



## DECIBEL 'STILL AND MOVING LINES'

PERFORMING SELECTED WORKS BY COMPOSER ALVIN LUCIER

THURSDAY MAY 13, 2010 · 7:30PM · WAAPA MAIN AUDITORIUM

BRADFORD STREET, MT LAWLEY. TICKETS ON THE DOOR.

MORE INFO: [DECIBEL.WAAPAMUSIC.COM](http://DECIBEL.WAAPAMUSIC.COM) · [TURA.COM.AU](http://TURA.COM.AU)



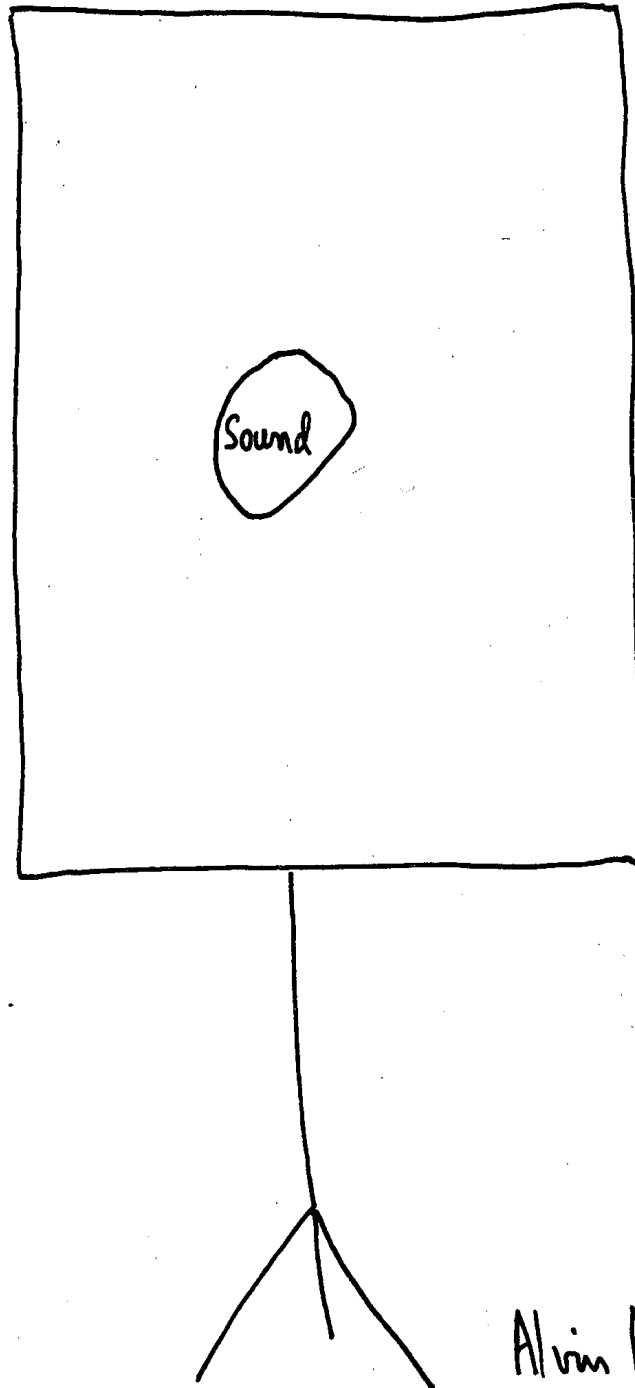
decibel



PART OF TURA NEW MUSIC'S 2010 SCALE VARIABLE NEW CHAMBER MUSIC SERIES.

TURA NEW MUSIC PRESENTS SCALE VARIABLE

# DECIBEL



*Alvin Lucier*

STILL AND MOVING LINES

The Music of Alvin Lucier

## Introduction

Welcome to the first program of music by Decibel for 2010. It gives me great pleasure to introduce the first of our monograph concerts - concerts devoted to the work of a single composer. The music of American composer Alvin Lucier (b. 1931) makes the ideal choice for such a concert, as he has been at the forefront of experimentation when combining electronic and acoustic instruments, the very combination Decibel seeks to explore.

Lucier's works engage with acoustic phenomena and auditory perception. They examine the physical properties of sound itself: resonance of spaces, interference between closely-tuned pitches, and the transmission of sound through physical media such as walls and objects. The works move between sound art, installation, recording and notated composition. His compositions are loosely focused around three areas of musical exploration: attempts at making the inaudible audible, the revealing of sound shapes, and investigations into the acoustics of space. In programming this concert, I have aimed to choose works that cover all of these areas, and in doing so created the first concert fully dedicated Alvin Lucier in Perth, featuring a number of Australian premieres.

Many of Lucier's works were written before the digitisation of sound, making use of technology such as tape. Lucier views technology as a tool, shaped by little more than what will get the job done at the time. Bearing this in mind, Decibel has modernised the technology to use what is available to us today. In fact, digital technology is what has made many of these pieces more performable. The speed of computer processing means the wait for tapes to rewind or the splicing knife to cut and edit sound are no longer required. Being mindful of differences between digital and analogue sound reproduction quality, we have aimed to replicate the sonic nature of analogue technology in the program much as possible.

The importance of Alvin Lucier's work is only now being recognised. I think you will find his compositions are eloquent, imaginative, poetic and expressive in a way that makes Lucier's contribution unique in modern music.

Cat Hope

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, DECIBEL



*Decibel with Peter Holland* Photo by Yvonne Doherty.



## PROGRAM NOTES

### 1. ***Shelter* (1967) for vibration pickups, amplification system and enclosed space.**

In *Shelter*, Lucier offers the sounds of outside the auditorium translated through its very walls. The auditorium itself becomes the *Shelter*, and the activity outside the room enters the loudspeakers within it. By strategically placing contact microphones on walls, doors and doorframes that separate the auditorium space from the outside world, it is possible to capture the transmission of sonic energy through the very structure of the building. The entrance and settling of the audience, the air conditioning and power systems, lighting and the musicians playing in the rooms outside are reduced to vibrations picked up by sensors that are equalized and amplified. What you will hear are the sounds filtered by the physical characteristics of the building.

### 2. ***Carbon Copies* (1989) for saxophone, piano, percussion and playback.**

In this work, performers prepare a continuous recording of sounds from their environment as a continuous piece. In the performance, they are required to attempt to play exactly what they have recorded, using their own musical instruments, whilst being reminded of the recording. The same recording is shared with the audience through loudspeakers. Lucier first investigated this idea of imitating the environment in an earlier work, *(Hartford) Memory Space* in 1970. It was inspired by the ability of animals to imitate certain physical characteristics of their environment in order to survive. Lucier posits that imitating our sonic environment will help us relate to it more fully. The performers almost disguise themselves by blending in with the sounds around them. In this way, they are required to remove the 'art' from their playing, an idea that appears in much of Lucier's work. This is not an improvised piece - the copying is very controlled and learnt beforehand, driving the musicians out of their musical comfort zone. The work was commissioned by the American ensemble *Challenge*, an ensemble active in the 1980s and featuring Antony Braxton, David Rosenboom and William Winant.

### 3. ***In Memoriam Stuart Marshall* (1993) for bass clarinet and pure wave oscillator.**

This is one of many works Lucier has written for sine tone generators and instrument. These works explore the spatial properties of sound by revealing certain acoustic phenomena that are created by the interaction of a pure tone with a rich harmonic instrument. The clarinetist interacts with the electronically produced tone and in doing so, creates moving sound geographies in the space. Unlike other sine wave pieces, such as *Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas* (1973 – 1974), this work is scored, using a diagram that indicates the direction of pitch movement for the clarinetist. Each interaction creates a different acoustic phenomena within the room, depending on the room. Lucier's sine tone pieces began as a provocation to an awareness of one's surroundings using sound, influenced by the ideas of author Carlos Castaneda.

### 4. ***Nothing is Real (Strawberry Fields Forever)* (1990) for piano, amplified teapot, tape recorder and miniature sound system.**

This work came about when Japanese pianist Aki Takahashi commissioned Lucier to arrange a Beatles tune for her to perform. Not wanting to make yet another Beatles cover to the list of hundreds, Lucier decided to displace the tune by altering and manipulating its sound quality. The original melody is broken into clusters played over the entire range of the piano, more like Lucier remembers them than how they were written in the song. These clusters are left to hang and decay in the space, only to reappear replayed from a speaker hidden in a teapot that sits on the top of the same piano, rearticulating the sounds through the very body of their source, and manipulated by movements of the teapot lid and surfaces.

### 5. ***Hands* (1994) for organ with one or more players.**

Performers hands are used to subtly alter the harmonics produced from the pipes of an organ. A series of adjacent semitones are played and sustained on the keyboard – the melodic, rhythmic and chordal detail is all generated this way. The performers are free to choose which pipes to 'effect' using a range of suggested hand movements, as most notes on the organ have a number of pipes according to the different stops selected.

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## Interval (20 minutes)

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### 1. ***I Am Sitting In A Room* (1970) for voice and electromagnetic tape.**

*"Every room has its own melody, hiding there until you make it audible."*  
Alvin Lucier, 1994.

This classic of electronic music has existed for many years as a piece of recorded sound art. It is important because it was an early example of process music, and was one of the first works to really examine the acoustic space of a room as a compositional element. Digital technologies have made this work more readily performed live, a possibility always suggested on the score. The spoken fragment of text serves not only to tell what will happen to itself, but also provide the sonic material to start the piece. This voice is gradually altered as it is repeatedly played and recorded many times in the space. What was once a short paragraph of spoken word slowly becomes a piece of music, the meaning of the words is lost, and all that remains is the rhythm of the original voice. The acoustic space has taken over the voice, it is the main performer in

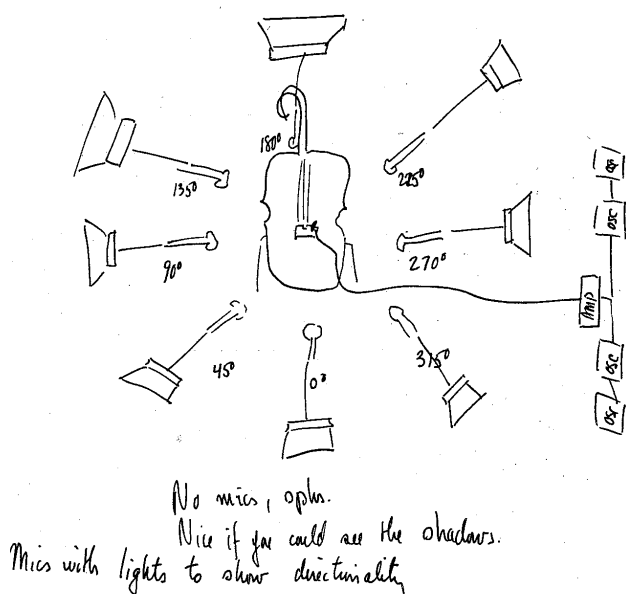


Alvin Lucier performing *I am Sitting in a Room*.

this piece. The human voice intersects in a very direct way with its immediate environment. The original recording of this piece features Lucier's own voice, which has a stutter making it very distinctive. Likewise, Peter Holland's voice is distinctive to most Western Australians, making him the perfect choice for this work. This is a music rooted in the power of speech.

**Peter Holland** started working life in 1964 as an actor with the National Theatre Company at The Playhouse. The following year he was appointed as an announcer at the ABC, where he spent the next 32 years making programmes on radio and television. For 20 years, he was the ABC's principal television news-reader in WA, later presenting the television news for Channel 9 in Perth. He remains an active broadcaster for ABC ClassicFM.

## 2. *Directions of Sound From the Bridge* (1978) for string instrument, audio oscillator and sound sensitive lights.

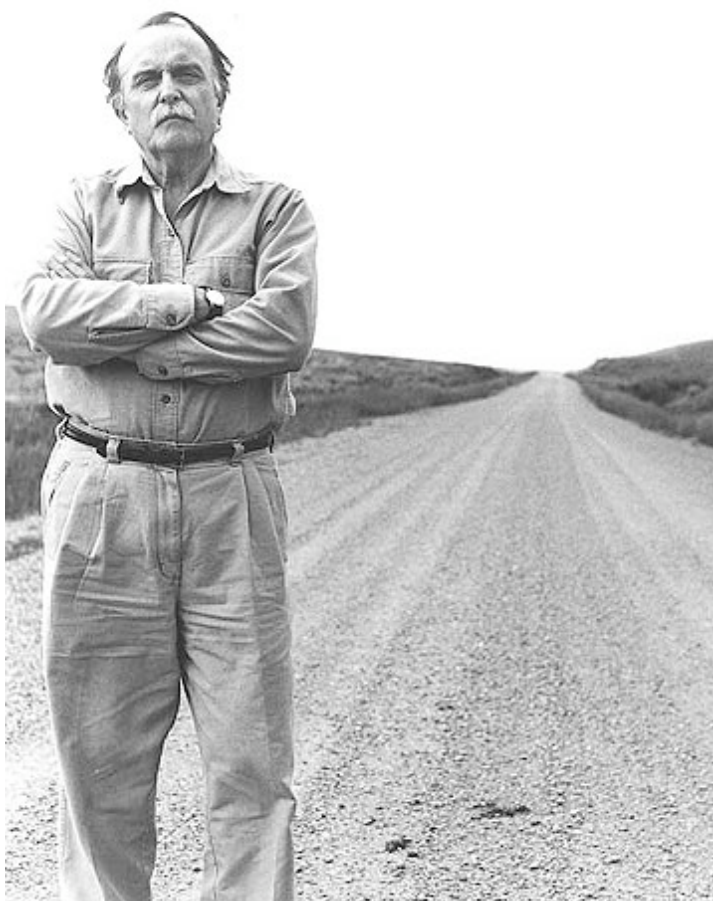


Lucier is interested in the three dimensional phenomena of sound, and the way sound emanates from instruments into space. In this work, Lucier is attempting to reveal the simple sonic beauty of the instrument, allowing it to speak without a player using any extreme or rehearsed technique to play it. A tone is played at the cello's bridge, the pitch very slowly and continuously changed in a way that would be impossible for a performer of the instrument to achieve. The cello creates what Lucier calls a 'sound shadow', usually unperceivable due to the sheer amount of activity on the instrument during performance. In this work however, the sound shadows are revealed by lights in the space illustrating the direction and intensity of movement of sound throughout the space.

## 3. *Ever Present* (2002) for flute, saxophone and piano with slow sweep pure wave oscillator.

Soon after the composition of *Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas*, Lucier expressed interest in creating pieces that used more than one wave and instrument. This work iterates this idea in a wonderfully subtle, involved way. The two sine wave generators interact with each other in acoustic space, interrupted and enhanced by the acoustic

instruments. The combination of electronic and acoustic timbres create complicated patterns in the space that change depending on where you are in the room. The sine tones are part of the music ensemble alongside other instruments, controlled and mediated by performers.



Alvin Lucier



**Decibel** is a new music ensemble that presents compositions that combine electronic and acoustic instruments. Formed in 2008, the group has presented two major concerts to date, *Tape It!* at the 2009 Totally Huge New Music Festival and *SomAcoustica* as part of Scale Variable Chamber Music Series in 2009. They have commissioned four new Australian works from established and emerging composers, and adapted others for performance. Decibel toured to Brisbane late last year to perform at the Apple University Consortium's *Createworld* Conference, and later this year will perform in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and New Zealand. Decibel have been recorded by the ABC and featured on their *New Music Up Late* program. In 2010 they will record their first CD.

**Cat Hope** – artist director, flute, electronics.

**Stuart James** – piano, MaxMSP programming.

**Lindsay Vickery** – clarinets, saxophones, Max/MSP programming.

**Malcom Riddoch** – programming, electronics.

**Tristen Parr** - cello, electronics.

**Special Guest – Peter Holland.**

Max/MSP programming for *Directions of Sound From the Bridge* – Kynan Tan.

Stage assistants – Samuel Gilles, James Herrington.

Sound recordists – Charlie Daly, Bob White.

Lighting – Steve Warren, Jon Davey.

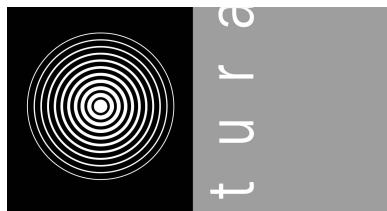
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## TURA NEW MUSIC

Award-winning Tura New Music is one of Australia's peak bodies for the production and presentation of new music events and a resource agency, promoter of new music events and advocacy/support network for Western Australian new music artists and performers.

Established in 1987 the company has presented hundreds of events featuring thousands of artists across WA, commissioned hundreds of new works, established an international class archive, facilitated dozens of projects with like-minded partners and taken new music to the far reaches of the state.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## sounding a room

**darren jorgensen: decibel play alvin lucier**



Malcolm Riddoch, Decibel, Still and Moving Lines  
 photo Gemma Pike

PERTH AUDIENCES LIKE TO THINK OF THEMSELVES AS UNBEARABLY ISOLATED, SO WHEN LOCAL ENSEMBLE DECIBEL DECIDED TO PERFORM THE COMPOSITIONS OF ONE OF THE CANONICAL FIGURES OF EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC, ALVIN LUCIER, THEY ATTRACTED A GOOD CROWD. LUCIER WAS A GOOD CHOICE FOR THE FIRST OF DECIBEL'S COMPOSER SERIES IN THIS REMOTE CAPITAL, BECAUSE HIS WORK LENDS ITSELF TO THINKING ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE IN BOTH SPACE AND TIME.

After the lateral philosophies of the late New York school, Lucier deconstructs the usual arrangement of composers, performers, listeners and sounds. It is as if his pieces are more realised than interpreted, demonstrated than performed, as sine wave oscillators collide with clarinets, voices echo into nothingness and a Beatles melody is played through a teapot.

Nothing illustrates Lucier's special place in the history of the acoustic arts more than the first piece performed here, Shelter (1967). Malcom Riddoch manipulated the difference between sounds that could be heard through the venue's walls and their amplification inside, picked up by contact microphones placed around the building. As one sound mirrored another, the walls seem to dissolve in the mix. What Lucier has designed here, through the slight phase change between outside and inside, is a way for an audience to become aware of how our ears construct the spaces around us, and Riddoch's achievement is to orchestrate the resonance of these spaces. Lucier's pieces realise the simplicity of sound's presence, beyond the range of the home stereo, bringing to his work a quality as timeless as the idea of the room itself.

So in the classic I am Sitting in a Room (1970), the sound of a recorded voice is played back and recorded again and again, until the recording is muffled by its own resonating, spatial echoes. Here the former West Australian newsreader Peter Holland came out of his ABC studio to bring the piece a particular resonance for its





Hollander came out of his ABC studio to bring the piece a particular resonance for its local audience, his familiar voice becoming unfamiliar as it diffracted into space. In these early pieces the room itself is an instrument, while later Lucier works turn to the sine wave oscillator as an instrument, combining it with the clarinet, flute, saxophone and piano to investigate tonal relationships. Decibel's program was largely made up of these later works, in which the appearance of classical instruments alongside the purity of an electronically generated pitch rendered them grotesque, the human breath a distorted and messy medium with which to investigate the greater goals of Lucier's spatial sounds.



Tristan Parr, Decibel, Still and Moving Lines  
photo Gemma Pike

In Memoriam Stuart Marshall (1993) sets a clarinet against an oscillator, and demands that the instrument match its pitch. Here clarinet player Lindsay Vickery struggled for some minutes to engage with the precise sound of the oscillator before meeting it with his own. As if in a colossal battle between human and machine, Vickery's breath came to create a series of sound effects that produced negative images in the oscillations, outlining resonant frequencies that sought out an exact spatial collusion. The performance became nothing short of sensational, as the ear attended to magical shifts of pitch, tone and even rhythm that appeared as pulsing shapes shifting from one side of the room to the other. Vickery's triumph came at a price, however, as his sweating brow revealed the frailty of the human instrument system of sound production against the cleaner, digital sound source. Lucier's simplicity, his attendance to singular effects, appeared to edge this archaic instrument into obsolescence.

Lucier's pieces may be better conceived as scientific experiments or works of conceptual art than as music in a compositional sense. So his commissioned Beatles cover, Nothing is Real (Strawberry Fields Forever; 1990), is here performed on piano by Stuart James and played back through a teapot, its lid lifted and replaced, as per Lucier's instructions, by Decibel's director Cat Hope. We are no longer listening to the famous melody, but instead to its duration and spatial presence: in Directions of Sound from the Bridge (1978), James altered an electronic tone played from a cello's bridge to show how the shape of the instrument changes the way this tone is distributed around the space. Lights placed around the room brightened and dimmed according to the changing pitch and the cello's sound shadow. Thus Perth was treated to a lesson in acoustic phenomena, an interrogation of the conservatism of the concert format, and an ecstatic experience of sound at its most sparse.

**Decibel, Still and Moving Lines: The Music of Alvin Lucier; Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Perth, May 13; <http://decibel.waapamusic.com>**

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