

# NEW DIRECTIONS

## AT THE AUSTRALIAN ART ORCHESTRA

Article: Peter Knight Email: [phjk@me.com](mailto:phjk@me.com) Website: <http://aao.com.au>

**Trumpeter/composer Peter Knight is a multidisciplinary musician who has gained acclaim for his eclectic approach, integrating jazz, world music and experimental traditions. He leads the multicultural band Way Out West and was recently appointed Artistic Director of the Australian Arts Orchestra. Here, he lets us in on his thinking about future directions.**

It seems to me that the ideas which led to the formation of the Australian Art Orchestra nearly 20 years ago are still very relevant in 2013. The notion of a group that has improvisation as its core practice, that engages with contemporary forms, prioritises cross-cultural collaboration, and sits (in Paul Grabowsky's words) 'somewhere between the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Ensemble Modern', sounds pretty damn interesting to me. As Artistic Director I intend to strengthen these foundations, supporting existing key AAO projects whilst also creating some new directions. It's an amazing opportunity; I'm excited about working with this extraordinary group of musicians and looking forward to building on one of the most substantial legacies in Australian music.

I see the AAO as an important vehicle for the exploration of contemporary music and art – for imagining what Australian music might sound like in twenty years. And broadly speaking, my fundamental motivation for getting involved with the organisation is to facilitate the making of interesting art music: to ask questions, to create spaces for contemplation and so on. I'm personally really interested in the exploration of meeting points in music (and art making in general) and I think this aligns well with the AAO which has been at the sharp end of this kind of engagement since its formation.

I also believe that an organisation like the AAO can and should have at the heart of its mission the objective of building community. Making and sharing music is above all about people and I am thinking a lot about the ways that the AAO can nurture the next generations of improvisers, composers and artists working across multiple disciplines. I want to build on the success of recent projects like *Hard Core on the Fly*, which brought together members of the AAO with younger improvisers under the leadership of Scott Tinkler to perform a series of concerts based on sharing of ideas, improvisation, and experimentation. I would like to see this engagement with local artists continue perhaps with a greater emphasis in the future on cross-disciplinary and cross-artform

collaboration. The AAO is a store of embodied knowledge and should be a site of research creating new work that reflects contemporary practice.

The AAO should also continue to reflect Australia's cultural diversity. Central to this is an ongoing commitment to maintaining and deepening our engagement with Australian indigenous cultures, particularly through the *Crossing Roper Bar* project (which has been going for around ten years now), but also with new projects in years to come that will take forms yet to be imagined.

For me the AAO's long-standing and visionary engagement with Asian cultures is another of the aspects of this organisation that drew me to apply for the AD position. I have a record of commitment to the notion of a future in which truly new music that engages Asian and Western influences is part of the cultural fabric of our region, having worked, during the last seven years, with musicians from Vietnam, Korea, China (Sichuan) and Japan. The opportunities that exist here for collaborations with artists from Asian cultures make being a musician living in Australia in 2013 particularly exciting. Being an improvising musician seems especially relevant as improvised practice, which is at the core of the AAO, is also important in many Asian musical traditions making it an ideal platform for facilitating musical dialogues with our regional neighbours.

Over the next few years I'd like to see the AAO deepen and develop existing collaborations such as Adrian Sherriff's long-standing project with South Indian group, Sruthi Laya, and *The Return of Spring*, which is a newer project that extends Simon Barker's work with Korean pansori singer, Bae Il Dong. I intend to support these projects through touring and new releases and in addition, create new possibilities for collaborations extending the role of the AAO as a central player in the fostering of cross-cultural links with Asia. I also have plans to investigate the creation of a residency program in Northern Australia that reaches out to Asian music graduates as well as Australian musicians and that invites collaboration.

In addition to the two focus areas I have already discussed, Europe and the UK both remain critical to the future development of the AAO – notwithstanding the current economic difficulties which have made everything in the music scene there more difficult. The response to recent European concert presentations of *Crossing Roper Bar* underscores the potential for the AAO to develop a far greater presence in Europe. It's important to make this development a priority for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that the chance to travel and perform live for good audiences around the world nourishes every aspect of any ensemble. In addition though, for the AAO there is an important role to play in terms of advocacy for Australian creative/improvised music more broadly. It seems to me there is a huge potential for the development of a greater awareness of our scene(s) overseas and that the AAO should place itself right at the centre of this conversation.

All of this is going to place considerable demands on my time and keep me pretty busy for the foreseeable future though I am fortunate my role at the AAO is complemented by our wonderful Executive Director, Lena Gan, and recently appointed Executive Producer, Jeni Howland,



along with an energetic and highly skilled board. In fact, my job is only part-time, which leaves me able to pursue my own practice separately with the support of an Australia Council Music Fellowship – an opportunity and privilege that I am very grateful for.

The main projects I have planned for my own practice during this period follow the direction my music has taken for the last couple of years since I made a distinct turn coinciding with an intense period of reflection and experimentation afforded me by the opportunity to undertake a doctorate at Queensland Conservatorium under the supervision of Erik Griswold. During this time I began to really work in earnest at expanding my practice to integrate electroacoustic approaches with the aim of opening up my language as both an improviser and composer. This work culminated in the release of three albums, *Residual* with Anh Nguyen (Parentheses 2011), *Fish Boast of Fishing* a sextet featuring Erik Griswold, Vanessa Tomlinson, Adam Simmons, Frank Di Sario and Joe Talia (Listen Hear Collective 2012), and the most recent, *Allotrope* (Listen Hear Collective 2012), which is a collection of solo works featuring the trumpet processed through amplifiers, pedals and laptop.

To follow this, in the last six months I have travelled by myself through Europe, UK, Asia and North America performing solo as well as in (mostly) spontaneous collaborations with a whole range of musicians and artists. This has been an amazing experience and a real time of musical growth for me. It's a very different feeling to that which I get touring with a band where you tend to delve deep into the relationships that exist within the group. When I'm on my own I have found that I need to be more open – it's a vulnerable, challenging place but ultimately it has been rewarding and I feel like I am a much stronger musician for these experiences. I'm intending to build on this with a new solo album extending the ideas captured on *Allotrope* by drawing in a wider range of source materials.

As well as my solo project I have started working on a new Way Out West album featuring a line-up that includes the Sydney-based koto player, Satsuki Odamura and guitarist Lucas Michailidis. This will develop the approaches I have taken with previous Way Out West albums to integrate my electroacoustic practice. I'm also finishing an album with the Korean singer/laptop artist, Sunny Kim, and bassist, Chris Hale which we began work on last year. This one is a kind of abstract minimal electro dreamland hanging on Sunny's sublime voicings of Korean poetry as well as wordless forays.

I'm not sure which order all this will eventually go in but the fourth project I have planned is a collaboration with the extraordinary Melbourne-based folk singer, Paddy Mann (Grand Salvo). We want to make an album with a band line-up similar to my *Fish Boast of Fishing* sextet that creates an abstract messed-up setting for Paddy's direct vocal and lyrical style.

It seems like a lot when I write it all down like this but I feel much more excited than daunted as I ponder the next few years and pretty fortunate to find myself in the position I'm in. Certainly all the travel I have been doing recently has served to affirm for me (if I needed affirmation) that we have one of the most energised and interesting creative music scenes in the world. I'm really fired up about having the opportunity to contribute to it, to help to build it, promote it and advocate for it both here and overseas.



Peter Knight, new Artistic Director for the Australian Art Orchestra.

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