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Phil Slater: a constraints-led approach to making music



Phil Slater in the landscape... PHOTO CREDIT TRAIANOS PAKIOUFAKIS

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Trumpeter Phil Slater's latest album *The Dark Pattern* springs from a self-imposed discipline of improvising on his instrument while on walks around Mt Keira, a dominant feature of the Illawarra escarpment south of Sydney. But although he uses a nature-inspired metaphor to describe the structure of his compositions, the album is not an attempt to paint a landscape in sound. Instead, he says, he wants to develop an understanding of place "through a musical experience and engagement with it".

“It’s not like a train on a track,” he says. “It’s like a stream making its way down a hill. It’s about momentum — fast bits, slow bits, ponds and pools, whirlpools.”

A radical departure in jazz terms, *The Dark Pattern* has been widely praised but has also confounded some listeners. The double album features Slater accompanied by long-term colleagues Matt McMahon (piano), Brett Hirst (bass), Simon Barker (drums) and saxophonist Matt Keegan.

Joseph Cummins, writing in the Music Trust’s e-zine, was enthusiastic: “*The Dark Pattern* is by far the most consistently sublime and intensely beautiful music I’ve ever heard. (It) is easily the album of the year.” The album has been nominated for an ARIA and also for the \$30,000 Australian Music Prize.



The Dark Pattern: nominated for an ARIA and for the \$30,000 Australian Music Prize...

Part of the challenge Slater set himself on *The Dark Pattern* was to replace conventional referents of jazz - such as harmony, meter and style - with what he calls “constraints”. Certainly, some of the improvisations on these fragmentary compositions sound inhibited. Other than some ravishing displays of virtuosity from Slater himself, gone are the passionate solo statements that have been a staple in jazz for decades. As Cummins notes: “Every sound, every ride cymbal, long tone, piano chord, bass note, made by this quintet seems to emerge from careful contemplation.”

To illustrate this constraints-led approach, Slater uses an analogy with sport. Just as soccer players have to read the game, jazz musicians have to pay attention to what’s going on around them. “When you watch a great soccer player, they’re able to make all these decisions that are perfect for the situation, given the distance to the opponents, the speed of the ball, how far away they are from the goal. I find that really interesting as a model for making music.”

One of the world’s great trumpet players, Slater came to wider notice in 1997 when he took part in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Competition in Washington. Slater didn’t make the final three from which the winner was chosen, but he later heard from legendary US trumpeter Freddie Hubbard who was on the selection panel.



US trumpeter Freddie Hubbard: he enjoyed Slater’s playing because, out of hundreds who applied, Slater didn’t really sound like him...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

“Freddie said the reason he enjoyed my playing was that out of hundreds who applied, I didn’t really sound like him,” says Slater. “In Australia we often make the mistake of thinking the Americans want us to sound like them. The really hip ones want us to sound like ourselves.”

Indeed, Slater has become a celebrated figure in Australian jazz while seeking an original approach to his instrument. He has won several Bell awards, the Wangaratta Festival’s National Jazz Award, the Freedman Fellowship and other honours.

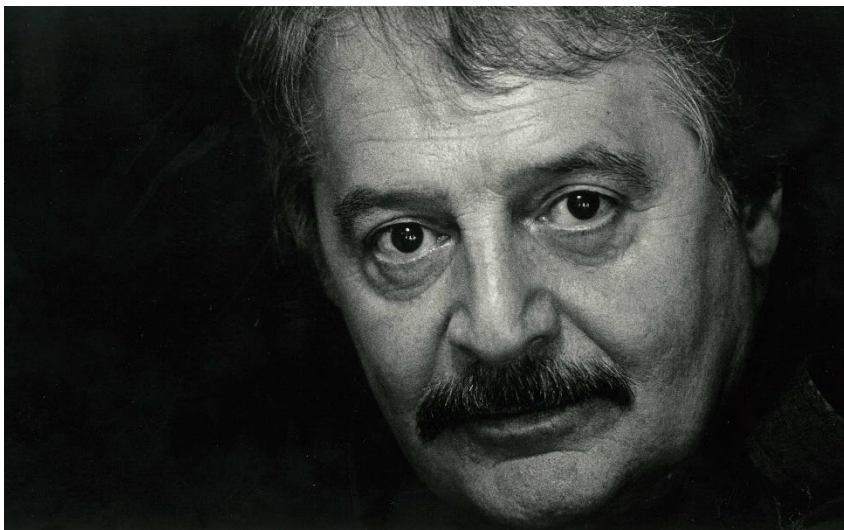
“The trumpet’s an old instrument, with a rich history, and I feel I am part of that tradition,” he says. “My playing doesn’t sound like Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, or James Morrison. But jazz is about paying attention to the constraints on your performance, and using that to find a solution to those constraints, which could be socio-economic, or physical.



Slater: if you just concentrate on the constraints, the music can emerge in a self-organised way...

“Thinking about jazz in terms of constraints is really an interesting sort of unifying principle. The music that results can create moods and have energies, and it can sound in lots of different ways. What’s interesting is that if you just concentrate on the constraints, the music can emerge in a self-organised way out of the constraints, if that makes sense.”

Slater says the role of the landscape in his music has been misunderstood. He is not representing the sounds of the environment in the tradition of Australian composers such as Peter Sculthorpe and Ross Edwards, but instead describes his approach as “non-representational”.



Slater is not representing the sounds of the environment in the tradition of Australian composers such as Peter Sculthorpe (above) and Ross Edwards (below)... SCULTHORPE PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR



He had a long relationship with Sculthorpe, with whom he studied composition at the University of Sydney in the early 90s. At the time, Slater was influenced by minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass, so it's not surprising that he was attracted to the contemplative music of the successful Australian trio The Necks, who have blended minimalism with free improvisation for 30 years.



The Necks, L-R, Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck: they are a huge influence on Slater...

“I admire the members of The Necks as individual artists,” Slater says, “in the way they play their instruments, their physical approach to music, but also as an ensemble, as a way of making music. The Necks are obviously a huge influence on me.”

While Slater is a formidable theoretician - he is a lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and has almost completed his PhD - he warns against bogging down in musicology. In the long run, he is a performer.

“I don't think people need to be interested in the theory behind the music. I want people to have their own reactions and experiences with what they hear. I try to avoid talking about it in these terms — that's what my PhD thesis is about. The music is just music.”

The Dark Pattern is released by Earshift Music.