

Flogging the next big thing

MUSIC

New Music from Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands

Dead Horse Productions.
World Wide Warehouse,
Melbourne, February 13.

DEAD Horse Productions seems an appropriate name for an organisation dedicated to presenting contemporary art music. An ironic joke, perhaps, on the difficulty of attracting audiences to a notoriously alienating art-form.

In fact, the name springs from the small township Dead Horse Gap, on the Alpine Way past Thredbo, birthplace of the group's founder Kate Neal. And rather than flogging a tired idea, this event did much to suggest that new music is alive and kicking in Melbourne. Several hundred people turned up for this inaugural concert with new music from Australian, Belgian and Dutch composers.

The World Wide Warehouse is in the back streets of Collingwood, and about as far as you can get aesthetically from a concert hall. There's no raised stage and the chairs are arranged any-old-how. Performances take place all around the warehouse and there is plenty of time in between to chat to one's neighbour or get a beer from the bar. Like Musica Viva's Menage series it has the feel of a club and the punters respond accordingly.

The works themselves don't try too hard. Rather than a didactic dose of angst-ridden creation these are approachable and entertaining performances. The first work by Dutch composer Mayke Nas involved four people writing on black-

The warehouse is about as far as you can get aesthetically from a concert hall

boards, the strokes of their chalk amplified throughout the auditorium.

Neal's compositions show great variety: one moment she is combining with video artist Mendel Hardeman for some sharp social satire (*Holy Vessels*), the next exploring micro-tonalities (*Little Fury*). *Rabid Bay*, for piano and big band, blends dense notation with bebop riffs. It would be good to hear them all again with perhaps more rehearsal time for *Rabid Bay*.

David Young's *Roccia* for strings and piano continues his pictographic mode of writing, plotting rock art drawings on to an open stave as cues for improvisation. Like Young's popular *Skin Quartet*, performed at last year's Melbourne Festival, the score is projected digitally on to a screen for performers and audience to follow as it scrolls along.

The Dutch and Belgian works were more formal and conservative in structure and design, showing strong links to European traditions. Their inclusion brought a welcome injection of funds from the Dutch Government, highlighting the lack of equivalent funding in Australia.

While there is support in the major institutions for the presentation of new music, more resources are needed at the radical grassroots level where individuals such as Neal slave away to put a show together. Dead Horse shows a lot of potential — it would be a shame if this positive start turns out to be a last gasp.

Martin Ball