

THE AUSTRALIAN

A unique jazz concert featuring the string quartet



In concert at the Lennox Theatre L-R, Liisa Pallandi, Caroline Hopson, James Eccles, Oliver Miller, Paul Cutlan, Brett Hirst ...PHOTO CREDIT RODRIC WHITE

MUSIC

Paul Cutlan String Project

Lennox Theatre, Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, NSW, February 7

The Australian, February 10, 2021

ERIC MYERS

In Parramatta on Sunday, a substantial audience was able to enjoy a unique musical experience, courtesy of Sydney woodwind virtuoso Paul Cutlan. I say unique for three reasons. Firstly, Cutlan's music was built around the classic string quartet, rarely heard in jazz. Secondly, while including the well-known soprano saxophone, Cutlan primarily used the bass clarinet, an instrument so difficult to play that it's usually avoided by jazz musicians, and therefore also rarely heard.

Thirdly, there was no drum-kit, which might have handicapped the music. Ironically, this worked in Cutlan's favour. As on his new album *Living*, his solo lines, Brett Hirst's bass figures, and the exquisite sounds of the string quartet, could all be heard with pristine clarity, without drum-kit commentary.

The result was music with all the refinement and purity of classical chamber music. The string quartet included Liisa Pallandi and Caroline Hopson (violins), James Eccles (viola) and Oliver Miller (cello).

The audience was invited to share the epiphanies of two composers other than Cutlan. Jenna Cave's composition & arrangement *Sleep in my Arms* was about rocking her newborn baby to sleep and the bliss she felt as her child drifted into slumber. Gary Daley's *Middle of the Moment* recalled an experience in Italy when he was able to silence the ceaseless chatter in his brain and lose himself in a kind of reverie.



Gary Daley at the piano in another setting: his sparkling incursions were indispensable to the success of the Cutlan concert...

Daley himself joined the ensemble as guest pianist for Cutlan's arrangements of the latter piece and also *Thanks for the Espresso*, a gorgeous work by the blind pianist Jann Rutherford who died in 2003.

Daley's pianism was indispensable to the success of the concert. It was a reminder that this was jazz after all, which might have slipped from view, given the formality of the string quartet. Without Daley's sparkling incursions, the

music might have seemed one-dimensional. His presence was also welcome in Cutlan's beautiful version of John Coltrane's *After the Rain*, which concluded the concert.

Over and above Cutlan's skill as an orchestrator, this performance was a triumph for him as an instrumentalist. He gave a faultless exhibition of how to play the unwieldy bass clarinet, exhausting the expressive possibilities of this extraordinary instrument, and taking it to its outer limits.

In its high registers, its sound is not unlike that of a normal clarinet. In its bass registers, however, it is capable of boisterous, jarring sounds and sinister figures. These were completely appropriate to the urgent images and wide range of emotions that Cutlan was concerned to evoke in his pungent anti-war suite *The Eleventh Hour*, a 25-minute work in five movements.



Cutlan: exhausting the expressive possibilities of the extraordinary bass clarinet... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

Its last movement *Desolation* was a moving example of heartfelt writing and playing, in which Hirst came to the fore with powerful bass improvisations. The suite ended on a reassuring note of calm and cautious optimism.

In the afterglow, I was reminded of what American Dave Brubeck once said: to know what's really going on in the world, listen to your jazz musicians.