

GARY FRANCE AND DRUMATIX

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Hear A Different Drummer

The ANU School of Music's Gary France is talking through what possible ways Swedish percussionist Anders Åstrand could make an ice instrument. Within the space of thirty seconds, France – a percussion impresario and passionate performer – rattles off half-a-dozen options, from creating a sonorous ice guitar to carving out an ice bowl and covering it with a skin to make a drum. The mind, as they say, is boggling.

“He’s from Sweden!” laughs France. “If you live in the land of the midnight sun, that’s just what happens,”

“We’re not doing any of that here. This is not the land of ice.”

The possibilities for performance, as I soon discover, are in no way ruled out by the seeming improbability of the material. Besides ice, Åstrand has composed percussion works for fighter aircraft and tractors, as well as music for fire sculptures.

Anders Åstrand (sadly without his ice sculptures) is coming to Canberra as part of the ANU School of Music's Premier Concert series, “a special selection of concerts that have been chosen to showcase [the School of Music's] staff, elite student performers, and featured guest artists,” France explains.

The series premiered in March, with a jazz double bill featuring performances from the inimitable Mike Price Trio and jazz quartet Vertical, and will continue throughout the year, providing opportunities for the ANU School of Music students to perform with world-class musicians. It also provides audiences with an affordable opportunity to access great music. At twenty bucks a pop for student tickets, it's “a super accessible concert,” says France.

The next concert on May 5 will see France – Head of Percussion at the School of Music – leading the DRUMatiX percussion group as they perform a program of jazz, fusion and world music infused compositions for percussion with Åstrand and fellow percussion maestro Dave Samuels.

Samuels – one of the world’s leading vibraphone players and a mentor of France’s – has performed at jazz festivals around the world. Jazz enthusiasts will know him from his work with jazz supergroup Spyro Gyra, as well as his current, Grammy-winning jazz-Latin music ensemble, The Caribbean Jazz Project.

“I’m fans of both of these guys. I studied with Dave in 1977 [...] so it’s a particular treat to have him here with us,”

France is particularly excited about the fantastic opportunity the performance will give ANU percussion students in DRUMatiX, who will act as “a percussion orchestra,” that will support the performances of Åstrand and Samuels. “The students are actually performing with these guys. They’re performing compositions that both of these guys have composed,”

On the issue of performance versus theory in artistic education, France is passionate and articulate.

“It’s extremely important. It’s quintessential. You can quote me on that. It’s quintessential for young musicians to interact musically with artists and educators who are examples of world’s best practice,”

France, a native of Syracuse, New York, originally came to Australia to teach at WAAPA in Perth, and has much to say about the role of performance in creative arts education.

“Students can improve dramatically when allowed the opportunity to interact in this way,”

“This is nothing new to Australia, as conservatoriums were established in Australia along this model. The ANU School of Music, formerly the Canberra School of Music, is an example of this research and performance practice-led teaching,”

“There’s no question that out of these elite training institutions come outstanding performers.”

The ANU is certainly producing outstanding performers – and performances. In the same month, France will perform in a concert at Llewellyn Hall celebrating the Bicentennial Year of the Argentine Republic, paying homage to Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera with a performance of Ginastera’s *Cantata Para America Magica*.

The Cantata is “a gigantic, monumental work for percussion, two grand

pianos, a gigantic work, and I think only ever performed in Australia once,”

“[It’s an] absolutely amazing work,” says France. “The fact that we’re doing these two concerts in one month is unbelievable,”

Bringing world-class performances, with opportunities for students, performers, and audiences to catch a glimpse of excellence, is of paramount importance, says France – and, he suggests, it makes for a better experience of life all round, which is why he continues, enthusiastically and passionately, with the often “daunting” task of mammoth performances as well as teaching.

“We have to continue to do good deeds for our young people and our art [...]. All those people who spend all their time complaining about the state of the world, if they actually spent some time doing something about it, we’d have a better world!”

Gary France and DRUMatiX will perform with Anders Åstrand and Dave Samuels at Llewellyn Hall as part of the ANU Premier Concert on Wed May 5 at 7.30pm. For info on the Premier Series head to www.music.anu.edu.au. Bookings through Ticketek.