

THE AUSTRALIAN

Premiere performance of Matt Keegan's "Vienna Dreaming"



Matt Keegan on alto clarinet and violinist Veronique Serret in action at Mary's Underground on Sunday night. In the background is bassist Brendan Clarke Jr...PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

MUSIC

Matt Keegan

Yulugi

Mary's Underground, Sydney, February 28

ERIC MYERS

In a powerful performance on Sunday night, the gifted saxophonist Matt Keegan premiered his suite *Vienna Dreaming*, inspired by his great grandfather the Austrian pianist & composer Heini Portnoj.

This was the latest example of so-called “programme music” produced by leading Sydney jazz musicians. This genre, best described as instrumental art music inspired by a non-musical narrative, has existed for centuries but, in recent years, there has been a rash of them in Sydney.

They include Lloyd Swanton’s *Ambon*, inspired by his uncle Stuart’s experiences as a Japanese POW; Jeremy Rose’s *Iron In The Blood*, inspired by Robert Hughes’s classic book *The Fatal Shore*; Chris Cody’s *Astrolabe*, inspired by the 18th century French navigator/explorer La Pérouse, who sailed into Botany Bay in 1788; and more recently Paul Cutlan’s anti-war suite *The Eleventh Hour*.



A shot of Lloyd Swanton’s “Ambon” suite being performed at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival in 2015: another example of “programme music”...

Such music is primarily designed to put the listener in the frame of mind to appreciate the narrative that has inspired the composer. In Keegan’s case it is the experience of Portnoj, an Austrian Jew who, with his wife Annie and daughter Elizabeth, Keegan’s maternal grandmother, escaped from Vienna after Nazi Germany annexed Austria in 1938. Thankfully, they ended up in the sanctuary of Australia.

Keegan’s suite is a major achievement, and the album *Vienna Dreaming* has been justly celebrated. Listening to it was an exquisite experience, and I came to Mary’s Underground with certain expectations.

For this performance Keegan retained himself and drummer Miles Thomas but otherwise arranged the music for new players: Ben Hauptmann (guitar), Veronique Serret (violin), Freyja Garbet (keyboards) and Brendan Clarke Jr (bass), all splendid musicians who played beautifully.

The presentation was not a disappointment, but I point out the following: First, an essential aspect of the music, so appealing on the album, was Keegan's ability to take the listener, not so much to Vienna, but to the mind of Portnoy, thinking of Vienna. Given the strident volume level in *Mary's Underground*, this ethereal quality, described by a perceptive critic as "dreamily swimming in a pool of wit, beauty and wistfulness" was to some extent missing.

Second, all instruments were heavily amplified, creating an electronic wall of undifferentiated sound. This may not have been a problem elsewhere in the venue but, where I was sitting, I felt this approach sacrificed many nuances in the music.

Third, although Keegan outlined briefly the story of his great grandfather before the music commenced, no other reference was made to the narrative. The composer chose to allow the music to speak for itself.



Matt Keegan (right) on baritone sax with Miles Thomas (drums) and Brendan Clarke Jr (bass) ... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

This is not to say that *Vienna Dreaming* did not work well standing alone, in the same way as film music can work without the film. And there were brilliant

improvisations, a joy to hear. The playing of Keegan himself on baritone sax and on the highly unusual alto clarinet was a tour de force, and the spirited violinist Serret was a contagious crowd-pleaser.



Yulugi, featuring Keyna Wilkins (left) & Gumaroy Newman (right): a bracing introduction to Aboriginal culture... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

In a bracing introduction to Aboriginal culture, the curtain-raiser was provided by the trio Yulugi, featuring Gumaroy Newman (didjeridu, vocals), Keyna Wilkins (flute, vocals, piano) and Lisa Lawrence (vocals, dance). Warmly received, their repertoire included pungent poems that Newman wrote some years ago as a 19-year-old. Sounding completely contemporary, they were moving testimony to the fact that indigenous Australians, at long last, have a real voice.
