

Mediaportal Report

18/06/2011

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Canberra Times, 18/06/11, Panorama, Page 22
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Article Information

Item ID: 00105794159
Circulation: 32,116
Number of words: 809

Advertising Space Rate

AUD: 1,861



Arctic totems

A percussion piece celebrating Inuit landmarks will be performed at the National Gallery **Philip O'Brien** writes

Across the Arctic Circle, from Alaska to Greenland, Inuksuit landmarks have stood for centuries as silent witnesses of the passage of time. And these man-made stone totems ("inukshuk" in their plural form) are still used today by Inuit tribesmen as landmarks and navigation tools.

American composer John Luther Adams is fascinated by the landscape of Alaska, where he has lived for the past 30 years. So, in 2009, he wrote *Inuksuit*, a work celebrating the stones of the Arctic Circle. However, this was a composition with a difference. It was written for between nine and 99 percussionists and meant to be performed with the audience members able to move freely around the musicians, in the same way that the Inuit people would move freely about the stones.

The Australian premiere of *Inuksuit* will be performed at the James Turrell Skyspace at the National Gallery of Australia at dawn on June 25. The concert, lasting between 75 and 90 minutes, will feature an ensemble of performers including Allen Otte and John Lane from the United States, Speak Percussion from Melbourne, Synergy Percussion from

Sydney and local group DRUMatiX Percussion.

"My music has always been rooted in the earth," John Luther Adams has written. "Over the past thirty-five years I've composed many works inspired by the outdoors, but heard indoors." *Inuksuit* was the result of his desire to write a large-scale work specifically to be performed outside.

"The word 'Inuksuit' translates literally as 'to act in the capacity of the human' ", he wrote in notes about the work. "[It is] haunted by the vision of the melting of the polar ice, the rising of the seas, and what may remain of humanity's presence after the waters recede. The work is intended to expand our awareness of the never-ending music of the world in which we live, transforming seemingly empty space into more fully experienced place."

The choice of the James Turrell Skyspace, at the National Gallery of Australia, for the performance was an inevitable – yet inspired – one because both artists have a fascination with expressing space and landscape in their work. Indeed, Turrell's work is also concerned with light. As he recently told ABC television's *Art Nation*, he is "interested in the 'sweet spot' . . . the change from day to night or night to day."

Michelle Fracaro, from the Gallery's education and public programs, says the Skyspace is a viewing chamber which affects the way visitors can perceive the sky. Audience members at the concert will have the opportunity to experience the concert while strolling in the Gallery's Australian Garden or within the Skyspace itself, she says. "They'll be able to enter the stupa – the core of the Skyspace – and view the sky through an ocular cut out of the top. At dawn and at dusk there is a light cycle which changes the white walls within the stupa to different colours."


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"It's not intended as a polite performance where people sit and watches the musicians. For the audience, it's about interacting with the sound as well as the opportunity to view the Turrell light cycle while the music is happening. And, for the Gallery, it's about providing those audiences with different ways to experience the collection."

Adams intended that each performance of *Inuksuit* should be different, determined by the size of the ensemble, the specific instruments chosen and by the geography of each site. "Inuksuit invites exploration and discovery of the relationship between the music and the site, as well as the musicians' interactions with both," he wrote.

As such, the work uses three groups of percussion instruments and five types of musical materials: Breathing/Wind; Calls/Clangs; Inuksuit; Waves; and Birdsongs.

Gary France, Associate Professor at the ANU School of Music where he is Coordinator of Percussion, is artistic director of the Canberra performance of *Inuksuit*, which will feature thirty percussionists.

"Coincidentally, there's a concurrent presentation of *Inuksuit* in the Northern Hemisphere on the Summer Solstice (June 21) in New York City's Morningside Park," he says. "We would have loved also to have presented the work on the winter solstice but, logistically, it's easier on a weekend." The Canberra concert will also launch the ANU School of Music's Antarctica Festival.

The nature of the music and the time of day will also be an opportunity for audiences to be quietly contemplative, France says. "Too much of our lives are spent in the past and in the future. This is a rare chance to be mindful of our place in universe, simply to be in the moment." Just like those *Inuksuit* stone totems in the Arctic Circle.

• *Inuksuit* by John Luther Adams at the James Turrell Skyspace, National Gallery of Australia, at 6am on Saturday June 25. Enquiries: 6125 5753

The ANU School of Music Antarctica Music Festival and Conference from June 25 to 29. Enquiries: 6125 4878. Website: <http://www.music.anu.edu.au/antarctica>



Inukshuk by artists Alec Petodoosie, Sam Akesuk.