reference to the public treatment of the corpses of Mussolini and Clara. Tape and a duet of ocarinas, pulsing drums, ruined piano and the bass clarinet solo meshed together even better than in any of the other works. It was a good way to end the program and was reminiscent of the end of the previous concert in the series, where the abstract experimentalism of Decibel was toned down with an Ennio Morricone piece.

Decibel had clearly thought about the execution of *Pretty Things* on every level, and there was not one error or oversight, technical or otherwise, that was major enough to distract one from the music. The performance and sound design was flawless, the compositions were innovative and interesting, and the concert was presented in a space with and acoustic that actually favored the music. Decibel remains a figurehead of Australian new music.