

# KINOKONZERT: ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING WITH *NOSFERATU*

Interview by Jochen Gutsch

**IN NOVEMBER 2019, SYDNEY'S PREMIER CONTEMPORARY CHAMBER GROUP ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING WILL TEAM UP WITH PERTH-BASED COMPOSER CHRIS TONKIN FOR A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE SILENT FILM CLASSIC *NOSFERATU: A SYMPHONY OF HORROR*.**

**The ambitious project will be presented as the sixth edition of the Goethe-Institut KinoKonzert series, which has fascinated Australian audiences since its inception in May 2018. *kultur* spoke to lead percussionist Claire Edwardes and to the composer Chris Tonkin.**

***kultur*: Chris, what do you have in mind in terms of instrumentation and arrangement for the *Nosferatu* soundtrack?**

**CHRIS TONKIN:** I've chosen cello, clarinet, percussion and electronics all of which I've written for quite a bit over the years. There's a large colour range in the group that I find attractive. For *Nosferatu* I split and mix these up into different combinations; sometimes all four, sometimes one or two instruments alone, sometimes all acoustic and sometimes all electronic. The film is over 90 minutes long so I'm aiming for some variety. The performers will probably appreciate the odd break also.

***kultur*: Claire, Ensemble Offspring has collaborated with many composers. Is there a set process for commissions of new pieces?**

**CLAIRE EDWARDES:** We are always on the lookout for new and exciting composers to commission as well as coming back to long term collaborators such as the wonderful Chris Tonkin from Perth. We recorded a work Chris wrote for us on our first CD – he approached us about collaborating on *Nosferatu* a few years ago and we are really grateful to Goethe-Institut for getting on board with it. We commission a mixture of established and emerging, mostly Australian and a handful of international – but really we are committed to the championing of Australian composers.

About seven years ago we initiated our own commissioning fund – *The Noisy Egg Creation Fund*. This was a way to develop our private donor base for the first time and it was really necessary because gradually money was being siphoned away from the Australia Council for the Arts, so no one could rely solely on government funding for the creation of new work in Australia any more.

We have commissioned over 30 works via this means and we are so proud of this statistic. Sometimes our commissions are

for large collaborators such as an upcoming opera by Cathy Milliken which we will present with Sydney Chamber Opera in 2022 – and other times they are small chamber works such as some for our *Birdsong at Dusk* touring trio program in 2019, for which we just commissioned a pied butcherbird piece from Hollis Taylor and Jon Rose.

***kultur*: Chris, some of the artists in our KinoKonzert series respond to exact cues in the films, while others improvise more and follow a general mood – what's your approach?**

**CT:** A bit of everything actually. What you're describing are really degrees of correspondence between the image and the sound/music. While planning the music I went through and made notes of how and where the music might accent the film. For instance there are some instances where there may be actual direct sight and sound coordination, in the moment. More often it might be a question of capturing momentum, the direction a scene is taking. Then there's also, as you say, following the general mood of the scene with music that seems appropriate. I'm going for a balance and trying not to overdo any one approach.

***kultur*: Claire, recently Ensemble Offspring worked with Berlin's Ensemble Adapter and New York's International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) for Sydney Festival. Was this a one-off project or do you have further plans for this international collaboration?**

**CE:** Yes indeed – it was our first gig of 2019 as part of Sydney Festival at Casula Powerhouse and we had an absolute blast working with and hosting those two groups in our hometown. The project is being remounted in New York in the middle of the year without us and then in September, Ensemble Offspring and ICE will venture over to Berlin to return to the three-way present that we just experienced here in Sydney.

Ensemble Offspring has never before performed in Berlin so we are very excited about it! We will perform Natasha Anderson's APRA Art Music Fund commissioned work which she wrote for all three

ensembles, entitled *Cleave*, alongside some new works by local Berlin composers. That tour is actually pretty huge because we begin in Berlin, and then we go onto perform two shows at Gaudeamus Muziekweek in Utrecht, a concert in Amsterdam at a collective venue called Splendor, and then onto the UK for a tour of bars!

**kultur: Chris, you studied violin and piano and have majored in music composition. However, these days you focus more on electronic music and sound art. What is it that attracts you to this way of working?**

**CT:** With composition I've always thought a lot about colour and the 'shape' of sound, which is an approach that lends itself to electronic music, which is often about manipulating sound on these terms. I think this is why I like instruments like cello and clarinet also, not only because of their colour range but also their ability to make sound shapes, transitioning smoothly across the whole spectrum. Percussion of course also has a virtually infinite variety of colours.

I like the programming aspect of computer music also. There are right and wrong solutions so it's a nice change from composition where you're often deciding – sometimes it seems arbitrarily – between so many possibilities.

**kultur: Claire, Ensemble Offspring is known for high-level musicianship and for mastering complex music. However, the group also engages in educational and community projects. Please tell us a little more about those.**

**CE:** It is indeed a fine line to tread – that of valuing musical and presentational excellence alongside community and educational goals equally. It is a constant work in progress and two recent examples I think show quite clearly how committed we are to both aspects of our output but how it's never easy.

Last weekend we presented *Sizzle* at the Petersham Bowling Club here in Sydney. It was our tenth iteration of this family-friendly, cross-genre musical event that Ensemble Offspring presents annually. We had been working for three weeks with the Tempe Public School Performing Band and had commissioned Alice Chance to write a work for the young band alongside a new piece by our clarinet player Jason Noble and jazz guitarist Jess Green.

The idea was that the students would get inspired by working with the professional musicians of Ensemble Offspring as mentors, as well as having a really special performing experience outside of the school assembly norms – and that they would get to work with a composer first hand, most of all a female composer. Most people don't realise how few works by female composers they would play in their lifetimes, so it's really important that the next generation become aware of why gender equity in instrumental music is so important in this day and age.

The concert was a real buzz for all those involved, as well as the parents – but as you can imagine the audiences who were expecting our regular professional *Sizzle* opener were perhaps a little bemused. Most people took it in their stride but I daresay we lost a few punters that day. There are two sides of the coin and I am constantly thinking about how to successfully do both!

Another project dear to our hearts is *Ngarra-Burria*: First Nations composers. Ensemble Offspring worked really closely with the five composers in the first iteration over 2017 and 2018 and even travelled to Brewarrina in central NSW to perform their works in an outdoor setting at the festival there presented by Moogahlin. It was such a wonderful experience and one that we are committed to into the future.

We feel it is so important to champion and support Indigenous composers in our niche art music scene, given how sidelined they have been pretty much always. The times, they are a-changing. thanks to Chris Sainsbury, the founder of the program alongside all of the partners, and that is so exciting.

However, the issue of relevance-vs-excellence also pops up from time to time in that initiative and that is something that we all grapple with. 'First nations first' is their saying and so it should be. I am totally in support of that mantra yet because Ensemble Offspring is all about quality and excellence and high level musicianship as you say, when we are making recordings or performing their work in concert it is important to us that these airings show off everyone in the best possible light.

In a way this whole tension is a big part of new music making in general and working with young and emerging composers as there is always an element of variation from piece to piece when a young composer is still finding their voice and honing their technique. So it is definitely something we are very well attuned to and take in out stride!

**kultur: Chris, some of your research looks at the effects of artificial intelligence (AI) on music. What are the most important questions and developments we will need to keep an eye on in the near future?**

**CT:** Yes I have been getting into this over the past couple of years. A friend and I made an algorithmic song-writer/producer called *Mississippi Swan* that could and did generate over 70 EPs worth of unique songs per day. We exhibited it as a sound installation in a few places in 2017/18. I've actually used some modified algorithms from that to create some of the electronic music for *Nosferatu* also, but with a fairly different aesthetic aim.

*Mississippi Swan* pretty much creates new music (results may vary) based upon a stock of existing material. Whether that's intelligent or not depends on how you define it. On one level, all it is really is a collection of ideas that my collaborator Rick Snow and I gave it, however, it does often seem to have a mind of its own.

For us it's not a question of replacing human composers or generating thousands of hit songs or anything like that. When we started working on it, we just thought it would be fun as we're both into programming. There's quite a lot of this thing going on everywhere and in everything of course.

Despite my interests, I'm paradoxically not really that comfortable with the amount that digital technology has encroached on all aspects of life. I'm actually happiest in nature on a bushwalk or some similar activity.

## KINOKONZERT: ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING WITH *NOSFERATU* PROGRAMS & EVENTS

18 - 22 November 2019

Details announced on  
[www.goethe.de/australia/kinokonzert](http://www.goethe.de/australia/kinokonzert)

*NOSFERATU* is often cited as the world's first vampire film. Released in 1922 by legendary German filmmaker F.W. Murnau, the movie is an expressionist adaptation of Bram Stoker's original Dracula story. The silent masterpiece has inspired not only legions of filmmakers but also many composers. To this day the film is highly regarded, holding its IMDB rating at 97% and appearing in many best-of lists.



**ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING** is an internationally renowned new music ensemble led by acclaimed percussionist, Claire Edwardes. The group up of virtuoso musicians have performed worldwide and received many awards. For this project they will collaborate with Western Australian composer Chris Tonkin, Head of Composition and Electronic Music at the UWA Conservatorium of Music. Tonkin specialises in electronic music and sound installation, with research contributing to the field of musical artificial intelligence and generative art.



[LEFT] Chris Tonkin  
[RIGHT] Claire Edwardes