

Phil Treloar / Feeling to Thought

PHIL TRELOAR  
composer, marimba player, percussionist  
A Critical Biography

Phil Treloar is one of the most important figures in Australian creative music. Any one of his areas of endeavor – drummer, percussionist, composer, conceptualist or bandleader – may have been enough to earn him this plaudit. Together they add up to a staggering contribution.

(John Shand, 2009. 'Phil Treloar: Magus' in *Jazz – the Australian Accent*)

In an extensive career devoted to creative pursuit the composer/performer, Phil Treloar, has addressed himself to the problem concerning relationships as these are found at the intersection of notated music-composition and improvisation. In 1987 he coined the term *Collective Autonomy* to signify this endeavor. Born in Sydney, Australia, his creative journey led to Kanazawa, Japan, with this still quite traditional city becoming his home in 1992. Increasingly since the late 1980s, a growing understanding of Buddhist life and practice has become intrinsic to Treloar's expression. In recent years greater access to the exchange and sharing of his creative ideas has been opened with the advent of Feeling to Thought, an independent record label established for the purpose of documenting his research and collaborations in *Collective Autonomy*.

In November 2009, Feeling to Thought released of *Paradox Once Found*. Conceived of as a unified large-scale structure, this "Work" is a journey through transformations of textual readings and interpretations rendered into the realms of written text and musical form expressed in spontaneous improvisations for solo marimba. This three-and-a-half hour "Work" is the third in Treloar's project, *Pathways of the Mind: exploring sympathetic resonance*, an ongoing series assigned to his solo percussion explorations.

Feeling to Thought is presently preparing of *Other Narratives*, a six-volume reproduction series (7-CDs in all) which, through sound recordings and written text, presents a detailed account of *Collective Autonomy's* development 1976 through 2003. While featuring several collaborations with tremendously talented musicians from the performance fields of notated composition and improvisation, it brings into high relief the crucial significance of Treloar's long-standing concern for, and explorations of, structure: in Treloar's view, the preeminent factor and key to an intersection which embraces equally these two fields of creative activity.

Several of Treloar's compositions find their roots planted firmly in Buddhist terrain. Among these *Zen's Way: through the eye of Gogō-an – homage to Ryōkan*, premiered 2004 in Kanazawa, is, to date, the most extensive expression. At just under two hours in duration, this "Work" is structured in accord with the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra (Skt., *Saddharmaṇḍarīkasūtra*; Jp., *Myōhō-rye-kyō*; Chin., *Miao-fa lien-hua ching*), semantically correlating some forty *kanshi* (poems

composed in classical Chinese characters) by Ryōkan with that of the Sutra. Though a scripture not fundamental to the sect in which Ryōkan trained (Sōtō-shū), the Lotus Sutra was, nonetheless, one his favorites. It has an extensive history in Asian Buddhism and, with its assertion for 'one true Path' to Buddhahood and its affirmation of trust and compassion, it is generally acknowledged as being a scripture central to Mahāyāna Buddhism. *Zen's Way* is currently being considered for an extensive re-write with a view to performances and DVD production.

Dedications have assumed a substantial place in Treloar's œuvre, beginning in 1974 with *Tribute*, dedicated (modestly) to John Coltrane (recorded on vinyl: Philips 6641 225). In 2002 the premiere of *SHADES: in memoriam Roger Frampton* was performed in The Studio, Sydney Opera House and again the following year, twice, at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz. Frampton had been a close colleague of Treloar's from the time of their formative years in music and, as Treloar states the case in his Wangaratta program notes, "[*Shades*] seeks to embrace Roger's being, not simply as a memory but more as an experience; as an activity that might recall aspects of the man as he liked to pursue creative endeavor."

Treloar's concert demonstrated how thoughts can be transformed back into feelings during a live performance. [His] sincerity and passion conveyed the essence of Frampton's creative spirit. The work was boldly uncompromising and expressionistic, yet also contained passages of subtle melancholy and delicate beauty...

( Jessica Nicholas, *The Age*, 2003 - review, *SHADES: in memoriam Roger Frampton* )

To some extent Treloar's work has been informed by various excursions into creative potential at the interface of acoustic and electronic media. These were pursued during the period 1976 ~ '88 and, for the most part, involved analogue electronics; some in the context of purely live performance, some as studio realizations, while others were compositions for tape and live performance. Formative in this area was the close association Treloar shared with Melbourne based musicians, David Tolley and Dur-é Dara, Tolley being a notably forerunner in improvised electronic music.

Treloar's most extensive exploration in this genre, a twenty-minute environmental piece entitled *Double Drummer* (1982), involved live performance for solo percussion & electronics, four-channel tape playback, and projected transparencies. The subject and source of both the tape and the transparencies is the cicada (a large-winged homopteran insect). Field recordings were made then processed in studio conditions, the transparencies – set to a multiple projection system and controlled by a tone signal – were furnished by the naturalist, Densley Clyne, with the live percussion component being rendered by Treloar. The tape and visual components were made in the Electronic Music Studio, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, with guidance from Dr. Martin Wesley-Smith.

...'Double Drummer' by the jazz-man, Phil Treloar, was rumoured to be the 'Sacre du Printemps' of the night, the environmental audio-visual revolutionary piece that would, if not fling open the doors of popular resistance to Australian electronics, at least kick them ajar.

(Anna-Maria Dell'oso, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1982 - feature article, Fourth Biennale of Sydney)

*Double Drummer* was performed subsequently at the Australian Museum during 1983 in the context of a concert devoted to Treloar's work.

Questions concerning culture and identity have been an abiding passion with Treloar since his earliest days of creative engagement. In the aftermath of a six-month period in New York City, 1980, where he studied with the extraordinary African-American drummer, Billy Hart, Treloar had clarified his *raison d'être* and embarked on a long journey of discovery. While the seeds for this journey had been planted many years earlier, they came to fruition in 1987 with the advent of *Collective Autonomy* as its index. From that point forward his path has continued to unfold without digression. Back in 1981 he had assembled an ensemble,

Expansions, devoted to the task and although short lived, it made its mark on a then blossoming creative Australian-music ethos.

This concert confirmed that Phil Treloar has struck out on a highly original course in Australian music. Though utilizing the language of American jazz, his music is increasingly an authentic expression of the experience of being Australian. If we are to have jazz music in this country which is the outgrowth of our own culture, we have to look to musicians like Treloar and his colleagues.

( Eric Myres, *Jazz*, Jan./ Feb. 1982 - feature edition )

A remarkably productive period while a member of Pipeline Contemporary Music Project, 1988 ~ '92, found Treloar with several commissions that allowed him to explore under ideal circumstances his concepts regarding *Collective Autonomy*. Under the artistic direction of virtuoso trombonist, Simon de Haan, these were not only given state-of-the-art performances by Pipeline members but were also recorded and broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). A number of these will appear in the reproduction project, of *Other Narratives*, mentioned above.

Solo "Works", too, have been crucial to Treloar's path. These have covered the entire gamut, from a focus on electronics to that of acoustics; from freely improvised pieces based on conceptual structures to precisely notated compositions. Of the improvised group the above mentioned *Pathways of the Mind: exploring sympathetic resonance* is an instance. Several "Works" within the notation group interweave compositional exploration with his processes of understanding Buddhist thought. One such instance is *Journey Without Goal* – for solo cello. Originally commissioned in 1988 by the Australian cellist, Julia Ryder, this nineteen-minute "Work" was revised in 1992 for performance in a Pipeline concert by the exceptional cellist, Christian Wojtowicz. Revision consisted in clarifying the complex structure that binds the piece together and mapping onto its topography, significant indices drawn from Buddhist scriptures, with the latter indicating links between the music notation and its conceptual interpretation. In an interview prior to its premiere Wojtowicz, in reflecting on *Journey Without Goal* and the concert program in general – dedicated to the Australian composer, Keith Humble – had this to say:

There is absolutely no concession as to what is traditionally possible. And that's why it's fantastic working with these people. ... They're writing for the unknown and pushing the boundaries of the possible. These composers are not interested in newness for newness's sake. They're interested in how far they can push the limits of roots that they actually feel themselves. [Interviewer] : "One of the most challenging works he [referring to Wojtowicz] has tackled, *Journey Without Goal*, alternates highly rhythmic, driving passages with contemplative, improvisatory sections." [Wojtowicz]: It's the most difficult piece I've ever worked on. As I practice it, I find it's not the goal that's important, but the conquering of the difficulties on the journey.

( Christian Wojtowicz: an interview with Shirley Apthorp, *The Mercury*, June 25, 1992. )

Boundaries and imposed limits have been issues central to Treloar's work since his earliest days in creative activity and in fact, are responsible, at least in part, for his creative trajectory. General resistance to new forms presents no surprise to those engaged with creative pursuit at its limits; indeed, this is an age-old story. For Treloar, the advent of *Collective Autonomy* served to remove the wedge from between categorical notions. It accessed common ground between people and their idiosyncrasies as it also did for categorical predilections.

If pressed to choose one person who best represents artistic "open-door" practice, Phil Treloar certainly fits the bill. ... Treloar moves fluently between the worlds of contemporary classical composition and avant-garde or experimental jazz. In fact, his work is evidence that categories such as this are really no longer very useful.

( Kathy Peters, *24 Hours*, September, 1988 )

For Treloar, 1988 was a year of confluence, one during which his long-term engagement with improvised music and his studies in music composition – B mus degree, composition major, under the guidance of Dr. Graham Hair, Sydney Conservatorium of Music – came together. He was invited to participate in the Australian Bicentennial's September concert series, 'New Direction – a preview of the nineties', presenting a program of his "Works". Significantly, his active association with Simon de Haan and Pipeline began with performances of *Moon Man's Variations* – for harpsichord and cor Anglais and *Variations on 'Directions Changing'* – for ensemble and improvising quartet. And a two-week residency with his quartet, Feeling to Thought – Treloar, dms.; Steve Elphick, acoustic bass; Mark Simmonds, ten. sax.; David Ades, alto sax – at the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music facilitated a hands-on opportunity to explore *Collective Autonomy* with music students through the rehearsal and performance of his thirty-five minute composition, *Primal Communication: version two* – for string orchestra and improvising quartet. The performance was broadcast nationally on ABC-FM. One of the students, in appraising the residency, was cited as summarizing the view held by many who participated:

The group has prompted me to reconsider the whole idea of music and the musician. ... Especially impressive was their self-acceptance without egotism. Their philosophies of communication and creativity in a performance environment shed a great deal of light on earlier composers, especially pre-Romantic. This is what music making is all about! Being part of the Primal Communication concert was the most exciting musical experience I've ever been part of; I'm honored. The fact that they seemed to have enjoyed the residency just as much is an extra delight.

( reported in *PRESS PRESS*: Winter 1988 )

Treloar's long-standing, often stated, assertions regarding the preeminence of structure as a key to problem solving at the intersection of notated composition and improvisation has, for many years, gone largely unnoticed. This should not be so surprising. It's an extremely difficult area to tackle. Where form and structure in improvised music emerge, in general, from intuitive processes, they are established in notated composition, in general, through the conscious employ of logical procedures. Scarce few seem to have an understanding that equates both. Simon de Haan alludes to the difficulties when, in a discussion of the 1950s Third Stream experiments he says, "They never got off the ground, because the composers didn't understand who they were writing for. It was either classical composers writing for jazz musicians they didn't know, or vice versa." ( Adrian Jackson, an Interview with De Haan, *The Age*, May 11, 1989 ) Whilst this is true, the problem penetrates the terrain in greater depth. The musicologist and critic, Peter McCallum, has come closer than most with his perception of the 'structural problem' in terms that reflect Treloar's project:

Treloar's pieces [compositions] tend to exploit a slowly evolving shape which develops over large spans. ... Treloar [while improvising] seems to tap into submerged rhythms which twitch with an unpredictable, strangely organic logic.

( Peter McCallum, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 17, 1989. Review, Pipeline/Feeling to Thought collaborative concert, Joseph Post Auditorium, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, May 13. )

Treloar, in an extended percussion solo near the start, showed his lolling poise in the projection of obsessively irregular rhythms and complex cross-patterns. This gives him the ability to measure a gradual sense of growth and decay over long spans.

( Peter McCallum, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 13, 1989. Review, *INTOO MINDS* – the premiere of a Treloar "Work", commissioned by pianist, Mike Nock, Joseph Post Auditorium, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, March 8. )

Missing from these insights, however, is a crucial observation, to wit, that Treloar has discovered a way of rendering rhythm and rhythmic components so as to equalize or replace altogether the role usually assigned to pitch in cadential formulations. Having absolutely nothing to do with instrumental technique *per se*,

that logic McCallum refers to as “strangely organic” is in fact a result of Treloar having problematized musical time and its relationship with phrase-length. This problematization finally generated a concept Treloar refers to as ‘*arcs of duration*’, with these being constituted through a structural complex he construes in terms of ‘phrase—sub-phrase’. A thorough exploration of this began with his *String Quartet No.1* (recorded by the ABC in March, 1986).

John Shand gets very close to nailing it down when he says:

[Treloar was] fascinated by the possibilities of musical time not delineated by rhythm, but simply expressive of itself. He learned that the concept of time could be widened into ‘sonic sculpture’ or ‘sound shapes’ [Treloar’s coinage]. ... Using relationships as ‘structural foundations’ was to become crucial to Treloar’s own work.

( John Shand, 2009, pp 68 ~ 69 )

Of the several points made salient in Shand’s formulation, two stand out. Firstly, ‘the possibilities of musical time not delineated by rhythm’, and in particular the phrase, ‘not delineated’, because, and as McCallum has inferred, we are dealing with living matter, something that is ‘organic’, malleable and flexible, rather than an item reified and precisely described; ‘possibilities’ of which any instance is just one among many; ‘musical time’ which, not necessarily, refers to chronometric time. But, secondly, over and above this, we are moulding sonic events that, when collocated, constitute a sound-world whose very perception depends upon events passing through time; the ear registering frequency; events per unit time. The ‘relationship’ between predictability and the ‘unpredictable’, in any given instance, constitutes the enabling factor for structural perception, whether this concerns pitch, rhythm, or a combination of both. In whatever case, the absence of one does not render structural perception void. McCallum casts a glance in this direction when he says: “This gives him [Treloar] the ability to measure a gradual sense of growth and decay over long spans.”

For Treloar, cadential formulations come to ground through material consonant with a context and structured such that the balance between the predictable and the unpredictable leads, *as if inevitably*, to a state of rest. The phrase, ‘as if inevitably’, is crucial. While the inevitable suggests predictability, the ‘as if’ bears obvious metaphorical implications – a step removed from the ‘real’ – signaling potential and opening up space for surprise, indeed, the unpredictable.

The entire path followed by Treloar in his discovery of relationships has embraced both notated composition and improvisation. In the process one field has informed the other while informing itself. Treloar has not given precedence to either one. His compositional endeavors began long before he could make even the most modest claim to being a composer. Intuitively he realized the two fields could be integrated so as to enhance each other, doing so through innate expressivity.

By 1976 he [Treloar] knew that inspiration is about energy and spirit rather than demanding or implying a necessity to copy or borrow stylistic elements; that it is most likely to be harnessed by playing naturally and truthfully.

( Shand, 2009, p.69 )

In Treloar’s musical vision these energies and spirits bear multi-dimensional potential so as to embrace a logic that doesn’t necessarily depend on, though doesn’t preclude, pre-determined, *a priori* principles. Feeling through intuition is as able to manifest structural solidarity as is carefully worked notated composition. A recording enterprise, *The ‘Lazy Curl’ Project 2008* – an interactive collaboration between Treloar (playing marimba) and the Australian percussionist, Hamish Stuart, with recording by Shane Fahey – gave yield to a musical topography that bears this out.

I can’t imagine a recording which could capture more extemporization and random acts of giving from the human spirit. ... [I]nteractions which at times border on telepathic. ... Neither courageous nor self-indulgent but honestly and faithfully

expressed, clearly influenced by the over-arching maze of sound found in the bushland near Milton, NSW.

( Peter Wockner, *Limelight*, April Edition, 2009. Review of *Shades of There*, the first release of a 3-CD series from The 'Lazy Curl' Project )

Pushing this multi-dimensionality yet further, *of Paradox Once found* took *Collective Autonomy* to a new level. And it's worth quoting here from Treloar's booklet notes:

Consistent with my philosophical position regarding relationships between spontaneity and sympathetic resonance, crucially, one's spirit requires time and space by and through which 'natural breath' might be given free reign. The necessity for time and space certainly applies here because the particular textual materials with which I interact are precise, complex, and multi-dimensional. Ultimately, the expression engaged through this process is one relegated to the subliminal. Far from bearing any negative overtones though, this relegation is a letting-go-of. That is to say, not banished to the unknown but rather, devoid of conscious imposition. In light of an intense reading of these particular textual utterances the feelings that emerge through the musical realm are not consciously predetermined nor specifically directed. Resonance with the text is made manifest through devoted time; to gaining clear focus on the text's spirit, as I understand this to be. Thus the text that follows is an indication, an index, to pathways of consciousness I experienced *prior* to engaging spontaneous improvised musical expression. Neither the text I read, nor the text I wrote, functions as a program for the music in any way contrived through conscious formulation. And so it is with the ground of utmost respect that my heart is open and responds in resonance.

( Phil Treloar, *of Paradox Once Found*, Booklet, p.2. )

Phil Treloar has never done things by halves. Australia's most significant and influential improvising percussionist has always engaged in the creative process with life-and-death intensity. That the third instalment of his *Pathways of the Mind* series is a triple CD of solo marimba improvisations is therefore only mildly surprising.

It often beggars belief that these pieces were not fully composed. The Japan-based Treloar's instinct for real-time devising of form is phenomenal. But form is a hollow shell if the content it encompasses does not engage, move and transport in some combination, and his melodic/harmonic content is so lush and multifarious as to be like gazing at a vast field of diverse flowers as they dance in a breeze. Simple ideas, meanwhile, receive complex extrapolations without losing their immediacy.

Binding the work is the magnificently-recorded resonance and warmth of Treloar's marimba and the pervading meditative mood – echoed in an accompanying perceptive, candid and affecting essay on cultural imperialism.

( John Shand, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 27, 2010 – Review, *of Paradox Once Found* )

During 2010 Treloar returned briefly to his roots in the jazz world, presenting three extended pieces – *Moon Man's Main Message*, *Shades of Bhairav*, and *Directions Changing* – at performances in Sydney and Melbourne. This occasioned the formation of Spaces and Streams, a trio which, in addition to Treloar playing drum-kit, included tenor saxophonist, Julien Wilson and acoustic bassist, Philip Rex. A recording made by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is planned to be released on *Feeling to Thought* in the near future.

After one performance in Melbourne, the mutual understanding was already profound. They played two pieces of nearly an hour's duration and each sped by in what seemed like 20 minutes, so involving was the narrative development, so beguiling the beauty and so affecting the emotional clout. Space, clarity of ideas and layering of sounds were fundamental to the success. ... Such power cannot emerge from a vacuum but it does need space for combustion to occur, and each player was alive to this, so nothing was imposed on the music. The intensity grew organically.

( John Shand, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 10, 2010 – Concert Review of Spaces and Streams )