

By Gary France

Graeme Leak

**Commonwealth
Festival 2011
Opening Night Concert
October 23, 2011**

DRUMMING THE LIGHT

Strange Fruit / Zakir Hussain and his Masters of Percussion

The tribal ritualistic drumming of the Gha, Ewe and Dogomba peoples of west Africa, the joy of Panorama (the massed Steel Pan spectaculars of Trinidad and Tobago), the 100 piece Marimba Orchestras of Clair Omar Musser, the overwhelming precision and excitement of DCI (North American Drum Corps), the fervour of the Swiss Fasnach, the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, the awe inspiring abandonment of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro Brazil, to the inspired "Percussion Jams" staged by Mickey Hart during the 70s and 80s with the grateful Dead...

We can trace the twentieth century's fascination and celebration of Drums and Drumming through to the formal fusion of cultural drumming spectacles as staged by late master percussionist John Wyre (Nexus).

Drums and drumming are often the unifying component that major arts organizations pick when staging significant public events. Percussionists are now the "go to" people for creating events with a sense of awe, grandeur and community. Australia enjoys a rich tradition of embracing percussion for large international events. During the past 25 years the Australian arts community has celebrated significant national events with the Percussion.

A brief list of these include:

- 1988 (World Expo '88) John Wyre and Nexus presented "World Drums" concert, Brisbane.
- 1993 Heartbeat World Rhythms Festival of Fremantle.
- 2000 Celebration of the Century visions of Ian Cleworth and TaikOz performing on the Australian Opera House.
- 2002 The opening Ceremonies of the Olympics massed drumming and movement concert featuring "Fire by Michael Askill.
- the 2006 Common Wealth Music Festival (Melbourne) featuring the World Rhythms spectacular in the Meyer Music Bowl.
- 2008 the Olympic Torch Relay Dawn concert World Rhythms Festival (Canberra).
- 2010 the Australian Percussion Gathering 1000 Gongs (Brisbane).

and most recently, October 23, 2011, as Perth hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) the government of Western Australia commissioned an eight day cultural festival. Naturally, the opening event would manifest itself as a major drumming spectacular. The centrepiece of the opening concert was a massed percussion performance (world premiere) for 220 percussionists of all ages, abilities and influences under the direction of Australian percussion icon and master musician, composer and producer Graeme Leak.

Graeme Leak is well known as artistic director and percussionist for the internationally acclaimed Spaghetti Western Orchestra (SWO) recently returning to Australia after a sell out concert, 6000 people, at the Royal Albert Hall, London, (*but that is another story for a future PERCUSscene!*) and for working with communities all over Australia. Graeme was, in fact, the composer of the massed percussion piece at the 2008 World Rhythms spectacular at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

Drumming the Light was commissioned for and performed as part of the Commonwealth Festival Perth 2011, an initiative of the Western Australian Government. The Festival was staged alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to showcase the diversity of Western Australia and celebrate the people and cultures of the Commonwealth."

Coordinator for this enormous undertaking was Perth percussionist Louise Devenish (see *player profiles this issue*). Louise demonstrated a cool command and warm sensibility over coordinating

the musicians, rehearsals and artists involved and should be commended on an outstanding professional achievement!

Drumming the Light included:

- 108 school age percussionists and their tutors from Perth Modern School, Shenton College, Nedlands PS, Hawker Park PS, Rossmoyne SHS, Eastern Hills SHS, Greenwood SHS, Ellenbrook SHS, Churchlands SHS, Mount Lawley SHS, Leeming SHS, St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls, Mercedes College, Trinity College, Perth College, St Brigid's College, Penrhos College, Helena College and Presbyterian Ladies College.
- 17 music students from the University of Western Australia and WA Academy of Performing Arts.
- Professional and community artists from contemporary, classical, world and fusion percussion groups Defying Gravity, Tetrafade Percussion, Ozmosis, Bloco Do Norte, Sambanistas, Hills Community Drum Circle, Wongai, Dunumba, WA Academy of Performing Arts Acting Circle, Rocky Drumming Club, Drumbeat ,the WA Symphony Orchestra and WaSamba!

Graeme Leak writes....

Drumming the Light is a piece for massed drummers, composed specifically for the drumming communities of Perth, a community that includes professionals, students as young as 12, street





Samba bands, Drum Circle drummers and keen amateurs. The piece, to be played from memory, is grouped in five parts: 1 – metal; 2 – very high drums; 3 – high drums; 4 – medium drums; 5 – low drums. Each part can carry as many doubling players as are available so theoretically the piece could have any number of performers. The minimum number of players to hear all parts is 9, as the metal part is sub-divided into four (triangles, finger cymbals, clash cymbals, small gongs and agogo bells). All players are mobile.

There are 9 interlocking patterns labelled 8a, b, and c; 7a, b and c; and 6a, b and c. Players learn their individual patterns from memory and the piece is constructed by arranging these patterns into a sequence.

In addition to the patterns and the instruments, LIGHT is an integral player in the piece. Each group leader operates a foot switch that turns on a stage lamp focused on that group, used to reinforce the downbeat (the 'one'). Also, the conductor uses a lamp and foot switch to signal changes of pattern to the whole ensemble. The conductor's baton is luminous, allowing for easy visibility across distance and making possible an exit from the stage through the audience of the massed ensemble, while the conductor stays on stage keeping the beat.

The patterns are designed to fit together in various combinations, which become the arrangement. The three time signatures of 6, 7, and 8 can be run simultaneously to create musical interest and complexity, even though the individual parts are quite simple.

Perth, Australia's city of light, welcomed the world with a free, family friendly, musical and light-filled evening.

Strange Fruit, one of Australia's iconic physical theatre companies, began the evening with a mesmerising performance of Ringing the Changes. Part ritual, part spectacle and part soundscape, performers swayed above the crowd playing a set of beautiful bells commissioned as part of the Federation of Centenary 5000 bells. Strange Fruit were joined on stage with a quartet of outstanding percussionists performing melodies and accompaniment on Federation Bells and Glockenspiel. The performers: Stephen Fitzgerald, Leah Scholes, Louise Devenish, and Steven Richter flawlessly integrated the ensemble. A surprise was the addition of one hundred percussionists secretly integrated into the 10,000 strong audiences surrounding Strange Fruit. At the appropriate moment artistic director and conductor Graeme Leak signalled the intermingled percussionists to stand and play triangles. Patterns were coordinated with the swaying of artists/circus performers atop of 5-metre poles that swayed back and forth. As the artists swayed they would play specially posted Bells atop of poles. The effect was truly mesmerizing and joyfully liberating!

International drumming sensation Zakir Hussain and his Masters of Percussion completed this opening event. A classical tabla virtuoso of the highest order, Zakir is a national treasure in his country, India, and has achieved worldwide acclaim. For this performance he was joined by the dancing drummers of Manipur, whose acrobatic choreography created an energetic percussion finale.

Light and fireworks illuminated Supreme Court Gardens as the evening's musical journey concluded, and embodied a symbol of new beginnings and hope.

Zakir Hussain and his Masters of Percussion

