

THE AUSTRALIAN



Jazz musician Chris Cody... PHOTO CREDIT JOHN APPELYARD

CHRIS CODY, 54, is an Australian jazz pianist/composer who has written ‘Astrolabe’, a suite inspired by the 18th century French navigator and explorer Jean-Francois de La Pérouse, who sailed into Botany Bay a few days after the arrival of Captain Arthur Phillip’s First Fleet

INTERVIEW BY Eric Myers

You live near Sydney’s Maroubra Beach, but you’ve spent many years living in Paris, and now divide your time between performing in France and Australia. Are you a Francophile?

Absolument! I read Camus and Sartre at school and discovered French cinema. Films by Truffaut and Godard stirred up my fantasies about the place and its people. I imagined playing piano on the Left Bank from about 15. I moved to Paris for 22 years, played with many French and American musicians, touring Algeria, Africa, and most European countries. I met my wife and my children were born there.

The La Pérouse story is a fascinating one. Can you summarise it?

La Pérouse was commissioned by Louis XV¹ to circumnavigate the world, improve existing charts, meet with indigenous peoples and expand scientific and cultural knowledge of the world. He led two frigates and 225 men including scientists, naturalists, and three illustrators. The young Napoleon Bonaparte applied to be on the expedition but was rejected. When La Pérouse arrived at Botany Bay three days after the First Fleet he had been at sea for two and a half years, exploring the Pacific. He stayed at Frenchmans Cove for six weeks, carrying out repairs before sailing north to the Solomon Islands where both ships were shipwrecked. The first crew was massacred by the islanders, the second survived a year waiting to be rescued. The Pandora, searching for the Bounty mutineers, ignored their smoke signals. They built a boat and sailed off but were never seen again. King Louis XV¹ famously asked before he was led to the guillotine, “is there any news of Monsieur La Pérouse”?



Jean-Francois de La Pérouse: commissioned by Louis XV¹ to circumnavigate the world, improve existing charts, meet with indigenous peoples and expand scientific and cultural knowledge of the world...

What attracted you to writing this suite?

Having just moved back from France, and living near La Pérouse, the themes of old world versus new, the meeting of different peoples and cultures, of migration, identity, and our own eventual disappearance resonated strongly with me. What if Australia had been settled by the French? The French had staked a claim to the western half of Australia that they charted, but the French Revolution, wars and financial difficulties put it all on hold. By the time they were ready to try again, Perth had been founded. Approaching James Cook's 250th anniversary let's also remember

the Dutch and French explorers, and the indigenous perspective. La Pérouse in his journal points out the absurd notion of claiming a land already inhabited, on behalf of a faraway kingdom.

How would you describe the suite in musical terms?

There are nine pieces drawing upon jazz, classical, and world music. I wanted to capture some of the colours La Pérouse would have encountered, while showing the meeting of cultures, so we start with some medieval old world impro, move through upbeat jazz to an austere brass chorale, a still becalmed ballad, a Japanese temple piece, to canons, chaos, mourning and finally a waltz for hope. I use 12 instruments including violin, accordion, piano, double bass, percussion, horns, woodwind and didgeridoo to evoke different cultures and moods. Each musician also improvises and the suite takes the listener through a full range of emotions.



Chris Cody: nine pieces drawing upon jazz, classical, and world music...PHOTO CREDIT PAUL FAURE-BRAC

How do you go about creating a theatrical experience with the music?

Having read the fascinating ship journal I thought it would be good to give a voice to La Pérouse. Actor Simon Wilton reads revealing extracts from his journal. Photographer Paul Faure-Brac has created beautiful photos and video loops of sea and skylines and some artists' drawings.

Astrolabe: Suite for La Pérouse will be performed at Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, on Sunday August 11.