

Classical & Contemporary Music

KIT LAWSON



Arthur is making an Early start

BOVINE artificial insemination, bonsai and violin making make uncommon bedfellows, but that is how it is in the Robinson household. While Arthur leaves the cows to his partner Jean, his penchant for fashioning wood extends to both the growing and the cut variety.

The patio of his house in Chidlow is overflowing with tiny trees in ornamental pots while his workshop is packed with sawn timber.

Robinson came to violin making via a very circuitous route but the threads were always there.

Born in the UK, he went to art college and thence into teaching art and music — he played saxophone and violin — later moving on to a job in the film library at Shell Mex while taking evening classes in typography and composition.

He emigrated to Australia where the same company employed him in its advertising department. When a job in graphic design came up at what is now Monash University, he found himself teaching, among other things, the music section of the history course, relating music and visual design and discussing serial systems in graphics and music.

After opting out for a while and becoming a saxophonist in a rock band he began working for Allens, the music retailer in Melbourne, in charge of the instrument department.

Then came the turning point. There was a back room piled high with violins in varying states of disrepair and no one there to do anything about them. Robinson had a go.

"It's funny," he said. "When I look at

bridges and so on. I've always been fascinated by the violin. The design alone is extraordinary.

Why does it work?

"One of my colleagues at Allens had an uncle who had been a fine violin maker. I went to see him and he told me to bring him some wood. When I did, he looked at it and felt it and said, 'You'll make good violins'."

Robinson repaired violins for 15 years in Melbourne before coming to WA to become a maker.

"The old masters used sets of proportions," he said. "When you realise that, instrument making becomes quite easy. I don't have natural hands. Some people use tools perfectly, but so long as I get the sound, sound is what counts.

"There are a lot of makers who work from a purely craft basis with no real feel for sound. Craft comes with time. I go by feel and what the wood dictates."

His knowledge of wood is encyclopaedic and he declares despondently that for good tone, the best wood comes from Bosnia.

In 1993, he went to Europe to study the work of the great masters in the museums of Holland, Germany and England. One outcome of his studies was to make a violone, commissioned by Roger Tuffley, founder of the Recorder and Early Music Society in Perth.

A double bass player with a passion for early music, Tuffley had been looking for a contra-bass to conform to the sound when playing with other members of the viola da gamba family.

"It's an unusual thing," Robinson said, "probably the only one in Australia. It's based on the bass gamba, but the D tuning is lower than most and at 7 feet it's about as big as a double-bass."

It clearly inspired him, because at the time of writing he was in the final stages of making a baroque cello in the style of Venetian master Domenico Montagnana.

"The wood thicknesses are exactly the same as a modern cello but the bass spar is shorter and so the note dies more quickly," he said. "The sound post is also thinner and the bridge lower."

To date, Robinson has always worked to order and indeed, has been commissioned to copy some very valuable instruments, including that of Ashley Arbuckle, concertmaster of the WA Symphony Orchestra. This cello is his first venture into instrument making "on spec".

"I never really know how an instrument will sound until it is finished and even then it has to be played in order to settle into its true sound" he said

insisted that he be the first to put the bow on it. It was an anxious moment. But I was listening to some music on the radio just recently and the cello began to vibrate, so at least I know it's alive."

Back to Brunei for Musica Bella

■ IF THERE were a record for the most travelled West Australian ensemble, Musica Bella would surely hold it.

At the end of March they will pay a return visit to Brunei to give concerts at the Panaga Music Society and the Australian High Commissioner's residence and workshops in Bandar Seri Begawan and across the South China Sea in Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia.

Tamara Herman (recorder) is the single constant in the group and it is not unusual for the final line-up of musicians to be unknown until the eleventh hour.

This time, however, bassoonist Natasha Woodley and harpsichordist Vanessa Milner are set to join her in works by Telemann, Couperin and Hotterre.

Towards the end of April, Musica Bella will record its first CD for Sunset Music.

Musica Bella may have made a home from home in Asia but plans are well underway for travel further afield. January 1997 will see the ensemble set off for a tour of Singapore, Italy, Israel and Jordan.

Record Review

■ THERE HAS been some very fine percussion in Perth of late: Alison Eddington's success in the ABC Young Performers' competition, concerts by the Orchestra of the Global Nomads with Ron Reeves and Gary France's *Dances With Drums*.

Now France has preserved his contribution on *Works For Percussion*. Recorded live at PICA during *Dances With Drums*, the works on this CD for Sunset Music — all composed for France — demand his skill of delicacy and grace as much as his thrilling facility with the mallets.

The opening work, *From Now*, is Edward Applebaum's first venture into composition for percussion. In eight sections and loosely based on the various creation myths, it begins with a hypnotic almost soporific rhythm of boo bams and woodblocks.

But just at the point when a nap becomes a real possibility, there are a series of gossamer chime strokes, an almost imperceptible change of rhythm which

denly, like bits of comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 hitting Jupiter, in come timpani and bass drum.

Each section is, in its way, equally surprising whether it be in the pairing of instruments or in the exposition of the principal motive moving from the simple to the complex. But more surprising still is that each section is both composed and improvised. Such is France's innate skill, the work is seamless.

This recording contains much of what is satisfying about music for percussion; pyrotechnics contrasted with mellifluous introspection, unexpected pairings of instruments and, despite the tonal quality being strictly "contemporary", it is easy to listen to, preferably lying prone on thick carpet.

The programme notes are perhaps best left unread until after the first hearing. For example, Roger Framp-ton's *Time*, a stirring perpetuum mobile for concert grand marimba, seems to owe less to the theories of Einstein and Stephen Hawking than to the White Rabbit pausing against the relentless passage of time to mutter, "Oh my ears and whiskers".

Dragons In The Sky, composed by Mark Schultz for horn, percussion and computer-generated tape, and Sandra France's *Monism* for violin and marimba are dramatic, eloquent works. The apposition, sometimes opposition, of the instrumental pairs also serves to underline France's technical prowess.

There are times — Friday evenings, for example — when a massage of the psyche is called for. This CD does it very nicely.



Gary France... thrilling facility with the mallets.

recital (as part of his first Australian tour) on the new great West-end Smege organ at St George's Cathedral.

The limitations and virtues of this particular instrument were revealed in full.

As one would expect with an organist of this stature, technique is not a consideration. What is more important is the choice of tempo and registration and its impact in the dry acoustic of St George's.

The lack of echo in the cathedral was not allowed to detract from any of the pieces played through the choice of more rapid than usual tempi.

Scott's playing was imbued with a driving vitality, especially in the Mozart *Fantasia in F minor* which had a vigorous, virile attack. This approach was also evident in the works by Bach, Guilman and Schumann.

Preconceived notions of interpretation were of little use when assessing the musicality of the performances which were of a high order, especially in the Bach *Tocatta Adagio and fugue in C* which had a restless driving insistence.

The most gratifying playing was heard in the two pieces by the Swiss composer/organist Lionel Rogg. His *Les*

ceived, making the most of the organ's flutes and mutations.

The organ's limitations were exposed in Whitlock's lush *Canzona* from his *Sonata in C minor*. A greater array of 8 foot stops is required for this piece to be truly convincing, and it is a testament to Scott's skill that he so nearly made it work on this organ.

The final piece, Dupré's *Variations sur un Noel*, was a lively choice which exploited the more unusual reed colours of the organ. It was full of life, grasping the listener's attention firmly.

At no stage did the playing seem to rush — expansive phrasing had a compelling logic in a particularly fine performance.

TRIO MUSICA CLASSICA

Government House Ballroom

February 18

■ MUSICA Classica, comprising Bart Van Oort (fortepiano), Ryo Terakado (violin) and Hidemi Suzuki (cello), played a programme which delighted lovers of the late 18th and 19th century piano trio repertoire.

It was interesting to compare the balance achievable by an authentic fortepiano of the era with the usual tonal balance when using a modern concert grand piano.

What became apparent was that the oval-shaped Government House Ballroom is not conducive to an even spread of sound. The fragile tone of the keyboard frequently was swamped by the string tone, when not competing with the rock concert going on in the Supreme Court Gardens.

There was a great deal of discomfort during the breaks between movements as the tonality of the particular work was contaminated by outside sounds.

Early Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn and the much neglected Hummel were represented in the programme. Apart from some digital slips in the Beethoven, the playing was crisply articulated and pleasing to the ear because of the smaller toned fortepiano.

The Mozart *Trio in B Flat* was a joy, especially the gently flowing *Larghetto* followed by the sparkling finale which was never in danger of being rushed.

The Hummel *Trio in E Flat* had more muscle than the others and, being largely unfamiliar to the bulk of the audience, had a greater impact. The opening unison figure had strength of purpose which set the scene for a sinewy performance in the first and final movements.

Balancing them was the lyrical *Andante* where the elegantly shaped fortepiano line was accompanied by pizzicato cello in a

Reviews

Alan True



JOHN SCOTT

Organ Recital

St George's Cathedral

February 4

■ JOHN SCOTT — organist at St