

PAUL GRABOWSKY: ACCOSTING THE COUNT

by Adrian Jackson*

[This article appeared in Australasian Jazz & Blues, Volume 2, No 1, 1995]

Paul Grabowsky is used to being in the spotlight. A child prodigy as a classical pianist, an outstanding prospect when he decided as a teenager to concentrate on jazz, he always appeared destined for big things.



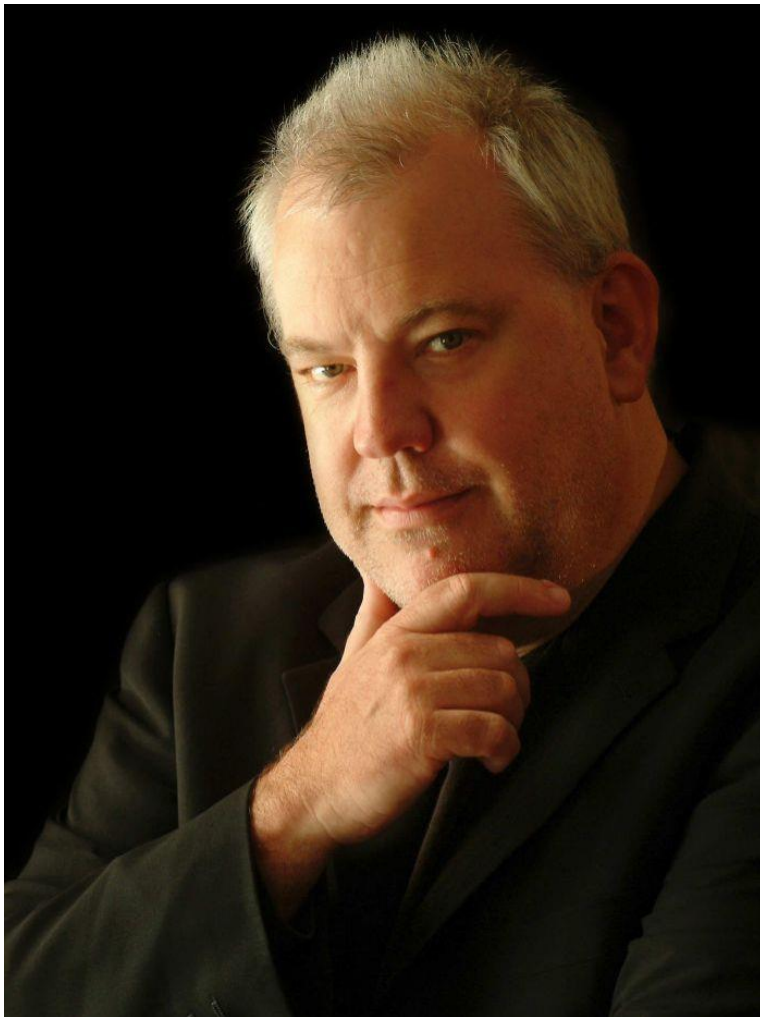
Steve Vizard's Tonight Live show in the early 90s, with Vizard in front, Paul Grabowsky at the piano, trumpeter Bob Venier top left, and bassist Gary Costello in rear...

**In 1995 when this was written Adrian Jackson was artistic director of the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues.*

And over the last decade, he has enjoyed a good deal of celebrity, whether for his profile as musical director of the Seven Network's *Tonight Live* show; his achievements as writer (and usually, performer) of scores for film and television productions (among them, *Phoenix*, *Janus*, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*); or his diverse activities as a jazz bandleader, composer and soloist.

But lately, he has been unusually prominent, even for him, for reasons both positive and negative. The good reasons involve the successful launch in November of the Australian Art Orchestra, a dream that he has nurtured for several years now. The negative reasons? Criticism about his involvement in the Australia Council's funding process, as both a decision-maker and funding recipient.

In essence, some of Grabowsky's critics believe that he has used his position as Chairman of the Music Committee of the Australia Council to feather his own nest. They point to the Touring Assistance grant that enabled his Sextet to tour Europe in mid-1994 (\$15,000); over \$12,000 of Composer Commission grants for the AAO in 1994; and a \$45,000 grant to the AAO for administration in 1995.



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The signs of a successful career so far - a Bosendorfer grand piano, some ARIA awards on the mantelpiece, several original paintings on the walls, and an imposing sculpture in corrugated iron, looming in the corner - surround us as we sit in the front room of his Elwood house to discuss these criticisms.

Grabowsky sighs, "Well, nobody has actually said anything to me, directly. But I have heard that certain people have been saying these sorts of things. All I can say is that it shows an inability, or an unwillingness, to recognise the facts, and the processes involved."

He points out that the Sextet's grant was awarded in 1992, before his term with the Australia Council began; that one Composer Commission grant was requested by, and awarded to, the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz (which commissioned him to write a piece for the 1994 Festival), while the other two enabled the AAO to commission other composers to write for the Orchestra; that as Chairman, he takes an impartial role in the Music Committee's discussions; and that he left the room when any grants from which he might benefit, directly or indirectly, were discussed.



The AAO in performance at the Adelaide Festival, 1996: the trumpet section from front to back, Stephen Grant, Bob Coassin, Scott Tinkler... PHOTO CREDIT DEAN GOLJA

Beyond that, he says, "We now have very strict guidelines in place to do with conflict of interest, that prevent any Committee member from being the sole recipient of any grant." This meant that, to remain on the Music Committee, he had to decline a commission from the Brisbane Biennial, and a grant that would have enabled *Cheviot Beach* (an opera about disappearance of PM Harold Holt, which he has been

discussing for some time with playwright Joanna Murray-Smith) to get off the drawing board. I suggest this must have been a hard decision. He nods, "It was. But I feel that the job I'm doing is important, and to walk away from it for the sake of a couple of commissions would have been ... irresponsible. I really believe that Australian music is going through an incredibly exciting phase; jazz in particular. And we need to ensure that the systems which help the musicians to create all of this music are flexible enough to deal with change as it happens, rather than running



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Even those critics who are not simple-minded enough to believe that Grabowsky is abusing his position for personal financial gain, argue that the AAO is absorbing a disproportionate, and unjustifiable, share of the limited amount of funds that seem to be available for jazz applicants.

"People need to understand that this is a much bigger project than anyone else has attempted to this point [in Australian jazz]", he responds. "You've got an 18-piece ensemble, you've got people writing and arranging music for them. They need to rehearse, they need to go on the road. You have to have people to organise all of this, to administer the Orchestra, to raise finance for the whole operation. It's an enormous undertaking. It will require a lot more funding than we've received so far. The \$45,00 is just for administration. " I mention that it is a drop in the ocean, compared to the amount of government money (from the Australia Council, the ABC and direct funding) that goes to orchestras operating in the classical field. Grabowsky agrees. 'We need to establish a track record before we can get that sort of funding. I'm really hoping that the (Victorian) State Government will come in, because we are a Melbourne-based ensemble, and one that will hopefully enhance Melbourne's position as a creative centre. At the end of the day, the only thing that's going to convince anyone that the expense is justified, is if the music is good. Now, the Orchestra is nowhere near approaching its maturity yet; that's going to take years.

"But the fact is, it should exist. We should have an ensemble that can tell everyone around Australia, and the rest of the world. ' This is what improvising musicians and composers in Australia are capable of. And once the Orchestra gets up and running, it will be there for a long time; it will be an irresistible force."

"Franky," he grins, "I think it is an irresistible force."

The AAO has certainly got off to a strong start. Its predecessor, the Paul Grabowsky Orchestra (that performed *Ringing The Bell Backwards* at the 1993 Melbourne Festival and again at the Continental Cafe in January '94) recorded those radical Grabowsky arrangements of European popular songs for a CD, which will be released under the AAO's name (on Origin Records) early in '95. And its first public performance as the AAO (at the '94 Wangaratta Festival), while uneven in several respects, certainly left no doubt that the ensemble can achieve great things in terms of both composition and improvisation.



Beyond that, Grabowsky hopes that the Orchestra will begin touring (through New South Wales, the ACT, Victoria and Tasmania) in March, presenting music from Bell, from the Wangaratta program, and new works.

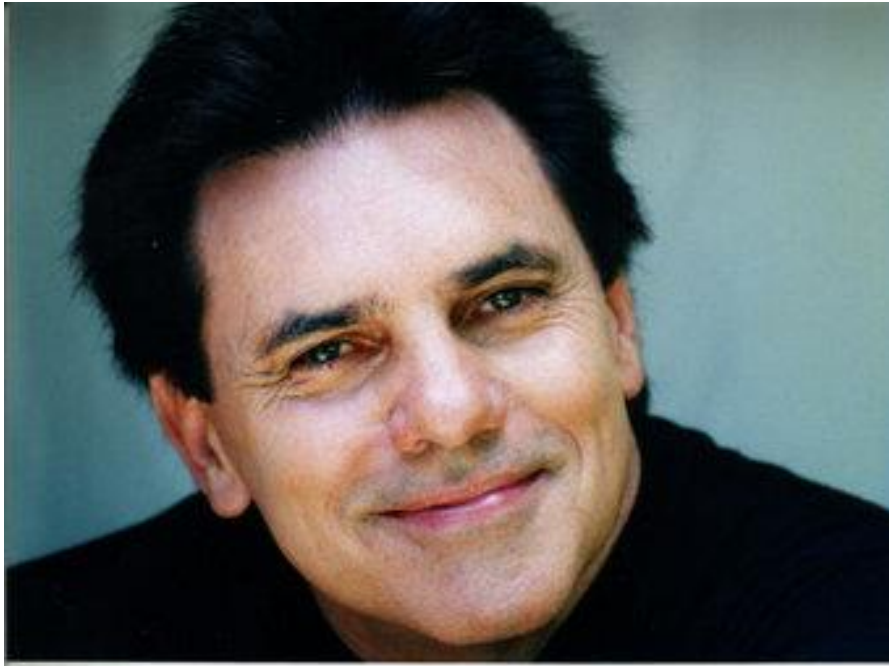
And he has grand plans for the Brisbane Biennial in May. The AAO's program will include a piano concerto that Grabowsky is writing to feature the outstanding 'contemporary classical' pianist, Michael Harvey. (This reflects the composer's long-

held desire to break down the barriers between different musical genres). The Orchestra will combine with the Australian Chamber Orchestra for a concert to be conducted by Gunther Schuller, which will include several of the American composer's works in the 'third stream' area. And, should the Brisbane Biennial succeed in bringing out Ornette Coleman and Prime Time, the suggestion has been made that Ornette might guest with the Orchestra - which would be, Paul Grabowsky admits, "all my dreams come true".



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Looking further ahead, Grabowsky has been commissioned by the Adelaide and Sydney Festivals, for performances in 1996. He envisages a multi-media production, involving singer Lynden Terracini, librettist Morgan and film-maker Kevin Lucas.



Grabowsky envisages a multi-media production, involving singer Lyndon Terracini (above) and film-maker Kevin Lucas (below)...



"It's based on a Somerset Maugham short story," he explains, "called *Rain*. A lot of the music will be based on hymns from the Salvation Army; Lyndon grew up in the Salvation Army, he's got very strong feelings about it."

Then there is his ambition to stage a co-production with the Bangarra Dance Theatre, a Sydney-based aboriginal dance company. Grabowsky says, "I would hope that we could involve aboriginal musicians, as an integral part of the Orchestra, rather than as a token gesture. That would require extensive workshopping, I think. There's a whole improvising tradition there, that's been untapped."

He has also made a start on the AAO's second album, having hit the studio the day after the Wangaratta Festival, to record tracks with guest solos from Steve Lacy and Dewey Redman.



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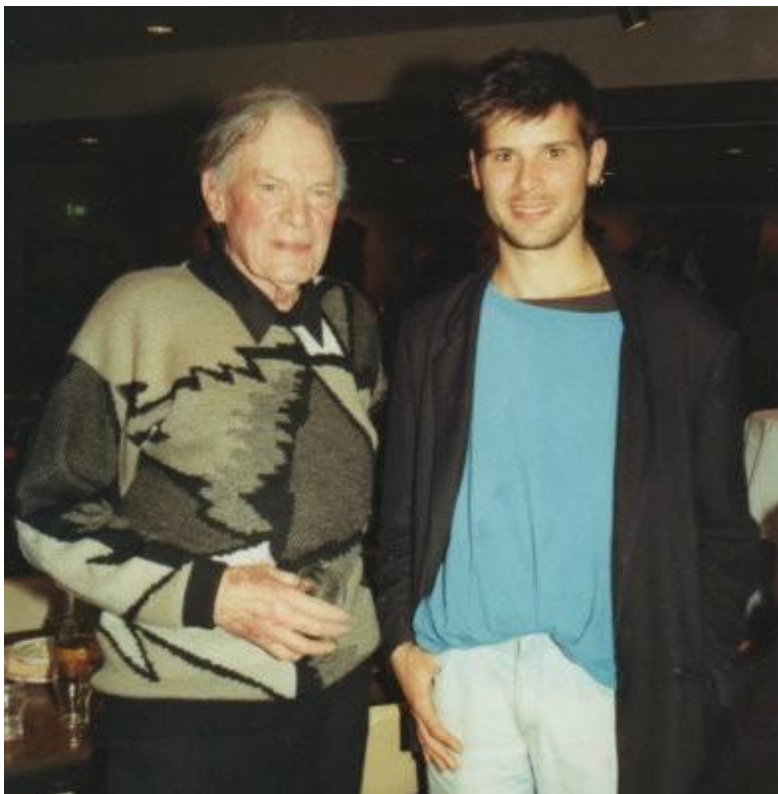


"Innovative work is carrying the music forward, and it is what is creating interest in Australian jazz from overseas. I think it's important to see jazz music as one large organism, and it's important to put any particular part into context. But I fear that a large part of the Australian jazz family is unable to do that."

By the time these 1995 projects get underway, the Orchestra's personnel is expected to comprise Bob Coassin, Stephen Grant and Scott Tinkler on trumpets; James Greening and Adrian Sherriff on trombones; Philip Rex on Tuba; Ian Chaplin, Sandy Evans, Tony Gorman, Mark Simmonds and Elliot Dalglish on saxophones; Grabowsky on piano; Stewart Campbell on keyboards; John Rodgers on violin; Doug de Vries on guitar; Gary Costello on bass; Niko Schauble on drums; and Daryl Pratt on percussion. The talent involved speaks for itself. I find it surprising that any reasonable commentator, possessing any imagination, could fail to see the creative potential and importance of such an ensemble. I wonder whether some of the flak directed at the AAO is prompted by personal or geographical jealousy, or simply by blinkered conservatism.

Grabowsky nods, "What you come up against in the Australian jazz community, when you try to mount a major initiative like this, is entrenched conservatism - people who can't accept that music is changing beyond what their listening experiences have led them to accept. We enjoy our myths about egalitarianism, but when it comes to 'otherness' in music, there's a tremendous reluctance to embrace new music as being part of the same genre."

This leads us to the issue of the Australia Council's emphasis on innovation as a virtue, which some advocates for more traditional forms believe has barred them from the arts funding process. "We don't actually get many applications from traditional bands or organisations. But I can say, if any such application is rejected, it won't be because it involves traditional jazz. That would be absurd," says Grabowsky.



Stephen Grant (right), pictured here in 1993 with Ade Monsbourgh...

"I think it's great that people like Stephen Grant are coming along, who are able to say something new in the traditional style. But in essence, it's had its day, the same as bebop has, or 18th century European orchestral music has.

"I'm more interested in music that's being created by people who are articulating the contemporary Australian experience. No-one has told them they have to go out and create music like The Necks are doing, or Clarion Fracture Zone, or That. They're just going out and doing it, in response to an artistic impulse. I make no apology for saying that innovative work is in need of support. Innovative work is carrying the music forward, and it is what is creating interest in Australian jazz from overseas. I think it's important to see jazz music as one large organism, and it's important to put any particular part into context. But I fear that a large part of the Australian jazz family is unable to do that."

It is worth noting that the AAO will not perform new music exclusively, although that will always be its priority. At Wangaratta, they performed Charles Mingus' rarely-heard *Praying With Eric*, as arranged by Melbourne pianist Sam Keevers.



Melbourne pianist Sam Keevers: he arranged Charles Mingus' rarely-heard Praying With Eric...

Grabowsky explains, "There is so much fantastic music out there that Ellington wrote, or Gil Evans, or Cecil Taylor: great music that nobody plays any more. The possibilities are endless. I certainly think that the Art Orchestra should explore the jazz repertoire, as long as it isn't done in a simply re-creative way. The sky's the limit."

As for the suggestion that anyone might be ill-disposed towards the AAO because it is based in Melbourne, Grabowsky shakes his head: "Among other things, the Art Orchestra was designed to help bridge that unnecessary and intolerable divide between Melbourne and Sydney."

He adds that he has often worked in bands involving Sydney musicians, such as the Wizards Of Oz, the Bernie McGann-Paul Grabowsky Quartet, Modern Marriage, and various editions of his Sextet: "Whenever I do something like that, it's always been very fruitful. It makes me feel like I'm part of an Australian jazz scene. I think this is a perfect example of how well musicians from Sydney and Melbourne, and elsewhere, can interact, where that competitive vibe is totally absent."

He compares this with the Australian Jazz Orchestra, a group formed for the Bicentennial program in 1988, of which he was a member: "That was a bureaucratic - Sydney-based, if you like - attempt to create a national jazz orchestra. It was never going to last, because it lacked a long-term vision. There was not a lot of thought put into deciding who should be in it, or why."

Leaving aside the Orchestra, and issues of funding politics, Grabowsky still has plenty of music to talk about. For starters, he enthuses about the Trio, with bassist Gary Costello and drummer Allan Browne, which he formed upon returning to Australia in 1984.



The Paul Grabowsky Trio, L-R, bassist Gary Costello, drummer Allan Browne, pianist Grabowsky...

"I think we've reached a new level of communication lately. We've played some fantastic gigs, and I've had people like Mike Nock and Mark Isaacs tell me they love it, because it's a real band. We're about to record for the ABC; I've got high hopes for that."

The pianist is also planning to make a solo album (for Origin Records). He has long resisted this format, but explains, "That solo field has always been dominated by Keith Jarrett, Cecil Taylor... maybe Chick Corea, too. You listen to them and think, 'Where else is there to go?'"

“Well, now I've come to accept that my piano music has evolved into a style that is unmistakably me; the sound that I make is my sound. I've accepted that's the case, and I'm happy to explore the format, without worrying about whether I'm influenced by Keith Jarrett, or forced into some other direction, simply to avoid being influenced by him.”

He has also agreed to play a concert with the Australian Chamber Orchestra in May, as the soloist on a program of Bach and Gershwin: "It's been twenty years... I'm reconciled to that music now; I don't feel I have to conform to other people's concepts of how I have to play it. I can't just improvise my way through it, but I can approach it as an improvising musician, and try to breathe new life into it.”



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