

# Solo Performance

## Gary France Press Clippings

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### Enticing...

#### DANCES WITH DRUMS

PICA

Reviewed by Naomi Millett

Gary France's May 20th performance of commissioned new works was the most fulfilling and artistically sound event I have attended at PICA this year.

There were so many instruments - marimbas, vibraphones, xylophones, wood blocks, tubular bells and timpani - crammed into the space, that initially it was difficult to believe they were all to be played by just one person.

Percussionists are the only classical musicians who have to be able to change location rapidly as they perform, and this was especially evident in Ed Applebaum's *From Now*. France moved deftly between the grouped items, which were arranged in a circle, picking up and replacing sticks with a surgeon's precision and taking the listener on an aural journey through exotic timbres.

*From Now* was a substantial offering, employing an extraordinary selection of unconventional devices including Chinese temple bowls, gongs, and PVC pipes as well as more traditional percussion. The majority of sounds used here were gentle, but I particularly enjoyed the more dynamically robust section for gongs, in which simple five note phrases were artfully varied.

With a Rothko-like black and red glowing backdrop, *Dances* was visually enticing as well, and contrasts of timbre were technically enhanced by the illumination of instruments as France moved deftly to them.

Later, American composer Mark Schultz's *Dragons in the Sky*, for pre-recorded tape, French horn (Darrel Poulsen) and percussion, suggested music of the future in that it successfully blended music technology with live musicians. Poulsen's assortment of snarly, brash and muted effects on the horn suited the programmatic nature of the work, a musical description of the war between Tolkien's winged dragons and the kingdom of the elves.

The opening of Sandra France's *Monism*, for marimba and violin (played by Pal Eder), brought to mind two people talking simultaneously yet speaking different languages, or parallel lines stretching into the

distance. As the piece progressed, however, rhythmically precise imitative snippets, meditative moments and even a fugal passage were introduced.

The pairing of bowed and plucked strings with struck wood demonstrated that unusual combinations can be effective within a carefully conceived formal structure.

It was encouraging to see so many music lovers supporting the contemporary avant garde at this farewell recital by France, who is returning to America soon.

Don't despair if you missed the concert, though, because France is also in the process of recording a CD of several new Australian compositions for solo percussion, a project assisted by the WA Department for the Arts and Evos Music.

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### DANCES WITH DRUMS

*Dances With Drums*, a concert of percussion works performed by Gary France (with support artists Pal Eder, Violin, and Darryl Poulson, French Horn), took place at the PICA Performance Space on the 19th-21st of May.

Of the five pieces presented, four were world premieres of works commissioned by Gary France. The fifth, USA composer Mark Schultz's *Dragons in the Sky*, was inspired by *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien and involved the use of taped sounds (synthesised through the use of computer generated algorithms developed at the University of Texas) and French Horn. Timbrally and rhythmically, the work was exciting and it is no surprise that it has been performed many times in the USA, being a worthy addition to both the Horn and Percussion repertoires.

The premiered pieces were all Australian works: Ed Applebaum's *From Now*, Sandra France's *Monism*, and two works by Roger Frampton, *Time* and *Space*, companion works for solo Marimba and Vibraphone respectively.

*From Now* was a percussionist's tour de force focussing on the exploration of timbres and incorporating ethnic and especially created instruments as well as the better known Western percussion instruments. Consisting of a number of 'stations', each featuring Western and ethnic instruments of similar timbres, this piece gave an insight into the more subtle side of composition for percussion. The percussion installation for this piece was arranged in a spiral, through which the soloist progressed, and this use of a spiral structure, in the composer's words, "[symbolises] both the recurrent nature of the sections and the pathway to the future, for the spiral does not end...".

Sandra France's *Monism* for Marimba and Violin was written to illustrate the Hindu philosophy of monism, which opposes dualism and believes that each individual is a different manifestation of the 'one'. Musically, this concept was realised through the use of unifying structural material which was, paradoxically, used as the source for a great deal of contrast between the two instruments. This contrast was resolved, however, in a fugal finale, which by its nature certainly lends itself to the unifying reconciliation of individual instrumental temperaments.

The two pieces by Sydney composer Roger Frampton, *Time* and *Space*, were composed in response to a request from Gary for a single piece. Unable to choose between the Marimba and Vibraphone, Roger decided instead to write two short pieces, one for each instrument. Each piece in a way explored something characteristic in the nature of each instrument, at least as the composer saw them. *Space*, for Vibraphone, exploited the 'metallic' overtones of this instrument with rhythmically relaxed music which, in the composer's words, suggested "quasars, star constellations and other celestial phenomena". *Time*, for marimba, was a 'perpetuum mobile', using regular, metronomic rhythms to "suggest the regularity of time". Using techniques of rhythmic modulation (or metric modulation) and utilising numerous cross-rhythmic effects, this was a virtuoso piece which Gary France certainly gave the impression of handling effortlessly.

For those of you who missed the concert, look out for a *Dances With Drums* CD to be released soon through Sunset Music.