

TIMOTHY CONSTABLE

Timothy Constable is an award-winning percussionist and composer, and has been a member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra since 2014. A compelling, creative and sensitive performer, he has performed as concerto and chamber music soloist at most of the Australian classical music festivals, as well as in New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Poland, UK, Ireland, Senegal, USA, China, Korea, Nepal and South-East Asia. He was the artistic director of Synergy Percussion between 2009 and 2017, during which time the group undertook some of its most ambitious work, including the 40th anniversary season in 2014, and extensive collaboration with renowned ensemble Noreum Machi (South Korea), commissions of music by Steve Reich and Anthony Pateras, several recordings and the video project 40under40. His commissions have include compositions for Omer Backley-Astrachan (Maholohet Festival, Israel) and Orava String Quartet (Australian Festival of Chamber Music), as well as Cinemusica (Australian Chamber Orchestra), Ordinary Time and Spirals (Southern Cross Soloists), and numerous works for Noreum Machi, Synergy Percussion and Taikoz. Contemporary dance score credits include Meryl Tankard, Shaun Parker, Legs on the Wall and Dance Makers Collective.

He is committed to both new and ancient music, with a large body of world and Australasian premieres to his name, including Steve Reich's Mallet Quartet, György Ligeti's Sippal, Dobbal, Nádihegedűvel (With Pipes, Drums and Fiddles), Anthony Pateras' Beauty Will Be Amnesiac Or Will Not Be At All and Flesh and Ghost, and music by Simon Holt, Lisa Lim, Arvo Pärt and Gerard Brophy among others. In the realm of ancient music, he has studied with Senegalese master drummer Aly N'Diaye Rose and Korean Jangoo with Kim Yeong-Taek and Kim Chong-Hee.

Timothy Constable is a Freedman music fellow, an Elizabethan Theatre Trust scholar, a university medallist of Newcastle University, and a graduate of the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.

Congratulations on your inspirational career with so many of the worlds top performing ensembles including your recent appointment to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Can you please tell me about your preparation journey for this awesome job.

For me, music has been like a series of irregular revelations, where a new style, context, tradition or experience would blow my mind and trigger a whole new chapter of learning and inspiration. Orchestra was the first. I remember dancing out of a concert where a local Newcastle orchestra played Dvorak. About the same time, singing along, and doing crayon drawings as a 4 year old being babysat by my conducting father, I fell in love with the timpani.



By Gary France

Different revelations followed and I was pulled in other musical directions - from dancefloor electronica to Korean Shaman drumming - but in the end I now find myself in SSO, and it's like a homecoming - a chance as an adult to explore 'full out' those sound worlds which were the soundtrack of my very early life. I didn't study percussion formally till I was 13, but by then I'd been playing piano a number of years, singing every day, and improvising rhythms on kitchen furniture. Hearing Synergy at 13 was my next revelation. The euphoria quickly became "I want to know how to do that". The percussion room at Newcastle conservatorium became my favourite place, and Daryl Pratt, my teacher of many years, my hero. Though it was a regional 'con', there was some really great equipment there. My teens really set me up as a musician. I was listening to Steve Reich and John Adams, sneaking into clubs for further revelation courtesy of Billy Cobham or Directions in Groove. I had access to MIDI studio gear and started composing in (what felt like) earnest by 15. My originals jazz quartet Wood, in which I played marimba, I am proud of to this day. The rhythm section was way finer than I deserved, and blowing choruses over their textures and rhythms felt like flying! I also played in a funk band as a drummer for a couple of years before taking off overseas to study in Stockholm with Kroumata percussion ensemble. I was there about 18 months, tough cold months but hugely inspirational. Then suddenly I was back in Sydney in my early 20s, playing in Synergy and guesting in the SSO section. Synergy sustained me through the first 15 years of my professional life. Both Michael Askill and Ian Cleworth were mentors of the highest order and I'm just so grateful. Percussion ensemble felt like a completely legitimate career choice at that time, Synergy having carved it out such a place in the cultural landscape since the 70s. Over the course of my time with the group, I had access to dozens of amazing artists and composers, and increasingly scope to try ideas and hone my own style and sound. Some collaborators, like Fritz Hauser, Aly N'Diaye Rose, Omar Farouk Tekbilek or Juhong Kim, offered me musical revelations all their own and set me on whole tangential travel adventures. But when it comes to actual preparation for the orchestra, it was really the ability to listen attentively and come



up with just the right sound, that set me up the most.

During your career you have occupied numerous positions in Australian ensembles, notably Synergy Percussion. Can you please describe the role of the Percussionist in the orchestra? What do you do to prepare for the numerous programs you prepare each year etc. How do you find time to practice and prepare? Do you have a regular routine?

I do Tai Chi 3 times a week. The role of percussion in the orchestra is changing. For a long time it was largely a question of adding colour and poise to special musical moments, and in this style of playing Colin Piper's remark that "all of them wrong and you right makes you wrong" is pretty apt. But under our current chief conductor we have premiered dozens of new works, most with super gnarly percussion parts. We just toured the new percussion concerto by James MacMillan, and the section parts are so tricky that a reviewer in Berlin pointed out that we were every bit a match for the soloist (Martin Grubinger). Then the next week it will be about just finding the perfect tam tam sound for that one note. Perhaps because I have a history of playing fistfuls of notes, perhaps because of my tendency to overthink things, I find the less I have to do, the harder it is! Then the next week we're playing a movie soundtrack or backing a band, and on and on it goes.

Can you please describe some of your most exciting performances during your profession, movie soundtracks, concertos etc.

Sometimes it's the gigs that looked like they were going to head south, and then turned amazing. I've had gigs as a DJ like that, where you're playing your own music and the room wants a different style, and you have to hold your ground and pray that they turn. Any Synergy member of the era will remember a concert we did for the Commonwealth Games festival at Myer Bowl in Melbourne (about 2006?). We were the second last set in a serious blockbuster program, and our set was MUCH more introspective than the epic doof of our precursors. By the time we went on the 15000 punters were screaming for 'something we can 'f*ck&#ing dance to!!'. I knew that the opening first 3 minutes of our set was just me singing a quiet African song with Philip accompanying on frame drum. We huddled backstage and were completely ready for things to come flying at us. Somehow from that first note we grabbed them, and

they followed us spellbound throughout then went nuts. Synergy's 40th birthday season was hugely rewarding for me, with big commissions, and performance situations that we worked really hard on over a number of years. Working with Steve Reich on a festival at the Opera House was another highlight.

Timothy, You are also a prolific composer, please tell us about this exciting aspect of your career.

It just seemed to evolve naturally out of me jamming little things on the piano when I was growing up. When I started writing electronica in my teens, I loved the feeling of being able to craft the sounds, and all of my pieces for instruments live or die based on how convincing the sounds are. I guess there are a few pieces that I'm proud of. I like the piece Cinemusica for Australian Chamber Orchestra and Synergy. It confused the hell out of the critics (always a good sign) and people seemed to really like it. I like my album City Jungle, a drum n bass electronica project Synergy did in 2011. I am proud of several of the songs I wrote with my band Moth People



between 2009/13. Synergy gave me a great outlet for writing over a decade or more, even commissioning a percussion symphony from me at one stage! Probably my deepest pieces were written for Korean ensemble Noreum Machi, as I worked very hard over many years to inhabit their rhythms and aesthetic, to try to add some of my orchestration language and extrapolate some of the rhythms to ridiculous complexity. Taking those pieces to Korea and getting the stamp of approval from their audiences meant the world to me.

I understand you are also conducting!

I was always told, if 4 mallets becomes a struggle, put 3 of them down.

As you hold a leadership positions in the many organisations you perform with, can you please list, from your viewpoint, the essential tools that developing and early career musician must have in their virtual "Career/Life" toolbox?

Speaking as a percussionist first of all, I tend to emphasise the basics when I practice myself or teach. You have to be able to read anything. You will benefit hugely from a fluid relaxed technique that is malleable but dependable. You may have to be ready to lug. A lot. But from a broader standpoint, you have to anticipate that the industry will change beyond imagining over the course of your career. I've watched this in the short time I've been active, and it is happening faster and faster. I hope we'll always have orchestras and flesh and blood people playing music, and as I said I emphasise the canon of our traditions in my personal approach, but as a musician coming through now, really you have to be ready to put your ideas into dialogue with an industry that keeps changing and accept that you may need to creatively change your tactics several times. I feel the competitiveness of the marketplace now has encouraged a greater specialisation right from an early age, but I would encourage listening widely, playing lots of pieces (not just excerpts!) dreaming big and being ready to change musical direction if the job you wanted doesn't quite work out.

As it is often impossible to narrow this answer, what are your top two favourite percussion instruments?

My marimba and my mudung chungoo (Korean drum).

Do you have an all-time favourite musician that you listen to when driving in the car, traveling alone etc.?

Bach, Louis Cole, Keith Jarrett.