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## REVIEWS

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### **Gail Priest, ed., *Experimental Music: Audio Explorations in Australia***

Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2009

ISBN 978-1-921410-07-9. xiii+237pp., ill., ports + CD-ROM

**Reviewed by Clinton Green**

This is the first book to attempt to focus exclusively on documenting experimental music in Australia. Previous writing on this subject has been extremely thin on the ground, basically restricted to the essential trio of Jenkins, Bandt and Whiteoak, as well as a smattering of articles, web sites and theses.<sup>1</sup> Given this lack of documentation in comparison to the vibrant experimental music scene that has grown in Australia since the 1970s, *Experimental music: audio explorations in Australia*, edited by Gail Priest, arrives as a well-overdue resource for anyone interested in this aspect of Australian music. The book is most welcome in this respect, but to an extent is flawed in its over-reliance on documentation of activities of experimental artists and collectives. Whilst such secondary documentation is valuable, the book lacks any robust enquiry into the nature of experimental music activity in Australia on conceptual or theoretical levels. Priest acknowledges these limitations (pp. 1, 7), identifying the book as a starting point for more comprehensive studies in future. She is correct in this summation that this collection of essays begins the long task of making up the lost ground of documenting Australian experimental music, but in some ways has only begun to explore the topic to any depth beyond that of detailing artists and their activities.

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<sup>1</sup> John Jenkins, *22 Contemporary Australian Composers* (Brunswick, Vic.: NMA Publications, 1988); Ros Bandt, *Sound Sculpture: Intersections in Sound and Sculpture in Australian Artworks* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2001); John Whiteoak, *Playing ad lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836-1970* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency Press, 1999).

Priest—a sound artist in her own right—has convened a selection of writers from a variety of backgrounds (academics and performers, some straddling both spheres) to author chapters on a range of aspects of experimental music performance in Australia. As acknowledged in the preface (p. 7), there is a significant reliance on anecdotal accounts as source material from most writers. For the most part, this works well and does not result in any over-indulgences of a subjective nature by the authors. The book is primarily a history of the various experimental music scenes throughout Australia, written by people who were active in them, so the anecdotal is actually a necessary ingredient in the mix, although the success of each chapter does vary. Julian Knowles begins with an excellent overview of the current state-of-play, documenting significant developments since the 1980s, with a focus on the numerous festivals and performance series that have emerged throughout the past two decades. Ian Andrews gives an enthralling first-hand account of the experimental fringes of post-punk in the 1980s, which fills in many gaps that previously existed in discussions of Australian experimental music that have overlooked this. Two chapters are devoted entirely to electronic music, one of which is a case study of the *Clan Analogue* collective, as viewed from within, by Bo Daley. Less visible areas are also represented by informative chapters on experimental radio (by Virginia Madsen) and instrument building (by Sean Bridgeman), and chapters are also devoted to sampling and improvisation. Often these first-hand accounts by authors who were/are actively involved in the scenes they write about are informative enough to carry things off without a great deal of theoretical or conceptual basis to their discussion (for instance, there is little enquiry into what subsets of electronic music should still be considered experimental in the twenty-first century), although Cat Hope's contribution on noise music disappoints by providing little discussion of the role noise plays in Australian music. Despite the chapter's intriguing title, 'Cultural terrorism and anti-music,' the bulk of its content consists of groupings of noise and related artists. This shortcoming may be indicative of the broader lack of theoretical understanding of noise music by serious music writers generally, an area that has only begun to be explored in the literature through the application of some of Attali's ideas to the burgeoning phenomenon of noise music.<sup>2</sup>

The focus throughout is more on performance and recording (as opposed to composition, with the possible tangential exception of Alistair Riddell's chapter on computational processes) and the artistic communities that have grown around experimental music practice during the period under discussion. *Experimental Music* maintains a scholarly approach throughout, with competent referencing. For the most part, each chapter retains a readability that does not suffer the pitfalls of overtly opinionated perceptions by the authors or their interview subjects. These characteristics are reminiscent of Holmes's international history of electronic and experimental music and its focus on artist quotes and interviews presented in the interest of readability.<sup>3</sup> However, *Experimental Music* does not approach Holmes's achievement in depth of detail, or, significantly, in examining the theoretical and conceptual nature of experimental music (admittedly, Holmes's history is now in its third edition, so perhaps this is a standard *Experimental Music* can aspire to if future editions arise).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music, and Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

This shortfall in theoretical depth is most apparent with the lack of space allocated to examining how to define what experimental music actually is. Priest looks at this briefly in her preface (pp. 1–3) and Knowles allocates a small section to the question (pp. 11–12), but, as Priest acknowledges, this raises more questions than answers. Such definitional problems are nothing new in experimental music, but the book would have benefited from more investigation of these very questions. Initially, this lack of space dedicated to just what it is the book is about leaves the reader wanting something more to ground the book's subject matter upon. This reflects the book's decision to act primarily as documentation, as opposed to being a serious enquiry into experimental music in Australia. As such, the road taken is coverage of music scenes and artists who identify their own work as 'experimental music' and are accepted as such by their peers; this is, perhaps, the most practical route to follow in the interests of documenting this music. Were the alternative of nutting out a water-tight definition and only including artists who existed under its terms taken instead, no doubt many significant artists would have been left out. Instead, we have a relatively complete document of experimental music and related activities. Some noteworthy names may not have been afforded as much discussion as others, but in general the coverage is vast, and there are no glaring omissions.

The accompanying CD contains nine tracks from artists discussed in the book, including a precious live recording of Teletopa (David Ahern's early experimental Sydney ensemble, previously unheard on an official release) from 1971. The book features eye-catching photos throughout that help convey aspects of experimental music performance.

*Experimental Music: Audio Explorations in Australia* succeeds in documenting its subject in a fashion that is both readable and informative, and will prove a valuable text to anyone interested in this previously under-represented field in Australian music. The book's shortcomings in the provision of any serious enquiry into just what experimental music is in Australia, or of the theories and concepts that underlie it, will disappoint to a degree, but should not undermine the book's value as a significant starting point in taking Australian experimental music seriously. This book will be valued for years to come both by those active in Australian experimental music, and for those looking for a guide into this most challenging of music.

**Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell, eds, *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave* (Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series)**

Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2009

ISBN 978-0-7546-6395-9. ix+216pp. Hbk, bibl. ind.

**Reviewed by Ian Chapman**

An academic tome dedicated to Nick Cave might strike some as being something of a surprise. Looking beyond his 1995 flirtation with the mainstream, *Where the Wild Roses Grow*—a duet with pop superstar Kylie Minogue—it is clear that Cave's output has largely, whether by design or default, taken place in the half-lit peripheries of popular music/popular culture. Yet, a volume such as this has surely been long overdue. One of rock's great subterranean-dwellers, Cave has received—and continues to engender—considerable critical attention throughout a career