



Journal article



Freedom and structure take on instruments and hardware

a conversation with Lindsay Vickery

by [Cat Hope](#) // 10.9.08

Image: Lindsay Vickery

After a performance of Lindsay Vickery's recent works at a Tura New Music Scale Variable event, *tectonic*, at the Art Gallery of Western Australia on the 21st of June 2008, [Cat Hope](#) and Lindsay Vickery talk about what makes music interesting, relevant and personal.

CH: The focus of the music in the Scale Variable program seemed to be on different ways of approaching composition and its performance. The use of aleatoric processes around structure is prominent in your work, as is the flow-on effect of that to other elements of the work. How do you approach structure in your work?

LV: In this case, the idea was to develop ways of organising non-linear music in such a way that it still makes some kind of sense, or at least is satisfying to listen to from a narrative perspective. There is a tendency for very non-linear music (and other arts) to be devoid of drama or resolution or anything to hold onto narrative-wise – this approach has been explored pretty thoroughly in the last 50 years. I'm aiming to look beyond the excitement of juxtaposition and surprise, at how to create logical and recognisable structures in nonlinear music. So these pieces were exploring ways of approaching this problem.

The large ensemble pieces employed three different tactics: *érafage* (2007) combines an underlying static composition out of which smaller fragments emerge; *Parallel Trajectories* (2003) is 'multilinear' – each performer has multiple pathways through the score; and in *Tectonic* (2007), blocks of music move against one another independently changing tempo and orientation. The *delicious ironies* (2001-8) pieces, by contrast, deconstruct recordings of some of my existing linear compositions in conjunction with live improvisers who also have parts of the original score to use as material.

'I like the way that meaning seems to accumulate around randomly or subconsciously generated material.'

I suppose I'm interested in structure and freedom at the same time and so these mobile forms try to address both tendencies. In some way, perhaps, it also solves, or at least sidesteps, the desire to leave the composition open. The 'finished' work includes so many possible pathways or realisations; this approach avoids having to fix the composition in one particular form. In the case of the *delicious ironies* pieces it has allowed me to unpick the stitches of a fixed work and reassemble it in a new way.

The oldest work on the programme was *Dice Game*, a solo clarinet and electronics piece from 1995. It got included because it sort of prefigured the way of working for the other music in the concert. Although the clarinetist has a linear score, the work was conceived with, what I called then, 'windows' opening out onto other parts of the score. Like several of the other pieces played in the concert, this approach requires recognisable blocks of music with differing textures, rather than much development, in order for the listener to be able to discern that they are hearing music from somewhere else in the piece. *Dice Game* was also my first really consistent use of acoustic sound processing in a way that is totally integrated into the work.

CH You use a lot of improvisational elements in your pieces. What is it about this approach that you prefer to a 'complete control approach'?

LV: I like the immediacy and sense of mentality – if that makes sense – of improvisation; the feeling of intention that necessarily flows from the fact that the listener knows that the performer has made certain choices. Maybe it's important that a piece of music is something to be performed and not just an artifact to be thought about. That is obviously more overtly true of improvisation than reading notated music.

The piece *Tectonic* was very interesting in this regard; each group operates entirely independently in terms of dynamics, articulation, tempo and so on, but their musical material is closely related. For example, most of the material is made of prime-number polyrhythms, so it's not that easy to

discern the difference between what is scored and what is the result of groups playing at different tempi. Most importantly it's not at all possible to have a specific understanding of how a performance is going to sound until it is under way.

Interestingly, it is very difficult to get a sense of the piece when you are one of the performers, because of the weird effect of the relativity between your own tempo and that of other people. In the audience, the perception of rhythm and tempo shifts throughout the performance – different groups are ascendant from time to time – they seem to be stable while others are less so. But as a performer, your own part always seems stable (even when it is accelerating) and everything around you appears to be in flux.

You could reproduce this effect on a computer, and in fact *delicious ironies* does exactly this, but somehow it's different with live performers. There is more danger or tension. I'm very interested in this idea of creating tension through multiple tempi – maybe it's a way to avoid relying on harmony, texture and dynamics to mark the form of a composition.

CH: In a recent conversation with Anthony Pateras, we discussed the importance of 'ourselves' – the composer – in the performance of our works, and that it is almost always impossible for a performance to happen without us: we really write ourselves in. Is this the case with your work? I noticed you performed in almost every piece on the program in *tectonic*.

LV: I think that's true of a lot of my music, and for economic reasons, especially if you are planning to tour, it's pretty handy if you *are* the only person written in. But in this concert I definitely tried to write myself out, in the sense that I hope anyone could have performed the part I played. Anytime you are doing something relatively unique, though, it's always easier to do it yourself than to train someone else. All those badly performed modernist works from the last century are an example of this – although not all composers want to be onstage. Ligeti was famously disappointed by nearly all of the performances of his music. Now that he's gone I, for one, really wish I could have heard how he played his own work.

CH: So you don't see it as a limit of the possibility of notation, or the need for a certain style of improvisation?

LV: Well, notation, for me, is useful to signify structure. I use a range of kinds of notation: traditional representations of pitch, rhythm, dynamics and so on, but also square-headed notes that represent 'noisy' sounds – hitting the body of the instrument and so on, diamond-headed notes which just give a pitch-set without any rhythm and noteheads without stems which are meant to signify something in-between where the pitches have an order but no precise rhythm. These forms of notation cover a pretty large range of possibilities.

Several of the pieces on Saturday also hand over freedom in terms of sound production to the players – that is, whether to play the note with a 'classical' mode of sound production or whether to do something else, for example to 'ghost' a phrase, or use glissando or play *sul pont*. This is heading in the direction of improvisation.

Then there is actual improvisation, just giving the players text instructions or asking them to respond to the sounds they hear from the computer. Except for *Splice* (2002), none of these pieces are totally free in this regard – there's always some sort of guideline, either a specific instruction or examples which suggest for them to improvise something 'like this'.

You know, I've played with a lot of free improvisers as well – but there is a kind of trust involved that wouldn't be sensible to expect from a group of orchestral players. I don't mean that in a derogatory way, just that they are usually expecting to work within boundaries that you set up, not to have a totally free reign. I think there's just a different expectation and trust in that scenario. If you don't define the parameters you want them to work in, their trust in you diminishes.

CH: How much do performers bring to your composition? Do you choose them on the basis of any criteria?

LV: The most important things are the ability to be able to make decisions, to be able to listen and respond, and a certain empathy with the sound world you are trying to create. If people are very fixed in their ideas or technique, it can be impossible to get them to respond in the same musical language. I've had this happen working with classical, jazz and rock musicians – the tendency to fall back on familiar riffs or scales or tone production.

CH: What is it about Max/MSP that attracts you? You use it in nearly all your compositions now.

LV: It was used in all of the pieces on Saturday, but I do still write with dots on a page. *érafage* was originally performed by a group in Germany without Max/MSP. But it is much easier with the computer. I just said I like musicians who can make decisions, but there is a limit; players' musical imagination sometimes dries up when they have too many decisions to make or maybe certain kinds of decisions to make. In any case, it's easier when the computer is determining some things and the performer others. At least I think so. Maybe it's to do with left and right brain decision making. Some decisions feel expressive and others more structural. I try and give most of the structural ones to the computer. I think this becomes more important when you are dealing with a number of players. Perhaps people find it difficult to think as a group and as an individual – when there are a lot of players they want clear instructions so they can deal with the finer issues

of the group dynamic.

CH: There is a big influence of surrealist painting and writing in your works. How did this come about?

LV: I don't really know. It goes back a long way – till high school definitely. You can see the connection between the non-linearity and juxtaposition in surrealism and the musical goals I've just spoken about. It has always felt like a very natural way of thinking to me. I suppose you are referring to the Max Ernst influence on *éraflage*, which has the subtitle 'homage to max ernst'? I don't know why I have such an affinity for his work. Not all of it actually, but the collages, the Arizona paintings (that he started making before he saw Arizona), his interest in glyphs and asemic writing – it definitely does something for me.

Partly it's an interest in Ernst's techniques for discovering patterns, like fumage, frottage, collage etc. They are like new ways to probe the imagination. I like the way that meaning seems to accumulate around randomly or subconsciously generated material. All of my 'cypher' pieces use this approach: the best example is the dripping tap in my opera *Rendez-vous* (2001), which generates all of the musical material. This interest perhaps also explains the desire to leave the composition open so that new material can be discovered.

CH: You are a big film fan - how do you think films influence your work?

LV: The most obvious example is *Parallel Trajectories* which is kind of modelled on Mike Figgis' film *Timecode* (2000). This is a film that has four screens showing synchronised images from different locales or perspectives throughout whole duration. I've also looked at the way some films with non-linear narratives function: like *Hana-Bi* (Takeshi Kitano 1997), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1994) and *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer 1998). Obviously the visual narrative of film doesn't work in exactly the same way, but there are some parallels. For example Tarkovsky's notion of 'time-pressure', that there is an inherent rhythm in a shot that has to flow with the surrounding shots. This is exactly the kind of problem faced, well actually in several of the pieces from Saturday, but particularly in *éraflage* where the fragments that appear have to strike a balance between contrast and connection with the other material. David Lynch's latest batch of films *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and the recent *Inland Empire* (2006), have very interesting structures as well. I'm into the (Slavoj) Žižek kind of interpretation that sees their irreconcilable narratives as three perspectives on the same story presented simultaneously or existing simultaneously in the mind of the main character. This is a little like the approach in *Parallel Trajectories* and quite like that of the solo piece *<as viewed from above>* (2001) that ended up not being played in Saturday's concert.

CH: Do you think the Western Australian musical environment shaped your development as a composer in any way?

LV: I think the influence is mostly through people I've worked with. If you mean the natural environment – well, I've thought about it, but I can't really see much influence.

CH: To me, there is a certain 'flatness' in some of your work, like a modern building – no parts, lines or textures jump out, and the pieces start and end out of nothing, almost. Do you make a conscious decision to make your pieces this way?

Is this related to the question before? Because 'flatness' is always seen as a very Australian quality, right?

CH: No, actually, it's a compliment, not a comparison. It creates a sublime beauty in the work's performance.

LV: In this case I think it's more a product of the compositional processes. A lot of the pieces use what are basically block-form structures – textures that are differentiated by density, dynamics, pitch sets, rhythm, tempo and so on – rather than melodic or harmonic development. I might want to define the result more as sculptural (although that would suggest it's not flat), in that the musical materials have a sense of being fixed at least in some abstract way, but the listening experience has a sense of being in motion: exploring the materials from different perspectives: different configurations, colours, tempi – that kind of thing.

Parallel Trajectories was definitely conceived in that way. If I had to express its shape as an image it might be something like a half-submerged rotating clockwork mechanism. The audience only hears parts of it, and those parts change. The performers can only react to the lines which are present at that moment. The lines and the harmonies revolve very consistently and the players are left to choose how to colour them. *érafledge* also has a very slow-moving and consistent surface, that is only really disrupted by the event called an *embrouillage*, a tangled texture, that can appear after the piece has been going for a while. On Saturday this event happened twice, one time about two thirds of the way through and then again at the very end. The other surface details are created by the interruption or overlaying of some smaller fragments that are 2, 3 or 4 times faster than the slow moving surface.

In the other pieces the changes in the surface are either caused by additional layers being added or subtracted, usually by the computer – as in *Splice* and *Delicious Ironies* – or by tempo changes most notably in *Whorl* (2004) and *Tectonic*. I suppose I was a little concerned about the variables

in those works getting out of control, in a bad way I mean – such as feedback or unrelieved chaos. But there is obviously also the possibility that they will generate something quite static and restrained.

I would love to be able to play them over and over in a studio to see just how broad the range of outcomes might be. You might think I should know that already, but there really are too many combinations to be certain of the outcome – at least in *Tectonic*.

Your observation about the music often starting and ending out of nothing – that's interesting. I think this has been a common gesture in a lot of my music. Perhaps it's a by-product of an approach based on the accumulation and erosion of material I mentioned before.

In general, I think this method of working – computer-controlled pathways for the performer and electronic processing of the result – is a very fruitful direction for me. It really does suggest a lot of possibilities that are more about parameters and content than form or approach. Like that surrealist technique frottage – there's always new surfaces to explore.

Further links

Lindsay Vickery (<http://homepage.mac.com/lvickery/>)
tectonic - Tura New Music (www.tura.com.au/events/scale/scale2008/concertTwo.html)

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