



Photo by Shanka Bosakova

MICHAEL ASKILL

By Gary France.

“It is rare to find a musician who dedicates so much of his time to his fellow musicians and does so with such enthusiasm. Askill is in turn an artist recording his colleague’s music, a producer sharing his experience and expertise in the recording studio, and in an informal but very effective way, an ambassador-at-large for his country’s culture.”

John Schaefer 'New Sounds' WNYC-FM, New York City

Michael Askill is a name synonymous with Australian Percussion. His commitment to Australian music through performance, composition, education and research has established a benchmark of artistic endeavour for us all.

In May 2012, I had the pleasure of reconnecting with Michael for performances at the Canberra International Music Festival. His dedication to our craft, generous spirit, and passion for “all things percussion” inspired both the musicians he performed with and audiences alike.

This article documents Michael’s journey so far as a percussionist/sound explorer, a journey of “unlikely detours and encounters” that leads to where “sound eventually resolves into silence”.

Born in Durban, South Africa, Michael and his family moved first to Birmingham, England, and then, in 1957 when Askill was five, to Australia. (“The Australian Government were offering passages from the UK to Australia for 10 pounds!” Askill remarks.)

While undertaking percussion studies with legendary teacher Richard Smith at Adelaide’s Elder Conservatorium, Michael performed with the (then) South Australian Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Youth Orchestra. During this period he had the opportunity to meet with and perform new compositions by Peter Sculthorpe, Barry Conyngham and Richard Meale.

In 1971 Michael moved to Sydney to join the ABC’s National Training Orchestra. Instead, he was invited directly into the position of Principal Percussionist in the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust Orchestra. While playing in the AETT Orchestra he met the members of world renowned Les Percussions de Strasbourg who invited him to further his studies in France. In Strasbourg he performed with the Orchestre de l’ORTF and L’Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg while studying with Jean Batigne at the Conservatoire where he was awarded a Premier Prix de Percussion ‘avec felicitations du jury’ (translates as: “Honours, with Committee Praise”, and is the highest distinction awarded in the French academic university system).

In Strasbourg he also had the opportunity to experience the full potential of percussion as a form of musical expression and had the opportunity to work with composers such as Olivier Messiaen and Tona Scherchen. And it was in Strasbourg in 1972 that he first met the Australian dancers Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon who were touring with Les Ballets Felix Blaska. Graeme would later become Artistic Director of Sydney Dance Company and form a creative relationship with Michael that has resulted in a number of important collaborations involving dance and percussion.

On his return to Australia, Michael re-joined the AETT Orchestra in time for the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973. In 1974 he formed a percussion group with Colin Piper, Ron Reeves and Ian Bloxson called Sydney Percussions. Sydney Percussions’ first concert was presented by David Ahearn as part of his A-Z music series in the Recording Hall of the Sydney Opera House. The group went on to become Synergy Percussion and membership over the years has included a virtual roster of Australia’s leading percussionists such as Ric Miller, Ian Cleworth, Rebecca Lagos, Graeme



Michael by Michelle Grace Hunder2

Leak, David Hewitt, Philip South and many young percussionists who now continue Synergy’s legacy. Synergy became well known for its role in actively commissioning many new works for percussion and for the many imaginative collaborations with international drummers and percussionists including David Jones (Australia), Fritz Hauser (Switzerland), Aly n’Diaye Rose (Senegal), Hossam Ramzy (Egypt), Dave Samuels (USA), Glen Velez (USA) and others. (See our article in this issue, *Synergy The Early Days*)

An interlude in Melbourne in late 1974 saw Michael appointed as Principal Timpanist of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Hiroyuki Iwaki. During this period Michael also taught at the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium.

In 1976 Michael returned to Sydney to take up an appointment as Principal Percussionist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. During his ten year career with the SSO he was also an active performer of contemporary music with Synergy Percussion, the

Seymour Group, Flederman and Nigel Westlake’s Magic Puddin’ Band. He performed as soloist with the Sydney, Adelaide and Queensland Symphony Orchestras on a number of occasions including performances of Richard Mill’s *Soundscapes* and HK Gruber’s *Rough Music*.

In the mid-80s Michael left the Sydney Symphony to concentrate on his passion for new music and his performance activities with Synergy Percussion and Flederman. He was invited by Michael Atherton to form a new group to explore the burgeoning interest in the multi-cultural aspects influencing Australian music. This new group, eventually called Southern Crossings, became one of Musica Viva’s most important educational assets in Australia as well as being frequently invited to tour for the Department of Foreign Affairs to Korea, Canada, India, Philippines, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Mexico, Italy and the USA. During this period Michael began to explore composition from the perspective of a performer and composed music for Synergy Percussion and Southern Crossings. As



Photo by Grant McIntyre

Artistic Director of Synergy Percussion, he was also actively engaged in commissioning new works from Australian composers including Nigel Westlake, Carl Vine, Ross Edwards, Peter Sculthorpe, Gerard Brophy, Martin Wesley-Smith, David Lumsdaine, Andrew Ford and others. Many of these have become 'standard' works in the percussion repertoire and Synergy's concerts set a new standard in providing an exciting and entertaining platform for the presentation of new music in Australia.

Michael's *Lemurian Dances* was composed for Synergy in 1990 and has since been performed throughout the world (recently at New York's Lincoln Centre) and entered the repertoire of groups such as Hungary's renowned percussion group, Amadinda. The early 90's saw Michael appointed as Head of Percussion at the Canberra School of Music (now ANU School of Music), then invited by Australian guitarist John Williams to join his new septet Attacca. Attacca featured leading Australian musicians such as Nigel Westlake and Timothy Kain with the cream of London session musicians. Once again in the role of performer/composer Michael contributed *Lemurian Etudes*, *Moving Pictures* and *To a Stranger*. Attacca toured the UK in 1992 culminating in concerts at the Brighton Festival and the Barbican, then the Sydney Opera House.

In the period between 1992-1999 Michael was involved in a series of intensive collaborations as composer, performer and musical director with now legendary Australian choreographer Graeme Murphy and his Sydney Dance Company. These collaborations, *Synergy with Synergy*, *Free Radicals*, *Salome* and *Air and Other Invisible Forces* provided a unique opportunity to explore music and dance interactions featuring percussion. While *Synergy with Synergy* used a suite of works (Elliot Carter, John Cage, Istvan Marta, Ross Edwards, Nigel Westlake and Michael Askill), the scores for *Free Radicals*, *Salome* and *Invisible Forces* were composed entirely

by Michael. In the roles of musical director, performer and composer with SDC Michael toured to the USA, China, Germany, Switzerland, Singapore and throughout Australia. In 1999, under his artistic direction, Synergy was awarded 'Long-term Contribution to the Advancement of Australian Music' by the Australian Music Centre.

In 2000, Michael was invited by Max Lambert - the Musical Director of the Sydney 2000 Olympics - to compose a percussion sequence for the *Fire* section of the Opening Ceremony. In 2001, Michael was invited by Jonathan Mills - Artistic Director of the Melbourne International Festival - to curate a percussion spectacular for the Sidney Myer Music Bowl entitled *pulse:heart:beat* that featured percussionists from Australia, Africa and the Middle East. In 2002 he was commissioned to direct a special concert in the Sydney Opera House for HH Dalai Lama and compose a dance sequence (*Ocean*) choreographed by Meryl Tankard. In 2003 he was commissioned by the Sydney Opera House to compose the music for Meryl Tankard's *Pearl*. In 2004 he created *...in the between* (Meditations and Illuminations on the Tibetan Book of the Dead) with collaborators Riley Lee (shakuhachi), Tenzin Choegyol (flute and vocals) and James Coates (spoken word). In 2005 he recorded *Space* with the outstanding Swiss drummer and sound artist, Fritz Hauser at Therme Vals in Switzerland and resumed his collaborations with Graeme Murphy, composing and performing for *Hua Mulan* at the Oriental Arts Centre in Shanghai. In 2006, Max Lambert once again invited Michael to compose percussion sequences, this time for the Opening Ceremony of the Asian Games in Doha, Qatar. In 2007 he won Best Original Score for his music composed for the short film *Eclipse*. In 2008 Michael led Synergy Percussion to Tucson, Arizona for their American debut at the Tucson Winter Chamber Music Festival and later that year performed his

final concert with Synergy Percussion at Sydney's City Recital Hall in a program of music by Percy Grainger, Peter Sculthorpe, Gerard Brophy, Ross Edwards and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Michael had led Synergy on concert tours around Australia as well as New Zealand, France, England, Sweden, Hungary, Germany, Hong Kong, China and the USA - performing Australian music.

Since 2009, Michael has re-focused his activities in Brisbane. He is Lecturer in Percussion at the University of Queensland and Percussion Specialist at the Queensland Academy of Performing Industries. He is completing a PhD in composition at the University of Queensland - an exploration of his own compositions and compositional process in relation to collaboration and the ongoing discourse and development of percussion music, recording and electronic processing. He is frequently invited to be a guest teacher and ensemble director at the Queensland Conservatorium.

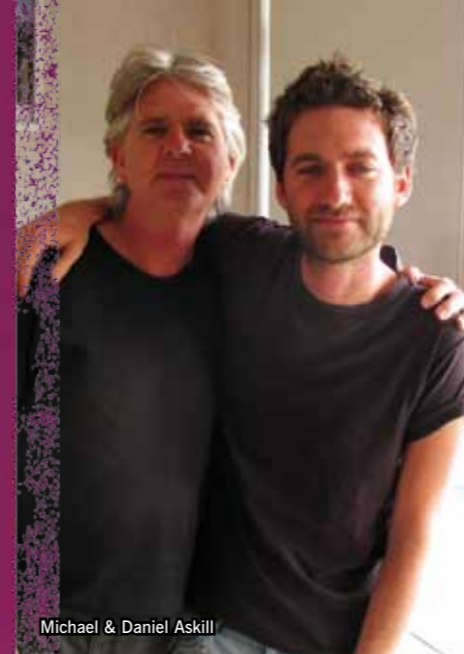
In 2010 Michael curated *1000 Gongs* as part of the Australian Percussion Gathering held at the Queensland Conservatorium. *1000 Gongs* demonstrated the immense power and magic of these instruments as channelled through visionary composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, James Tenney and John Luther Adams performed by a line-up of percussionists that included Sylvio Gualda (France), Steve Schick (USA), Kuniko Kato (Japan), Phil Treloar, Tom O'Kelly and Vanessa Tomlinson (Australia) along with students and players from around the country.

In 2011 he invited 3 percussion graduates from the Queensland Conservatorium (Rebecca Lloyd Joes, Stephanie Mudford and Cameron Kennedy) to join him for performances of *Suite Synergy*, a re-creation of highlights from Graeme Murphy's *Free Radicals* and *Synergy with Synergy* with a new dance company called Mod Dance. 2011 also saw the creation of a new percussion group artistically co-directed by Michael and Vanessa Tomlinson called Early Warning System. In September 2012, Early Warning System performed John Luther Adam's epic percussion quartet, *Strange and Sacred Noise*.

Recent commissions include *Morning Song* for string orchestra with vocal and instrumental soloists for CHOGM 2011 in Perth and a complete 180, a percussion duo for Sound Collectors (Louise Devenish and Leah Scholes). Michael is also working on films with the New Zealand director, Mark Lapwood and the Los Angeles-based director, T. Arthur Cottam.

One of Michael's most fruitful collaborations over many years has been with the German record producer, Eckart Rahn. This has resulted in a significant discography, particularly as a soloist and composer on Eckart's Celestial Harmonies and Black Sun labels.

In recent years Michael has begun to explore the sounds and properties of gongs and singing bowls. He has formed relationships with gong makers in Wuhan, China and singing bowl makers in Kathmandu, Nepal. He has a significant collection of these instruments and has integrated them into his performance practice, recordings and compositions while researching their origins, history, vibrational qualities and effects.



Michael & Daniel Askill



Alym Diaye, Rose & Michael



Michael & Nigel Westlake

MICHAEL ASKILL - WORKS

Selected Discography

Invisible Forces - Black Sun 15032-2
Space (music for bells, cymbals and gong) with Fritz Hauser - Celestial Harmonies 13262-2
Rhythm in the Abstract (Selected Pieces 1987-1999) - Black Sun 15030-2
Salome - Black Sun 15031-2
Free Radicals - Black Sun 15027-2
Australian Percussion - Celestial Harmonies 13085-2
Fata Morgana with Omar Faruk Tekbilek - Celestial Harmonies 13110-2
Buddha: Radiant Awakening (Michael Askill & various artists) - Celestial Harmonies 114215-2
Michael has performed on many other recordings including:
Drumming by Steve Reich : Synergy Percussion and guests
Toru Takemitsu & Carl Vine: Synergy with the Sydney Symphony
Impact: Synergy Percussion Synergy
Percussion: SynergyPercussion
Synergy with Samuels: Synergy Percussion with Dave Samuels
Track: Southern Crossings
Roads to Xanadu: Music of Michael Askill & Nigel Westlake
Music from Australia: Australian Chamber Orchestra
Music of Nigel Westlake: includes Michael's multi-tracked version of *Omphalo Centric Lecture*
Music for Percussion
a complete 180 - for percussion duo (2012)
3 Places in Kathmandu (2009) - for percussion quartet (2009)
Caboalture Drumming - for African & Japanese drummers (2005)
Spirals - for percussion quartet (2001)
no rest from the dance - for percussion sextet (2001)
Fire - for twenty percussion players (2000)
Free Radicals Suite - for percussion trio (1996)
Going On - for percussion quartet, shakuhachi, koto and spoken word (1991)
Lemurian Dances - for percussion quartet (1990)
No Trace - for percussion quartet and electronics (1989)
Music for Mixed Ensemble & Solo Instrument

Morning Song - for string orchestra with instrumental and vocal soloists (2011)
Breath Alone (in 4 movements) - for solo flute (2006)
Lemurian Etudes - for violin, piano, double bass, bass clarinet, guitar and percussion (1992)
To a Stranger - for guitar duo (1991)
Moving Pictures - for cello, flute/recorder, guitar, percussion and electronics (1990)
Jusan - for bass clarinet, marimba and electronics (1989)
Music for Dance
Suite Synergy (2011) - Choreography by Graeme Murphy
Hua Mulan (2005) - Choreography by Graeme Murphy
Pearl (2003) - Sydney Opera House 30th Anniversary version
Ocean (2002) - Concert in Honour of HH Dalai Lama - Choreography by Meryl Tankard
Pearl (2000) - Choreography by Meryl Tankard
Invisible Forces (1999) - Choreography by Graeme Murphy
Salome (1998) - Choreography by Graeme Murphy
Free Radicals (1996) - Choreography by Graeme Murphy
Music for Film, Video & Television
Tryptich - The Spirit of Water (2010) - directed by Daniel Askill

442 & 190 - after JG Ballard (2009) - directed by Jesus Olmo
Angel (2006) - directed by Daniel Askill
Eclipse (2006) - directed by Mark Lapwood
We Have Decided Not To Die (2001) - directed by Daniel Askill
Roads to Xanadu for ABC-TV
A Big Country - Family in Exile for ABC-TV
The Seven Deadly Sins - Sloth for ABC-TV
The Makers for ABC-TV (1989)
Music for Events
2011 CHOGM, Perth - *Morning Song*
2010 Australian Percussion Gathering, Brisbane - *1000 GONGS*
2009 Chinese New Year, Sydney - *Parade*
2008 FIFA World Congress, Sydney Opera House - *World Drum Suite*
2006 Asian Games, Doha, Qatar - *Asia Drum Suite*
2005 Queensland Multicultural Festival, Brisbane - *Gong Suite*
2005 Woodford Folk Festival, Qld - *Dawn Ceremony*
2002 Concert for HH Dalai Lama, Sydney Opera House - *Pearl*
2000 Sydney Olympics - Opening Ceremony - *Fire*
2000 National Museum of Australia, Canberra - Opening Ceremony - *Cloud Swing*

Website info ???



Early Warning System - Photo by Sharka Bosakova



Michael & Detlef Kieffer