

Tape It! Program notes

William Burroughs: *Electronic Revolution* (1970)

William Burroughs is an American writer who explored the concept of the cut up technique in literature, in publications such as *The Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine*. *Electronic Revolution* is a collection of essays that proposes the cutting and sorting of news reports as a way to incite the masses into action and reinterpret facts. It effectively proposes an aural version of his cut up technique, cutting up audio recordings of text rather than the text itself. The essay concerns the power of alphabetic non-pictorial languages to control people by drawing attention to the dangerous possibilities of using human voice as a weapon of misinformation. Burroughs outlines ways to record words and cut them up, suggesting they can easily lead to the false news broadcasts or garbled political speeches causing confusion and even psychic control over individuals. Burroughs' believed that everything is recorded, and if it is recorded, then it can be edited. In many ways, this is what the media does with the news today. Decibel has reworked this piece using live sampling and manipulation software – the modern cut ups – to treat examples of current TV news reporting. As Burroughs has remarked, “When you cut into the present the future leaks out.”

Warren Burt: *Another Noisy Lullaby* (2009) world premiere

Another Noisy Lullaby is a piece for acoustic instruments, whispering and electronic sounds written especially for Decibel. Everything is soft, balanced and hopefully, creating a delicate suspended atmosphere. The piece originates as a series of anagrams that are translated into notes and electronic sounds. Everything comes from the same source, but the differing media mean that the relationships are impossible to perceive. Nonetheless, the quiet texture of diatonic melodies, whispers, and noise bands will hopefully ask the question: if noise music is supposed to have an element of aggression and confrontation to it, how tender, how delicate, how nurturing can we make something, and still have it be noise?

Warren Burt is a composer, performer, video artist, writer and a few other things. He lives and works in Wollongong, NSW. Currently, he is an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow in Music Research at the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. More information about him can be found at www.warrenburt.com.

Cat Hope: *In the Cut* (2009) world premiere

This piece is a study in decline, in particular pitch decline, and the decline of structure and melody. The work begins in the high range of instruments and journeys constantly downward in pitch until the instruments have no tuning left at all, just a loose string or open embouchure. The turntable has a 10” record that plays a descending tone (made especially for the work) that links the bass guitar to the acoustic instruments. *In the Cut* is a novel by Susanne Moore published in 1999, later adapted into a film directed by Jane Campion. This piece is inspired by the slow burning eroticism that accompanies the disintegration that takes place in that story.

Cat Hope is a Western Australian composer, performer and researcher who creates works of sound, video and performance art. She is a vocalist, bassist and flautist. She has worked in pop music (in *Gata Negra*), noise (solo as well as in *Lux Mammoth* and *Abe Sada*), new classical music and free improvisation. Her works are published internationally and she tours often.

Mauricio Kagel: Prima Vista (1962/64) Australian Premiere

Most of Kagel's works have their structural basis in subversive rhetorical gestures such as paradox and disjunction, and use regular instruments used in unusual ways. Prima Vista is no exception. It is written for "slide pictures and undefined sound sources", and involves an elaborate set of instructions for the arrangement and reproduction of the score and sounds. The musicians are divided into two groups, and record their first rehearsal. This recording is played back and manipulated in the performance, each group's material manipulated by the opposing group.

Mauricio Raúl Kagel (1931 –2008) was a [German-Argentine composer](#) who was notable for his interest in developing the [theatrical](#) side of musical [performance](#). Although he took private lessons on piano, organ and cello, as well as in singing, conducting and theory, he was self-taught as a composer. He is often thought of as a 'postmodernist' before the evolution of the term. By temperament a dadaist and provocateur, Kagel drew on the musical examples of composers like [John Cage](#) and Karlheinz Stockhausen during his life. He also made films, such as "Ludwig van" (1970), whose soundtrack derives from pages of [Beethoven](#)'s music plastered on the walls of a set representing the composer's studio.

Brian Eno: Music for Airports 1/1 (1978)

Music for Airports is thought to be the first album of ambient music, low-volume music designed to modify one's perception of a surrounding environment. The first track from the album, 1/1 was a collaboration with Eno, Robert Wyatt and Rhett Davies and designed to be continuously looped as a sound installation, with the intent to defuse the tense, anxious atmosphere of an airport terminal. The phasing of tape loops of different length is a key to this work – they come in and out of synchronisation due to different lengths of the tape and the natural movement of the medium. A single piano melody is repeated and at different times other instruments will fade in and out in a complex, evolving pattern created by the phasing. At some point the sounds clump together, and at other points, be spread apart. Decibel have kept true to this concept by recording their own tape loops and playing them on the stage, yet have reinvigorated the work by performing live with the tape machines.

Brian Eno is an English musician, composer, record producer, music theorist and singer. Eno's solo work pioneered innovative production techniques. In 1972, together with Robert Fripp, Eno developed a tape-delay system described as 'Frippertronics'. He was a member of the glam/art rock group Roxy Music and despite being a self-professed "non-musician", Eno has contributed to recordings by artists as varied as Nico, Genesis and David Bowie in various capacities such as use of his studio/synthesizer/electronic treatments, vocals, guitar, bass guitar, and as just being 'Eno'. He also composed the Windows 95 start-up 'chime'.

Lindsay Vickery: Transit of Venus (2009)

In astronomy a Venus transit occurs when the planet can be observed passing directly in front of the Sun. The event is rare, a pair of transits occur eight years apart but only once every 243 years. Similarly, in this work the orbits of the three performers revolve around one another rarely aligning into unison. Transit of Venus utilises a non-linear score, live sound processing and independent click tracks to control the quasi-improvised performance by the players. In addition to following the tempo of their individual click track, each player must also follow a mobile set of symbols that dictate the evolution of the dynamics, changes in the texture, the pitch class resources that they should use to realize the score, and finally the period of time over which these changes should occur. For example, the textures indicated are arranged in a continuum from silence through to free improvisation a chaotic state in which all note-forms and noises have escaped each other's gravity. The three players have periods of relative independence from one another and others where they are brought together in a tempo/texture unison.

Lindsay Vickery is active as a composer and performer across Europe, the USA and Asia. His music includes works for acoustic and electronic instruments in interactive-electronic, improvised or fully notated settings, ranging from solo pieces to opera and has been commissioned by numerous groups for concert, dance and theatre. He is a highly regarded performer on reed instruments and electronics, touring as a soloist and with ensembles in many parts of the world. He was a founding member of Alea, Magnetic Pig, SQUINT and HEDKIKR: presenting new music by Australian and international composers for over 20 years.

Ernie Althoff: Front Row (1991)

Front Row is a piece that uses sounds as a kind of notation. The performers work with the score operators to choose signals that indicate the sounds they will create during the performance. These sounds are put onto cassette loops and manipulated by the operators for the performers to follow. Althoff considers the cassette recorder as his 'virtuoso instrument', and uses it to explore a large range of timbres through manipulation.

Ernie Althoff is a composer/performer/instrument builder/artist who has worked in Melbourne, Australia since the mid-1970s, when he bought his first vari-speed cassette recorder. During his years as one of the stalwarts of the legendary Clifton Hill Community Music Centre in Victoria he pioneered an array of techniques for this device in the field of low-budget live electro-acoustic performance. Besides numerous tracks on compilations since the late 1970s, Althoff has released three full-length solo albums. His recent work explores sound installation and kinetic sculpture.

"Our culture, until relatively recently, has forgotten how to explore other musical landscapes. In Althoff's case, his machines are like surveying instruments which aid him in mapping out a section of this little-known land for himself." Larry Wendt, San Jose. 1994

Daniel Thorne: We'll never know (2009) Decibel composers commission, world premiere

We'll Never Know is a meditation on the idea of 'what might have been.' I have recently been fascinated by choice and its consequences – left instead of right, up instead of down, here instead of there. In this piece the soundtrack acts as a sort of window into other possible forms that this piece could have taken had different choices been made while composing it, starting with a few short glimpses at this 'parallel' composition before the live performance and the soundtrack eventually combine. The catalyst for these thoughts was the passing of my aunt, who this piece is dedicated to.

Daniel is WAAPA's composer in residence for 2009. In 2006 Daniel was the recipient of the WAYJO Bendat Family Trust Scholarship for musical and professional excellence, and in 2007 was commissioned by the Australia Council to compose a new work for the Mace Francis Orchestra. In 2008 he was awarded the WAYJO/Department of Culture and the Arts scholarship, and was commissioned to compose a new work as part of the orchestra's 25th anniversary celebrations. Daniel's compositions have been recorded by the ABC, and appear on recordings by the Mace Francis Orchestra and WAYJO. He is also a passionate performer of new music, and is a founding member of two of Perth's leading new music ensembles, the Mace Francis Orchestra and the Johannes Luebbers Dectet.

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Concert 1: Tape It



September 10 2009

As part of the [Totally Huge New Music Festival 2009](#)

7.30pm [WAAPA](#) Main Auditorium

A pdf of the [program](#) is also available. This includes details of the [works](#) and the [ensemble](#).

[full reviews of this concert can be found [here](#)]

This concert focuses on works that involve acoustic instruments playing with the ‘tape’ as another instrument. The group works on this concept in a number of ways: literally on tape, CD, with sampler, turntable or computer. The performance features works written for Decibel by Warren Burt and a commission from emerging Western Australian composer Dan Thorne.

“This was [Decibel's] first performance, lets hope there are many more to follow” *The West Australian*.

Warren Burt *Another Noisy Lullaby* (world premiere)

Ernie Althoff *Front Row*

William Burroughs *Electronic Revolution*

Brian Eno *Music for Airports 1/1*

Lindsay Vickery *Transit of Venus*

Cat Hope *In the Cut* (world premiere)

Mauricio Kagel *Prima Vista*

Dan Thorne *We'll Never Know* (world premiere – DECIBEL commission)

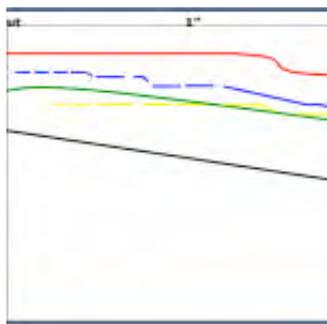


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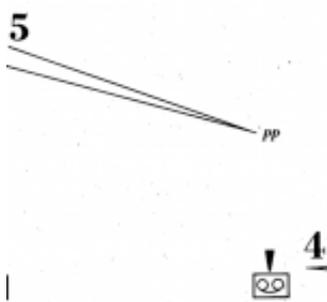


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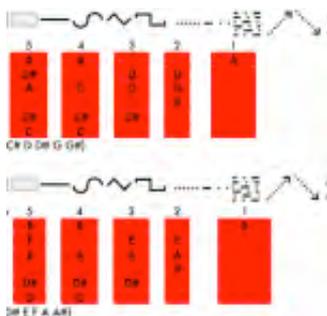
supported but the Western Australian Department for Culture and the Arts.



A page from Cat Hope's In the Cut



A page from Mauricio Kagel's Prima Vista



A page from Lindsay Vickery's Transit of Venus

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jonathan marshall: decibel, tape it!, totally huge



Decibel, Tape It!
photo Ian Henderson

I'M SITTING AT A DESK, SYNCHING MY COMPUTER'S CD PLAYBACK INTO A PAIR OF STUDIO REFERENCE SPEAKERS WITH A GLOWING, INDISTINCT IMAGE OF A TV MONITOR PLAYING BACK A SEPARATE DVD OF THE SAME LIVE PERFORMANCE. NEARLY TWO MONTHS AFTER DECIBEL PREMIERED AT PERTH'S TOTALLY HUGE FESTIVAL THIS SEEMS A PERVERSELY APPROPRIATE MANNER IN WHICH TO REVIEW A NEW ENSEMBLE DEVOTED TO EXPLORING MEDIATED MUSICS AND PLAYBACK DEVICES AS INSTRUMENTS. ALVIN LUCIER WOULD BE PROUD ("I'M SITTING IN A ROOM...").

Decibel is the brainchild of Cat Hope, and the first performance, Tape It!, offered a veritable hit parade of the Perth sound scene: reed-instrumentalist and MAX-patch master Lindsay Vickery, sound designing legend Rob Muir, art-and-rock-crossover cellist Tristan Parr, as well as Malcolm Riddoch, Stuart James and Dan Russell. A diversity of acoustic instruments combined with—or in some instances vied for attention with—assorted electromagnetic and digital sound reproduction technologies (laptops, reel-to-reel tape-players, guitar amplifiers, speakers, portable cassette-players, turntables etc).

The devices and the performers were variously positioned about the auditorium in order to install the works in various ways, and even in the stereo format in which I accessed this performance after the event, the complexity of spatial effects was impressive. Effects of proximity and distance (William Burroughs' viral radio montages), focussed presence (especially in Mauricio Kagel's Prima Vista) and ambiguous distance, all enlivened the performance. Broadly, the program tended to shimmer and shift, to grow but rarely arrest or conclude, producing a wonderfully affective series of effects in which musical resolution was alluded to but deliberately avoided.

Hope's choice of materials, varying from new works of her own and those of Vickery, Warren Burt and Daniel Thorne, through to adaptations of extant pieces by Kagel, Burroughs and Brian Eno, highlighted composers who exploited elements of indeterminacy, collaborative composition, open works and imprecise, impressionist



effects. Far from the rigorous precision of post-Serialist composition by the likes of Brian Ferneyhough, Hope's contention would seem to be that playback devices are best utilised within more rules-based compositions and performative models.

Indeed, several of the pieces featured live projection of graphic or rules-based scores, suggesting an equivalence between this mode of notation and the tape loops employed elsewhere. This was most evident in Althoff's *Front Row*, where the looped sounds on cassette are, as the program note explains, intended to act "as a kind of notation"—here scoring a duel of toys and their sounds. Thorne's contribution was the odd one out in this sense with his tendency to employ urgent string refrains suggesting a quasi-Romantic set of emotional tensions and attempted musical resolutions which other artists eschewed.



Decibel, *Tape It!*
photo Ian Henderson

Tape It! represented not just an argument in favour of playback machines as instruments—a contentious if not altogether novel concept—but also a coupling of this idea with a specific aesthetic vision of what emerges from the pre-recorded and the acoustic. Hope's thesis was, in this sense, counter-intuitive but persuasive: that the use of recorded or programmed material produces a greater diversity of only partially predictable outcomes, rather than necessarily supporting closed-off, formal processes of scoring like dots and lines, which have largely tended towards the construction of ever more predetermined outcomes.

Whilst the sonic palette on offer was unambiguously contemporary—the bursts of ringing noise which characterised Decibel's interpretation of Burroughs, the rapid attacks and micro-gestural acoustic instrumental flourishes of Kagel and Vickery, Hope's own acoustic drones, the fragmentation of conventional tonality without the imposition of a new over-arching logic such as Schoenberg insisted upon within Serialism, digital glitch, slide and process by Hope, Vickery and Eno, radiophonic sampling by Althoff and Burroughs—the performative logic employed overall by Decibel suggested the present bleeding back into history.

If the much prized staves and points of Western composition from the 18th to mid 20th centuries represented nothing more than an earlier form of "recording" or "playback" technology—the live performer as CD player—then contemporary electromagnetic devices are different from pre-modern ones in character, but not in nature.

In enacting this acoustic, electromechanical cyberneticisation of player and machine, Decibel's program effected a curious kind of displacement. Despite the spatialisations of Hope, Muir and their collaborators, the sounds seemed strangely unfixated and placeless. Instruments seemed to echo and scratch (notably Kagel), but not sing or voice. There was a kind of materialism to these compositions which simultaneously rendered them as effervescent or impossible to locate metaphorically. Burroughs' citation of the ever mobile mediascape and Eno's *Music For Airports* were paradigmatic here in their articulation of a metaphoric, global or alien non-place.

One cannot and indeed should not reduce Decibel's multifarious program or explorations to a single effect of what I will here call "aetherisation." Kagel's more emphatically theatrical use of the instruments, or Burt's totally beguiling idea of

something which is both 'noise' and lulling, suggest a range of processes and moods which are not easily amalgamated under a single affective model or critical paradigm. Decibel is, at least at this point, not about defining or demagogically fixing a unified approach to sound, music, playback and performance. It remains an open project, an exploration.

Nevertheless these trends and arguments over what happened after Serialism, following Cage's celebration of chance, or what should be occurring in the wake of the rise of electronic composition and noise art as legitimate forms—all of these much debated controversies interact here to produce a number of tensions which Hope's programming effectively exploits. It was therefore not only musical irresolution which acted as the concert's dominant motif, but of musical history itself. Indeed, Althoff went so far as to quote the same trains sampled in Pierre Schaeffer's landmark *Étude Aux Chemins De Fer* (1948) within his own contribution, driving home the historicist nature of a project such as this.

Hope and her peers (and here I would include Anthony Pateras as striving towards a similar model in his compositions and in his collaborations with Robin Fox) continue to argue that noise art, concrete approaches to sound and to the sample, together with instrumental composition, graphic scores and rules-based ideas, are not incompatible. Whilst there is no doubt that all of these methods productively animated Decibel's performance, it remains to be seen if they are truly compatible, or should rather be seen as parallel trends which may be employed in conflicted tandem. Just as Cat Hope's own approach favours the unresolved, so the combination of ideas and processes here might favour an endless, irresolvable dialogue, rather than a new condition of musical interpretation.

Decibel, Tape It!, director, performer Cat Hope, performers, collaborators Lindsay Vickery, Stuart James, Malcolm Riddoch, Rob Muir, Tristan Parr, Dan Russell; West Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Music Auditorium, Totally Huge New Music Festival, Sept 10, <http://decibel.waapamusic.com/>; <http://www.tura.com.au/>

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Electronic playback brings a charge to Decibel

CONCERT

Decibel
WA Academy of Performing Arts Auditorium
Review: William Yeoman



Decibel's musical director and flautist, Cat Hope.

In this opening concert of the 9th Totally Huge New Music Festival, new music ensemble Decibel presented *Tape It*, an intriguing program of works that according to the group's musical director and flautist Cat Hope demonstrate the many ways in which electronic playback can be incorporated into musical composition.

But *Tape It* wasn't just a feast for the ears. Decibel's seven members, for the most part dressed in black suits and ties, were manipulating a curious mixture of acoustic and electronic instruments and devices, including violin, cello, flute, reel-to-reel tape machines, portable cassette players, tape decks, turntables and laptops.

The result was a mélange of retro fashion and cutting-edge technology, sound and visuals, combining to take the audience to a very strange place indeed.

The music itself ranged from the fragmented soundscape of William Burroughs' 1970's *aural cut-up* piece *Electronic Revolution* and the melting intensity of Cat Hope's "study in decline" *If the Cui* for turntable, bass guitar and acoustic instruments to the anodyne ambience of Brian Fink's *Music For Airports* and the macabre humour of Ernie Altorf's humorous *Flute Row*, in which Dan Russell and Tristan Parr fought it out with toy trumpets and whistles in response to "aural scores" on cassette players.

Surprisingly, one of the most beautiful and traditional-sounding works was also one of the newest, Daniel Thorpe's elegiac *We'll Never Know*, which was especially commissioned by Decibel for this concert.

Decibel wants to treat electronic playback mechanisms as instruments in their own right and to explore repertoire by using original technologies while extending the repertoire for such works in WA.

This was its first performance, let's hope there are many more to follow.

The Totally Huge New Music Festival continues until September 20. Tonight at 7pm you can hear the works of the best of WA's young composers performed at the *Breaking Out Young Composers Night*, at the Western Australian Museum Exhibitions Gallery.

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The West Australian

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DECIBEL

WAAPA Main Auditorium,
Mount Lawley

10/09/09

The TURA Totally Huge New Music Festival has built a reputation over the last decade for delivering some truly unique events. This year one of the highlights early on in the program was the **Decibel** debut performance. Tang-

It, centred around the idea of using tape and other pre-recorded elements as an instrument.

The performance began with a working of a William Burroughs piece. The old beat writer had a penchant for chopping up his own words and rearranging them, delighting in the results of the reinterpreted meaning. Indeed, the chapters of his *Naked Lunch* masterpiece are only in that particular order because that's how it was handed to the publisher. It was a fitting opening.

The inclusion of computer programs projecting instructions to the musicians raises a whole series of interesting ideas. Cat Hope's *In The Cut* was the first instance of the performance being dictated by a random computer generated projection. Different coloured lines were projected onto the screen with each colour indicating a particular instrument. As the lines steadily scrolled along, the musicians interpreted the descending or intermittent lines on their instruments. Other pieces used arrows and icons to tell the musicians what to play. Watching these classically trained musicians taking their cues from the screen is possibly, and hopefully, the closest our culture will get to *RockBand: Mozart*, raising a lot more interesting ideas and music than that game ever could.

After the intermission, the room had changed around with three long tape loops now spanning the entire stage area. They were synchronically set off and the four musicians began at interpreting Brian Eno's *Music For Airports (1/1)*. It was only the second time the seminal tape piece has ever been performed and while the tape loop carried the main piano motif, Cat Hope's flute and Tristan Parr's cello went far in creating the right atmospherics around it.

The night featured pieces composed by the musicians themselves and closed with the premier performance of a new piece. Daniel Thorne's *We'll Never Know* was a piece as opposed to the improvised or computer generated experiments performed earlier. The musicians were linked with earphones and the delicate atmosphere of the piece closed the night perfectly. The pieces were sometimes challenging but raised a lot of interesting points about composition and the use of pre-recorded pieces as a medium, something ABC Classic FM clearly agreed with, recording the whole night for a broadcast in a classical version of the j's *Live At The Wireless* to air down the track.

JASON KENNY

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30 November 2009

Decibel

18.11. and 10.09.2009 // Perth // WA

by [Kelly Curran](#) and [Ben Hamblin](#)



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/)

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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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