

Recollections - Eight

Sylvio Gualda

forever in my thoughts

a review by Phil Treloar of
a never-to-be forgotten reading

Most musically interested people who have but glanced in the direction of Western contemporary composed/notated music will have encountered the name, Sylvio Gualda. I first became aware of his artistic standing years ago through a friend, Tom O'Kelly, who, after completing his VCA course as a percussion major with Barry Quinn, went on to further his studies with Sylvio for a few years in France. Tom is always quick to sing very high praise when Sylvio's name comes up and this regarding both his musical and personal self.

Sylvio studied at the Paris Conservatoire and recognized at an early age the general lack shown percussion as the bearer of limitless creative potential. Determined to make a contribution that might change this state of affairs, Sylvio, in 1976, presented the first *recital* of percussion known to the history of Western concert music. Until his recent retirement Sylvio had been solo timpanist with the National Opera Orchestra, has recorded many of the twentieth-century's masterworks – *Le marteau sans maître* with Boulez and Bartók's *Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion and Orchestra*, just to cite two – he has commissioned and premiered several new percussion works including numerous concertos, had instruments modified and/or built from scratch, and worked in close collaboration with composers such as André Jolivet and, perhaps most notably, Iannis Xenakis. In 1976 Sylvio premiered Xenakis' *Psappha*, since recognized as a ground-breaking tour de force as well as *Ais* by the same composer. In addition to his huge contribution as an interpretive performer he has been equally significant as a teacher, having been on faculty at the Versailles Conservatoire since 1970 and the Acanthes Centre of the Aix-en-Provence Festival since 1978. Sylvio Gualda's contribution has been, in a word, enormous.

In August this year I had the pleasure and privilege of meeting Sylvio. I'd been honored with an invitation as one of four international guests to participate in the Australian Percussion Gathering (APG), this year convened by Vanessa Tomlinson at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, with the other guests, in addition to Sylvio and myself, being Steven Schick (USA) and Kuniko Kato (Japan). Meeting and hangin' out with him I came to discover Tom's unreserved praise regarding Sylvio to be utterly founded. Many events from the APG remain with me as being deeply moving and strikingly notable, and these by both students and experienced performers alike. It was a wonderful occasion and one that quite turned my head around. The general 'vibe' between people certainly not being the least of these, it was one of exchange and sharing rather than being one of competition. The kind of support shown between the students, all of whom had journeyed from Australia's major cities, was nothing short of astounding. Among the many APG events that remain vivid for me is the double performance (on the same program!) of Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation*.

A Franco-American, Varèse (1883 ~ 1965) had studied mathematics and engineering before devoting his energies to new musical precision. *Ionisation*, the percussion piece written between 1929 ~ '31, is scored for thirteen players on about thirty-seven instruments, with a performance duration of approximately six minutes. Its compositional structure stems from a foundation of rhythmic cells and instruments grouped according to timbral characteristics. While beginning very quietly with a sense of mystery emerging from skin and metal sounds it unfolds, through a long arch of interrelated transformations that alternate between loud and soft dynamics, towards a mighty climax about three-quarters the way through with the entry of piano, after which it returns again to a sense of quietude, but now with piano, celesta or glockenspiel and tubular bells predominantly defining the sound.

Ionisation was performed at the APG as both the first and last work on a fairly lengthy program of percussion music. The same players performed both renderings and these were drawn from some of Australia's foremost orchestral percussionists; indeed, a remarkable lineup of musicians and talent. The interpretation at the head of the concert was conducted by Steven Schick while the concert's closer was conducted by Sylvio Gualda. And while I have no wish to draw comparisons between them in terms that amount to 'good'-'bad', 'better'-'worse', or any other such binary judgmental formulation, I'd like here to comment on Sylvio's reading of Varèse's landmark percussion piece.

Watching Sylvio conduct was absolutely consistent with the kind of things he focused upon verbally during the one, very brief rehearsal he had with the players, namely, feeling and expression. The surface detail of *Ionisation* is wrought with technically demanding figures. To my mind, Sylvio sees these as a means to an end; the end being a gut-felt essence he seems to think is fundamental to the work. After hearing and feeling the result of his reading I'm utterly convinced. It was only after the final sounds had faded that I was aware I'd been listening, perched right on the edge of my seat. I looked round towards Kuniko Kato with whom I was seated, to discover she was as wide-eyed (wide-eared!) as I. We both had smiles on our faces from ear to ear! I think what it was that Sylvio managed to draw out of the music (and musicians playing) was a kind of freely-given restraint that ultimately focused unified energy on the major climax. But to achieve this, every sub-climax had an incredible sense of anticipation about it so that each one led, inexorably, to the next, without implying the feeling of finality. With each turn, each fortissimo, each pianissimo, each entry, each thunderous bass-drum attack, each delicate snare-drum wisper, Sylvio knew where the music was leading. Every phrase, every crescendo, seemed like an event loaded with the deepest feeling ... an expression of discovery. His conducting seemed to bring forth the very ground he stood on; from some deep place he knows of and was able to communicate through his body ... all of it, not just his hands and arms. Amazing!! Sylvio Gualda 'vibed' like *Ionisation* had just been born. The same kind of mighty feeling I got from Elvin Jones seven nights in a row at the Vanguard in 1980; the kind of feeling that is 'inspiration', and inspiring. The kind of feeling that gives birth to life. Sylvio Gualda ... thank you!

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