

MEMOIRE 9

Obstructionism and Performance

As Australian critic and poet Clive James has suggested, memories can be unreliable. The ageing process seems to create a jumble of images that just pop out in quiet moments of contemplation, while taking a constitutional or performing ablutions. Recently, I was pondering the practical obstacles of playing a concert - even in front of small audiences, the kind of audiences that attend music destined to remain unpopular.

I'm not talking about the various government regulations, public liability insurance, legal restraints, and other bureaucratic nonsense that have crept with stealth into our lives in recent decades. I'm remembering other acts of obstructionism.

In January 1981, the percussionist Roger Turner set up a concert (part of a series) for him, the late, great Paul Rutherford, and myself at the bravely named Workers Music Association in Notting Hill, London. We arrived an hour or so before the scheduled event to find that the janitor had got jacked off with hanging around for us (probably realising as well that the music might not be to his taste) and had gone home, leaving the premises locked. What to do?



The former Workers Music Association, London.

I've written Roger to confirm that what I recall actually happened. I spotted an open window above a drainpipe and gamely climbed up and started to crawl through the window to find out that I was half stuck about 3 meters above an open toilet. The thought of ending up in the toilet before getting to play a note of music did enter my mind. Somehow, I managed to get most of me through the window and was now upside down facing the bowl. With an elastic grace that is no longer part of my anatomy, I headed south and then quickly flipped my body - adjusting to a northerly upright posture just in time to avoid a watery fate. I then headed to the front door, and with a victorious sweep of the arm, opened it to let in the musicians and audience of maybe ten punters.

Roger writes: 'I've just sent a couple of photos of the building. Of course, it's changed a lot ...there used to be a flat roof area between the building and the one next to it ...you'd go up the stairs from the street, across the flat roof area and then through the door to the WMA itself. So you can't see evidence of the toilet window you crawled through to get in, as it's all been transformed into a large notting hill desirable residence for a white millionaire no doubt ...we still live in a housing co-op round the corner.'

The centre of Sydney in the 1970s and 1980s was a very different beast to today's real estate obscenity. I had a choice of over a dozen welcoming venues where I could put on improvised music - for free. An incomplete list would have included the ICA (Central Street opposite Hoyts entertainment on George Street), Betty Kelly's Sculpture Centre, Old Marist Brothers School, Art Industry Empire, Frank Watters Gallery, Darlington School, Cell Block Theatre, the old Performance Space (Cleveland Street), Stephen Mori Gallery, ICE run by Ian Hartley (founder of Yellow House, Ice, Spurt magazine documenting Sydney's punk and new wave scenes), the exquisite (Walter Burley Griffin-designed) Paris Theatre (pulled down by real estate vandals in 1981 and replaced with an architecturally challenged block of luxury apartments). Jazz venues such as the Basement, The Pinball Wiz, and Jenny's Wine Bar also tolerated experimental music from time to time. Exiles Bookshop was a favourite. A number of street events were mounted from there including a confrontational Taylor Square performance (conducting the traffic conducting the musicians), and an amplified solo violin rooftop concert in which I set up some fifty chairs in the dividing strip (no longer there) and opposite on the Oxford Street pavement. The concert went for an hour, the audience took their places, the police were never called, no one complained, a car skidded to a halt (you can hear it on the recording) to avoid a random pedestrian, and after this brief sonic intervention, life continued.

Not all musical activities were greeted with such candour. One sweaty summer night in the performance room above the bookshop, I was midway wheeling a mobile sonic device around the room when a fire cracker was thrown through the open window and landed with a colossal bang (amplified by the room's very lively acoustics) at my feet. Blood drained from the faces of the audience but somehow it seemed, as Moondog would have put it, 'strangely strange but oddly normal', so after a stunned pause, I continued my wheeling.

As it happened, the director of Festival d'Automne was in the audience searching for representatives of Australia's avant garde to represent the country in Paris later that year (1983). After the concert was over, she came up to me and announced that this was 'perfect' for the Pompidou Centre. I'm not sure if I she thought the explosion was a contrived part of the performance or not.

And so there we were at 'Beaubourg' (The Pompidou) - Martin Wesley-Smith and myself were waiting in the wings for the International premiere of our collaborative 'Tango' project for Fairlight CMI and violin. Seconds to go. Nervous? Yes. Without warning or explanation some twenty stern looking men pushed us aside and marched onto the stage where they stood menacingly while the presumed leader rendered a speech to the audience. They stood there about fifteen minutes before marching off, pushing us aside again as if we didn't exist. I guess in the scheme of things, we didn't. The members of the union declared that they would go on strike unless management responded to their demands, a list so long (my school boy French gave up after the first volley) that I assumed the management would also capitulate rather than having to listen to all that. With tentative steps we took to the stage, even more nervous about what the republic might have in store for us.

Taking on a French trade union may be considered an unequal joust but competing (on the other side of capitalism) with an American bank constitutes an even more unequal endeavour. It's 1985 and The Festival New Music America has invited me to play in Houston, Texas - sponsored by a bank. Despite the question of why would any bank have anything to do with improvised music, I was assured by the organisers that they had scored an awesome venue for my ten-hour marathon. (I would love to have heard the negotiations). They said it was the biggest bank foyer in town and something of an architectural wonder. It was huge; a gaudy cathedral to commerce plastered with ornate ostentation. I've tried to track down the name of the actual bank but, it all being pre-internet, I haven't been able to come up with the program details of the festival. According to my Google search, however, it would have to have been the JP Morgan Chase building.

And so I started my long form concert at 7 am. Even at low volume level the rampant acoustics made my sound unavoidable, and I was already playing full tilt when the unfortunate employees arrived for work with looks of WTF on their faces ...some put fingers in their ears. No one lingered in the foyer.

Being America, I had asked for a television to aid my concentration throughout the ten hours of music. The bank had also gratefully provided a large sign that read something like 'The Bank of blah blah blah proudly presents, in association with New Music America, Jon Rose', in front of which I was performing. It looked like a prop from the TV series *Dynasty*: a white board with fancy gold italic script and border.

As the morning progressed the occasional group of high school visitors were shown around. Suitably bored by a tour of this monument to high finance, they plonked themselves down in the twenty or so chairs (generously provided for an

unsuspecting audience) and immediately honed in on the TV show. Although my job was to provide an alternative sound track to the life of an everyday domestic television set, they took no interest in my activity and were soon yanked off by their teacher to an explanatory talk on capitalism at the far side of the space half a football pitch away. Not much else happened, although I did sense the odd sniff of hostility if anyone walked by.

I stopped for a ‘bathroom’ break at high noon. On returning I saw that the large sign advertising my presence had disappeared. I returned to the task at hand and noticed someone actually was watching, maybe listening. The man from the *Houston Chronicle* put it like this:

'During the lunch hour, Jon Rose of Sydney, Australia, was about midway through his 10 hour marathon 'Don't Even Think About Moving'. While watching Petticoat Junction on TV, he was wearing sunglasses and playing a black violin. He paused to think every few minutes. Themes from The Godfather and Love Story, played with cracked wit, were wound into difficult Bartokian passages. Vivaldi or a folk tune would snake into the piece. Perhaps Rose was commenting on TV as the unending backdrop of life? What if we were required to react to Television for 10 straight hours, could any of us provide the running commentary? Then The Rifleman came on.'

At around 3pm, I happened to turn my head to discover that the sign was back, some hasty brush work had removed all reference to the sponsorship of the bank; the plain white board now read “Jon Rose - Australia”. The lines of any responsibility had been cut.

I have been lucky enough to tour China twice (1994, 1998) when the People’s Republic was on the cusp of returning to great power status. Most of the traditional Hutong in Beijing were being buried by brand new skyscrapers; the authorities had just built the sixth ring road, a seventh coming soon; the air in November was a choking dismal smog. Despite the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the 1990s were a period of comparative openness. Censorship determined that all visiting musicians must present their song lyrics for control (not a problem for improvising musicians), but even Chinese pop stars could have some fun at the expense of the secret police. I was told that at one large concert the singer in question asked the crowd to join in with the chorus, he then asked the secret police to sing along by themselves in the next chorus (which they embarrassingly did). The hundreds of police were easily identifiable: they were all wearing the same identical Hawaiian T-shirts as their plain clothes disguise! This humorous scenario is hard to imagine under the current total surveillance police state of Xi Jinping.

Shenzhen (the Chinese entrepreneurial hub next to Hong Kong) in the 1990s had a special status and regular Chinese citizens were not allowed in without a permit. It’s hard to figure out who actually invited us to play there or who bribed whom for the pleasure, but there I found myself about to play solo in front of several

thousand people in a huge auditorium (actually a cinema as we were about to find out). At the time I had a complicated set up with interactive violin bow, pedals, and stereo electronics. With the sound check underway, I asked where the mixer for the house was. I was told it was in another building nearby on the 5th floor! How on earth could they hear what was going on in the auditorium, I politely queried. Everything is set up they don't need to hear the result, I was informed. Several hours of negotiation took place and eventually I was reluctantly given a small auxiliary mixer on stage with me where I could at least make my own modifications. It is now almost time for the concert and I'm sitting there onstage awaiting to start the proceedings when a small army of uniformed cleaning ladies arrive to clean the stage. The translators had left and so I was left to fight them off - physically waving my violin bow at their intimidating mops - preventing them from covering my equipment with water and bubbly soap. They were extremely angry at their routine being thwarted by this upstart of capitalism. Eventually the shouting and pointing stopped, the audience poured in, and I played a 45-minute set to a fairly non-plussed audience. Luckily, I played the first set. The second set consisted of a mixed Scandinavian/Indian group playing a typical world music melange. They were just about to start their third number when the manager of the house appeared. He announced in Chinese and English (to huge applause), 'Now concert over, time for movie.' In front of the aghast band, a screen descended and *Saving Private Ryan* suddenly appeared with the sound cranked up to distortion levels in the PA system. Now it was clear why there was an audience - not for the music at all but for the latest Hollywood movie.

The following morning in Shenzhen, I walked passed a shop, and there to my amazement in the window were a set of Chairman Mao Zedong's *Little Red Books* - one in Chinese, one in English, and one full of Mao's poetry, which I was told later was all stolen from various poets (who became anonymous). I couldn't resist the temptation; my fee was spent on these collector items that are now housed in The Rosenberg Museum along with a (dubious) violin from the Long March.