
Chroma ~~ACMA~~

Newsletter of the Australasian Computer Music Association, Inc.
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**ACMC 98 BRISBANE ROUNDUP
&
THE CAREFUL ART OF CACTUS PERFORMANCE**



EDITORIAL

Welcome (finally) to Issue 29 of **Chroma** – the first issue in years to be produced without Warren Burt at the helm. It's taken a bit longer than I anticipated to get this issue out, and it's finally here just in time for a bit of holiday reading. I've never given it much thought, but now I realise how much work that Warren Burt has put into Chroma (and the Australian computer music scene) over the years. I hope that Chroma will continue to be an intelligent, informative, and **regular** resource for the Australasian computer music community.

This edition contains a thorough review of interFACES (this year's ACMC, hosted by the Queensland University of Technology in sunny Brisbane) by Greg Schiemer, and a reflection by Greg Jenkins on the dangerous politics of cactus performance.

It's also worth mentioning the new ACMA committee elected in July at the ACMC:

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Email addresses for the above committee members can be found on the ACMA web site at:

<http://acma.asn.au>

I'm definitely looking forward to a busy, creative, and productive New Year. If this year's ACMC was any indication, computer music creators and educators will continue to make and teach with energy and passion, despite the hurdles of Government and University policy that may seem to make our tasks so difficult.

Have a great Geek New Millennium.

Dan Horwood.

InterFACES: ACMC2000

Greg Schiemer

The ACMA conference has been an annual regional event in the calendar of the Australasian Computer Music Association since 1993. InterFACES ACMA2000 was the second such conference hosted by the School of Music, at the Academy of the Arts in the Queensland University of Technology (the first was in 1996). It was a revelation to see the energy and enthusiasm driving this conference. Elsewhere in academia, in Australia at least, much of the energy is dissipated in the day-to-day struggle for recognition and

survival amidst the competition for funding. InterFACES ACMA2000 was accomplished through cooperation between the various levels of academia fueled by the energies of the local underground independent electronic music scene, one that is very much alive in Brisbane. The team, lead principally by Andrew Brown, with the support of the Head of Music, Andy Arthurs, and Peter Lavery, head of the Academy, and a lot more in the QUT hierarchy, amplified much of what is happening outside of academia, thereby setting a blueprint for how ACMA conferences should be run in future.

This year's conference provided a forum for work from both inside and outside academia. This year too there was a slightly smaller contingent of participants from New Zealand, which I believe was caused by people receiving notices of acceptance of papers and pieces too late to make bookings. It's a long way to swim. Nevertheless John Rimmer and Ian Whalley made it to Brisbane ensuring that ACMA remains a regional and not just a national conference.

In an age where the mantra of globalisation accompanies the decline of everything local – ie. industries and the communities that depend on them -- it was refreshing to witness a focus that acknowledges the importance of having a strong regional forum for new developments in computer music rather than trying to create a South Pacific alternative to the International Computer Music Conference. The emphasis this year was regional rather than international.

A noticeable difference between this ACMA Conference and the previous one was the role of international visitors. In Wellington in 1999, the keynote address was given by the composer Jonty Harrison and though he raised several issues, no public discussion followed his address even though there were plenty present who wanted the opportunity to challenge some of the statements he made. In Brisbane, the keynote address for the conference was not given by a composer, but by Zane Trow, Director of the Brisbane Powerhouse Museum. Up till now, keynote speakers at ACMA have all been composers. But for me the significant difference was that David Shea, the international visitor at this year's conference came onto the scene almost unannounced, established his credentials in an impressively virtuosic performance, then on an invitation from the organisers, gave an impromptu presentation about the role of contemporary composers in new genres such as film. Shea, in contrast to the keynote speaker from the year before, took part in discussion from the floor of the conference in the

closing paper session.

Now, in advocating that ACMA's role is to provide a regional forum for computer music, I do not expect that it should promote the work of Australians and New Zealanders to the exclusion of work from elsewhere. But I would expect that locals who pay to go to an ACMA conference are given a chance to interact with international participants in the way that happened in Brisbane. ACMA2000 managed to strike a balance between the regional and the global. Without a primary commitment to computer music in the region, we, the Australasian Computer Music Association, simply make ourselves a poor alternative to the ICMA. We risk becoming an organisation for a bunch of individuals feathering their academic nest -- I speak here as an ageing academic -- rather than working together to set the agenda for computer music in our own changing cultural environment. This amplifies Ian Whalley's sentiment about "contexts of reception outside the academy" in his paper entitled "Tales, tellers, and taking part: The computer music/audience dialectic". A similar point of view was advocated by Zane Trow in his keynote address and by Andy Arthurs in another presentation. But it was Andrew Brown's paper "Modes of Compositional Engagement" that best defined new compositional models that represent the diversity of electronic music compositional activity both inside and outside academia. The same diversity was present in both the paper sessions and the concerts.

The conference also had its fair share of composers who have all done time in academia over the past three decades. People like these made a special contribution at this conference, and have done so at their own expense. They've left academia behind but not their commitment to the ongoing development of the new electronic musical culture. For the sake of new-comers to the field of computer music, it might be worth pointing out the extent to which these are part of a particular electronic music tradition that has developed over the past three or four decades, much of it the legacy of composers like Keith Humble, Don Banks, Tristram Cary and Douglas Lilburn.

Warren Burt, a long-time composer and new music provocateur ever since the early seventies of the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre and the now defunct Latrobe University Music Department, as ever, put some music software packages -- in this case Softstep -- to the test in his latest algorithmic composition, *Brisbane Nocturne*, which was premiered in the fourth concert.

John Rimmer, now retired as Professor of Music at the University of Auckland, has also been a long

time catalyst in the development of computer music in New Zealand. On this occasion he presented a piece, *People, Power and Pollution*, and made an active contribution in discussions. His piece deals with the social legacy being left to future generations, sentiments that had a resonance with many at the conference.

Another contributor was Richard Vella, composer and music editor of Currency Press, and a founder of the music course in the School of Mathematics Physics Computing and Electronics at Macquarie University, and also the last professor of music at Latrobe University in the early 90's. His presentation on this occasion was a new book on composition that is designed for the current education environment.

David Worrall on this occasion articulated his vision of composition no longer constrained by his role as director of ACAT, the centre he single-handedly established at the ANU in the late 80's. There is life after ACAT even if the position that was redefined to force his departure has not been filled. At ACMA2000, David Worrall exhibited an installation called *The Twins*. Such a work has a life beyond this installation and I look forward to a future appearance in a more mobile form and powered by low voltage electronics. Ideally this appearance should take place in one of the new arts technology complexes, preferably during an opening ceremony. On such an occasion they could be surreptitiously smuggled in, filled with helium, and released. There they would remain hovering near the ceiling over the heads of all present, all the while attempting to establish dialog with the officiating dignitary during his official opening speech. Security would be left with no choice but shoot them down -- publicly enacting what the streamlined tertiary system has done to three decades of computer music in Australia.

Electro-acoustic composition in schools both secondary and tertiary was also the focus of two papers: one by Roger Alsop, from the Victorian College of the Arts, the other by Steve Dillon, from Griffith University. The role of technology in tertiary training programs was widened in Andy Arthurs' presentation on an exciting instrument-building initiative involving collaboration between the Brisbane Powerhouse and the Academy of the Arts at QUT. Again the difference between the visions of the three was largely their response to the cultural framework of their respective institutions. The initiatives at QUT have none of the impediments associated with tradition ie. scholarly music research that has played an active role in the complete obliteration of electronic music from all tertiary music institutions in

Melbourne. Dillon's paper focused on philosophical issues underlying creativity that uses technology as a tool in secondary curricula. We had similar papers from New Zealand at the Auckland conference in 1997. The conference needed more papers from people in such positions. Such papers are important because they highlight some of the problems brought about by streamlining of tertiary music within Australia, which has happened without any recognition of what preceded current e-commerce-driven interactive learning environments.

At the same time the conference had its share of academic papers characterised by involvement with disciplines outside music. An interdisciplinary team consisting of Michael Towsey, Andrew Brown, Susan Wright and Joachim Diederich presented a paper on genetic algorithms for the algorithmic generation of melody. Simon Dixon, an expatriate working at the Austrian Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence presented a paper on the development of AI used for performance transcription. Alan Dorin, from Monash University's School of Computer Science and Software Engineering presented a paper on a rhythmic generator based on cellular automata, much of this an outgrowth of his creative work in the field of computer graphics. Gordon Monro from Sydney University's Mathematics Department presented a creative work also based on cellular automata. The work, entitled *Peer Pressure* was played in one of the concerts, and the origin of the algorithm was discussed in a paper sessions. Andrew Sorenson presented his new java-based composition environment called jMusic, which was also the subject of a workshop presented by the three Andys: Sorenson, Brown and Troedson -- ACMA's answer to the three tenors, is really the five Andy's if you also include Andy Kettle and Ande Foster -- in conjunction with Alistair Riddell, another refugee from Latrobe and a composer well known for the development of computer-automated player piano in the late 70's. Unfortunately I was unable to attend two additional papers on jMusic by Alistair Riddell and Andrew Troedson. Alistair Riddell and Andrew Brown also collaborated in the creation of *Colloquy*, which I believe is the first work using jMusic for processing audio.

Cross-disciplinary involvement characterised much of the work that will shortly be presented as part of post-graduate research. The presenters included composers like Densil Cabrera whose acoustics projects, based at Sydney University Architectural and Design Science, involve environmental infrasound, and Peter McIlwain from the university of Adelaide, who has developed a spatial

composition environment based on neural networks. Ian Kaminskyj, from Monash University's Electrical and Computer System's Engineering, reported on the development of a sound classifier algorithm for identifying musical timbre. Kenny Sabir, the University of Technology Sydney electrical engineering graduate presented a paper on DASE, his design of a new network for distributive audio sequencer.

This year was the first in which the ACMA conference proceedings and not just abstracts were refereed. In Australia, this has become necessary as a means of keeping computer music activity competitive with other disciplines in academia as the Universities struggle to disburse dwindling funds equitably. I don't know how relevant this is in New Zealand academia but it seems to have little relevance to the wider computer music community that was represented at ACMA2000. Those of us who no longer have the privilege of a post in a university have little to gain from this. I am not advocating that we revert to the simpler refereeing process that existed prior to 2000. Indeed, as one of the beneficiaries of this innovation, I am simply saying that our efforts must be directed towards a broader musical agenda than the survival of computer music, and even music departments, within the University system. Even collaboration with specialists from other disciplines within academia, though fine in itself and compliant with current government priorities, offers no guarantees for the future of computer music. Like mad cow's disease, there seems to be no end in sight to the bad public policy that has eroded public education and research infrastructure over the last decade. Local initiatives in computer music can only prosper if ACMA is less dependent on academia and more engaged with local communities.

This lead was visibly shown by the organisers of InterFACES ACMA2000 particularly in its music program. The organisation of the music involved people working in local radio stations and music cafes. Drawing on the feral energies of people like Greg Jenkins, Richard Wilding, Andy Kettle, Ande Foster, Bruce Schneider -- and apologies to a whole lot of others I know were involved but whose names I cannot remember -- no problem was too difficult to solve. However, I wouldn't be surprised if Greg Jenkins still has thorns in his hands after his performance on amplified cactus. I think of the time and energy this group must have spent to organise the program, the equipment, the staging for eight concerts -- one of which involved a live radio hook-up with a local area network computer network, and a diffusion system that covered two parts of the concert venue as well as

the Pot Music Bar night club. The programming was an intelligent mix of pieces that avoided problems with such concerts which tend to have an oversupply of electroacoustic pieces. The concert programming interspersed a range of memorable and not so memorable electro-acoustic pieces with live performance, experimentation with concert presentation format, eg. diffusion done by volunteers from the audience, live hookup between concert and radio, alternating between the concert hall venue and the Pot Music Bar. This programming helped to avoid the aural fatigue I usually experience before the end of every computer music conference, irrespective of the quality of the pieces presented.

The first concert on Wednesday 5th July was the welcoming concert of the conference concert series. It featured *Sju* by John Young, *Night Ascends from the Ear like a Butterfly* by Hideko Kawamoto, *Transposed Hexanies* by Greg Schiemer, *Glitch* by Jo Thomas, *NOIXE* by James Hegarty and *Like the Lily* for viola, double bass and tape by Frances White with Robert Davidson playing double bass and Bernard Hoey on viola. The programming strategy probably relied on the expectation of a live performance in the middle to provide contrast with electroacoustic pieces. However an elusive hardware design by yours truly meant that yet another CD was added to the play list.

Concert 2 had a unifying theme of flowing water and flowing breath. I particularly welcomed the opportunity to hear some of the earliest PDP-11 pieces done by David Hirst including *Storm Studies 1* and *2* by David Hirst. The program also featured *Ebb* by Frank Ekeberg, *Asian Breath 2* by Ando Yoshiko, *Voicewind* by Robert Mackay, *Gutura* by Pablo Garcia, *Deep Sea* by Michele Biasutti, *Tidal Cycle* by Densil Cabrera. Perhaps the most original musical offering of the entire concert series was Cabrera's piece, which is based on infrasound data derived from tidal reports. Cabrera gave a presentation in one of the paper sessions describing the process involved in this piece.

Concert 3 was held at the Pot Music Bar in 80 Petrie Terrace. And what a memorable musical event this was! In a relaxed nightclub atmosphere we heard *Soundhive* by Ande Foster, *KETTLE - Microtracks* by Andy Kettle of 4ZZZ, and *endoPHONIC* by Greg Jenkins and Richard Wilding. These guys are amazing, working in forensic audio or repairing hearing aids by day, by night the driving force behind fringe radio programs on 4ZZZ radio and regular gigs at clubs like the Pot Music Bar. And it was nice to know

other people still like cannibalising consumer goods (Andy Kettle's CD with pickups on the transport mechanism) and building new hardware (Jenkin's Basic Stamp card in a lunch box). And those wonderful ear-splitting 2" CD miniatures of Andy Kettle! Avenging the Joh era was never so much fun.

Next day (Thursday 6/07/00) it was back at the Academy for Concert 4. The concert had an urban theme, probably inspired by Brown's *Powerhouse Suite*, a live performance piece involving four players. For me the sounds that had the most enduring associations with urban life were the surreal sound transformations in Stelios Giannoulakis' *The Maze* and the metallic urban sounds of Antonio Neto's *Paisagens Londrinenses II* although I missed the start of the program and therefore Peter McIlwain's *Bird Speaker Pieces*. The concert also featured *Fragments 1* by Bruce Schneider, *Paisagens Londrinenses II* by Antonio Augusto Caminhoto Neto and *Revolutions* by Ande Foster.

Concert 5 on Thursday 6/07/00 was the one where volunteers from the audience were asked to participate by controlling the sound diffusion. The concert featured *Brittle* by Norm Skipp, *People, Power and Pollution* by John Rimmer, *Mâts* by Elsa Justel, *Asklepion* by Paul Fretwell, *Liquid Sky* by John Young, *Colloquy* by Alistair Riddell and Andrew Brown, *Rio de los pájaros azules (The blue bird's river)* by Beatriz Ferreyra, *Degrees of Separation "Grandchild of Tree"* for amplified cactus, effects, and tape by Paul Rudy. *Colloquy* was the first work created using the audio features of jMusic. The diffusion was done in two adjoining theatre spaces with the audience free to relocate to the adjoining space at any time during the concert.

Concert 6 (Friday 7/07/00) was dominated by pieces involving mixed media and live performance. A remix entitled *the mother instinct* was performed by a local group called smear, a piece called *The Retreating Flower* by Melbourne-based clarinetist, composer and visual artist, Brigid Burke, followed by a computer animation entitled *Crossing Boundaries* by Eric Chasalow and a live performance entitled *Simulation* composed and performed by Dan Muller, Neil Baxter and Melinda Downey from Queensland.

This was followed in Concert 7 (Friday 7/07/00) with a live hookup between 4ZZZ Community Radio Station and the concert hall. This was a concert combining three modes of distribution live performance, radio broadcast and web interaction and the most experimental of the live events at ACMA2000. It featured Stephen Stanfield's *Outside Looking In* for pre recorded audio,

improvising instrument/s, and real-time effects processing, Jeff Faustman's *I, Consumer*, a concerto for car horn, television, and falling children, Kenny Sabir's Distributed Audio Sequencer, or *DASE*, a live-to-air and live-via-web performance and David Shea's live improvised electronic keyboard performance. Two of the participants on stage on this occasion have been active in community of radio in various places: Stanfield in Mackay 4CRM-FM Mackay, and Sabir who hosts Elephant Tracks on 2SER-FM in Sydney. Andy Kettle was the 4ZZZ radio host on this occasion. *DASE* seems to be both the name of the system, the name of the piece and the name of the group. The excitement for me on this occasion was compounded by hearing and watching *DASE* performers -- Kenny Sabir, Alex Swarbrick, Matt Flax, Kaho Cheung -- navigating round technical problems with laptops hooked up to a LAN while the show was live on air, covered in several of places by some quick thinking from Andy Kettle improvising in the studio. Flying by the seat of the pants, *DASE* was hardly an event to be upstaged. Nevertheless David Shea in the next act came pretty close with a truly virtuosic performance on a single synthesiser keyboard. No sequencers, no effects. This was someone who knew the instrument intimately and knew how far to push it. Those present were privileged to witness a performance like this.

Concert 8, the last in the auditorium came on Saturday (8/07/00). It included *De Selby's Mechanism* by Tim Bowman, *dust* by Benjamin Thigpen, and *Fly Baby Fly* a short film written and produced by David Megarrity, Anthony Mullins and Kier Shorey with a soundtrack by Greg Jenkins and Richard Wilding. David Hirst's *Mann Rave 4, Residue*, a 3D animation with computer music score by Dennis Miller, Gordon Monro's *Peer Pressure*, Warren Burt's *Brisbane Nocturne* and finally -- as if all that was more than enough -- *Relief* by Jens Hedman.

I was not able to get to the final concert on Saturday (8/07/00) at the Pot Music Bar. So I didn't get to hear Alan Nguyen's *South East Freeway* or Jon Drummond and John Encarnacao live electronic improvisation. By the time that concert got underway I was on the bus heading south.

For me, one of the enduring memories of the ACMA2000 concerts will be Kenny and co, with their laptops and mini-hub during the radio hook-up. I got the sense that the torch is already being passed to the next generation of networked computer musicians from outside the tertiary music system, who have grown up only ever knowing

and playing with digital audio and whose principal computer programming language is Java. This was not Java created for the dorks in e-commerce land. Here was the hard evidence of Java as a language capable of shifting the musical paradigm away from the control of a single composer and into the hands of a new collective musical intelligence. Though musically raw, here nevertheless was a glimpse of electronic music in the future based on a marriage of digital networking and wireless technology, a computer music no longer based on the traditional western model of composition but something which, in time, will represent cultural models as diverse as the cultural backgrounds of these performers.

The message must be understood by future ACMA organisers. The new energy that now exists in computer music exists largely outside academia. The energy for this event came from people with a strong commitment to electronic music as it happens in the clubs and in the community radio network. Many came to Brisbane from various parts of the east coast by the cheapest mode of transport just to participate. QUT has successfully tapped into this. The rest of us don't need to work out survival strategies for the future of tertiary training in music. We simply need to embrace the transformation in electronic music that is happening under our noses in the local community to which we all belong.

ACMA2000 couldn't have happened without helpers like Bruce Schnieder, Andrew Troedsen, Amber Hansen, Dan Horwood, Richard Wilding, Greg Jenkins, Andy Foster, Andrew Boughen, Neil Baxter and Melinda Downey who attended to the various routine demands and challenges made throughout the conference. In praising the organisers and workers of ACMA2000, of course, one mustn't overlook those who sweated and toiled to host previous ACMA conferences, often without the same level of cooperation from those higher up in their institutions. ACMA2000 showed what can be done when an institution gets behind the efforts made by the organising team instead of getting in the road. If I didn't have to play a role in producing similar future events, I too could do what Juan Antonio Samaranch did and call this one "the best ever".

PRESENCE II Press Release

Martin Fumarola

Following the success of PRESENCE:

The CEC (Canadian Electroacoustic Community) and *PeP* (Productions Electro Productions) team present their new CD release: *PRESENCE II*, a set of 2 compact discs of electroacoustic music:

PRESENCE II is the second self-funded CD project of *PeP* under the auspices of the CEC, featuring 34 pieces by 32 composers with the presence of 10+ countries: Canada, England, USA, Argentina, Brazil, Taiwan, Korea, Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, Finland, and Denmark. In fact, the international approach is one of its most distinguished traits, the global ea community is present in this release. But if there is something that makes PII unique, that's the wide variety of ea music and tendencies present in the CDs: from soundscape-influenced through acousmatic works, including traditional and "classical" electroacoustic music as well as pieces of historical significance, and never forgetting the web-oriented compositions. It is also to point out the important number of women composers participating in PII: Chin-Chin Chen, Annette Vande Gorne, sylvi mac Cormac, Diana McIntosh, Barbara Golden. Whereas certain pieces are already very well-known as they won top prizes in internationally-renowned competitions others are brand-new creations, including one track specially produced for PRESENCE II and another one specially recomposed for it. Works durations are anywhere from 00:37 to 12:36.

Some of the "creme de la creme" of the international electroacoustic and computer community is making presence in PRESENCE II: Jorge Antunes, the pioneer of electroacoustic music in Brazil; Otto Joachim, the pioneer of electronic music in Canada; ea productions by several composers belonging to (or produced in) the Electroacoustic Studio of the University of Birmingham; the first ea piece by Martin Fumarola; those artists who contribute so much to the international community from their so honourable ea associations like the SAN, CEC, Ars Sonora, SEAMUS, DEGEM: Adrian Moore, Ian Chuprun, Yves Gigon, Beg Thigpen, Thomas Gerwin, etc.; those pieces that won prizes in the Russolo and Bourges contests, etc, etc.

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MIKROPOLYPHONIE (ISSN: 1327-256X)

David Hirst

MikroPolyphonie is an online journal published on the World Wide Web. It aims to encourage analysis and discussion in any genre of contemporary music making and research.

MikroPolyphonie publishes refereed articles in the Articles section as well as unrefereed opinion pieces in our Forum section. Contributors may submit any articles relating to contemporary music. Feedback on articles can be emailed from readers, and Resources provides useful information and links. The Gallery provides an opportunity for viewing and submitting material that relates sound, image, and text. The Editors page lists our reading panel and editorial staff.

Look out for the upcoming Volumes 5 and 6, which provide an insight into recent Australasian computer music research. MikroPolyphonie is at:
<http://farben.latrobe.edu.au/mikropol/>

NEWS

- This year MikroPolyphonie was named in realsci's academic top 100 e-journal sites:
<http://www.realsci.com/infobox.cfm?Key=http://farben.latrobe.edu.au/mikropol>
- MikroPolyphonie is now archived at the National Library of Australia:
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**CALL FOR ARTICLES AND MUSIC
SUBMISSIONS**

**Organised Sound
An International Journal of Music and
Technology**

Volume 6, Number 1

Issue thematic title: Music Technology in
Australasia/South East Asia
Date of Publication: April 2001
Publishers: Cambridge University Press

Articles, sound examples and/or pieces to be
considered for publication in the named issue are
now invited.

Music Technology in Australasia/South East Asia

Along with increasing globalisation, each region
has its distinct characteristics. Australasia/South
East Asia represents an exciting crossroads of
established traditional and new approaches.

Are there distinct national or regional aesthetics in
electroacoustic and computer music in this corner
of the globe? Which developments in relevant
areas of music technology are taking place or are
about to take place in Australasia/South East Asia?
Are they related to distinct aesthetic ideas,
compositional procedures, technological
applications and/or technological developments?
Are there environmental or cultural circumstances
that influence computer music in this region?

Music technology in Australasia/South East Asia is
to be celebrated in issue 6/1 of Organised Sound.
This represents the first time the journal is focusing
on a regional theme. The editors are pleased to
announce that Ian Whalley at the University of
Waikato in New Zealand (musik@waikato.ac.nz)
has been invited to act as coordinator for this issue.
As Organised Sound publishes an annual CD,
sound examples or pieces relating to the issue's
theme are also being sought.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: 1 February 2001

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**Spiny Norman and the Electronic
Aesthetic**
Or
**“How much fun can you have with a
cactus in Newcastle?”**

Greg Jenkins

I attended the THIS IS NOT ART Festival (or TINA as it is known) in Newcastle that ran from 5-9 October. TINA was made up of 5 loosely linked concurrent festivals/conferences namely; Electrofringe, National Independent Electronic Labels Conference, National Young Writers Festival, The National Student Media Conference and the Independent Radio Conference.

I was there to showcase my newly discovered talent for playing the cactus. I discovered I had this skill during the last ACMA conference, interFACES, when I volunteered to play the cactus part in a work scored for cactus and tape, submitted for performance by the American Composer Paul Rudy. I found the sounds and textures I was able to extract from the cactus as well as the physical immediacy of performing it strangely enjoyable and it got me thinking a little deeper about technology and electronic music.

When composing and performing, I find that technology oscillates between being a subservient musical instrument and being an independent entity whose potential is guided and harnessed by human input. When using a cactus as a sound source I apply 2 contact microphones (gotta have that W I D E S T E R E O cactus image!) then amplify and electronically process the sounds that result from plucking, scraping and rattling the sharp spines. On one level the cactus is a subservient musical instrument, a sounding body that is activated by the performer. On another level however the cactus is this independent entity. Most obviously it is a living organism with a self defence mechanism designed to injure any other living organism that tries to do it harm but also the electronic processing I use consists of multi-tap delays with very high levels of regeneration and feedback. These have a tendency to “take off” and become self determining sound objects without careful guidance. This is another way in which the independent entity asserts itself. I began to view the cactus as a metaphor for technology - a thorny ally in the artistic process. Besides, I reasoned that the pain of a careless cactus spine jab was no worse than the anguish experienced when trying to save a file and having your machine inexplicably crash, destroying hours of computer based musical musings.

While I don't profess to be original with the concept of amplifying the sound of the cactus spines I do think that I may be able to lay claim to being the first person to use a CV to midi converter - the CV in this instance standing for Cactus Voltage. For the Electrofringe performance I attached an extra contact microphone to the cactus and connected it directly to a trigger input on my drumKAT midi drum controller enabling me to trigger midi devices by plucking the cactus spines.

There was considerable interest in the cactus at both the gig I played in Civic Park (perfect place for some plant music) and the workshop I gave on cactus technique. The cactus fits in fairly well to an emerging genre that I term “scrape music” whereby the sounds are largely derived from scraping some form of heavy duty stylus over physical surfaces. I have certainly found using a non electronic physical “instrument” and processing the resulting sound to be very a very rewarding process and it has helped to recharge my creative instincts. I suspect that this pro-physical interface approach is what excites other composers into scraping, scratching and banging their way to new music.

Overall TINA was a resounding success, the place positively buzzing. The sheer number of events scheduled meant that over the entire four days there was always at least one and often more sessions on at any given time that caught my interest. Congratulations to the organisers for executing a professional, stimulating and above all fun festival.