

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Teetering on the Brink of Tonality: An Interview with Neil Kelly

Wez Prictor

Composer Neil Kelly talks with Wez Prictor about Slave Pianos, music at La Trobe University, and the new fin de siècle.

I first met Neil Kelly in 1990 when I began my undergraduate degree at La Trobe University. Music at La Trobe was an amazing eye-opener for an eighteen-year-old country boy, particularly the tutorials run by Neil Kelly. They included atonal sight singing, twelve-tone composition and analysis, and a steady diet of Second Viennese school. I immediately became reacquainted with Neil on my return to La Trobe in 1998. His was a familiar face and someone whose teaching I had found most influential.

Born in South Australia in 1957, Neil Kelly began composing in 1974—his final year of high school—at which time he received the ‘South Australian Young Composer of the Year’ award. Two unrelated, yet similarly auspicious events during this year would have a profound influence on Kelly’s musical life. The first was the arrival of English electronic music pioneer Tristram Cary at Adelaide University in 1974, where Kelly would find himself a year later (although his studies would be interrupted by playing bass in a variety of pop/rock bands). Serendipitously, Kelly had already become enamoured with the VCS3 synthesizer, an instrument designed by Cary himself only a few years earlier. Meanwhile, in Melbourne, composer Keith Humble was busy establishing an innovative new Music Department at La Trobe University. Over a decade was to pass before these events collided when, in 1986, Kelly found his way to the ‘mystical’ La Trobe. There he taught composition, theory and repertoire studies, and worked on his PhD about Alban Berg’s *Drei Orchesterstücke*, before the Department’s untimely closure at the end of 1999.

In addition to his considerable catalogue of art music, Neil Kelly has composed for theatre, television documentaries and soundtracks, and has had numerous works published. His latest ventures include recording projects, CD production, playing bass in various bands (despite his ‘retirement’ from the rock scene), and perhaps most importantly his ‘re-composition’ work with the inimitable Slave Pianos Collective: an art music project that has exposed the composer to a world-wide audience.

Having both been a part of La Trobe music during its final days, Neil and I have remained in contact, and I maintain an interest in his continuing work, particularly his involvement with Slave Pianos. I caught up with Neil over coffee in Brunswick St in April this year to talk about his career in composition, Slave Pianos and the demise of the La Trobe Music Department.

You were a bit of a late starter weren't you?

I didn't do *any* serious music study until the last year of high school. I was one of the very fortunate people to have access to a VCS3 synthesizer. Tristram Cary, my teacher, designed it. Because Tristram was a pioneer of electronic music, he had a rapport with Keith Humble, and I'd heard of this mystical place in Melbourne—for me, Melbourne could've been the moon! I knew that it existed from that time, and I was really fortunate to have the VCS3 and a Tandberg 'sound-on-sound' quarter-inch tape deck, so I was off and running.

The VCS3 was a brilliant instrument in that it had a very different kind of abstract approach to sound. There was no keyboard interface, for example. So that was a big moment for me. Prior to that I had just been a rock 'n' roll bass player.

You actually won an award for South Australian Young Composer of the Year in 1974; that must have been an amazing time.

It was. Prior to that I was living in the country, and I moved to the city and somebody said 'it's ok, you can do music!' Before that, I thought I was going to be a doctor or something like that. I was definitely a maths and physics man, but I knew all along that the only thing I was really committed to for life was music, and that was a great turning point.

Was there any particular event that led to this?

One huge catalyst was having a good teacher, someone who facilitated and encouraged. But it might have just been that someone gave me permission to do what I always wanted to do. However, at that time, composition was always secondary to my more serious aspirations: pop stardom!

Do you still think of yourself as having come from a rock 'n' roll background?

I do. When I was in that world I was always 'The Professor,' because I could read music, but I was a rock 'n' roll bass player from the age of twelve, gigging pretty hard. That's what I feel is my first instrument. The rock/pop thing was a huge part of my life. I was a full-time gigging musician for probably twenty years. Even while I was at La Trobe I was still playing. I must have quit in about 1990, when I went into full-time teaching.

When you turned respectable?

Yes, that's it!

The La Trobe Music environment was one in which prejudices against non-tonal music were broken down very quickly, while still building upon a 'traditional' music theory education.

That is exactly the essence of it. One of the key aspects of the La Trobe manifesto, which Keith Humble really implemented, was to throw people in the deep end. It is interesting that he was a breakaway from Melbourne University when he set up La Trobe. Everything Keith did was based on conflict, and intensity.

Although it was not necessarily the deep end in terms of struggling to cope, but in terms of exposure to new material and the challenges of working in an unfamiliar environment.

Yes, not so much the deep end, but just throwing everything up in the air, and starting afresh without so many musical preconceptions. The fact that a big part of what happened at La Trobe was oriented towards atonality is kind of incidental. The Second Viennese school was important there because a lot of us were interested in that, but it could have been anything—there were other things, like *musique concrète*—anything that made people investigate music in a different light.

The Music Department at La Trobe University has been a major influence on the Australian contemporary music scene since 1974; surely its closure must have had some impact on the avant-garde milieu?

It will change the landscape of Australian music. I do think that La Trobe has had a great impact on the culture of contemporary music, but I don't think that things are going to go back to 1974, because there is now so much dissemination of contemporary thought.

It's almost too easy to be subversive now.

There is that, but the thing that La Trobe had that you don't see much of elsewhere is a slightly more rigorous approach to contemporary music. The rigour in the early days of La Trobe, the exploration of new music, was pretty hardcore. People were actually forced to engage with that material—it wasn't just something that you read about in a book. No matter who you are, that exposure forms your musical life forever: different options, different ways of thinking about music. *Slave Pianos* is the same for me; it's about exposing yourself to different possibilities.

Have you perceived a widening of the socio-musical gap between the conservative and the avant-garde in Melbourne and around the world? Do you see the avant-garde and the conservatorium circles as adversaries or partners in the battle for funding?

I don't want to get into the whole area of 'institutionalised art.' It's difficult to say whether the so-called 'avant-garde' has achieved greater acceptance. Perhaps the nature of it is that it *shouldn't* be accepted and it has to thrive in its own little pocket; the Planet Café on Tuesday nights might be the best place for the avant-garde in Melbourne. If you try to institutionalise it, as we *kind of* did at La Trobe, eventually the institution chews it up. Since I've been so heavily involved in the visual art world, I've become very cynical about the idea of avant-garde at all, and it is to do with that issue of government sponsored art.

It could be said that applying for funding to undertake such subversive projects is an ironic, even Dadaistic statement in itself!

Well, I used to give lectures called 'Beethoven the Subversive!' Hopefully our kids will be able to go to an institution where creative thinking, initiative and innovation in the arts are valued as important in terms of learning, building a better society and imbuing our culture with original thought. At the moment, though, I find it difficult to associate anything like that with universities.

The closure did enable you to set up your home studio, which I know was something you had been thinking about for quite some time.

The writing was on the wall at La Trobe for a long time, probably for the entire ten years that I taught there. There was a gradual decline for many reasons, so I was planning my contingency, which was probably that I was always destined to get away from academia and get back to making my own music. I may never have done it if La Trobe hadn't collapsed; it was definitely the catalyst that gave me the opportunity to fend for myself musically. I have got back in touch with a lot of my past lives.

Cultural context and the *fin de siècle* are significant topics in your research on Alban Berg. Recently you witnessed the demise of the La Trobe music department, an event that also coincided with the turn of a century, of a millennium in fact. It was also at this time that the Slave Pianos concept—at that stage based at La Trobe—was getting into full swing.

I made quite a few observations about the spirit of the times; the period towards the end of our time at La Trobe was obviously parallel with what I was looking at in turn of the century Vienna. I became obsessed with the first couple of decades of the twentieth century and the Second Viennese School. In the end, the fact that I was studying the year 1914 in particular became less interesting than the fact that I was looking at a piece of music as a document of a historical period, so it became a cultural thing. Therefore it becomes relevant to look at the turn of the twenty-first century in the same way. Music is a document that reflects the time, in some way or another.

In 1998, Neil Kelly became involved in one of the most unusual projects of his career, the Slave Pianos Collective. At once mocking and analytical, it is often difficult to tell where the Dadaist parody ends and deconstruction begins. Based around the avant-garde team of visual artists Danius Kesminas and Michael Stevenson, electro-acoustic composer [and La Trobe alumnus] Rohan Drape, as well as Kelly, the Slave Piano Collective might describe themselves in typically paradoxical style as being forever earnest but always tongue-in-cheek.

I am quite familiar with the work of Slave Pianos, but I don't think I could describe it. Could you explain Slave Pianos in simple terms?

No, but I'll try—it's a hard thing to do. It is a collaboration between musicians and visual artists where our primary task is to reinterpret works by other artists. It is an opportunity for music and the visual arts to find common ground. The initial idea was to take 'soundworks' by visual artists and to transcribe them for a piano playing device, hence the 'Slave Pianos.'

So what is a 'soundwork'?

Anything that produces a noise. In the case of a Jean Tinguely sculpture—which is the nicest sounding visual art work I've come across—you can transcribe the recordings, which can then be expanded from there to other types of adaptations. It is more that we find a pathway from a source work, and then reinterpret and transcribe. We use the term 'recompose.'

The Slave Pianos literature often uses terms such as 'anti-composition,' and the project seems to owe as much to Dadaism as it does to deconstructionism. When you 'recompose,' what exactly are you trying to achieve?

The term 'recomposition' has been coined by others, by composers remaking their predecessors' works. There's a great book by Joseph Straus called *Remaking the Past*. It's the best word we can come up with for what we do because it is not really arranging; we are trying to distill the essential elements of another work and then place it into a vastly new context.

How much new material are you adding? What of Neil Kelly the composer is in the music?

A lot, but always within a set of rigid frameworks that we draw up for ourselves. We did an opera *The Broccoli Maestro* last year based on the work of Melbourne painter Tony Clark. We studied his life and his works. Everything about the opera was drawn from his musical life, his painting, his philosophy; the plot was a transcription of a particular incident in his life. All the material was strictly from a given source, and then the layers of reference and compositional aspect came into it. We try not to invent new material; it is all about processing.

So it starts off as 'here's a noisy bit of stuff from a Tinguely sculpture; how can we make that into player piano music?' We try and do various things to achieve that.

Can you explain in technical terms how you go about taking one and turning it into the other?

It depends on the source work you see. Sometimes we plug it into programmed parameters, and it spits out music.

So you start with a recording?

Usually, but there are other pieces we've done. There is a piece by Duchamp, for example, which is just a bunch of notes that he and his sisters came up with by plucking them out of a hat. The string of notes becomes the source material for a work. However, we try to be faithful to the aesthetic of the source work—usually.

So are you 'doing a Nancarrow,' sitting down and punching holes in a piano roll? How does it work?

That was the original idea, but in the end it was too awkward. We wanted to do piano rolls because they make such beautiful 'art objects,' but in the end we bought our own machine, which is driven by MIDI and placed on any keyboard. It's an adaptation of a device made by an American company, so you can turn your grand piano at home into a pianola.

That was the starting point, and it's been a very central part of what people have come to know as Slave Pianos. Of course, what Slave Pianos is in the end is an art/music project that

works mainly in galleries, as installations, rather than concert halls. However, we have tried to bridge those areas as much as possible.

Even when we did the operas in Germany as ‘serious’ operas in concert halls, it was still a visual art project. It’s ambiguous, neither one nor the other, and in many ways that is the beauty of it.

Where and with whom did the idea originate?

The two artists in the team, Danius Kesminas and Michael Stevenson, called me at La Trobe and asked if it were possible ‘to take a recording, plug it into something, and spew out some piano music?’ Of course I said ‘get lost, go away!’

I guess they had envisaged some sort of automated process that didn’t involve hours of human effort!

We did a lot of transcription by ear as well, by the way. That was the start of it, and it has just snowballed.

The exciting thing for me as a composer involved with Slave Pianos is that it has created a whole lot of new opportunities: working with really interesting performers all over the place and, more importantly, an opportunity to compose in many ways in which I wouldn’t normally compose. That has been very stimulating.

You are obviously entrusted with making musical decisions, but at the same time you are trying to be transparent. Surely every musical decision you make becomes something new, something that has been added to the original source?

The process that we like to use with Slaves is that the compositional tasks are very much in the ‘predetermining the parameters’ phase. In an ideal situation, in the simplest case, you might take this source recording of a Tinguely sculpture and make up the rules, plug it in, and it will automatically produce the results. That is the simplest version. Obviously, if you are writing an opera, with text and all sorts of source material, then it’s a lot harder to pre-determine the rules. But it is the making of the rules, as in all composition, that is the tricky part—and the most creative.

The Slave Pianos charter proclaims, ‘the intention is to preserve but [the] effect is to alter.’ Surely there can be no bigger alteration than to take a visual work and turn it into sound, yet your brief is to do this as transparently as possible, to ‘preserve’ the original. How do you address this apparent paradox? It must be a fascinating challenge for a composer.

Depending on your relationship with the source material, there are degrees. Some material is beautiful in its initial form, while some is grotesque. Sometimes the challenge is to turn something grotesque into something sublime. It is very much context oriented and it depends on your relationship to the artist, and the artist’s works. It’s a very fluid thing, but the principle remains that we are trying to restate an idea in a completely different, often foreign, context. That is the joy of it.

Perhaps it is really the composer who is the slave?

Oh yes. There's a strange aspect to the work, whereby the composer can submit to the predetermined aesthetic framework, and to a certain extent one can feel like a slave. On the other hand, it is also quite liberating.

Slave Pianos has been very well received internationally; I understand the New York trip was particularly successful.

New York was tremendous. We did a series of shows in Soho, in the art district. We displayed the works and we had a piano that had been 'doctored.' We did a series of shows, and we tried to use as many disparate musical genres as we could. There were a couple of cornerstones to that series. One was our good rapport with the Flux String Quartet; they were really keen to do this kind of work, because they were trying to find a niche for themselves in the contemporary New York scene. If you come from Columbia, or uptown, and you have a connection with this strange art world, it's always interesting for a musician to find that crossover, so we wrote a lot of string quartet music, and connected with the underground contemporary music scene.

String quartets seem to be your other pet genre.

It wasn't intentional, but it is such a fantastic medium.

Although it is one of those formats that has very nearly become a parody of itself ...

That's what's great about it!

... yet it remains such a popular format for composers.

Do you know what I like about it? It's like the player piano in the Slave Pianos context; it's a fixed sound world. The challenge is, 'what can you do with that fixed sound world?' People have done a lot of great things with it.

Would you agree that the 'fixed' sound world of the string quartet has been blown wide open to some extent? The modern string quartet is the antithesis of 'fixed,' considering what composers are asking players to do with their instruments, their bodies and their voices; the contemporary string quartet has a theatrical, almost operatic quality ...

... and of course, Flux, being a bunch of New York groovers, was very keen to do it. We had them walking all over the place, trampling in boxes of gravel, speaking, singing and dancing. A lot of the newer string quartets enjoy that. Sure, it's a 'traditional' medium, but it has an incredible range of possibilities.

Having said that, this string quartet that I'm actually finally putting into *Finale*, for which I'm about to draw the final double bar line after close to ten years, is in many ways the last remnant of my twentieth-century La Trobe 'style.' It was, in a way, the crossroads piece for me, and the last of that type of non-tonal, quasi-tonal work. The piece is moving into new areas more to do with rhythmic planes of material.

The Marclay quartet, performed by Flux, is amazing. What was the source of the material for that?

It was a deliberate attempt to imitate a vinyl record. It is actually quite a literal transcription of a piece by the DJ artist Christian Marclay. Anthony Pateras (a La Trobe composition graduate) and I worked on that intensely over a few nights in New York, trying to get the rhythms. The original piece involved three turntablists generating a percussive piece that we painstakingly transcribed by ear.

You have mentioned that you feel it is time to emancipate yourself from Slave Pianos. Are you looking forward to becoming Neil Kelly, Composer, again?

In a way, Slave Pianos became the ‘institution’ for me after La Trobe and, in that respect, it’s been great. I’ve always had work to do, and have been able to travel with it, and meet, work and collaborate, but at the same time, there is a set of rules that goes with Slave Pianos. We are now moving to different parts of the world, and it is a good time for me to reconnect with my individual composing identity.

As this interview goes to press, rather than winding down, the Slave Pianos Collective is about to embark on a series of new projects, including a documentary monodrama, and a project exploring architecture and music in Berlin.

The first Neil Kelly work I was exposed to was *Gamut*, written for the bicentenary in 1988. The idea was that each of the eighty-eight notes of the piano keyboard was used only once. It’s a really nice performance and recording by Michael Kieran Harvey.

I listened to it the other day and followed it on the score: he actually plays it *pretty* much like it’s written!

High praise indeed from a composer!

I’m joking, of course, but the piece is one of those things; you give yourself a set of rules—‘write a piece with eighty-eight notes, using each note once’—it sounds simple enough ...

You agonised over it, I understand.

It’s quite difficult to come up with something. You have to make up a few more rules than that ... or you could just use a random note generator, or something.

La Trobe music alumni tend to be pre-occupied with the organisation of pitch material. In broad terms, how was *Gamut* constructed? There is obviously some kind of quasi-*klangfarbenmelodie* approach at work here .

There is a set of rules to do with distribution of the octaves and with register—I’m very interested in register. But still I tried to make it melodic, even though I was obviously very limited by having to get through the eighty-eight notes. What happens in that piece is that you realise how little the extremes of the piano are used in piano music, that not all notes are equal.

Did you use a twelve-tone row?

It definitely isn't twelve-tone. I know that because I've only ever written one twelve-tone piece!

Is that right? So twelve-tone music is not as important to you as people might think?

No. However, free atonality, or some atonal scheme where each note has more or less an equal relationship with the others is certainly a big part of what I've done.

Another piece that really impressed me was *Less and Less Human*.

That was a big piece.

Absolutely. It is certainly grandiose, even epic.

It is quite epic—the most 'epic' thing I have ever written.

With that piece in mind, and also being aware of how much some composers dislike direct comparison, the work conjures up some of the colours, if not the image, of Messiaen. But I would go a little 'left field' and suggest there is a element of Vaughan Williams in the work. Would it surprise you to hear that?

Ah, that is interesting, very interesting.

Vaughan Williams is not a name one would normally associate with Neil Kelly?

No, not at all. In fact, I seem to be denying any origins that I have in the British Isles whatsoever. I do actually love listening to those hymns, and I'm sure you're right; it is 'quasi-tonal', in a fairly simple way. However, if I had to pinpoint the source idea for the 'soundworld' of that piece, it is actually eastern European choral folk music.

This was around the time, was it not, that you wrote *Elindultam*, when you were working from various Hungarian and Bulgarian sources?

It was before that, actually, but there are passages in *Less and Less Human* that I could trace to a specific source in that eastern European sound world.

What then would you make of Vaughan Williams's relationship with Ravel, a composer perhaps more relevant to the *fin de siècle* milieu in which you have a great interest?

Funnily enough, the only reason I've ever looked at Ravel seriously was because of the obscure relationship he had with Alban Berg. It's a little known relationship, and part of my study has been to draw threads between those two. Schoenberg was very disapproving of Berg's interest in Ravel. Look, it's very interesting when someone listens to your music and makes observations like that.

You don't find it annoying?

It doesn't bother me in the slightest. I think I'd be more upset if you said 'that just sounds like a pastiche of Alban Berg'—which it does to me sometimes! I get a lot of those grand quasi-Romantic gestures from Berg.