

DECIBEL THREE CONCERT SERIES AT PICA 2011

CONCERT 2 — PRETTY THINGS

MONDAY JUNE 20, 2011 • 8PM • NEW MUSIC BY CAGE, DE GROOT, WALKER,

MEADOWCROFT, HOPE, VICKERY AND BOLLETER. TICKETS AVAILABLE NOW

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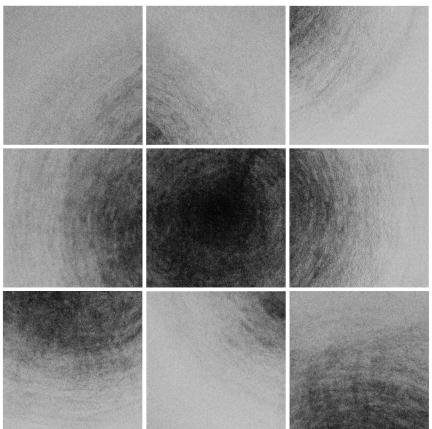


Department of
Culture and
the Arts



Decibel New Music Ensemble in partnership with TURA New Music and PICA Presents

PRETTY THINGS



Monday, 20 June, 2011, 8pm, Main Gallery Space, PICA.

1. John Cage: Radio Music (1957)
for 1 – 8 radio's.

2. Lindsay Vickery: Hunting Pack (2011)
for electronic keyboard, cello, cimbalom and Max MSP [world premiere].

3. Stuart James: Particle 1 (2011)
for 2 ruined cymbals, laptop, 2 microphones, and 4 loudspeakers.

4. Ross Bolleter: Deviance (2011)
for ruined piano, cello, flute, bass clarinet and playback [world premiere].

[Interval]

5. Chris De Groot: Agerasia (2011)
for three ruined records, cello and bass clarinet [world premiere].

6. Cat Hope: Kuklinski's Dream (2010)
for three carving knives, viola, bass clarinet and cello [Perth premiere].

7. Thomas Meadowcroft: Pretty Lightweight (2001) [Perth premiere].
for cello, viola, flute and playback.

8. Scott Walker: Clara (Benito's Dream) (2006)
arranged by Decibel for bass clarinet, ruined piano, meat punching, bass guitar, guitar, sampler, 2 drum sets and string trio.

Welcome to the second of three concerts at PICA in 2011. Decibel has deliberately chosen the gallery space to stage these concerts to engage with music that is not necessarily tied up with 'concert' conventions or specifications and enjoy the nature of PICA's unique building and acoustic.

Part of experimentation in recent music composition has been with the very nature of instruments themselves, and once extended techniques reached the maximum effect possible, and influenced by art movements such as fluxus and dada, composers began to use objects not usually associated with music creation to enable different sound worlds for music. *Pretty Things* features a selection of music with an emphasis on Western Australian works that make use of unusual items as musical instruments, instruments that have been altered by time or other interference, or instruments that may be thought of as 'pretty things' in their own right. It is notable how composers have responded to the 'pretty things' brief with ruin as an illustration of beauty and musical potential. We hope you enjoy the antique furniture, shiny surfaces, edibles, old gadgets, preparations and laughter.

Cat Hope, Artistic Director, Decibel.

8. Scott Walker: *Clara (Benito's Dream)* (2006)

This track is arranged from Walker's most recent album *The Drift* (2006), an album full of unusual instruments such as radios, donkey screeches, foley sounds and more, considered stylistically as somewhere between new music and songwriting. *Clara* represents an imagined dream sequence in which the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini considers his young mistress Clara Petacci's decision to face execution at his side, after she refused the option of freedom at his arrest by communist partisans in 1945. Walker remembers seeing footage at the cinema as a child, of the bodies being strung up by the feet on meat hooks outside an ESSO petrol station near the piazzetta Loreto in Milan, vilified by the public. Walker is known for withholding his singing parts from performers during recording of new works, and in Decibel's arrangement, whilst elements of the original orchestration such as meat punching, tape and ocarina parts are retained, the sung lyrics are almost all replaced by bass clarinet as a reference to this approach.

The lyrics are as follows:

Clara Petacci

Birds. This is not a cornhusk doll, dipped in blood in the moonlight, like what happened in America. This is us, our outsides snagged, dipped in mob in the daylight, like what happened in America. The breasts are still heavy, the legs long and straight, the upper lip remains short, the teeth still too small, the outside is green, the hair long and black, still coming through. She knows this room, she can navigate it in the dark. She entered the Palazzo at night by a side door, to ascend in a lift to the upper floor. She lies on the bed looking up not yet seeing, the signs of the zodiac painted in gold on the blue vaulted ceiling. His enormous eyes as he arrives, coming nearer in the surrounding darkness. His strange beliefs about the moon, its influence upon men of affairs, the danger of its cold light on your face while you were sleeping. She'll eclipse it with her head, stroke him 'til he sleeps 'til he has nothing to do among men of affairs. Sometime before dark her bare feet cross the floor, she gazes from the window at the fountain in the courtyard. Sometimes I feel like a swallow, a swallow which by some mistake has gotten into an attic and knocks its head against the walls in terror. This is not a rabbit skinned with a body of silver like what happen in America. This is not a terrapin with its shell turned away, like what happened in America. The mood soon changed in the clear morning air. A man came up towards the body and poked it with a stick. It rocked stiffly and twisted around at the end of the rope. Finer than a hair from every side, finer than a hair. This is just a cornhusk doll dipped in blood in the moonlight. This morning in my room a little swallow was trapped. It flew around desperately until it fell exhausted on my bed. I picked it up so as not to frighten it. I opened the window then I opened my hand.



Scott Walker (b1943, USA) was part of *The Walker Brothers*, a famous vocal trio in the 1960's. After leaving *The Walker Brothers* in 1967 to go solo, Walker forged a critically acclaimed career with his distinctive crooning ballads over lush orchestral arrangements with dark lyrics covering subjects such as prostitution, transvestitism, suicide and the plague. Walker's career took a critical downward turn in the 70s, and he became a recluse. Yet he has remained a cult favourite, and after a 20 year hiatus released the bleak and experimental album *Tilt* (1995). 4AD released his last full album *The Drift*, an exploration of violence and inhumanity spanning from World War II to September 11—with disturbing themes underscored by equally unnerving music. Walker also composes music for dance and film.

Decibel:

Cat Hope - Director, flutes, bass guitar, voice, ocarina.

Lindsay Vickery - Reeds, max programming, score players, chinese oboe.

Stuart James - Keyboards, percussion, samplers, ocarina, Max programming, live manipulations.

Tristan Parr - Cello, electric cello.

Malcolm Riddoch - Guitar, electronics, networking, electroacoustics, tape manipulations.

If you would like regular updates (but not spam!) on what Decibel do, please go to our web site and subscribe:
<http://decibel.waapamusic.com/subscribe>.

The next Decibel concert at PICA is on September 19, and is entitled *Camera Obscura*, as part of the Totally Huge New Music Festival.

You may purchase the debut CD by Decibel, *Disintegration: Mutation* and the book *Audible Designs* from the PICA front of house desk, or from our website.

Special guests:

Cimbalom, extra percussion: Josh Webster

Meat punching: Mace Francis

Ruined piano in *Clara*: Chris De Groot

Viola/violin: Aaron Wyatt, Bec Smith

Technical:

Front of House: Jessica, Gabrielle Sullivan.

Lighting and technical support: Andrew Beck

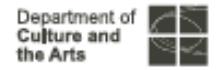
Stage Assistants: Bob White, Charlie Daly

Artwork: When Studio

Ruined piano supplied by WARPS (World Association for Ruined Piano Studies) studios, Bayswater, West Australia.

Thank You:

Tos Mahoney, Gabrielle Sullivan, KFord, Mondo's Meats, Meg Travers



decibel | decibel.waapamusic.com



1. John Cage: *Radio Music* (1956)

Radio Music is a work composed using chance operations. The 8 possible parts, of which Decibel will perform 5, indicate between 26 and 64 different frequencies between 55 and 156 kHz, notated using the numbers projected in the space. There are 4 sections, with or without silences between them, to be completed within 6 minutes. Decibel have created a system to randomly choose durations for the different 'tunings'. The work was premiered by John Cage himself along with Maro Ajemian, David Tudor, Grete Sultan and the four members of the Juilliard String Quartet. Period analogue radios (dubbed the 'stately gentlemen') from the 1970's have been sourced for this performance, and whilst the audio material at the tunings selected would have changed since the pieces composition, the replacement of analogue radio with digital will render this work unperformable.



John Cage, circa 1970.

John Cage (USA, 1912 –1992) was an American composer, philosopher, poet, music theorist, artist, printmaker, and amateur mycologist and mushroom collector. A pioneer of chance music, electronic music and non-standard use of musical instruments, Cage was one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde. Critics have lauded him as one of

the most influential American composers of the twentieth century. Cage is perhaps best known for his 1952 composition 4'33", the three movements of which are performed without a single note being played. Through his studies of Indian philosophy and Zen Buddhism in the late 1940s, Cage came to the idea of chance-controlled music, which he started composing in 1951. The tunings for *Radio Music* were selected using the I Ching.

2. Lindsay Vickery: *Hunting Pack* (2011)

The idea of a revisioning of the traditional "La Chasse" genre has been on Vickery's drawing board for a number of years. It is customary for hunting music to be triumphant, even pompous in its celebration of the "thrill of the chase". This work seeks instead to capture some of the terrifying, nightmarish collusion of the hunting pack: at once wild and unrestrained and coordinated and complicit. A state of order-in-anarchy is achieved by synchronizing the performers with independent computer-controlled click-tracks. This allows for the exploration of several unusual modes of rhythmic organization: polytempo - the simultaneous performance of multiple tempi (including) independent acceleration and deceleration of each player and microrhythm – the separation of the players by tiny time intervals. Computer control also permits the precise synchronization of electronic processing of the sounds of the performers, adding to the surreal methodical madness of the hunting pack.

Western Australian composer and performer **Lindsay Vickery** has created a consistently innovative body of work, notably drawing on non-linear formal structures, interactive music and improvisation. As a performer he has played an important role in the Australian New Music scene as a founding member of Alea, Magnetic Pig, SQUINT and HEDKIKR. He has had significant collaborations with The California Ear Unit (USA), the MATA Ensemble (NYC), Scintilla Divina Ensemble (GER), Jon Rose, Clocked Out, skadada and The Tissue Culture and Art group, performing at the Shanghai, Perth, Adelaide and Sydney International Arts Festivals, as well as Music at the Anthology (NYC), NWEAMO (Portland and San Diego) and the LA County Museum of the Arts Music series.

3. Stuart James: *Particle 1* (2011)

The cymbal is an instrument rich in harmonics, and is often used as a timbral and dramatic embellishment in musical works. Instead, this work features ruined cymbals as a sound source for live laptop processing to create an immersive spectral work. Certain microphone placements around the cymbals create a contrasting frequency response creating a mixed palette of sound colour. The laptop processing develops these sounds by manipulating the granularised elements of the timbre, spectra and their spatialisation. This piece is the first in a series of works by James that explore the use of Wave Terrain Synthesis as a means of controlling the evolutionary state of complex sound synthesis.

After graduating in jazz piano performance and music composition in 2000, Stuart completed a Masters in Creative Arts in 2005 researching correlations between sound and video and his more recent compositions and performances have stemmed from this research as well as granular, frequency domain, and wave terrain synthesis. He has performed in the *Cloud Orchestra* and the *Johannes Luebbers Decet* and has had composition commissions from *Tetrafide Percussion*, the ABC, and performances of his work by the *Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra*, *WASO New Music Ensemble*, and Michael Kieran Harvey. Stuart has been active as a music engraver and has contributed to several publications, notably a book on Australian composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks by Victoria Rogers on Ashgate. Stuart currently manages *The Soundfield Studio*, a commercial production, mixing, and mastering facility. He is also a lecturer in music technology at the *West Australian Academy of Performing Arts*. Stuart transcribes the music featured in the Decibel arrangements.

4. Ross Bolleter: *Deviance* (2011)

Deviance is the second piece by Bolleter to make use of ruined piano improvisation as a "sonic score" for performers to interpret improvisationally, and the first to be given a live performance. *Deviance* poses challenges to contemporary performers, inviting them to step away from conventional pitch conventions and enter the joyous and unpitched chaos of the ruined piano world. Thus, *Deviance* requires real time responses in a charged and changeable sonic field. In this way, it challenges the performers to

go beyond acceptable limits in their improvisational responses. *Deviance* ("deviants") invites the performers to devise "ruined" approaches to the performance. The axis of ruin in *Deviance* is a duet between the original ruined piano from Nallan sheep station and a ruined Ronisch from the Sandstone Hotel. Both pianos come from the Murchison goldfields in the north west of Western Australia. This work was commissioned by Decibel with assistance from the Australia Council.

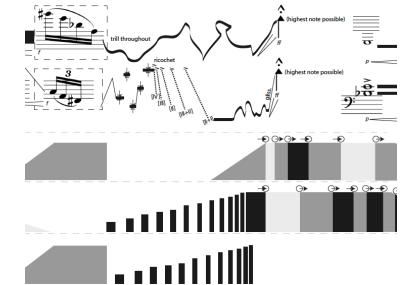
Ross Bolleter (b1946) is a West Australian improviser/composer who cut his teeth with 6 years as a pianist at the Parmelia Hilton in Perth. His performances often feature ruined piano improvisations laced with his stories and poems about the pianos, or other aspects of ruin. His CD releases include *The Country of Here Below*, (Tall Poppies, Sydney, 1994), *Secret Sandhills and satellites* (Emanem, London, 2006) and *Night Kitchen: an hour of ruined piano*, (Emanem, London, 2010). *Crow Country*, (Pogus, New York, 1999) was nominated as one of the 10 best albums of 1999 by New York's Cadence Magazine. Ross Bolleter has five ruined pianos in his kitchen on which he improvises and records at night.

INTERVAL

5. Chris De Groot: *Agerasia* (2011)

For De Groot, vinyl is an ideal physical representation of music; big, bold and tactile. Putting on a record makes the listening experience more enjoyable - as does the great audio quality of vinyl records! *Agerasia* uses altered or "ruined" vinyl as a sound source in combination with acoustic instruments (*Agerasia* refers to a condition of youthful appearance in an old person). The piece takes some inspiration from Ligeti's *Cello Concerto* [1966], heard in the cello and bass clarinet's sustained tones. The records used in *Agerasia* contain three marked sections, each prepared using a different process of ruin. This work was commissioned by Decibel with assistance from the Australia Council.

An excerpt of the score from *Agerasia*



Christopher de Groot is a West Australian composer whose eclectic tastes have had him write music for a wide variety of ensembles from jazz big bands to full orchestras as well as electronics. De Groot has a keen interest in music for film, although he is not fond of the label "film composer". This interest has led to numerous film scores, most notably Sam Barrett's film-noir inspired *Esoterica* [2010] and Dimitri Kirsanoff's *Ménilmontant* [1926]. In 2010 he composed a new spatial work, *Sororal*, for WASOs Echo Chamber Orchestra and four prerecorded cassette tapes. *Sororal* was recorded at the ABC studio 620, Perth. De Groot has recently completed his Masters degree in composition and lectures part time at the Western Australian Academy Of Performing Arts (WAAPA).

6. Cat Hope: *Kuklinski's Dream* (2010)

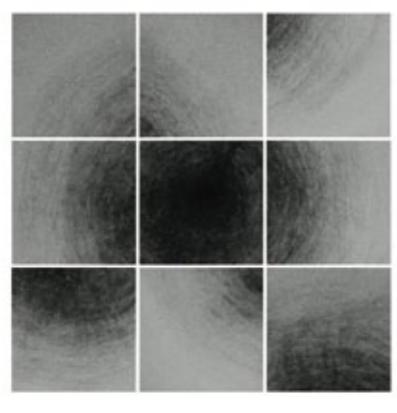
This piece attempts to depict an atmosphere that may reflect the final moments experienced by the victims of notorious York Mafia hit man Richard 'The Iceman' Kuklinski (1935-2006). The tools of his trade establish a texture in this work that is then mirrored and juxtaposed by more traditional musical instruments. Excerpts of Kuklinski's signature, taken at the time of his imprisonment, are used as notation in some parts of the score. This piece was commissioned by Melbourne ensemble Golden Fur and premiered at the Melbourne Recital Centre, and the knife amplification sets were built for the work by KFord.

Cat Hope is an accomplished composer, sound artist, performer, songwriter and noise artist whose practice is an interdisciplinary one that often crosses over into video and installation. She has written soundscapes for dance and theatre companies as well as film, and is a classically trained flautist, self taught vocalist and experimental bassist who plays as a soloist and as part of small ensembles, such as Gata Negra, Lux Mammoth and Abe Sada. She tours often and her work is published worldwide. This year she was a finalist in the 'WA Citizen of the year' awards, in the art, entertainment and culture category. She completed her PhD in Art at RMIT in 2010, and is currently on secondment as the CREATEC Research Fellow at WAAPA, ECU.

7. Thomas Meadowcroft: *Pretty Lightweight* (2001)

In the title *Pretty Lightweight*, 'lightweight' functions as 'light' (adjective) and 'weight' (noun). In this work, the performers play alongside a laughter track supplied by the composer. Although pre-recorded laughter is normally used to highlight jokes on television shows and in novelty tunes, the joke/laugh, stimulus/response model has been largely avoided here in attempt to get the music and the laughter to cancel each other's 'weight' out. Decibel have created a score player especially that ties in the prerecorded sound with the score, to assist accuracy in performance. A page of the score features in *Audible Designs*.

Thomas Meadowcroft is an Australian freelance composer and musician living in Berlin since 1998. He has on occasion used foreign or found objects (power tools, canned laughter, recordings of automobiles and BBQ areas etc.) as well as video projections (weather forecasts for the Mediterranean Sea, stills from childrens' books) in his compositions which been performed at various contemporary music festivals in Europe. His music has been commissioned by ensemble recherche, ELISION ensemble, KNM Berlin, and Les Percussions de Strasbourg. His scores are available through Plainsound Music Edition. Thomas Meadowcroft studied composition in the USA with George Crumb and Brian Ferneyhough.



DECIBEL THREE CONCERT SERIES AT PICA 2011
CONCERT 2 — PRETTY THINGS
WEDNESDAY JUNE 22, 2011 8PM • NEW WORKS BY ENRIQUE DE GROOT, WILLECK,
ROSS BOLLETER, LINDSEY VICKERY AND CAT HOPE. TICKETS AVAILABLE NOW
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decibel: pretty things

20.06.2011

@ Main Gallery Space, PICA

Review by: MITCHELL MOLLISON

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.

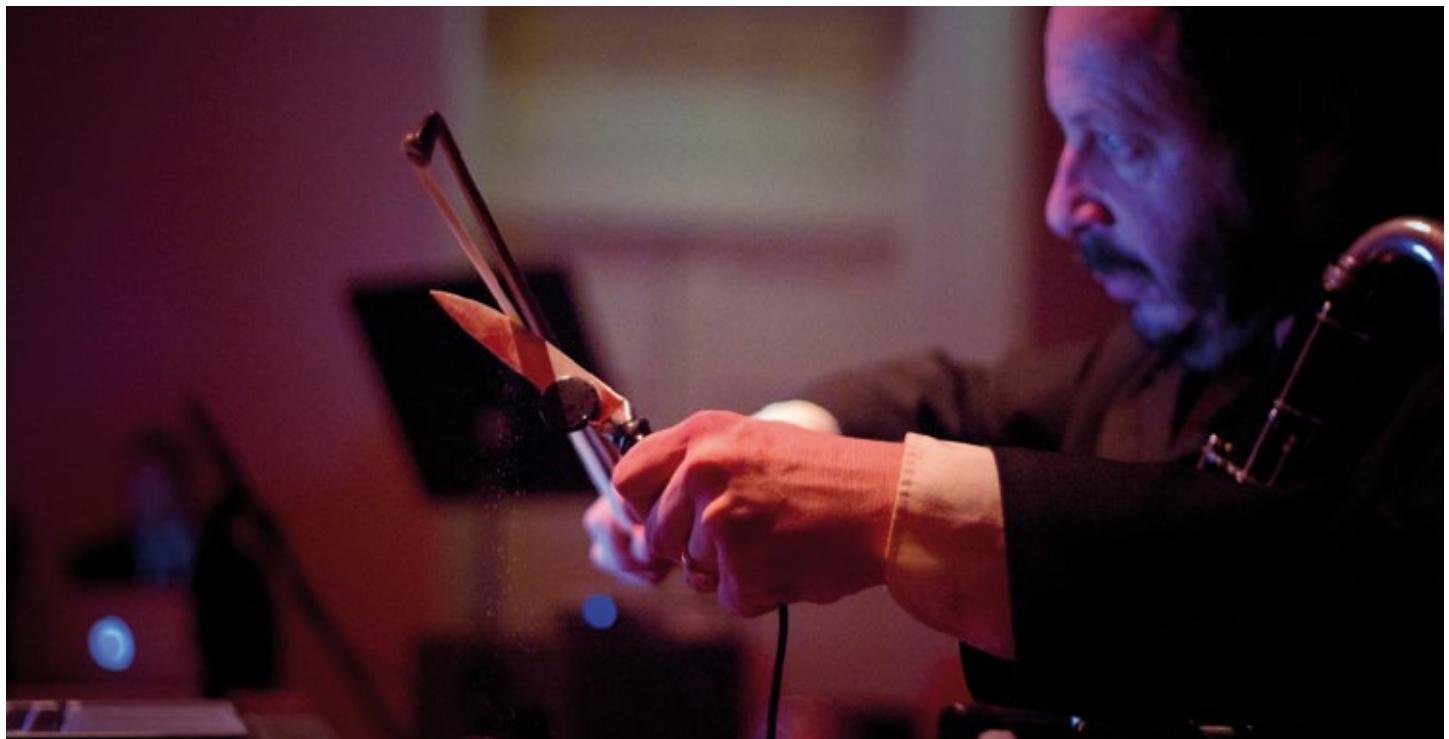
Ross Bolleter and Stuart James both presented works within the theme of 'ruin'. Bolleter, who is known for the ruined pianos he has collected and improvised on during the last ten years, presented

"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





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.



ARTICLES

LYNDON BLUE

DECIBEL PRESENTS 'PRETTY THINGS' AT PICA, MONDAY JUNE 20

June 22



Ask the aesthete what an art gallery ought to contain, and he or she will say without hesitation that it ought to contain 'pretty things.' Ask a member of DECIBEL and they will tell you the same, though their idea of what constitutes a 'pretty thing' will likely differ from that of Wilde and company. Beauty is, of course, in the eye of the beholder – and tonight, as I trot down the culture centre terrace and through the brightly lit doorway of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, I'm joined by a throng who are soon to behold Decibel's interpretation of 'Pretty Things.' It'll take place across eight pieces, ten performers, five radios, one suspended carcass, and a lot more.

Bodies congregate in the PICA bar, sipping lagers and trading hellos – then at the theatrical clanging of a bell, surge into the Central Gallery space. The yawning prism of a room is dimly lit by a red glow. Five plinths stand in the thoroughfare, flanked by the audience's two seated halves, atop each plinth a portable analogue radio. Austerely attired figures approach the plinths and take position, like cats set to pounce, as a projection appears on the opposing wall. The wirelesses fade in, hissing white noise and garbled shadows of music and speech

MAILOUT

What do you get when you cross cashmere with a loud hailer?

ARTICLES

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VENUE PROGRAMMING

Thank you Mister Tony Joe White now for a seven piece Gong band!

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from neighbouring frequencies. Five rows display scrolling markers and adjacent numbers. When the markers reach certain points, radio needles are hauled over to the indicated bandwidths and a new set of textures is unleashed. There are four ‘movements,’ with stony silences in between. Somehow, it’s a very pleasurable listen; the sense that both performers and audience are venturing into unknown, unforeseeable, unrepeatable sonic territory is riveting. There’s also a certain indulgence to be found in such pure experimentation – what we just listened to was JOHN CAGE’s Radio Music (1956) – the concept is simple, concise, bright-eyed, pure. It’s aleatoric music at its roots and it goes down a treat.

But we’ve gotten ahead of ourselves! At this point, for the uninitiated, it’s worth discussing: Who’s Decibel? It’s CAT HOPE, LINDSAY VICKERY, TRISTAN PARR, STUART JAMES, MALCOLM RIDDOCH. It’s a new music ensemble, based at WAAPA, fixated on the intersection between acoustic instrumentation, acoustic spaces and electronic processes. What do Decibel do? They perform experimental, boundary-dissolving works written by emerging and established local composers, as well as notable international pieces, both historic and current. How do they do that? With a fairly wild array of instruments, non-musical objects, software and unconventional performance layouts.

The next piece, composed by the group’s own LINDSAY VICKERY, illustrates in a lush painterly manner the potential of fusing traditional acoustic instruments with modern electronics. It’s called ‘Hunting Pack,’ and it explores the clinically calculated chaos its title connotes: separate click tracks in players’ ears lead to a polytempo arrangement; artificial sounds phase in and out of sync with velvety cello and richly resonant cimbalom. The result is both unnerving and beautiful, leading you to question your notions of dissonance. Soon another new work, STUART JAMES’ ‘Particle 1,’ captivates every pair of ears in the room. 2 ruined cymbals give rise to swelling textures, subject to laptop manipulation. Exhaled into the atmosphere by 4 loudspeakers, the textures create a sometimes thunderous, sometimes ethereal soundscape that is truly spectacular. The following piece is perhaps the most terrifying of the night – ROSS BOLLETER’s ‘Deviance.’ The lights are low. Strange throbbing intonations emerge from nowhere and a suited silhouette on his knees pulls at the exposed lower strings of an old piano. Gradually, as our ears prick up to detect any extraneous sounds amidst the deep minimal twangs and drones, we begin to notice sounds from all around. Freakish bowed strings. The strangulated bleat of an overblown bassoon. Elusive wisps of spectral flute. The sounds grow nearer, louder, and we realize we’re surrounded, being approached from all sides. But luckily, we are not these musicians’ chosen victims, no – they place down their instruments and get to work on the piano, tearing out strings, rattling hammers, flogging keys with mallets. Somehow, throughout this seizure of cacophonous demolition, a sense of musicality is retained.

A twenty minute interval ensues and, in the absence of any open coffee-houses in the vicinity, I do the appropriate thing to an ice-cream sandwich. Back inside the gallery, a strange shape hangs from above, veiled in black cloth, and ‘Agerasia’ by local composer CHRIS DE GROOT gets its world premiere. It’s a piece for three “ruined records,” cello and bass clarinet – the latter two provide smooth,

unwavering drone-swells as the three spinning discs vie for attention in a beautifully decrepit state. Unlike much experimental sound-art, de Groot's piece does not eschew or deny such things as regular rhythm, melody, the pop song – instead, it recontextualizes and subverts them, to sometimes haunting, sometimes humorous effect. Dusty, skipping vinyl mantras bleed into one another; hints of the recorded compositions are granted moments of their former glory and then swiftly silenced. There's a rise and a fall, and the piece finishes on a sweet, if incongruous, violin refrain.

Between 1948 and 1986, American mobster Richard 'The Iceman' Kuklinski allegedly murdered over 250 men. You'd feel pretty concerned if you discovered your name was on Kuklinski's (extensive) hit list. Composer and Decibel's artistic director CAT HOPE channels this sense of impending doom in her piece 'Kuklinski's Dream,' which, fittingly, is performed on bowed carving knives, amplified to capture the high-pitched song of the blade's edge. Darkly enough, parts of the killer's signature are used as notation in the score. More instruments join in the glassy, slow-motion shriek. Stark, sinister and chilling.

Two more pieces follow. The first THOMAS MEADOWCRAFT's 'Pretty Lightweight,' which in fact comes quite close to a standard interpretation of "pretty" – apart from a sporadic canned laughter track, which both undermines and, in a weird roundabout way, embellishes the piece's beauty.

The final piece is an arrangement of SCOTT WALKER's 'Clara' from his recent 'comeback' album, 'The Drift.' The black cloth comes off the suspended shape, to reveal a whitish-pink, headless half-pig twirling slowly in mid-air. I told you Decibel used unorthodox instruments, didn't I? I'm not sure how I feel about the use of "meat punching" in music – both morally (I believe firmly in music and art, but do either really require or justify the desecration of a creature's remains?) and aesthetically (it looks shocking, I suppose, but in a gimmicky, one-dimensional way – and it sounds kinda loud when punched, but otherwise it's sonically unremarkable). The arrangement, though, is stunning. Ruined piano, heavily effected electric guitar, bass guitar and clarinet, 2 drums sets, strings, sampler and the aforementioned pork chop – punched by jazz man Mace Francis – come together to create a poetic, dynamic art-rock maelstrom. Hope recites the lyrics, which conclude beautifully with a description of releasing a swallow into the open air. As the last word is uttered, all sound ceases, and a ghostly silence hovers in the work's wake.

Unbeknownst to most of the world, a great many amazing occurrences had just passed before the eyes of those seated in PICA's Central Gallery. And while each owner of each pair of eyes will have had different responses to the performance, I doubt that many will have left the space feeling unmoved or unaffected. I maintain that the worst thing you can do in music is to be boring; no-one could soundly sling that adjective at Decibel. They're adventurous, inquisitive, challenging. They both honour and sabotage modernist traditions. They're at times uplifting, at others, terrifying, and almost always, thought-provoking. Decibel are doing things that literally no-one else in the state, even the country, is doing, and as such they are as precious as the gold in our proximate desert plains. They don't produce the sorts of 'Pretty Things' you'll read about in 'Dorian Gray'. But if you yearn for sound that stretches your imagination, plays with your perceptions, and threatens



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UNDER REVIEW

Decibel rings out

CONCERT

Pretty Things (Decibel New Music Ensemble)

PICA

REVIEW NEVILLE COHN

As World War II drew to a close, Italian partisans killed Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci, whose mutilated bodies were suspended by their feet in front of a Milanese petrol station.

Scott Walker's Clara (Benito's Dream) is a response to Petacci's death, given a performance that was sonically compelling and visually unforgettable.

In the absence of a human corpsé at this Decibel concert, we saw instead half a pig carcass which at intervals was energetically socked by Mace Francis to the accompaniment of, among other instruments, ocarinas and an acoustic guitar.

No less memorable was Cat Hope's Kuklinski's Dream, a response in sound to the many contract murders perpetrated by

the so-called Iceman. Here, we listened to screeches, screams and groans, some of it simulated by a bow drawn over viola strings in a way that set the teeth on edge.

I particularly liked Ross Bolleter's Deviance, another of his pieces for so-called "ruined" pianos. A decrepit upright from the Murchison had its strings, keys and soundboard variously tapped, stroked, plucked and thumped by fingers and various implements to the simultaneous pre-recorded sounds from yet another ruined piano.

Towards the close of the piece, the piano was surrounded by Stuart James and other players, calling to mind a flock of benevolent vultures picking at a musical carcass.

Chris de Groot uses "ruined" LPs as a crucial factor in his Agerasia. On stage were two persons who periodically placed a turntable arm on what sounded like sand-strewn LPs, resulting in a cacophony of crackles, pops and screeches.

I very much admired the cimbalom playing of Josh Webster in Lindsay Vickery's Hunting Pack which was also admirable for fine work on the cello by Tristan Parr. Vickery's piece purports to capture "the terrifying, nightmarish collusion of the hunting pack" but, on first hearing, I could not readily come to this conclusion. Perhaps this intent will become clearer on further hearings.

A fascinating program also included works by John Cage, Stuart James and Thomas Meadowcroft. **t**



ENERGETIC Mace Francis