

Phil Treloar / Feeling to Thought

# Of Other Narratives

tracings in the ground of  
*Collective Autonomy*  
people–practice–theory–history

## Volume 3

### PRIMAL COMMUNICATION



## Exploratory

by John Shand

PHIL TRELOAR

Primal Communication

★★★★★

You know how dreams can have transitions and you seem to step through a portal from one world to another? Phil Treloar's monumental *Primal Communication* is like

that. Composed for strings (Conservatorium of Tasmania String Orchestra) and improvising quartet (Treloar, percussion; Mark Simmonds, tenor saxophone; David Ades, alto sax; Steve Elphick, bass), it continually astounds with its dreamlike sliding between these ensembles. To describe the two as simply juxtaposed is to miss the inexorable flow of the piece – a river passing through wildly differing country.

This performance was recorded and broadcast by the ABC in 1988, and now finds its first CD release. For this we should rejoice, as it is a pivotal work in combining composition and improvisation, and remains light years ahead of much that has been attempted since.

Christian Wojtowicz directs the strings in their moving and demanding music, while the improvising is equally stunning, notably a jubilant alto solo and an apocalyptic tenor one.

Crowning the album is Treloar's *Directions Changing*, a set of variations for the Feeling to Thought and Pipeline Contemporary Music Project recorded live in 1989, the latter including Simone de Haan (trombone), Daryl Pratt (percussion) and Michael Kieran Harvey (piano), all hooked into the improvising here – as if seen through a kaleidoscope from a different angle. A must.

**The Sydney Morning Herald** and *THE AGE*, October 6 - 7, 2012





## Phil Treloar - Of Other Narratives

tracings in the ground of  
Collective Autonomy / volume 3

### *Primal Communication*



by Peter Wockner

Volume three of this aural documentary series is about the

successful integration of the broad spectrum of orchestra and large ensemble with the focussed minutia of the improvising quartet. Proving the two can become united like a marriage, but they can simultaneously stand independently beside one another within a purpose built notated composition. These two separate recordings were made in 1988 and 1989, interestingly, prior to the formation of the Australian Art Orchestra (AAO). Each extend over 30 minutes. Treloar's writing style reminded me of that age old ideal of Duke Ellington who wrote both passages or movements and compositions with particular soloing musicians in mind. Both of these pieces contain particular highlights that showcase this idea.

'Primal Communication' starts with the Conservatorium of Tasmania String Orchestra igniting like a jet engine, slowly propelling up to velocity, reaching a point where the sound hangs in an elongated vacuum above the voicing of bassist Steve Elphick, who introduces Treloar on drums before the saxophones of David Ades and Mark Simmonds arrive in harmony and then break into free dialogue. Simmonds then unleashes a fiery solo followed by Ades, who crafts gradual momentum and allows his expression to be instinctively influenced by bass and drums. Meanwhile the Orchestra re-enters after twelve minutes with passages of tension followed by meandering mystery to surprising punctuations and highly dramatic crescendos before Elphick's bass throws out a fat groove for Treloar to latch onto. And so it re-develops. This is substantive work. The ensemble then generates a post-bop groove before Ades's slick, bluesy licks soar into dizzy heights, underpinned by Treloar's tight hi-hat. Simmonds then emerges from the dust more aggressive and freed-up by broken rhythms, plunging heavily into open ended improv eventually squeezing his tenor into high pitched territory at 28 minutes. The Orchestra re-enters with a series of buttressed support of Simmonds still soaring in the stratosphere, permanently blurring the boarder of improv and notated sounds. Following the climax a dialogue of elation occurs between quartet and Orchestra before the performance is appropriately bookended by no less than two minutes of applause. More than just satisfaction, this excitement was probably retained to give the 2012 and future listeners an insight into the level of connectivity achieved between the artists, the composition and the live Tasmanian audience.

Whilst the second piece 'Variations on 'Directions Changing' is more definitively broken into decisive movements, it is no less compelling. Whilst Treloar is unerringly focussed on creativity and the generous spirit within his music, no one should fall into the trap of overlooking his technical brilliance either. Two other high impact artists include pianist Michael Kieran Harvey (who has also performed with the AAO) and trombonist Simone de Haan. The trombonist's dramatic muted solo is like a Shakespeare soliloquy such is its vocal qualities, many of which would not be out of place in a Preservation Hall jazz band. The Conservatorium of Tasmania String Orchestra was conducted by Christian Wojtowicz.

*Jazz and Beyond*, August, 2012



Writing for a feature article which appeared in the Weekend *Review* pages of The Mercury, June 18, 1988, Rosina Beaumont observed:

“For two weeks they [Feeling to Thought] have been artists-in-residence at the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music, the first contemporary music group to be invited to such a position. ... The way in which Treloar crosses the boundaries between traditional art music and improvised music, with its sources in jazz, reflects his own musical experiences which embrace both a background in jazz music and an academic study of composition. ... Treloar now dislikes being called a jazz musician. One reason for his reluctance is an aversion to categorizing Australian music and musicians in terms of what is happening in music overseas. ... The residency of Feeling to Thought at the Tasmanian Conservatorium is an indication of the way in which traditional divisions between serious art music and music arising from the jazz tradition are being broken down.”

In the wake of the event Amanda Wojtowicz and David Hurst – who, as a member of the teaching staff at the Con, had been enormously supportive – published an article in the University’s *PRESS PRESS*:

“A PHENOMENON recently engulfed the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music in a whirlwind which radically altered many of the students’ musical preconceptions. This phenomenon was a residency by the Sydney based improvisation ensemble Feeling to Thought. ... The project was seen as a significant step in integrating performers of contemporary Australian art music with improvising musicians ... The residency further aimed to make a contribution to the Australian musical life in general by introducing the public to new ideas on composition and performance practice through the integration of disparate forces. ... Feeling to Thought’s residency was aimed at accessing student’s creative streams rather than driving home specific ideas or traditions. ... The emphasis on communication, respect for others and encouragement helped many people to build greater self-confidence and liberated some from the constraints of categorization.”<sup>1</sup>

As heard through the voices of four students:

“Their openness, directness, refreshing honesty, intensity, sincerity and enthusiasm were a thrilling contribution.”

“...they’ve made me remember the basic reasons why we play music, and also remember the personal element. Whether improvising or playing someone else’s music, somehow making it your own.”

“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!”

“[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.”<sup>2</sup>

And from the then Professor of Music and Head of the Conservatorium:

“I write to you and your colleagues on behalf of the staff and students of the Conservatorium to express our gratitude to you for so generously giving so much of your talent, commitment, energy and time to us during the period of your most successful and rewarding residency at the Conservatorium. ... I think it is clear that your visit gave focus to the exciting and creative possibilities across a whole range of interests in the Conservatorium. ... I look forward to working with you again here in Hobart.” Signed and dated, David Cubbin, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1988.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WOJTOWICZ, Amanda and HURST, David. *Feeling to Thought Residency. PRESS, PRESS*: Winter, 1988, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> For these four citations, see WOJTOWICZ, Amanda and HURST, David. *Feeling to Thought Residency. PRESS, PRESS*: Winter, 1988, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Document held in my private collection.