

THE AUSTRALIAN

A work for solo improvised trumpet and electronic soundscape



Melburnian Reuben Lewis (above) opened the Earshift Music Festival... PHOTO CREDIT DUNCOGRAPHIC

MUSIC

Reuben Lewis
Earshift Music Festival
October 1

ERIC MYERS

The 2021 Earshift Music Festival began on Friday night with a fascinating solo performance by Melburnian Reuben Lewis (trumpet, pedals, laptop, synthesiser). It opened ten consecutive nights of online performances, with an array of innovative improvisers still to come, ranging from the orthodox to those experimenting with sound.

Lewis played trumpet with one hand while twiddling knobs on a pedal board with the other. In the background ghostly images of himself appeared, playing either a laptop or a keyboard, against a lush electronic soundscape. What is happening here? Lewis is active in what appears to be a new genre in Australian jazz, utilising studio engineering techniques which may be common internationally, but are little-known here, outside of perhaps the studio albums of The Necks.



Reuben Lewis in performance on trumpet: ghostly images appeared in the background of Lewis playing either a laptop or a keyboard...

The pedal board subjects the trumpet to what Lewis describes as "a chain of effects pedals". Jazz trumpeters have used these before, including Miles Davis who in some contexts used a wah pedal. Lewis has taken this mode of expression to a new level of sophistication, giving him the flexibility he needs to produce an array of sounds as an improvising musician.

The laptop controls pre-recorded samples, here featuring sounds previously recorded by Lewis of bassist Adam Halliwell and drummer Ronny Ferella. Those sounds are processed through effects which Lewis manipulates through what is known as a MIDI controller.

The third instrument in Lewis's armoury is the Prophet 6 synthesiser which he operates as a conventional keyboard in performance, but which also has guitar pedal effects running through it.

So much for the hardware. What of the music?

The performance was short, only about 16 minutes. Still, with many nuanced sounds swimming around in a complex mix, much of it pre-recorded, there was much to listen to, and contemplate. Considered as a work for improvised trumpet and electronic soundscape, it was highly impressive and fun to hear.

Wedded to the primacy of the individual jazz soloist, I naturally felt that the trumpet – on which Lewis achieved a very beautiful sound – dominated the music, although I daresay that Lewis would consider the other three devices (or instruments) equally important.



Essentially Lewis (left) is gathering together snippets of music... and melding them according to his own individual vision... PHOTO CREDIT DUNCOGRAPHIC

Essentially Lewis is gathering together snippets of music, some of them pre-recorded, and melding them according to his own individual vision. My one reservation is that other musicians are uninvolved, so that the process excludes the spontaneous interaction between musicians which has long been the lifeblood of jazz performance.

When jazz musicians with differing personalities and agendas play together, they listen to and work off each other, creating art by contributing to the collective whole. Lewis is working alone, primarily in the role of sound engineer. Does the concentration of power in one musician's hands therefore marginalise the democratic spirit which has long been the most distinctive quality of the jazz ensemble? I think it's a reasonable question.

The remaining performances in this festival are: Oct 4 Meatshell (Melbourne), Oct 5 Cameron Undy (Sydney), Oct 6 Chloe Kim (Sydney), Oct 7 Kristin Berardi (Lucerne, Switzerland), Oct 8 Scott Tinkler (Bruny Island, Tas), Oct 9 Jeremy Rose x Zoe Hauptmann + Face to Face Video Series Launch (Sydney), Oct 10 The Rest Is Silence (Melbourne).