

# SPLINTER AT MUNGO: THE ART OF COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

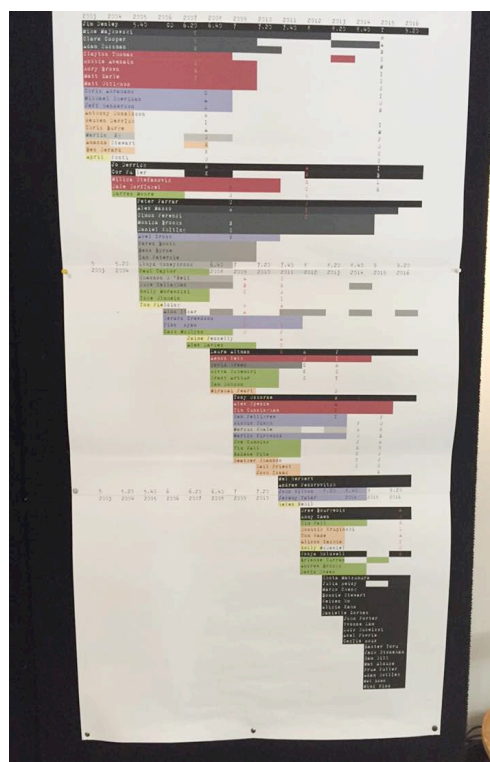
In 2015, the Splinter Orchestra received an invitation to be part of Tectonics Adelaide in March 2016<sup>1</sup>. Rather than fly directly to Adelaide, 21 members of the Sydney based orchestra decided to travel via land, rehearse and play on the way, and record for a number of days in Mungo National Park, NSW. This paper describes the working methods of the orchestra, their members' conceptual pieces, and its approach to site specific elements and the environment during this epic week.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Splinter Orchestra, formed in 2002, is a large-scale ensemble, consisting of a fluctuating number of members with various backgrounds: improvisation, jazz, classical, electronic, electro-acoustic, visual art, sound art, environmental sound, acoustic ecology and field recording. Some of the members are highly skilled and conservatorium trained instrumentalists, others are conceptual thinkers playing a just found object for the first time. Despite its size (which can be 30+) the leaderless and conductorless orchestra usually hovers around minimalism, and is based on a social, democratic, gender equal, and non-egotistical view towards cooperation via improvisation, conceptual ideas and site-specific conditions. Over the years, the Splinter Orchestra has become a social and artistic meeting point and a way to test and recalibrate one's own ideas.

From early 2015, Splinter resides in Tempe Jets Sports Club, near the Sydney airport, and rehearses weekly in various configurations in either their small studio or elsewhere on the premises: the bowling field, entrance hall or the parking lot. In January 2016, the month leading up to their departure for Adelaide, the orchestra celebrated their 15th anniversary with an approximately five hour long concert as the conclusion of the NOWnow festival in Sydney<sup>2</sup>. During this concert, 102 (!) present and previous members were invited to play along within allocated time slots, related to the year of their involvement, either in the venue itself or via communication media (Skype, Google Hangout and even 'good old' ordinary phone). Eight computers provided an individual dedicated 'voice' for several members residing in Melbourne, Brisbane, New York, Tokyo, Berlin and elsewhere.

A large scale installation outside the building took place before and during the concert, adding yet another layer to the event.



**Figure 1.** The time slots, from 2003 - 2016, with allocated names of 102 participants for the performance during the NOWnow 2016 festival.



**Figure 2.** The Splinter Orchestra at the NOWnow festival 2016, showing the computers, used by members who were unable to physically attend.

<sup>1</sup>Adelaide Festival of Arts, 04+05/03/2016, curated by Ilan Volkov: [http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/2016/music/Tectonics\\_Adelaide](http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/2016/music/Tectonics_Adelaide).

<sup>2</sup> In retrospect: 15 years of Splinter Orchestra, 23/01/2016, <http://thenownow.net/festival-2016/>.



**Figure 3.** Audience members amongst mattresses with cookies, listening to a dozen fishing rods with attached vibrators activating a number of bowls on the lawn bowling lawn.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. CONCEPTUAL PIECES

During rehearsals the orchestra had condensed a number of ideas into two clear conceptual pieces, *Microphony* and *Air Hockey*, which were both programmed by the Tectonics Adelaide festival.

### 2.1. Microphony

As is usual with recording techniques, a finalized recording is a fixed balance of the involved instruments between left and right channel. The Splinter Orchestra utilizes an additional source by having one or more persons as ‘microphonist’.

By walking with a hand held microphone amongst the musicians, these microphonists can use their microphone as instrument to ‘magnify’ and enhance certain sounds. This technique can be used in a number of ways: to add perspective to two-dimensionality; or, more conceptually, by performing in one space and sending the microphonists’ output to a PA in a secondary space where the audience resides.



**Figure 4.** The Splinter Orchestra at Tempe Jets Sports Club.

The above picture shows the orchestra on the bowling field of Tempe Jets Sports Club, whilst the audience is

<sup>1</sup> Aside from this bowling field, the Splinter rehearsal room was turned into an “instant poetry” room with computer controlled turntables playing spoken-word LPs.

listening to the hand held microphones through a PA in the main hall. By contextualizing the dialogue of sounds from musicians and sounds from their direct environment, a different light is shed on the event and the audience becomes increasingly aware of environmental sounds that otherwise might be taken for granted, e.g., a birdcall can be outside our focus in a concert situation, but when presented through a speaker it becomes part of our experience.

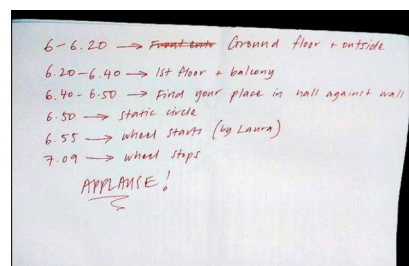
There are many variations on this idea depending on site-specific conditions: in May 2015 at the Powerhouse Museum (‘MAAS’), as part of Vivid 2015<sup>2</sup>, the orchestra was situated in a small semi-enclosed area (the entrance of the ‘Kings Cinema’) whilst a wireless PA was managed by two persons going up and down two large escalators in the main hall. In this case both microphones and PA were continuously moving through the performance space.

In the Adelaide Town Hall during Tectonics Adelaide, the orchestra played for 30 minutes in the foyer, whilst the audience was sitting in the Auditorium listening to the PA without being able to see the orchestra at all. It was up to the audience to listen directly to the acoustic orchestra, or ‘blind’ in the main hall to the electronic actions of the microphonists.

### 2.2. Air Hockey

In *Air Hockey*, a performance area (the ‘arena’) is defined beforehand. The participants go, in a more or less straight line, from somewhere on the borderline to another point on the borderline, whilst playing a more or less clearly definable sound. They alter their sound when ‘bouncing off’ the borders of the ‘arena’. Whenever two (or more) people accidentally ‘collide’ they stop and play together whilst others join them to form a cluster of musicians creating a musical event. This process repeats itself multiple times during a performance in an improvisational fashion.

In this way, independent, individual sounds continuously occupy the space as a whole, and a clear overall musical form is generated via the ‘co-op clusters’ and their musical statements. During the rehearsals and recordings in Mungo National Park, this concept was used a number of times in a number of different spaces, mostly outside.



**Figure 5.** The timeline and ‘arenas’ for *Air Hockey* during Tectonics Adelaide.

<sup>2</sup> 28/05/2015: Maasive Lates: The Absence Of ... <http://www.vividsydney.com/event/ideas/maasive-lates-absence-0>.

The above picture shows the overall plan for a 70 minutes long performance of *Air Hockey* as the ‘kickoff’ of Tectonics Adelaide. There are three defined areas: 1: ground floor including outside the entrance; 2: 1st floor and balcony; and 3: the Auditorium (the main hall). Also the elevator (my personal favorite because of its ‘beam me up, Scotty’ factor) and other niches were used. These areas and time slots were guidelines only and morphed into one another, whilst rogue members, following their own inspiration, were part of the concept.

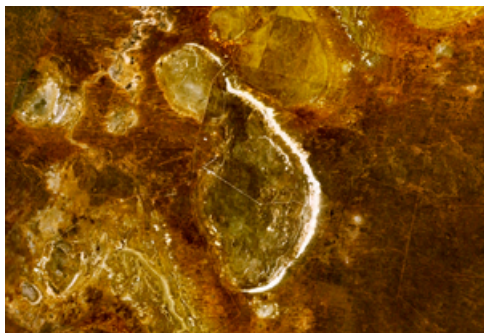
The performance was confusing for the audience (and sometimes ourselves) as it was not always clear what was part of the planned performance and what was part of accidental occurrences (such as an obtrusive pizza eating man and a person fainting and injuring his head). For the orchestra members, moving around in a straight line and clustering was challenging because of a large audience (400) occupying the same space.

The finale arrived when the orchestra after a state of consensus, standing against the walls surrounding the then seated audience in the main hall, started a giant turning wheel by walking anticlockwise around the outer edge.

So, what does this all mean and how has Splinter changed during this week?

### 3. LAKE MUNGO

When first arriving at Lake Mungo, I was completely struck by a unique mixture of extreme serenity and extreme harshness. Remains of both a cremated woman (Mungo Lady) and a man (Mungo Man) were found at Lake Mungo, proving that a human civilization has been living there for 50.000 years, making it one of the earliest human occupied places on our planet. Even though the ‘lake’ has been dry for approximately 15.000 years, I could still sense the history of water. The east outer area of Lake Mungo consists of large sand dunes in which I personally felt alien and secluded from the world. The present area is ancient in the sense that it looks the way it has appeared for thousands of years.



**Figure 6.** A satellite picture of Lake Mungo. One can clearly see the 40 meter high, 33 km long white sand dunes (‘Walls of China’) forming a clear silvery line.

The trip from Balranald, the last option to buy the supplies needed for a stay in the Mungo National Park, to Mungo Shearers’ Quarters was a 150 km long dirt

road during which my kidneys seem to circle through my insides a number of times. On the way we spotted a kangaroo, so badly injured that we had no other option but to kill her as mercifully and swiftly as possible, and hope her joey was old enough to survive. We had to deal with scorpions occupying the shower, and emus and feral cats as part of the landscape. I describe this to sketch how the orchestra had to come to terms with ‘down to earth’ life in cooperation with local climate, flora and fauna. Because of temperatures rising to 45°C during the day, the orchestra mostly recorded early in the morning and late during the evening, and listened to recordings during lunch.

Lake Mungo is full of juxtapositions to be drawn from when one is creating music within these site specific conditions, and when one is willing to ‘surrender’ and listen to the elements. In practice, when the orchestra was making sounds and music, I personally found it natural and easy to maintain a balance in between two extremes: focus in the moment versus letting things happen casually as part of an endless timeline.

Before producing sounds, the orchestra started with a few minutes of silence, tuning oneself to the place, and in this way connecting with the land and the sounds within, caused by native animals or the elements. We recorded and performed in a number of places: the huge woolshed, used by sheep shearers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the sand dunes; Zanci Homestead, an abandoned house with remains of chimney, toilet and agricultural machinery; and an airstrip in the middle of the ‘lake’.

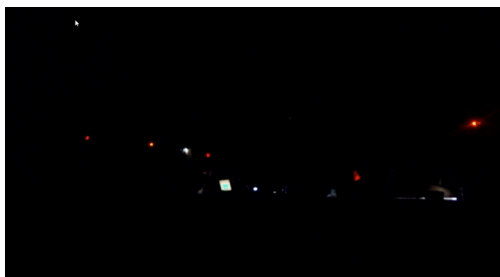


**Figure 7.** The Mungo woolshed, built in 1869.



**Figure 8.** The orchestra at Zanci Homestead, where they recorded a version of *Air Hockey* during sunrise in cooperation with accidental objects and local wildlife (e.g., aside from the inevitable flies, a butcher bird).





**Figure 9.** A night time session at the airstrip where the orchestra recorded and filmed Jim Denley's *Bike Light Piece* in which all members, in total darkness, interpret their own personal flashing bike light through sound, resulting in a fluctuating sonic cloud.



**Figure 10.** The orchestra recording and performing *Air Hockey* and *Microphony* at the sand dunes at sunset.

#### 4. EQUAL TEMPERED PITCH

During its voyage, the orchestra produced sounds based on their own inner logic and their relation to other sounds in an 'un-hierarchical' fashion. 'Tuning' is done in relation to oneself, others, the space, the environment and objects coincidentally present.

Although I am a pianist with a masters from the Amsterdam Conservatorium, have accumulated 35 years of experience in the music industry, and possess a PhD in composition from the Sydney University, it felt strange and confronting to arrive at the Adelaide Town Hall and hear the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra play a fixed composition in a tempered scale.

Music, lead by a single person and played in equal tempered scales, felt narrow to me in the sense that, within an octave, only a grid of 12 arbitrary pitches out of an infinitive amount were used, and only one person's (the conductor) interpretation of the moment was allowed to eventuate.

What I used to perceive as being 'in tune' had become 'dissonant' and out of tune, and vice versa. During the days before the Adelaide event, my ears had been 'sharpened' and renewed, achieving an unbiased open state towards sound, regardless of origin, pitch and colour, and, perhaps most importantly, without hidden agendas.



**Figure 11.** The Adelaide Town Hall where Tectonics Adelaide took place.

#### 5. SPLINTERS OF THOUGHT

*"something was changed that changes everything"*

I am not the only one in the orchestra who felt changed during the described week in my attitude towards sound and music in a social context, and as part of a simultaneous discourse with the strange, remote, unique, amazing, ancient places Australia has to offer when one is prepared to listen and hear.

When I emailed the orchestra the question *"How (if at all) has this trip changed your attitude/approach towards music/sound/Australia?"*, I received a number of diverse responses<sup>1</sup>:

*"I was overwhelmed with emotions when we arrived in Adelaide and performed at the festival after our road trip and three days in Mungo. These emotions swirled through my delusion of self and identification with the collective Splinter. I felt large parts of me dissolved into the collective, and in that state it was easier to catch the mood of the world."*

*In Indian music there is the notion of early morning, afternoon, evening and night ragas - as if part of the job of a musician is to attune to more than just the space. I've largely played outside in Australia with small groups or solo, so the experience of tuning to the world with a large musical barometer was new to me. And I loved it."*

- Jim Denley.

*"The trip has realigned me to the poetics of sound / making sound. The profoundness within the process (in this case, the process being the*

<sup>1</sup> Personal email exchange, various dates 17 - 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016. Listed here in order of receipt.



*final and only performance) in opening up 'moments of synchronicity' was a rare reality that I enjoyed in the moment. And also now in hindsight. I'm sure this was the case for everyone else in their own individual way. Reflecting on the trip, for me it is only the poetics of it all that has remained. I have been left with an almost intangible feeling to keep exploring in life "*

- Shota Matsumura

*"I feel like the deep silence of Mungo has made it easier to listen in the dense sonic space of inner-west sydney - like a ear recharge. I also feel like the lasting bonds made between members of the Splinter Orchestra has expanded musical possibilities in our Sydney scene. I can also remember times of deep relaxation whilst playing music, as if i finally had the space to see some musical idea to its complete resolution. I remember the experience being bigger than music, as I walked around playing the room with a mallet. This profound space is easily remembered as I now play music, like something was changed that changes everything. I also learnt the importance of not getting stuck in profundity, coz the music just happens."*

- Drew Bougeois

*"Music : it has reminded me of the importance of improvised music ; a medium where everything and everyone can be included and each moment lived, shared and appreciated. It is a rarity to be completely immersed in an experience. It was after witnessing the quintets<sup>1</sup> and experiencing what I can only describe as 'grace' I walk away with the intention to continue opening the doors for these kinds of experiences for myself and others in my work in music and across the arts.*

*Sound : I found an importance in finding the mid-point between self and ensemble during our plays which I feel I haven't given as much reflection on until working with Splinter. When we had our gigs in the Adelaide Town Hall I found myself the performer again but within a sound context and I was challenged to question my practise. I'm now finding it interesting where performative action is imbued with or leads to sound making.*

*Australia : i'd like to return to the red centre and make more music."*

- Mel Eden

*"Immersion together at Lake Mungo followed up by performance at Tectonics was very satisfying for me. I think to share these experiences together reminds us of the value of our work. Focussing for 3 days on our music at Mungo, I'm*

*sure will provide ongoing research incentives. Playing immediately after this at the festival was timely. To be appreciated (or hated and perhaps a little controversial), as we were in Adelaide, gives a welcome boost to confidence and perhaps a spur to further delving into the potential of this group. It's also a reminder that what we do is a fascinating process not just for us."*

- Tony Osborne

*"The trip to Adelaide Festival via Lake Mungo with the Splinter Orchestra had a great impact on me spiritually and as an artist. I was able to connect with my Indigenous heritage which until recently had been oppressed due to the devastating impact of the stolen generations on my family, like many others. This led to the inspiration to create a body of work exploring this search for answers and identity in my own life, which I'm currently developing.*

*Playing as much as we did created such a densely creative atmosphere within which I was able to explore some things on a deeper level than I have previously, and I came to understand more fully what makes me tick as a musician and improviser. I also found the social aspects of sharing and creating with the group to be very healing and conducive to really amazing sonic results."*

- Sonya Holowell

*"The Splinter trip made me think about why we make music and who it's for, but mainly I felt it was about the joy of the moment, the joy of community and the joy of making sound. The experience has enhanced so many positive feelings for me including my appreciation of Sydney, greater Australia and the people in it. It has left me with a happy desire to engage and explore and continue involvement with sound-making."*

- Romy Caen

*"I think mostly I just wanted to recognise how much gratitude I feel for the fact of the trip existing at all. In so many other contexts Mungo and Adelaide couldn't happen. The incredible warm connectedness of playing, even in the city, after missing the outback<sup>2</sup>, was once in a life time and completely unique. As such an ephemeral art, for me, the shock of being part of making the music we did, in light of the connections that we forged, is feeling how deeply the experience has settled permanently and shifted something within me. How that plays out remains to be seen but I am excited and open to it."*

- Prue Fuller

<sup>1</sup> Aside from the two major pieces, *Microphony* and *Air Hockey*, by the orchestra, Tectonics Adelaide also programed two sets by quintets made up from members of the orchestra: TQM4F1 and TQF4M1.

<sup>2</sup> Prue was not able to travel by car, therefore she missed the Lake Mungo sessions.

*"It's difficult to define or describe any specific change, but this trip has certainly brought up lots of questions and considerations for me..."*

- *Awareness of and sensitivity to space: physical surroundings, climate, social space, acoustic ecology of a place, its history.... How do I relate to and engage with vastly different spaces, musically? And to the people around me who share this space?*

- *Why do I play music / Who do I play for? An audience? Recording? Myself or fellow musicians? How does an audience, or lack of, effect how I engage with music and the people I make music with? Can I just 'be' with the music as a process without being concerned about an outcome?*

- *Music as a social activity: leading up to this trip and throughout, Splinter has spent a lot of time together extra-musically. It feels like this has had a positive effect on the music. Functioning harmoniously on musical and social levels...*

- *Playing outdoors, and in harsh dry conditions, prompted me to consider appropriateness of my instrument (clarinet) in such spaces: what's the best way to bring this instrument into relationship with this land - far away from where it was designed to be played - and what new challenges are faced when returning to a 'concert hall' style setting?*

- *It was interesting to observe an increased tendency in the group towards singing and 'sounding' the space... does this approach seem more appropriate? Considering/acknowledging the strong history and tradition of song in this country of which, I admit, I know too little about. How do we reconcile what feels appropriate in new spaces with what we work in our regular comfort zones?*

- Laura Altman

*"Post splinter trip my approach towards music, in particular collectively authored music, has shifted focus slightly - I realise now the key to opening many doors in terms of what can be explored socially and politically is 'the collapse of boundaries between the aesthetic and the social.'*

*If sound is equal to silence, then my approach to sound has changed. In Mungo I experienced a richer silence than I ever have.*

*My approach towards australia has changed in two ways:*

- 1) *Going to a remote place made me understand why I live in a city - why splinter's music lives and thrives in a city - it is born of and sustained by dense community*

- 2) *Woolshed - 'Walls of China'*

*In every engagement I had with(in) it the Mungo woolshed, although majestic in it's own right,*

*was utterly dwarfed by the majesty of the natural environment in which it has been erected.*

*This helped me to understand more the notion of the built environment as scars on the land."*

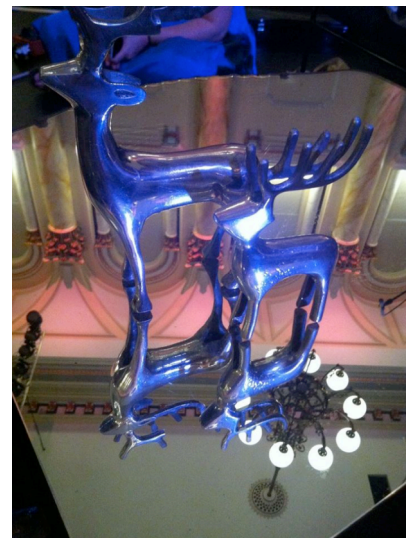
- Andrew Fedorovitch

The above answers (very personal and sometimes taking the form of new questions) show how the members of the orchestra speak of an ongoing process of realining and connecting; simultaneously with yourself, the ensemble, history, and the land we walk on; and realized via sound, music, playing, silence and, above all, via listening: *the art of communication.*

## 6. THE MEMBERS OF THE ORCHESTRA

The following is a list of the 21 orchestra members, and their instruments/tools, who were involved in performing at Tectonics Adelaide:

Maximilian Alduca (double bass), Prue Fuller (recorder, voice, objects), Mel Eden (voice, electronics, objects), Jim Denley (prepared flutes), Axel Powrie (flutes, alto clarinet, objects), Bonnie Stewart (percussion), Shota ('Umofos': electric guitar, trumpet), Peter Farrar (alto sax, PVC pipes), Adam Gottlieb (guitar, objects), Drew Bourgeois (percussion), Sonya Holowell (voice), Romy Caen (harmonium, electronics, objects), Cor Fuhler (guitar), Laura Altman (clarinet), Joseph Derrick (trumpet), Melanie Herbert (violin), Jack Stoneham (alto sax), Marco Cheng (acoustic guitar), Andrew Fedorovitch (alto sax), Tony Osborne (vocals, electronics), WeiZen (little critter, objects).



**Figure 12.** A mirror with decorative deer: Prue Fuller's unique setup at the Adelaide Town Hall during Tectonics Adelaide.

## 7. REFERENCES

Lake Mungo:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake\\_Mungo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Mungo)