

PROFILE — CLAIRE EDWARDES

Claire Edwardes was born in Sydney (Australia) in 1975 and began learning piano at the age of five. In 1997 she graduated as Student of the Year from Sydney Conservatorium of Music and in 1999 won the Symphony Australia Young Performers Award. She moved to the Netherlands to complete a master's degree at Codarts and the Conservatorium van Amsterdam on a Dutch Government Nuffic Huygens Scholarship and was resident in the Netherlands for seven years. There she won numerous instrumental competitions, toured extensively, performed with numerous ensembles, including Ictus Ensemble and the Percussion Group of the Hague, and founded the percussion group Duo Vertigo, with Niels Meliefste. She also worked closely with many composers, including Louis Andriessen, Unsuk Chin, Harrison Birtwistle and Steve Reich. On her return to Sydney in 2006 Claire became co-artistic director of Ensemble Offspring. Both as a soloist and with the ensemble Claire has commissioned, programmed, curated, documented and performed music by living Australian composers. More than 50 pieces have been written for her as a soloist, and Ensemble Offspring have commissioned over 300 new works. She is a passionate advocate for equity in classical music through projects such as Rhythms of Change, which introduces music by Australian female composers to percussion students, and Ngarra-Burria: First Peoples Composers, which facilitates musical voices from the Australian First Nations. In 2022 Claire was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in recognition of her services to Australian music.



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At what point did you decide to make new music such an important part of your work? Were there particular works or musicians that inspired you?

It's always difficult to pinpoint the moment I became obsessed with new music but I would say it was a gradual development from my Bachelor degree at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where I was involved in the inaugural Spring Ensemble. As part of this opportunity I worked closely with composer colleagues from the year above me at the Con for the first time and got a lot out of it. This culminated in my time in Europe, where I sought out composers to commission for my duo with Niels Meliefste (Duo Vertigo) and became an intrinsic part of the Dutch and UK new-music scenes almost overnight.

If we go right back to my childhood as a pianist, I think the signs were there, as my teacher always had Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* as part of my daily practice routine (as well as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, etc.) and there was something about those unusual and uneven rhythms and modes that piqued my interest. When I hear my daughter

practising them now I am amazed at what a revolutionary Bartok was and wonder how the music that he and composers like Stravinsky were creating in the early twentieth century didn't alter the course of Western classical music in a more direct way – it's kind of crazy that they still sound like revolutionaries!

I also owe my new-music bug to the great George Crumb, whose *Makrokosmos* I chose to play as part of my undergraduate degree. It led me to really seek out unusual pieces that others were not performing, including Stockhausen's *Tierkreis* and compositions I found in the Conservatorium library (there was no internet or YouTube in those days) that I would include in my recitals. Then, of course, there is Xenakis' *Rebonds (A and B)*, which I played in the third year of my undergraduate degree – I think I knew even then what a deeply spiritual and important work of art this was, and I still perform it to this day. It is such striking and important music – the percussionist's equivalent of J. S. Bach.

How did Ensemble Offspring develop?

Ensemble Offspring actually began life in 1995 as the Spring Ensemble, and in a way I owe my lifelong commitment to new music to my own group. Matthew Shlomowitz and Damien Ricketson (still dear friends and highly successful composers) were the brains and brawn behind those early years of the ensemble. We were just a scratch band, really, brought together to play their final recital compositions in Roger Woodward's Sydney Spring Festival. It is not an uncommon thing for a new-music ensemble to stem from a Conservatorium but, as we all know, the years after graduation are challenging ones, with musicians (especially Australians) going overseas to travel, so it was Damien who kept the torch alight with enough funding from project grants to eventually start to pay musicians and give the group some sort of reputation. In those early years we were known for performing the music of early Philip Glass, a lot of amazing show-length projects by Damien Ricketson, including *A Line has Two*, *Fractured Again* and *The Secret Noise*, as well as championing works by some of Damien and Matt's teachers, including Bozidar Kos and Michael Smetanin. But, really, we were a scratch band of weird and wonderful instrumental combinations that changed from show to show.

When I returned from my seven-year stint in the Netherlands (1999–2006) I offered to assist Damien with the organisational side of what had become a pretty all-consuming thing in his life. Eventually we became co-artistic directors; we changed our company structure, created a board, became a not-for-profit organisation that could receive donations and built a core membership, all very much driven by me as someone who wanted to see the group thrive and go to the next level of operation. This core line-up has always been *Pierrot* + one: flute, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion and piano. After my time in Holland I was pretty much percussion-ensembled out (performing a huge amount with my own group Duo Vertigo as well as the Percussion Group of the Hague) and, for me, it was time to focus on being a musician rather than a percussionist. I still thrive on the challenge of making my (often very limited) instruments sound like a violin or a clarinet, and I think our core combination can offer a great deal of variety in tone colour. We often expand out, and also perform in subsets, but I love our core members and without them Ensemble Offspring would not be what it is today.

Ensemble Offspring has a number of really striking features, such as the encouragement of young composers, the focus on indigenous musicians and very strong visual ideas in the presentation of work. Why do you think these are important?

Creating new-music concert programmes in Australia is very different from in Europe. At first I found it very frustrating that I couldn't programme music the way I had been programming and performing it in Europe. Those years in Europe for me were dreamlike, performing full programmes of Harrison Birtwistle or Unsuk Chin and many more experimental and little-known composers. In Holland it was still the era of sturdy finances for the arts, when musicians were paid regardless of ticket sales, so we were able to have what felt like complete artistic freedom. Times have changed in Holland since then, so it's not just Australia where we have to prioritise bums on seats, but here in Australia (especially Sydney) audiences are still learning, and being exposed to all these different musics and programming needs to be approached in a very different way.

In Sydney at least, alas, there is not a huge new-music scene, so in recent years, to create a point of difference with all the well-funded early music and classical ensembles, Ensemble Offspring has developed an emerging composers' programme, working a great deal with under-represented composers to get them a leg up in the art-music scene. The way I see it, if we don't take on this role, who will? We are totally committed to tomorrow's musical voices and developing Australian living new music (that's what I like to call it). I feel it is so important for the development of our culture, and with Ensemble Offspring's 26-year history we have an important role to play in assisting Australian composers to both develop their voices and have opportunities to be heard overseas.

Your point about the strong visual presentation of our work is something that I think comes more from my own obsession as a percussionist with using the innate visual aspects of performance to heighten the overall listening experience. In the early days of Ensemble Offspring Damien and I experimented a great deal with concerts that were highly produced, almost like theatre shows, but doing those as one-offs became a crazy, unjustifiable expense, so now we mix more traditional concerts with 'shows' that are presented in unusual venues and in non-traditional ways.

New music in Australia seems to have a different character in the different big cities. Is this really the case and, if so, why has it happened and could you characterise it?

Following on from my point about Sydney being a tough place to present new music, I would have to say that Melbourne is definitely where it is at in Australia right now. In my recent post-COVID trips to Melbourne, I was reminded again that this is a city where grassroots art-making can flourish because of much better state government investment in the arts. Add to this the fact that it is a colder city, with a climate more like Europe, and that it is flat and reasonably compact, and you get a city more in line with Berlin, where cheaper real estate can lead to more start-up venues and opportunities for artists.

If you were to compare Melbourne-based groups such as Speak Percussion, Elision and Rubiks Collective with Ensemble Offspring, I guess the way we present could also be seen as intrinsically

'Sydney'. We do place a lot of importance on how our shows look, not just sound, and some people have said that this is because our city is influenced by the beautiful harbour and beaches we have around us, which in turn push up real-estate prices in Sydney and make edgy art difficult to present. Brisbane is even warmer than Sydney, so there's perhaps even less of a reason to sit inside and watch new music. At the moment in Brisbane, on my radar at least, there is Clocked Out, Dots & Loops, Alex Raineri's Brisbane Music Festival and some younger groups, but government support for new music is pretty minimal. Smaller cities such as Perth, Canberra, Adelaide and Hobart have bits and bobs of activity but no dedicated groups since half the Decibel members moved from Perth to Melbourne in recent years. There is TURA New Music doing amazing things with new music regionally in WA [Western Australia], and also a handful of the orchestras have fabulous female composers as their composers in residence right now (Holly Harrison with the TSO [Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra] and Olivia Bettina Davies with WASO [Western Australian Symphony Orchestra]) so that is exciting.

Unfortunately, government funding for the arts in Australia is dire and getting worse. As is the case everywhere in the world, none of this 'living new music' can be created, produced and presented on ticket sales alone. Ensemble Offspring lost our recurrent multi-year funding at the start of COVID, which has forced us to focus more on private philanthropy to support our activities. It's not easy trying to find private donors for this often weird and wacky music we create, but it certainly feels more sustainable in the long term than waning government funding.

Australia is obviously a very big country, with each city being about 12 or more hours apart by car, which means that each city's arts scene is quite siloed. This was not helped by COVID, of course. Even though I am based in the hub that is Sydney, I feel far away from my interstate colleagues, so I can't even imagine what it would be like living and creating in Adelaide or Perth. But I have my fingers crossed that, as we come out of COVID and can travel more, we are brought together in a physical sense and the Australian new-music scene can once again be more connected.

If you were formulating a ten-year plan for your work (or for new music), what would be the top three priorities?

My father always used to ask me what my ten-year plan was when I was in my 20s and I hated that question! But over my career I have learnt why it is so important to have a plan, and I always tell my students they need a ten-year plan 'because at least it gives you direction and you can always deviate from it'.

I am now 46, so in ten years' time I will be 56 – about the time when it would perhaps be acceptable to stop lugging around too much heavy percussion gear. I feel that Ensemble Offspring and I are in our prime right now, and the next ten years is the period in which to go hard and do all the things we have always dreamt of. For me, that is performing my solo percussion shows, including my all-female solo commissioning project Rhythms of Change, to as many and as varied audiences as possible, not just in metropolitan areas but also in regional areas. I want to really utilise the skills I have developed as a soloist, combined with my presenting skills, to break down the barriers so many people seem to have about listening

to unfamiliar and new music here in Australia. I am wholeheartedly committed to changing people's perception of new music.

Then there is all the important work we need to keep doing with Ensemble Offspring to support emerging, female and diverse voices and, more specifically, First Nations composers and artists. I feel like our journey with First Nations composers is only just beginning and, again, that will be a lifelong experience that will continue to inform how we programme, create and conceptualise art. We are at an important crossroads in Australia in terms of a new consciousness around First Nations culture and its importance. There are innate challenges with this but it is such an interesting time to put our own egos and white privilege aside and just soak it all up. 'First Nations First' is the mantra, and indeed when we work with these artists we become sponges for understanding the culture better. We are so fortunate to have the opportunity to work in this way and I am really excited to see how the next ten years will play out.