

THE AUSTRALIAN

No trace of the audience friendly at Emerging Composers Forum



Soundstream director and pianist Gabriella Smart.
Picture: Calum Robertson

GRAHAM STRAHLE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 5, 2016

A hint of what Australian music might sound like a decade from now is offered each year when a handful of young composers from around the country gathers in Adelaide to have their music performed. And on the basis of what we heard this year, it sounds like they are finally breaking the neo-conservatism mould.

In the five works presented at the third Emerging Composers Forum, held by Soundstream New Music, there was no trace of “audience-friendly” neo-tonalism, pop-infused minimalism or the like.

Instead, these were challenging and sometimes impenetrable compositions that bravely tried to merge music with mathematical theorems, psychological explorations of self and contemporary politics. Written for a set combination of singer, clarinet, cello, piano and toy piano, the pieces were never less than invigorating.

Anxious Objects by Brisbane’s Mark Wolf set the general tenor of the evening in its spiky atonalism and heavily expressionistic, almost manic, treatment of voice. Interspersing prerecorded excerpts of people milling about inside large public buildings led to thoughts about the relationship between human activity and enclosed space.

In terms of style, there was curiously little to separate it from 1960s modernism, and indeed its frantic outbursts and textual references to

architecture made this seem like Xenakis revisited.

A particularly challenging piece, but more in the theme it took on than the sounds it generated, was *Omid* from West Australian Mitchell Mollison. This consisted of slowly wavering, siren-like vocalisations, sliding pitches on clarinet and cello, and whimsical toy piano twinkling against a deep, electronically generated rumble played over speakers. Without recourse to Mollison's program notes, it was easy to miss what this work was about: the harrowing self-immolation of two young refugees on Nauru, Omid Masoumali and Hodan Yasin.

Adelaide composer Dan Thorpe's *Front Pocket, Back Pockets, Jacket Pockets* was the most hidden and mercurial. Though the title's significance remained obscure, it seemed to hold visionary ideas and expose the sometimes terrifying disconnect between the inside-outside nature of experience.

Two works that moved in an opposite direction were *Overlap* by Leah Blankendaal (Adelaide) and *Suspended Leaves* by Alex Turley (Perth). These were whispery and delicate for the most part, the first based on the idea of overlapping circles, in and between which the performers engage in gradually evolving improvisation. Taking textual ideas from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Turley generated plangent, folk song-like melodies and interesting chordal ideas

Baritone Anthony Zatorski and soprano Deborah Kayser put in engaging performances, as did clarinetist Mitch Berick, cellist Simon Cobcroft and Soundstream's pianist Gabriella Smart.

Emerging Composers Forum. Soundstream New Music. Studio 520, ABC Collinswood Centre, Adelaide, November 30.