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ELISION: sonic gastronomy

ELISION ensemble
Spirit Weapons
Customs House, Brisbane
July 22

Robert Davidson

I look forward to an ELISION concert almost as a gastronomic treat, as a rich and varied feast of sounds. The ensemble's concert for the Queensland Biennial, **Spirit Weapons**, once again delivered such an experience, with a mixture of recent Australian, Swiss and British works, most of them premières.

Brisbane's growing momentum as a new-music centre was demonstrated by a packed hall. All of the music heard in **Spirit Weapons** fits comfortably into genres stemming from the postwar European avant-garde, which take their place amongst the bewildering array of streams now included under the umbrella of "contemporary classical music." ELISION wisely specialises, and does not attempt the entire umbrella. Their focus (particularly on what is awkwardly known as "new complexity") has resulted in highly authoritative performances which meet the considerable demands placed on the performers. Flautist Paula Rae, for example, is asked to play piccolo, flute, alto flute, and bass flute in quick succession; pianist Liam Viney takes the lid off and attacks the insides with percussion mallets, and guitarist Geoffrey Morris plays with ten strings instead of six.

The challenge to performers often arises from the music's harking back to the old modernist enjoyment of contrast and extremes. This goes beyond stretching the players into the furthest extremes of register on their instruments (and further into bass, contrabass and piccolo versions of them), into the outer reaches of timbre, texture and dynamics. Textures are often either very busy indeed or otherwise hardly moving at all. But probably the biggest impression is that of colour.

Since its inception, ELISION has excelled in the production of a brilliant palette of sound colours. It is this range which leads me to think in gastronomic terms—the sounds are so physical one can almost taste them. Michael Smetanin's **Vault** has this quality, with its gorgeously crystalline sounds made by spiky high notes on the harp combined with viola harmonics, metallic percussion and rushing piccolo runs, along with bottom-register bass clarinet rumblings. The music's physicality is also expressed in body-based rhythms, played with James Brown tightness by the ensemble. Such physical music emulates well the photographs which inspired the piece—a nude series by Martin Schreiber, **The Vault of Heaven**. The music owes as

much to Steve Reich as Pierre Boulez, but perhaps lacks the compelling form of either.

A body focus is also found in Swiss composer Michael Jarrell's **Essaims-Cribles** (Swarming Riddles), conceived for dance. It indeed spends much of its time in swarming sounds, notes dramatically rushing around the ensemble. The performance featured Anthony Burr's exquisite tonal control over both the bass and contrabass clarinet. Burr created extraordinary moments of stillness with extremely soft, high pitches, and at other times gave the impression of three players by rapidly alternating notes in widely-spaced registers.

Burr's robust performance style was used to great advantage in an extraordinary new work by Liza Lim. A new piece by Lim is always an event, and she continues to surprise. **Spirit Weapons** consists of two short pieces drawn from **Machine for Contacting the Dead**. Lim composed this large work for Paris' Ensemble Intercontemporain on the occasion of an exhibition of newly unearthed 2400-year-old Chinese musical instruments. She resisted the obvious choice of composing for replicas of these instruments and instead invented ritualistic music referring to another object found in the tomb—a triple-daggered halberd (cutting/stabbing weapon). Three percussionists, perhaps reflecting the three daggers, form a "meta-instrument" with the contrabass clarinetist. This is very serious music, a "radiation of ancient wood and metal", but I can't help imagining a sense of fun, perhaps even mischief, in Lim's use of instruments.

The three percussionists play a range of sliding sounds. These include roto-tom drums, with alterable pitch, but also flexatones—sound effects instruments associated in my mind with cartoons—and Chinese worry balls, with their little clinky notes. Like Gavin Bryars' **Sinking of the Titanic**, this is music imagined as happening under water, and the Leviathan sound of the contrabass clarinet is a perfect fit. The piece is a "slowed down, submarine version" of the other component of **Spirit Weapons**, a cello solo, played with miraculous fluency by Rosanne Hunt, in which harmonic overtones continually emerge from sliding notes and the dark sounds of loosened strings.

The two remaining works on the program focus on scientific themes, quantum physics (René Wohlhauser's **Quantenströmung**) and cosmology (Michael Vaughan's **Infinite Skies**). Both works, while highly effective and dramatic, are essentially conservative in that they would not have sounded out of place at a Darmstadt concert 40 or more years ago. This is not to detract from the works, however. Both display exceptionally clear musical thinking, and reward the intense efforts of the performers. A wonderfully magical moment happens, for example, in Wohlhauser's piece when the top notes of the viola are combined with the lowest notes of the harp in short, synchronised repetitions so soft as to be barely audible.

I have to admit that something in my temperament finds an absorption in sound as highly physical somewhat less satisfying than a more rhetorical approach to music. To slightly oversimplify, I tend to enjoy music based on notes (such as, for example, the harmonically and rhythmically driven music of Louis Andriessen, also featured at the Queensland Biennial) rather than sounds. But sounds have delights of their own, and no one explores them with more **elan** than ELISION.

