

Embracing the new and unknown

Many people are intimidated by new music because of a lifetime of sonic conditioning – a challenge Ensemble Offspring takes in its stride
by Claire Edwardes

In my role as Artistic Director of Ensemble Offspring, as well as an active solo percussionist, I spend a great deal of time thinking about audiences – how do we get them to come to our concerts? How do we make sure they're engaged when they're there? How do we create unique experiences for them so they go away telling their friends what fun new music can be? By international standards we do well in terms of audience numbers, but it's still more of a challenge selling new music than it is to sell big name classical composers who everyone knows.

I think it's fair to say that most people have a fear of the unknown on some level – whether it be sharks (something they can't see and probably never will) or skydiving (my particular fear). But we don't often ponder the fear of the unknown in terms of music. Why is it that almost anything goes in the visual arts world (the weirder the better sometimes) and yet in music, non-traditional chord progressions or the lack of melody or rhythm tend to give people a sense of impending doom? It is clear to me that the reason is a lifetime of sonic expectation conditioning – whether it be through Western classical music or pop music with the typical I-V-I bass line. So it is no wonder that when people first hear music that isn't traditional in a tonal sense, they don't quite know what to make of it. At Ensemble Offspring we take this challenge in our stride!

Ensemble Offspring concerts can be tricky to market because of the broad spectrum of what we play – which can be anything from Steve Reich's minimal beats to complex atonal music to works by First Nations composers influenced by jazz. In our latest show, *The Surge*, which we recently toured to Canberra, Deniliquin, Cowra, Orange and Casula to warm and receptive audiences of around 100 to 150 per venue, we have embraced the concept of the 90s and also included a live visual element for all the new commissions. The idea for the 90s theme came from the fact that the line-up and several of the existing works on the program were written in the 90s for John Williams' group Attacca. (Also Ensemble Offspring was formed in 1995). We have added two guitarists to our traditional line-up of percussion, clarinet, violin, piano and double bass, which makes for a different look and sound. The existing works by Peter Sculthorpe (no longer new music by a live composer but amazing all the same) and Nigel Westlake are recognisable classics of the Australian chamber music repertory. Then there are the five new commissions from



Rehearsals for *The Surge*. Photo © Paul Mostig

Robert Davidson, Felicity Wilcox and Jessica Wells, which spin the gamut of sound worlds. Their brief was to reflect on the 90s and the 30 years since. Jessica Wells was asked to create three interludes, which would act as little sorbets between the other pieces with the themes of politics, social trends and technology. She has created three stunning and varied works, which do just what was intended. Felicity Wilcox's *Tipping Point* comments on climate change and the fact that we have now reached a sort of tipping point where something has to change for us not to crash and burn. And Robert Davidson has used some very funny text and visuals from Larry Smarr, the guy who developed the browser that popularised the World Wide Web, in which he is explaining how one 'netsurfs'. We open the show with Paul Mac's version of Paul Keating's Redfern Address, which chokes me up every time.

When paired with original and live synced video from Peachey and Mosig, the feedback we have received about this show is a mixture of nostalgia for the 90s, the light and shade of the reality of the past 30 years, and appreciation for the sheer virtuosity and energy of our musicians on stage. I know that some of our more hard-core punters may find *The Surge* a little on the tonal and melodic side, but my view is that there is a time and a place for ALL THE MUSICS. This show is both a blast to play and an important all-Australian program telling relatable stories. I am very proud of *The Surge* and we plan to tour it around Australia for several years to come! *Ensemble Offspring performs The Surge at The Edge, State Library of Queensland for Dots+Loops on 20 August*