



PIANO
INSIDE OUT

ZUBIN KANGA

move

Zubin Kanga New Australian Works for Solo Piano

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II. A Humanoid Robot
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Throughout its history, the piano has been a focal point for innovation. The virtuoso pianists of the 19th century expanded the boundaries of what was thought possible with two hands on a keyboard, a process stimulated by the rapidly-increasing technological advances of the piano. Although the piano itself became largely standardised by the beginning of the 20th century, the innovation of new techniques never ceased, and composers and performers began to gradually discover the new sounds and colours that could be accessed by moving beyond the keyboard.

Starting with Henry Cowell and his concept of the “string piano” (playing directly on the strings like a harp) and John Cage’s use of preparations (placing bolts, screws, erasers and cardboard between the strings), the innovation of extended techniques expanded steadily over the last half-century. George Crumb’s seminal *Makrokosmos* series (1972-1979) set a new benchmark with its thorough exploration of extended techniques, the blending of old and new styles and its practical approach to both technique and notation. In recent years, the use of the inside of the piano, as well as the keyboard, has become part of the standard vocabulary for composers.

Despite this history of innovation on the instrument, there are very few Australian works that explore and expand the use of extended techniques on the piano. It is in this context that I embarked on a two-year project to create works by Australian composers that explore new approaches to the instrument. My own exploration of these techniques began during my work with student composers as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney and continued as I worked with new music ensembles (including as a member of Ensemble Offspring for the last ten years), studied in London with renowned new music specialist, Rolf Hind and worked with some of the leading composers in Europe. This experience enabled me to offer composers a very wide palette of sounds to work with, and to offer them starting points for further innovation. Some composers chose just a couple of techniques to explore, while others threw everything into the pot, cooking up a heady mixture of sounds. In doing so, each composer re-imagined the sonic capabilities of the piano afresh, effectively “building a new instrument” (to use Helmut Lachenmann’s turn of phrase) with which to create their own expanded pianistic universe.

Elliott Gyger’s *...out of obscurity*, composed for me in 2011, is one of the most complex, virtuosic and expressively beautiful works featuring extended piano techniques that I have ever encountered. On his approach to composing the work, Gyger states:

***...out of obscurity* conjures forth music from the hidden spaces between things – common notes linking large chords, interference patterns generated by polyrhythmic layering, and combinations of piano sonorities, both conventional and unconventional.**

...out of obscurity starts out as a two-part invention, with the material in each hand cycling through a wide variety of techniques: plucking the strings (which gives the work its title), guitar-like tremolos and strumming, prepared notes in the bass as well as intricate keyboard writing. The counterpoint whirls into a climax before dissipating and fragmenting in the second half, which explores the sonorous qualities and expressive power of each unusual sound. Full of crystalline colours and a virtuosic handling of the many technical and contrapuntal elements, *...out of obscurity* sets a new benchmark for the virtuosic use of extended techniques within the piano.

Nicholas Vines' music is often full of flamboyant exuberance and *Uncanny Valley* is a prime example. Vines explains the title as follows:

***Uncanny Valley* is the exploration of a strange perceptual phenomenon in the fields of robotics and animation. Common sense suggests as a representation of a human being becomes more and more 'human-like', we have a more and more positive response to it. At a certain point, however, where the resemblance is especially close, our reactions in fact suddenly switch to discomfort, disquiet or even revulsion. There are many possible explanations for this, but the general idea is leading up to the 'uncanny valley', we see a very good estimation of a person, while in the valley itself, our perception is actually of a 'real' human being, but with something wrong or off.**

Vines uses this trajectory as the frame for a set of theme and variations, moving from an industrial robot (Variation I) to a humanoid robot (Variation II) to a stuffed animal (Variation III) before descending into the 'uncanny valley' for the combined Variations IV, V and VI with the much more creepy and

macabre figures of a corpse, a zombie and a bunraku puppet (an unnervingly lifelike traditional Japanese puppet). As the work traces the descent into, and ascent out of the 'uncanny valley', it ends with the Theme, a human being. Each of the movements features a different set of techniques, creating some startling timbral counterpoint between tapping on the strings, knocking and slapping the bass strings and the eerie rasp of paper on the strings, matched by raspy vocal sounds from the pianist. The result is an extrovert virtuoso work full of constantly bubbling energy that delights in all the strange and perverse sounds a piano can make.

Daniel Rojas is one of my most prolific collaborators, and has so far collaborated with me on three solo piano works, two piano concerti, as well as two major chamber works: for soprano and piano, and for piano duo. The title of his most recent piano work, *Entre Bajos y Alturas* (Between Bases and Heights) alludes to "the depth of space not only in musical and geographical terms but also allegorically in the spiritual and psychological dimensions."

As in many of his works, Rojas draws upon a number of different indigenous and modern Latin American musical traditions, but here the styles are filtered

through the sound of a prepared piano, using just five prepared notes to create a variety of unusual sounds and textures. The first movement "Vastos Llanos" (Vast Tablelands) is inspired by Rojas' research into the music of the indigenous people of the Peruvian Andes – here the prepared notes evoke the sound of the traditional thumb piano. The second movement, "Ochos Entre Dos" (Figure Eights Between Two) takes the Tango as its starting point, with four different variations of this dance form shuffled in quick succession and the prepared notes facilitating a moment of eerie counterpoint before an explosive climax.

The final movement, "Garras y Abrazos" (Pulling Embraces) explores and extrapolates the intricate rhythmic counterpoint of the Salsa and other Afro-Cuban dance styles. The prepared notes now sound like the cowbells and timbales of a salsa rhythm section, while the piano style has been expanded to borrow from Cuban pianist, Chucho Valdés as well as from Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky and György Ligeti, culminating in a wild final section that combines rhythmic complexity with Afro-Cuban grooves in a strikingly original and virtuosic manner.

David Young's *Not Music Yet* is a particularly provocative addition to the canon of works written in graphic notation. Composed as a watercolour score in black, white and blue, there are two versions, one forty-two minutes long and one seven minutes long (which is presented here). In both versions, the pianist reads the painting as a time-space score, with pitch on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal, and performs three 'passes' from left to right, first playing the black parts of the painting, then the white and finally the blue. Crucially, Young's instructions also stated: "while by its nature, this notation has many freedoms, every attempt should be made to realise the graphics' contours and shapes as *carefully* and *precisely* as possible." The resistance between his desire for interpretative precision and the ambiguity of the notation is what makes the work particularly intriguing, and as I've found at performances and conferences, controversial. On the central philosophy of the work, Young states:

The notation can convey great precision, nuance and complexity whilst remaining immediate, fresh and spontaneous. This paradoxical quality lends the performer some great freedoms all within very strict



Not Music Yet (2012) by David Young. Scan of watercolour score, 102 x 68 cm

parameters. And as with all music scores, even when the composer hands it over to the performer, it is still not music yet.

My realisation here utilises the percussive sounds of the inside of the piano for the black section, the white notes of the keyboard for the white section and the sounds of the strings themselves, played with my fingers and percussion mallets, for the blue section. Thus the work forms a cycle of sound and technique, gradually coming out from the inside of the piano and on to the keyboard before diving back in. I previously recorded both the long and short versions of *Not Music Yet* for

release on Hospital Hill Recordings. For this recording of the 7-minute version, I use similar musical building blocks but with a more playful and extrovert execution.

All of **Marcus Whale's** music wrings interest and variety out of very minimal materials, and *Errata* is no exception. On the choice of title, he explains:

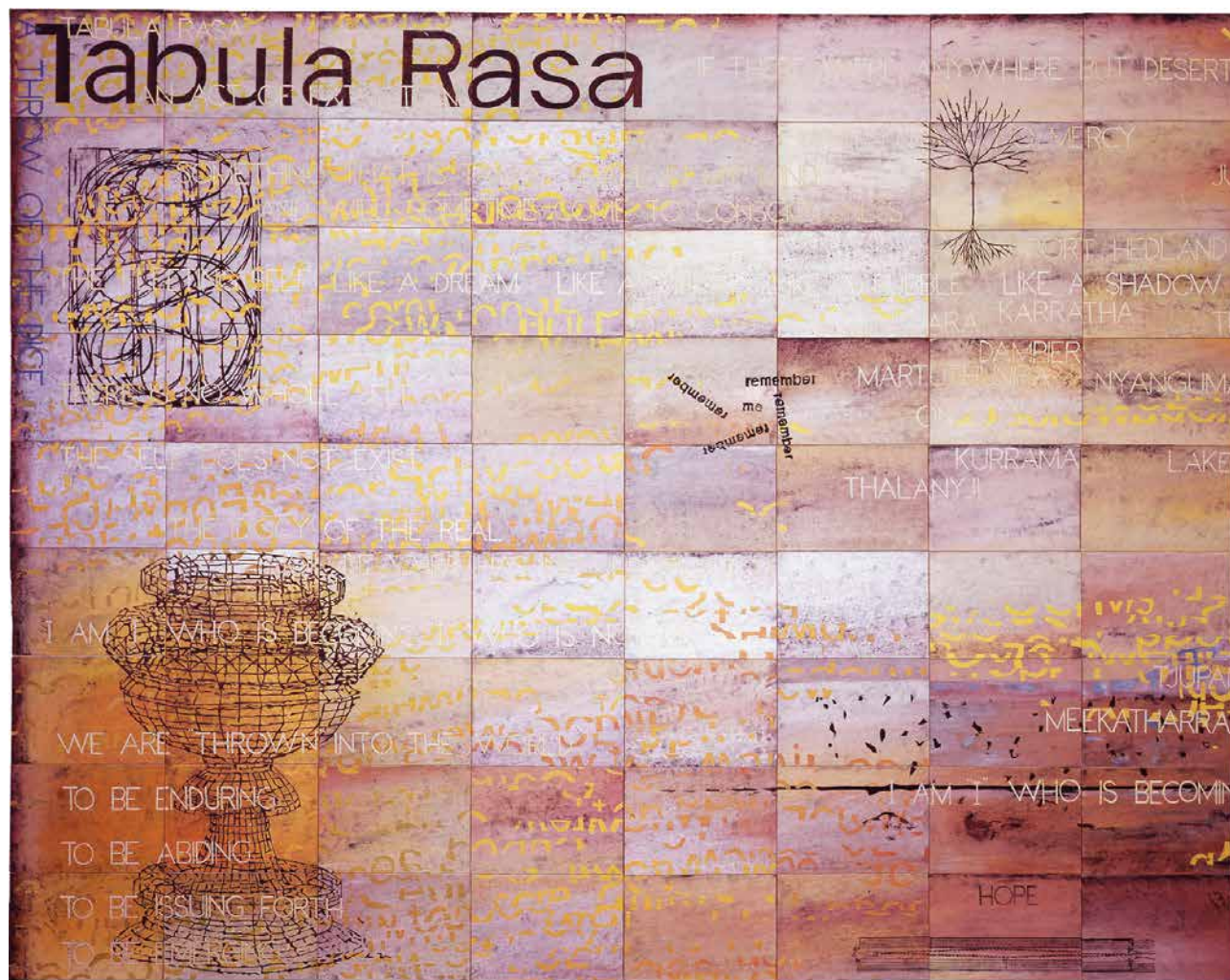
There is perhaps more to be learned from mechanical error in an era of industrial decay in which the dysfunction of physical objects is illuminated by the saturation of the invisible, by data. This is errata as in the elusive entropic

slippages in practice, in machinery, that render a splitting out from, a turning, an extraction, a folding.

Errata is formed of four closely-related sections: the first alternating between two harmonies in unpredictable ways – a mechanism that keeps jumping between states and speeds. This contrasts with a harmonically static second section that appears calm but never truly settles. A climactic passage telescopes and expands the earlier ‘glitches’ with the harmonies expanding across the keyboard before reaching a final resting point in which the opening harmony is coloured by two e-bows (small electromagnets on the strings). In this way, the suggestion of mechanised and electronic sounds give way to the unreal sounds of electrical devices in a closing passage of deceptive simplicity and beguiling beauty.

Rosalind Page first began discussing a new solo piano work with me towards the end of my undergraduate study at the University of Sydney. At the time, I was particularly interested in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, having done a course on his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, while finishing my philosophy major.

During the succeeding years of creative gestation, Page discovered the



Detail of *Tabula Rasa* (2011) by Imants Tillers. Acrylic, gouache on 288 canvasboards, 302.4 x 849.6 cm

work of Imants Tillers, an Australian painter who creates multilayered works with words, line diagrams, landscapes and stellar constellations superimposed in a complex web of meaning and memory. Page began a series of pieces, inspired by both Heidegger and

Tillers, and although the piano work is numbered second, it was completed first. Page follows Tillers' painting, *Tabula Rasa* from left to right, interpreting various elements from it literally (with the text visible in the painting "throw of the dice" corresponding to the literal

use of dice in the piano) as well as metaphorically (with Tiller's use of the outline of a cup derived from an 18th-century painting corresponding to Page's use of Baroque-inspired textures in the opening section). Page describes the three sections as follows:

remember me

**From the vestiges of determinism,
who is remembering whom?
And when memories are erased,
with what do we replenish our
being?**

late horizons

**Beyond the sinuous line tracing
family trees, how do we navigate the
abyss?
When language is lost, what can be
sung?**

cosmos

**In the diaspora of constellations,
what can we hold onto?**

Like Tillers' painting, Page's *Being and Time II: Tabula Rasa* is an expressive and multilayered exploration of memory, family, homeland and belonging.

Anthony Moles' *Diabolic Machines* is in many ways the most traditionally virtuosic of the works on this disc, but

Moles finds plenty of new ways to extend and recontextualise these virtuoso tropes. He describes his inspiration:

When writing the piece I had the image of a large machine that was made up of smaller machines. The machinery had no specific purpose, but would be forever running.

Combining a driving minimalist toccata texture, with serial techniques and the use of irrational rhythms, Moles creates a stylistic melting pot within a rigorous structure. A contrasting middle section utilises a slowed-down clockwork version of the relentless outer sections, while a long-building coda uses a reference to Franz Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 as the starting point for a massive build up of chords into walls of sound before finally dissolving into a texture resembling a broken music box.

Collaboration is central to my practice, and all the works on this CD were written in close partnership with the composers. Furthermore, the collaborations with Gyger, Rojas, Young, Whale and Moles became case studies explored in my PhD at the Royal Academy of Music, London, "Inside the Collaborative Process: Realising New Works for Solo Piano". Although my research resulted

in many fascinating findings, a burning question remained unanswered: how much of the performer can be found in the finished scores? Despite my rigorous documentation of the collaborations, the contribution of the performer to the composition process can be difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. I would hope that the variety of music on this CD demonstrates that performers can facilitate and foster the individual creativity and style of the composers they work with. But I also hope that some of my distinctive fingerprints remain, including my dedication to pianistic innovation that stimulated the many ways in which these composers turn the piano inside-out.

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Biographies

London-based Australian pianist, **Zubin Kanga** is internationally renowned for his performances of contemporary music. He has been invited to perform at the BBC Proms, Aldeburgh, London Olympiad Festivals (UK), ISCM World New Music Days, Metropolis New Music Festival, Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music, the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's "Journey Through the Cosmos" festival (Australia), Mars aux Musées (France) and Borealis Festival (Norway) as well as appearing as soloist with the London Sinfonietta and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Zubin has collaborated with many of the world's leading composers including Thomas Adès, Michael Finnissy, George Benjamin, Steve Reich and Beat Furrer, and commissioned more than 50 new works. He is a member of Ensemble Offspring, one of Australia's leading contemporary music ensembles, and has also performed with the Bang on a Can All-Stars, Ensemble Plus-Minus, Endymion Ensemble, Halcyon, Synergy Percussion, and the Kreutzer Quartet, as well as performing piano duos with Rolf Hind and Thomas Adès.

Zubin has won many prizes for his performances, including the 2012 AMC/APRA Art Music Award for 'Performance

of the Year (NSW)', the Michael Kieran Harvey Scholarship (2010), the ABC Limelight Award for Best Newcomer (2010) and the Greta Parkinson Prize (2009) from the Royal Academy of Music. In 2013 Zubin was nominated in two categories for Excellence in the APRA/AMC Art Music Awards.

A winner of the University Medal in Music from the University of Sydney and a Masters and PhD graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, London, Zubin is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Nice and IRCAM, Paris as well as a Research Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music and Research Associate at the Institute of Musical Research, London.

Elliott Gyger studied composition with Peter Sculthorpe and Mario Davidovsky, and is Senior Lecturer in Composition at Melbourne University. Major works include *From the hungry waiting country* (2006), for Halcyon; *Inferno* (2013), an hour-long solo work for pianist Michael Kieran Harvey; and a chamber opera on David Malouf's novel *Fly Away Peter* (2015). His "dialogue for orchestra" *on air* (2011) was awarded the Sydney Symphony 80th Anniversary Composition Prize, and *giving voice* (2012) received the 2013 Paul Lowin Song Cycle Award. He is also active as a conductor and

writer, with a particular interest in the music of Nigel Butterley.

Described as "riveting" (The New York Times) and "full, extravagant and wild" (Sydney Morning Herald), the works of **Nicholas Vines** (b.1976, Sydney) have been commissioned, performed and celebrated by organisations around the world. He is published by the likes of Wirripang and Faber Music, with the bulk of his work available through the Australian Music Centre. A CD of his compositions, *Torrid Nature Scenes*, was released on Navona Records in May 2013. Graduating in 2007 with a PhD from Harvard University, Vines now teaches at Sydney Grammar School and the University of New South Wales. Since 2007 he has run the New Works Program for New England Conservatory's Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice.

Daniel Rojas (b. 1974) is a Chilean-born Australian pianist and composer specialising in the rich and vibrant Latin American musical aesthetic. He has received commissions and performances from many notable artists, ensembles and orchestras, including Claire Edwardes, Southern Cross Soloists, Sydney Omega Ensemble, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Sydney Youth



Zubin Kanga discussing a new work with Daniel Rojas

Orchestra, The Metropolitan Orchestra and The Queensland Orchestra. Rojas has won several prizes for his compositions including the Fellowship of Australian Composers Award, Frank Albert Prize, the Miriam Hyde Memorial Award, and the Keys National Piano Composition Competition. Rojas is also a pianist and improviser, and has recently embarked with Zubin Kanga on a series of two-piano performances and recordings. A PhD graduate of the University of

Sydney, he is a lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

David Young is a composer currently living and working in Berlin. He was the Artistic Director of Australia's only contemporary chamber opera company, Chamber Made Opera, from 2010–2013, and was the founding Artistic Director of Aphids which remains one of Australia's most innovative cross-artform producing organisations. With musical

and aesthetic interests that genuinely reach into all artforms, David's composition has frequently extended beyond the merely aural. This approach is mirrored in his artistic direction, whether it be for the programming of a small dynamic arts company, or a large-scale festival such as Next Wave (he was director of Melbourne's Next Wave Festival in 2002).

Marcus Whale (b. 1990) is a Sydney-based composer, musician and artist. His practice encompasses live performance, sound installation and recordings, scored works and video. His compositions have been performed by The Song Company, Synergy Percussion, Ensemble Offspring, Claire Edwardes, Zubin Kanga, Chronology Arts and his own Volta Collective. He performs music solo as Scissor Lock, as part of pop groups Collarbones and Black Vanilla and with improvising groups Pollen Trio and The Splinter Orchestra, while recording for labels Two Bright Lakes, New Weird Australia, The Finer Things, Room40, Feral Media, Hellosquare and 3BS. Under these guises, he has performed or presented work at Sydney Festival, Vivid Sydney, Brisbane Festival, Underbelly Arts Festival and the Now Now Festival.

Rosalind Page has created works for theatre, dance, voice, chamber ensembles and orchestra. In 2004, *Fracture: a noh play for cello and orchestra*, an interpretation of Kurosawa's *RAN*, received a Highly Commended Award in the prestigious Paul Lowin Orchestral Prize and in 2006 her setting of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Sonetos del Amor Oscuro* won the Paul Lowin Song Cycle Prize. Rosalind has lectured in Film Sound: History and Aesthetics at the University of Sydney and taught Composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music since 2006. International residencies include Visby International Composers Centre (VICC), Sweden, CAMAC Marnay-sur-Seine, France, Herhusid, Siglufjordur, Iceland and The Banff Centre, Canada.

Anthony Moles was born in Darwin, Australia in 1983. He studied composition with Gerard Brophy and Stephen Leek at the Queensland Conservatorium where he graduated with First Class Honours. Anthony's music has been performed by ensembles including the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, the Sydney Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra, the Queensland Conservatorium Chamber Orchestra, the Ku-Ring-Gai Philharmonic, the Saint Cecilia Chamber Orchestra, the Song

Company and the Sydney Symphony Fellows. Soloists to perform Anthony's music include Vanessa Tomlinson, Anna Grinberg, Zubin Kanga, Geoffrey Gartner and Joshua Hill. Anthony is currently completing his Ph.D. at the Sydney Conservatorium under the supervision of Michael Smetanin. He is the recipient of a University of Sydney Postgraduate Award and was recently awarded the Dorothy N. Glover Memorial Trust.

Credits

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The Michael Kieran Harvey Scholarship provided invaluable support for the two tours that featured these works in 2011 and 2012 and for the creation of this CD. Special thanks to Michael Kieran Harvey for his advice, encouragement and support in recent years.

I would never have mastered the inside of the piano without my teacher in London, Rolf Hind, a pianist of superb technique and expressive power and an ideal mentor and collaborator. Thanks also to Ransford Elsley, my formative teacher who helped me to discover the virtuoso within and ignited my passion for contemporary music.

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Finally, thanks to my parents, Marlene and Rustom and to my brother, Jehan for their sage advice, crucial support and boundless love.

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