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Clocked Out: The States

by [Liam Flenady](#)



It was as though entering the aftermath of a fantasy carnival in the Midwest. Except that Nicholas Ng was warming up on the Erhu. A kind of nostalgia was palpable from the beginning; but a nostalgia mixed with an exotic strangeness, and an ironic distance.

In the middle of the shopfront of the Judith Wright Centre, a circle of six performers sat on chairs. In the centre, a large banner hung with the words, letters peeling away:

the dim led vei s of a oc an
transparent
blue pink
membranes wave
in fibrous sheets

Strewn around the room (amongst the confetti) were carnival game-wheels, streamers, and various paper decorations, all of red-white-and-blue.

As the audience entered, we were each given a card, on which was written a quote, the significance of which we didn't yet know. Each different, mine spoke of a rather erotic scene. Also detailed on the card were, presumably, rules to some sort of game where the colours red, white and blue corresponded to certain activities: 'cross out words from this quote which you disagree with', 'tear card to pieces and throw sprinkle about the room like confetti' and 'rate the text on a scale from 1 to 5'. We sat down on the cement floor in amongst the performers, and I contemplated this curious setting.

Such was the ambience of the concert, the general concept. When the concert got officially underway, this fascinating mix of nostalgia, the exotic, and the new, only took a more interesting and compelling form.

The ensemble began with *Amazing Grace*. This piqued my curiosity; it is a dangerous choice of repertoire at the best of times. But it was a remarkable success: Alison St Ledger's wailing (no words were sung), Nick Ng's Erhu, and the rather fascinating sounds of Joel Stern's bottle pumps (he pumped the air with his feet, and manipulated the pitch - somehow - with his hands), all swirled over the top of Erik Griswold and Steve Newcomb's keyboards. The fact that we sat in the middle of this, and the amplification had a 'surround sound' effect, really heightened this overwhelming hymn, almost effacing the subtle irony that I detected in its delivery.

After this came *If Not the Past*, opening with the line, 'If not the past then perhaps a sound-bite of the past', spoken by Craig Foltz. In this, layers of vocal loops and live spoken word were superimposed over a blues-gospel reminiscent of Keith Jarrett. Twice a home-percussion jam broke out, including toys, bells, wooden frogs, pencils and other household objects. What was emerging from the piece, though, was not so quaint. The segue into the next work *Politics* revealed what had been latent in *If Not the Past*: a more disturbing presentation of the human voice, both real and virtual. In this work, all the performers took up a fragment of spoken text, and with sampled voices, repeated *ad infinitum*. As these fragments accelerated and accelerated, the text pushed past intelligibility and into a kind of psychotic aural hallucination - perhaps a very fearful sonic image of Americanised media culture.

Ending abruptly, the severity of *Politics* was given a counterweight by the aptly titled *Tension Releasing Action Music #1*. This rollicking blues for melodica, bass melodica (yes, bass melodica) and erhu fascinated, clearly drawing much from its unusual instrumentation. Steve Newcomb and Erik Griswold played off each other wonderfully, while Nick Ng moved intriguingly between the blues and more minor-modal, 'eastern sounding' scales.

Following quickly, *Come Sunday* began with a soulful duet between Nick Ng and Alison St Ledger, with Steve Newcomb tasteful in the background, introducing dissonances on the organ under the otherwise consonant harmonic world. Joel Stern entered on bottle pumps, bringing a sound palette simultaneously comical, and yet surprisingly cantabile. Indeed the *glissandi* and wide vibrato of this curious instrument were very operatic, and very expressive. It offered a foreignness that was in a way more exotic than Nick Ng's erhu, and yet more home-made than any instrument in the room.

After Erik Griswold ended *Come Sunday* with a bittersweet major chord, a new contrast was added to the mix. *Conventions* was perhaps the most 'modernist' work of the evening, and displayed a bewildering diversity of sounds: blending spoken text, electronics (often imitating computer 'bleeps'), and extended techniques on the erhu, with quirky melodica rambles, and stark, fast-paced atonal leaps on the piano. Throughout, Craig Foltz's spoken lines expressed a kind of anti-romantic indifference to the human condition, coldly and

repetitively delivering phrases such as: 'Masking tape, signals, an orbit is what you make it', 'When it rains it pours', '... as in morphology and syntax', '... as in bandwidth'.

We were then allowed to relax with some more *Tension Releasing Action Music*. This trio again featured melodica and bass melodica, but this time with Joel Stern's bottle pumps. Their seesawing music provided suitable background for the utterly absurdist wheel-spinning game that was then played. Depending on the colour that the wheel landed on, the audience was to perform a given task. Thus our little cards were finally explained. And I for one was delighted with crossing out the words in my phrase that I disagreed with.

Following this came the utterly melancholic *The Party's Over*, a lilting pop progression providing a background over which the erhu (now running through a couple of different digital effects) sung, and Joel Stern's intriguing thumb-piano glissandi skittered.

All the while electronics bubbled along in the background. This was a curious denouement, in fact not a denouement at all, but an ending without 'finale,' without bombast: a fitting ending to a concert that was not a concert, but a riddle of American culture, an expatriate's memory.

Well, now that the party was over, the performers got down to some last *Tension Releasing Action Music*. Griswold, Newcomb, Ng, and Stern produced some serious Loony Tunes-esque chaos, while St Ledger and Foltz, with much ado, stripped down all the streamers and decorations in the room and dumped them in a large pile at the centre. Time to go home, folks. One could not say that the whole performance was in any sense 'perfect'. Each performer had moments where they seemed to snap out of this fantasy scenario, lose inspiration, and become wayward in their improvisations. However, this imperfection seemed only to work to the overall advantage of the pathos of the concert. It expressed a kind of fragility, a sense that, at any moment, this tenuous fantasy could just collapse. A totally 'perfect' rendition may have easily lost this rather humane feeling.

The concert was a riddle. This Clocked Out production proved that contemporary music doesn't have to be all dissonance and mathematics to make someone think. Speaking to Steve Newcomb at the end, I noted the ambiguous relationship to the USA, a nostalgia tinged with an acute recognition of the brutality of much American life, to which Steve replied: 'Yes, but also the beauty'. And indeed, despite (or because of) the quirks, this was a beautiful concert.

Event details

The States

Created by Erik Griswold, Sarah Pirrie and Craig Foltz

1-3 October 2009

The Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Fortitude Valley, QLD

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