

SUDHANA'S STEPS *Part 2*

From Feeling to Thought to Artistic Expression

An overview reflection composer by Phil Treloar

Australian Premiere Tour October 5 - 24, 2013



The Setup

It's sometimes difficult to find the right words when a creative project unfolds in a way that far exceeds your expectations. I suppose having expectations at all is not so advisable but nonetheless, at times, inevitable. This was certainly the case for me with *Sudhana's Steps*. So many preeminent musicians had picked up the baton that the emerging, positive outlook was overwhelming. Replete with its communally derived inspiration, the process of composing turned out to be a fast flowing stream. And performances? ...an utterly, joy-filled journey.

In light of *Sudhana's Steps* having been worked and performed during the Australian Premiere Tour abundant affirmative comments were unreservedly forthcoming. Perhaps the most oft-cited observation was that these pieces are destined to take their place in the repertoire alongside Elliot Carter's Eight Pieces for Four Timpani...exalted company indeed!

As was detailed in PERCUSscene issue 7, 2013, *Sudhana's Steps* consists of a set of six pieces, each being about six-and-a-half minutes in duration when performed in a solo context. Duo renderings in any paired configuration is a possibility written into the "Work". The set was commissioned by a consortium of percussionists from Australia and Japan after being initiated by Tom O'Kelly in collaboration with myself. During March this year Tom and I spent an intensive week together workshoping ideas. Subsequently, upon returning to my home in Kanazawa, Japan, I commenced work on composition. The Australian premiere performances took place in Brisbane, Hobart, and Melbourne on October 9, 17, & 24 respectively with a repeat performance of *PRIYADARSHANA* presented in

Canberra by Gary France, also on the 24th. A week of workshoping the music preceded each performance.

Sudhana's Steps, as with the *Elliot Carter Eight Pieces for Timpani*, are neither structurally simple nor easy to perform. Generally speaking, rather than difficulties being of a superficial nature it is more the case that these lie beneath the surface, requiring of the performer that they engage whole-heartedly the spirit of the music, with technical difficulties being part of the journey taken towards a spiritual end. In the event the performers who participated in these premieres gave rise to an experience that interested audience members will no doubt remember for some time to come. Crucial to this is the variety of interpretive perspectives brought to bear on the compositional materials where each of these points of view revealed characteristics unique to the performers themselves while, concurrently, they embraced utterly the integrity of the composition. These wonder-filled performances have lent credence to an inevitable reality, namely, that the process of music composition, far from being a completed task realized in isolation, becomes a communicable means through performers in performance, and, where recipients engage fully, the journey reveals itself as ongoing.

As their realization made clear, the six pieces comprising *Sudhana's Steps* don't conform to a general character. They are, nonetheless, quite meditative. Perhaps more accurately put these performances rendered them mesmerizing. So much so in fact that during the Melbourne performance no applause was forthcoming until the concert's very end when the audience expressed with sincerity and genuine enthusiasm their appreciation for the journey taken – one highly regarded musician describing his experience as transcendental. In contrast to this, though no less significant, the presentation in Brisbane gave rise to flurries of excitement between and even during renderings while the Hobart audience offered heart-felt respect and a delightful feeling of inspiration. Communication had transpired on many levels and indeed, the communal concern for collaboration at every step along the way had been met. What a joy! In a well paced and generally reflective program designed by Michael Askill, the Brisbane presentation was remarkably played by five performers: Callum Farquharson, *UTPALABHUTI* & *VIDVAN*; Nozomi Omote, *SURENDRABHA*; Gary France, *PRIYADARSHANA*; Vanessa Tomlinson, *ASHA*; and Tom O'Kelly, *ANANYAGAMIN*, with the last of these being dedicated to Tom in friendship. Between paired pieces of *Sudhana's Steps* compositions written by Michael Askill - *Pashupati* & *Inward Spiral* – were played and the concert began with a work by Akira Nishimura, *Padma in Meditation*. These three gentle, ambient pieces were beautifully performed by BaDaBoom Percussion Ensemble– its members drawn from students in the percussion department at Queensland



World Premiere - Brisbane

Back Row L-R: Tom O'Kelly, Phil Treloar, Callum Farquharson
Front Row L-R: Vanessa Tomlinson, Nozomi Omote, Gary France

Conservatorium, directed by Michael – and featured special guests, Rebecca Lloyd-Jones and Cameron Kennedy; altogether, an exhilarating concert of premieres.

Under the auspices of the Tasmania Symphony Orchestra *Sudhana's Steps* was performed by TSO's Principle Timpanist, Matthew Goddard. Having dedicated abundant time to learning all six pieces and coming to grips with their spiritual terrain, Matt's commitment was patently evident. Matt and his assistant, Maggie Abraham, had devoted considerable time in rehearsal to their functional relationship vis-à-vis the composition and this to the extent that Maggie's contribution had become intrinsic to the performance. With setup changes being made to the two prepared instruments - 29" timpani and concert bass drum - between pieces as well as during them, movement between performer and assistant was engaging in its elegance. Matt had prepared thoroughly the instruments of preparation so that changes were smooth and not the least interruptive to the general flow of the music and its performance. This, coupled with a profound understanding of the music itself, invited all those present to join Sudhana on his journey. It also brought to the fore the crucial significance of the assistant's role and the potential it bears for creative exploration. This will no doubt, be pursued further by Matt in two separate performances of the "Work" scheduled in the MONA-FOMA Festival in Hobart next January.

The Melbourne performance, presented under the auspices of the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM), made manifest a perspective on the "Work" I'd imagined while writing. Hall acoustics had much to do with this. Although the dynamic spectrum of these pieces is wide, fortissimo passages are generally brief while considerable music time is spent in pianissimo passages. Further to this not insignificant characteristic is the dovetailing of contrasting sounds common to all six pieces and often it's the case where these are juxtaposed. Rendered so beautifully as all six pieces were in ANAM's concert space, South Melbourne Town Hall, the sonic dovetailing conceived of as a compositional element became clearly perceptible as ever-shifting timbre, with this made salient through each of the performers having embraced the acoustic space with exquisite sensitivity. The Melbourne program was performed by Brent Miller, Peter Neville, and Matt Goddard, who travelled flown from Hobart to participate in the concert. During setup changes I played marimba improvisations. For *Sudhana's Steps* Brent served as Matt's assistant and Matt as Brent's. Peter, playing *SURENDRABHA* with precision and joy-filled abandon had devised a setup that didn't require an assistant and this decision explored yet another possibility for the logistics involved in performing these pieces. *UTPALABHUTI* and *VIDVAN* were magnificently explored with warmth and spontaneous, deeply felt dynamism by Brent. *PRIYADARSHANA* and *ASHA* received utterly focussed, clear and penetrating renderings by Matt. All were played with superb attention given to expressive detail and this to the extent that, clearly, each performer had made these pieces their own. Before playing the final piece on the program, *ANANYAGAMIN*, Matt made a moving dedication to Tom O'Kelly, expressing the gratitude of all who had engaged with this unique, communal project. There's no way *Sudhana's Steps* would have come to fruition without Tom's enormous contribution to the music and the organization and coordination of the Premiere Tour.

This performance of *ANANYAGAMIN*, along with the composition itself, was thus dedicated to Tom. Sublimely rendered by Matt, it was a perfect conclusion to an amazing, too rare an experience ...a truly communal project at every stage of the journey with genuine feeling for shared love and caring between people.

With all my heart I'd like to thank every person who has engaged with *Sudhana's Steps*, making it an experience both personal and creative; one for which I'll be ever grateful. And I can't sign off without offering endless gratitude to Tom O'Kelly. His love for people, creativity, and music, is a life-generative force.

Phil TRELOAR, November 2013



Tasmania Premiere - L-R: Phil Treloar, Matt Goddard, Maggie Abraham



Melbourne Premiere - L-R: Peter Neville, Phil Treloar, Brent Miller, Matt Goddard



Gary France - Canberra Premiere