

New music, new champion

Jonathan Marshall

Kate-Neal's production house for new music, *Dead Horse*, premiered with a recital counter-posing neo-Dadaist/Fluxus event-style work with Neal's own textural, jazz-influenced compositions. Action-based works were performed by Dutch musician Mayke Nas, while David Young screened graphic notation in a digital projection positioned between audience and performer.

The easy, visible logic and sense of fun in Nas' performances made them crowd pleasers. First was an amusing study adapted from the writings of Peter Handke. The performers wrote on 4 chalkboards hanging in a row, each word making up an ironic phrase of a misdeed or failure ("I found complexity in artists / I found banality in artists / etc"). Substitutions transformed sentences until each performer was left alone, scrawling their own list. An equally engaging seesawing between comic game-play and po-faced seriousness saw Nas and William Poskitt at a piano, swinging from side to side, playing heavy, open-handed strikes, interposing knee-slaps and handclaps, finally crossing each other's arms to slap the other's upright palms as in a schoolyard round, producing a tightly scored version of child's play. The best work in this tradition though was composer Thierry de Mey's *Table Music*, in which Nas and 2 others sat at tables sharply isolated

from the gloom by crisp squares of overhead light. They executed double-handed finger rubs across the surface of a smoothly planed wooden resonating box, as well as bony finger flicks, stabs of the fingers which kept the hands and arms elevated, flat hand slaps across the undressed top and horizontal flip-flops of the palms. These pieces from Nas and de Mey focused on rhythm and were not especially musically complex, but *Table Music* was so tightly choreographed, executed and framed that it resembled dance. The performance was also lent a palpable sensuality by the aural materiality of the amplified sound of flesh and bone on softwood.

Young's *Vat Canonica* series used materials derived from transcriptions of prehistoric rock art in Italy's Canonica Valley. Though exhibiting a spiky, aggressive timbre typical of Young's work, the latest composition had a seductiveness which was hard to isolate, but was nevertheless firmly embedded within its open gaps, extended one note gestures (signified in the projected score by a lengthy downward arc) and juxtapositions of small masses of noisy atonalism. Young's graphic notation directed jagged, highly textural playing, which included using crushed, dried leaves as percussion instruments. Nevertheless, only parts of the more aggressive interpretation offered by pianist Michael Kieran-Harvey touched upon the ambience of atonalist fury or abstruse serialism. Moreover, the invitation for the audience to join in the game of reading the quite precise, coloured

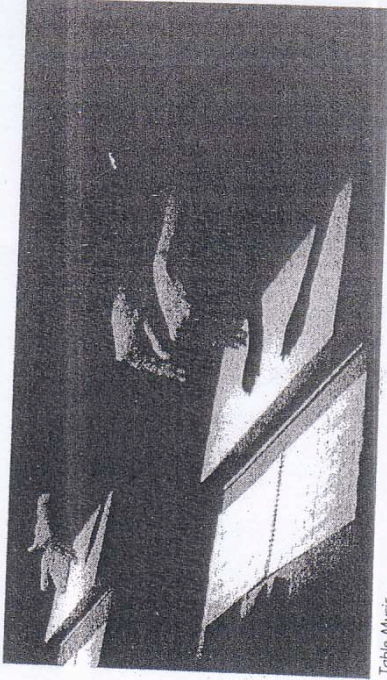


Table Music

Caerwen Martin

pictographs and lines from the score rendered *Rocúa* an accessible yet satisfyingly abstract contemporary composition.

If Nas and de Mey provided the performative highlight of the evening, Neal's were the most musically satisfying works. Two related suites concluded the recital, separated by a pleasant if somewhat unnecessary projection of a night time drive through Canberra. *Little Fury* constantly rested on the edges of things, falling into small motifs and resemblances which only lasted for short periods. It opened with thick, sustained notes and chords across the whole ensemble, which were then passed around without leading to a distinct lead instrument or ensemble section. Materials ebbed, flowed and peaked with fragility, without actually decaying in depth or evolving into a strong focus on any single instrument or rhythmic line. From within this crackling mass emerged jazzy accents, moments of Steve Reich-like throb, and almost Baroque or Nymman-esque ascents and descents over the staves. The overall

effect was one of dense shimmering, of internal transfers within a thick musical system.

With *Rabid Bay*, however, the jazz-like intonations of the preceding work emerged as the dominant theme. In an ensemble rearranged to feature brass instruments supporting Kieran-Harvey on piano, Neal's music took on a propulsive urban modernity recalling the marriage in US cinema of post-1960s jazz and atonal music, as in Bernard Herrmann's scores. This gave *Rabid Bay* a satisfying sense of musical aggression and drama.

Such a varied program could never satisfy on all levels, and some of the simple or naive video fare poorly in comparison with the accompanying music. However, the program established *Dead Horse* as an exciting vehicle not only for Neal, but a wide range of new music.

New Music Works From Australian, Belgian and Dutch Composers, *Dead Horse Productions*, *World Wide Warehouse*, Feb 13