

# Creative energy in Canberra's plans reflected in sounds

## Ethereal Eye

Kings Hall, Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House. May 17.

Reviewer: **Jennifer Gall**

In his homage to the Plans for Canberra by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony, composer Jonathan Mills has created a work founded on a series of metrical and coded musical structures.

The instrumentation and vocal line leads the listener through a labyrinth of secret formulae used to interpret the pair's anthroposophical philosophies that underpinned their vision for architectural design and town planning.

The title springs from a passage in Mahony's *The Magic of America* in which she describes observing "the ethers, moving, rising, forming, changing . . . things [that] cannot be seen by the present, normal eye".

*Ethereal Eye* is the representation in sound of this exploration, a meditation on the creative energy that resulted in the design of Canberra.

Integral parts of the performance were luxurious images developed by Ian de Gruchy and projected over the musicians, walls and audience. The combined effect of soundscape and projected light-tapestry increased the sense of sitting inside a grand, profound meditation.

A specially designed ensemble of microtonal percussion instruments created both the scaffolding for the performance and the fabric of the musical structure.

The composer played prepared piano, striking the bass strings to produce sounds like tubular bells and using a more conventional

approach to create a kind of narrative line. Michael Askill and Gary France, directing DRUMatiX, provided striking visual gestures in silhouette, the lighting set to cast dramatic shadows onto the walls.

Nigel Crocker used trombone and conch to suggest the summoning of creatures or beings from the deep, penetrating beneath the superficial present into the ethereal dimension.

In a clever conceit, the microtonal tunings of the instruments created synergies between scales, sounds and intervals and the mathematical series used by the composer to connect architecture and music.

In the first movement, the sound seemed to delve into the roots of the earth to establish the foundations of an organic structure, a series of other percussion effects and a repeated motif perhaps referring to the initials BG, Burley Griffin.

Anna Fraser contributed suitably unearthly vocal effects to the second movement as projections enveloped the audience, perhaps representing Mahony's visionary talents.

In the third movement, a delay effect enhanced the vocal line sung in counterpoint with an intensely busy melodic pattern played by France on the African slit-drum.

The final movement had an aquatic feeling, which would be appropriate given the importance of a system of purifying lakes drafted in the original design for Canberra.

A musician's work written for the delectation of fellow musicians, the many layers of *Ethereal Eye* provided extraordinary sounds and projected effects that continue to stimulate the imagination long after the last notes have died away.



**NEW WORK:** DRUMatiX perform *Ethereal Eye* in Kings Hall, Old Parliament House.