

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Timed summary of an interview with

**David Pye**

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA - ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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INTERVIEWER: John Bannister

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## **Introduction**

This is an interview with percussionist, composer and conductor David Pye. David has played a large part in the development of the Western Australian New Music scene. He initially studied music at the Victorian College of the Arts where he would be involved along with his classical studies with avant-garde music scene that was flourishing there in the 70s. He talks of the important people associated with this scene. On coming to Perth in 1980 to join the West Australian Symphony Orchestra as percussionist, David would quickly become involved in engaging other musicians to train and perform in groups outside the orchestra. After a trip to Europe and England to study with Ronald Zollman and John Carewe he would return to Western Australia with the aim of forming and performing with his own ensembles. He also studied at the West Australian Conservatorium of music at this time.

David formed the Nova ensemble in 1983. The ensemble would become important in pushing the development and direction of new music in Perth. Throughout the interview David talks of the various influences that he took into his alternative musical career that would draw on a wide range of styles and instruments. Strongly influenced by Indian and Indonesian cultures and musical styles while incorporating environmental sound effects with technology, David has created many alternative and imaginative compositions. Working with dance and theatre David was awarded best classical instrumental work in 1998 for his work *The Drummers of Gilgamesh*. He outlines the development of new music in Western Australia and around the world as he sees it. He also talks of the important people associated within the growing industry.

**Session 1**

**19/6/2018**

00:00:00

Background information. Born in Melbourne Croydon 1958. Parents' teachers. Early memories. The Hatari soundtrack. Music. Music lessons. Uncoordinated child. Piano and recorder lessons

00:03:40

Percussive element. Coordination of hands and feet. Casey Kasem top 40 on the stereo. Music high school. Deciding to join the school orchestra. Taking up percussion. The 1812 Overture. Playing the bass drum. Memories of being in the orchestra. Very passionate about being in a musician orchestra. Giving lessons from well-known musicians in Melbourne. Bruce Barber and percussion teacher John Seal.

00:07:35

John Seal was a leading light in Australian contemporary percussion movement. Playing xylophone and timpani. Music was the top mark in HSC. George Logie Smith legendary in Australia high school education. Inspiring and ferocious. Incredible orchestral program. Beethoven's symphonies, Berlioz Symphonie Fantastique, Mozart piano concertos. Sculthorpe's Sun Music. New works by John MacKey. Beethoven's Eighth Symphony. The role of the timpani. No intention of being a professional musician.

00:10:26

Interests in a career in astrophysics. Father was a mathematician. interest in space. Black holes. Coonabarabran telescopes. The Warrumbungle ranges. Orchestra and contemporary music. Acknowledged in pop music. Terrible drama. Going down the classical road. Works by Sculthorpe. School orchestras and being exposed to a wide range of influences. An eclectic sense of music

00:14:10

Deciding on future party music. George Logie-Smith. Larry Wilson. Where the percussion fits into an orchestra. The intensity with which you have to work. The timpanist was the second conductor in the orchestra. Playing triangle in orchestras. Fitting into the orchestral structure. The icing on the cake.

00:17:15

Going into a career. College. Science degree at University of Melbourne. The Melbourne Youth Orchestra goes on tour to Europe. Memories of the tour. Repertoire. No modern Australian orchestral pieces. Wagner Meistersingers Overture. Lutoslawski, Ravel. Deciding to become a musician. Scientists and creativity.

00:21:05

Musician would be better in the long run. Memories of the Victorian Time Machine. Auditioning for the Victorian College of the Arts. To study with Barry Quinn. Larry Wilson was a timpanist. The contemporary ensemble. Thrown in at the deep end. Playing graphics scores and free improvisation pieces. Minimalism by Glass. Philip Glass [symphony] in C. Working with sound artists. Covering an enormous range of contemporary music activity. Hearing experimental concerts by the Australian percussion ensemble. John Seal, Keith Humble, Felix Werder.

00:23:45

Felix Werder plays an electric viola with a plastic hairbrush. Percussions de Strasbourg. Melbourne at Robert Blackwood Hall. Opening eyes and ears. Australian composers see percussion as a viable way of creating music. Big turning point in Australia and composition. Catalyst frustration percussion in the mid 70s. Things never done before. Improvisation and reading scores

00:26:13

New forms of making sound. Allowed to be creative structuring and playing with instruments. Feeling special. Musician in the orchestra doesn't always feel special plane the dots. The Time Machine playing music. In contact with extraordinary creative people. Composers at University of Melbourne and Latrobe. The VCA had electives in Asian music. New ideas flooding in. Percussion concerto Barry Cunningham.

00:29:06

Principal players in the Time Machine. David Haymes. Jazz saxophonist Brian Brown Avant-garde jazz. Visiting lecturers and artists. Bill Fontana sound artists from the states. James Fulkerson. Alternative performance techniques. Exploring instruments and different ways of playing them. Graeme Hare and Laurie Whiffen, Richard Meale. Barry Cunningham. Visiting artists. Rob Clarke principal percussionist in the Melbourne Symphony. Derek Jones. Warwick Bone. Introduce to the music of Steve Reich. Listening to Music for 18 musicians. Piano phase. Doing Reich repertoire in Perth. Minimalism has been influence on writing

00:33:04

Warwick wrote a work performed in Perth. Reich and Philip Glass. European jazz on the ECM label. Free, structured and partially composed improvised music. Barry McKimm trumpet player. The Melbourne scene was very fragmented. The Latrobe scene and Keith Humble. Barry Cunningham and new notation of scores. The very eclectic Victorian Time Machine. John Seal percussion ensemble. Felix Werder. Ron Nagorcka. Period of Fermentation. Playing enormous variety of styles. At the forefront of Australian percussion seem. Dr Louise Devenish and the history of percussion in Australia

00:37:26

The old man of percussion. Graduating with distinction from VCA. Dream of playing timpani in the Berlin Philharmonic. Getting a job. Jobs didn't come up very often. Queensland Theatre Orchestra. West Australian Symphony.

Eastern states is where the action is. Jobs don't come up very often. Moving to Perth. Competition for jobs was fierce. The Gwen Nisbet music scholarship-Toorak Society patron. Percussion recitals are not music. Not invited to give the recital when receiving the award.

00:41:20

Thoughts of Perth and impressions. Experiences of Perth. Thrown in at the deep end with the W.A. Symphony Orchestra. Ripping a timpani skin in Mahler's second Symphony.

00:44:00

Baptism of fire. The guy in charge dealing with all the problems was a shock to the system. Percussion section was essentially untrained. Brian Sadique. Training the percussion section. Percussion instruments. Marimba. Paul Sarcich. Chris Turpin. Limited percussion gear at the University. The Conservatorium. Taking on private students. Paul Tanner and Amanda Dean.

00:48:20

Teaching students formed into a percussion ensemble. The West Australian percussion ensemble. A national broadcast on the ABC. Terrific relationship with the ABC. The eastern states versus W.A. Getting on top of the job. Flying back to Melbourne at every possible opportunity. Feeling Perth was home. Limitations of the orchestra. Very amateur percussion section up to speed covering the parts. Nabimba – John Hopkins. Verdon Williams.

**Session 2**

21/6/ 2018

00:00:00

West Australian Symphony Orchestra in an interesting place. Relationship with the ABC. David Measham. Ray Irving. Community concerts and orchestral recordings. Midland Railway workshop steam train polka. Light classical music out into the community. Country touring Albany, Bunbury Geraldton. Community response to classical music. Star Wars. Beethoven Symphony. Polarising the audience.

00:03:55

Ground breaking tours to Kalgoorlie and Esperance. David Measham was a great presenter. Less successful conductor. Orchestra suffering from lack of good conductors. Tension between orchestra and management. David Measham resigns. Albert Rosen from Czechoslovakia becomes Chief conductor. A character. Cultured and uncouth. Wonderfully energetic conductor. A wonderful conductor of opera. A small orchestra. The W.A. Arts Orchestra. Justifying the orchestra's existence and funding.

00:08:30

Bolstering the numbers. Flying musicians interstate. ABC is trying to look after its musicians. The scene in Perth WAAPA. The university music school. Young and inexperienced timpanist. Teaching at both institutions. Getting to know other members of staff. Brian Howard and Richard Gill at WAAPA. Frank Callaway and David Tunley at the University. The choral societies. Frank Callaway's legacy. The Indian Ocean Arts Festival in 1979. Percy Grainger. Callaway's contribution. The Gamelan Orchestra. John Hopkins from the eastern states. The new W.A. choral Society.

00:12:15

The Callaway Auditorium. Callaway's massive impact. Memories of Roger Smalley - a character. 1987 Nova ensemble. Smalley musically astonishing and naturally gifted. An incisive musical brain. George Crumb Macrocosmos III. Commissioning works from Roger. Influenced by music other than WASO repertoire. Listening to jazz. The W.A. Jazz Society getting to know the jazz muso's. Improvisation contemporary jazz. Keith Jarrett and the new wave of artists. Influenced by European classical music.

00:16:30

Musicians coming in through the Festival of Perth. Eberhard Weber electric jazz bassist. Improvisation side of music. Performing in Perth. The Victorian Time Machine. The Festival of improvised music. 1985. PFIM. Moving in classical circles. Heinz Mendelson Quartet. Ornette Coleman. Lindsay Vickery and Charlie Parker. Avenues in Perth opening up. Brian Brown. John Sangster. The core of the jazz scene in Sydney. The Lord of the Rings sagas. Classical instrumentations. Influence.

00:19:55

Combining improvising musicians and classically trained musicians. Disappointed not to find anything in Perth. Reasons for setting up Nova ensemble. Composition. Conducting. Percussionists become conductors. Studying conducting in Europe. Wyalkatchem. Going to Brussels Ronald Zollman. John Carewe. Simon Rattle.

00:25:18

Working with John Carewe. Score analysis. Ronald Zollman. Stick technique and memorisation. Doing concerts in London. Seeing all the major orchestras. Studying at the Barbican Centre. Conceiving the shape of the Nova ensemble. Boulez conducts Stravinsky. Tennstedt conducts Mahler. Idea for own ensemble develops. Classical pieces of the 20th century. Stravinsky's Soldiers Tale, Walton's Facade. Milhaud's Creation of the World. Knitting together a freelance career. Teaching and conducting. Having a role to play to bring new music to audiences

00:28:35

Consolidating a freelance career. Surviving as a contemporary musician. Funding money. Pay. Putting together an ensemble to perform Stravinsky's Soldiers Tale and Walton's Facade. The Playhouse. Nobody was paid. The musicians union. Disappointing crowds. Losing money. Funding for early concerts. Support by institutions. Players weren't getting paid.

00:32:45

Money a secondary consideration. Performers can't afford to pay. Paying musicians and looking for funding Federal and State. The origins of the Nova ensemble. The West Australian percussion ensemble. David Pye and friends. Artistic friendships formed. The Reich 'Sextet'. The Walton's Facade. George Crumb's Two Pianos to percussion. Personnel for every programme was different. Roger Smalley and Cathie Travers piano duet. Memories of Cathie.

00:36:00

Cathie was a hoot. The Fringe Festival and Prism Art Gallery. Ian Lilburne. Concert of Steve Reich's works. Peter Grimshaw. Praxis. PICA and other performance spaces. Fun places to play. The xylophone ragtime music. Eclectic program. Funding bodies complain. The Maritime Museum and the flyby nightclub. No proper concert venues. School halls and town halls. Making use of found spaces

00:40:00

The Maritime Museum. The flyby nightclub aircraft hanger. The Roundhouse the old lunatic Asylum. Churches in Fremantle. Spare parts puppet theatre. Finding a space that was affordable and available. Everything done on the smell of an oily rag. Jack of all trades. Publicity, programs, design posters, budgets and is a salesmen. Ensemble in residence at you W.A. Schoenberg. Bonita Boyd French flautist. Erzsebet Tusa. Roy Howitt. Bartok. The University International Arts Festival. David Blenkinsop. Success through the late 80s and into the mid 90s. The art scene in Perth developing. The key turning point. Evos get set up.

00:44:35

Connections with the people working on the alternative side. Free improvisers and artists. Tos Mahoney. Mark Cain, Ross Bolleter. The Festival of improvised music. Memories of Tos and EVOS. Quartet of quartets at the Princess May Theatre. Stuart Hille, Peter Hadley and Lorenz Lossius and Stuart Davie-Slate. Relationship with EVOS and Nova was solidified. Funding was very tight. Toss was an inspiration. His vision. Collaborations

00:48:25

Evolution of sound. Ross Bolleter. Allan Lamb. Improvising. Mark Cain was a big part of the scene. Creating good work. Finding the right venue to present music with EVOS. The Academy music auditorium or the Callaway music auditorium. Lynne Mitchell was the administrator. Evolving into Tura. Lindsay Vickery a practicing musician Magnetic Pig. Cathie Travers use of synthesizers. IWI MIDI wind instruments. Paul Tanner, Cathie Travers and Iain Grandage.

00:54:45

Magnetic Pig and the group direction. Solo leadership of Nova. Getting into composition. Nova collaborates with Chrissie Parrot. Igor Markevitch - Icare. First work - Terminal Velocity. No music technology. Working Cathie Travers studio. Improvisation on renaissance tunes. PICA central space.



**Session 3**

28/6/2018

00:00:00

Terminal Velocity tours. Composing from Chrissie Parrot Dance Company. Using composers within the West Australian community. Lee Buddle, Cathie Travers. Using MIDI technology. The Melbourne International Festival. Mixed reactions. An important step for getting Nova Ensemble out of Western Australia. Difficulties of touring over east and overseas. Cost of airfares and freight. Finding sufficient money to keep the ensemble touring on a regular basis

00:04:23

Fortunate to tour regularly. Working for Musica Viva. Touring Asia. Japan. The ensemble was beginning to make a national name for itself. Contemporary music best communicated through theatrical forms and dance. Music collaborating with other art forms. Puppetry and dance. Always enjoyed being the theatre. Theatrical spaces. Fascinated by the idea of lighting. Collaborations with lighting designers. Likely to work in a collaborative environment.

00:08:05

Contemporary music has got a lot to say in those art forms don't rely on melody. Creating sound effects. Creating an atmosphere. Ensemble and painters improvising together. Capturing a synergy. Taking the scene to the world. People find it hard to believe Western Australia is producing important things in the arts. The Australia Council. Promoting. The Festival of Perth and David Blenkinsop. West Australia Opera. Buzz dance.

00:11:45

Do work with the West Australian ballet company. Doing school show. Realising the musical vision. Contemporary European jazz and other influences. Terminal Velocity. Explaining the music to the dancers. Working with Phillippa Clarke 2 Dance Plus - Buzz Dance. Musicians dancing as well. Paige Gordon. Spreading wings and writing from different forces and larger scales.

00:15:05

Working within workshops. Building instruments. Musica Viva. Mark Cain and ACPVC and the Nova Ensemble. Memories of performance. Boxes rubbish bins and pockets. Theatre drives the show. Performing on the streets with the Festival of Perth. Trash. Instruments made using scrap metal. Junkelan. Exploring Indonesian musical structures and Indian musical structures. Rudimentary instruments.

00:19:40

Pockets. The strain of touring. Making our mark. Performing with children. Their talent of Mark Cain. Involving the children on stage at the end of the

show. A generation of interested people

00:24:00

Listening to new sounds. Try to stretch the kids ears. Mark Cain. Different instruments and different scales. Macedonian music. Indian music, Indonesian music. Paul Tanner and Latin music. World music in the 90s. The history of the development of popular music. Out there looking for the next sound from world music. Tabla and Djembe. What can we find? West Javanese Kendang Australian indigenous drumming. Rolf Harris.

00:28:00

Sustaining a living out of being a performer. Continuing creating new work on new projects. Finding large sums of money for larger projects. Producing bigger projects for a bigger splash. Into the shimmer heat Opera. Includes puppetry and opera singers. Putting a stop to a lot of activity. Writing grant applications. The Lament of Gilgamesh. Festival of Perth in the new Fortune Theatre. Presenting text with special new instruments. Mark creating new clarinets in new tuning. Junkelan and Ritual Fragments. Collaboration with Indonesian and Indian dancers and designers.

00:33:20

Exploring writing the music and words. Working with choreographers. Wonderfully fertile exciting period. The Drummers of Gilgamesh. The Fremantle Symphony Orchestra. The director of the Mandolin Orchestra at W.A. Robert Schulz. Ann Carr-Boyd. Successful concerts in Melbourne. Lee Buddle. Writing a Symphony. Indian scales and rhythms.

00:37:45

Working with the Fremantle Symphony Orchestra. Bach, Mahler and Australian contemporary work. Writing major orchestral scores. Ian Grandage, Lee Buddle and Lachlan Skipworth Symphony No. I. Commissioning new works from local composers. Robert Shultz.

00:40:55

(audio excerpt ) Fantasy for Clarinet and Orchestra. Paige Gordon and Ban Dance Theatre. Rumpelstiltskin story. Michael Hodgkins clarinet player.

00:43:35

(audio excerpt ) New Norcia Textures Dominic Perissinotto. Collaboration on a number of projects. Origin New Norcia Textures. Electronics in concert often go wrong. Musicians with various technical skills and influences that can improvise. Environmental recordings. Idiosyncrasy organ at new Norcia.

00:47:50

Doing improvisation with organ at its heart. Women not allowed into the monastery. Working with the organ and with Dominic. Sense of space. Anthony Pope. Halls Creek. Writing a laptop. Recording at New Norcia. Bird recorded. Including the sound of bird. Duplicating the bird.

00:51:25

Hunting down the sounds of cicadas in Northcliffe. Sculpture Trail. Being inspired by ideas pulsing of cicadas. Different sounds produced by cicadas. The rise and fall of the dynamic ways. The pulsing of cicadas in the south-west in time. Independent rhythms. Interlocking drum patterns. Trying to find individual cicadas. No taking the rhythmic patterns of cicadas. Each has its own rhythmic pattern. Together they are building a pulse. cicadan rhythms [David's pieces are written in lower case]. Indonesian rattles Angklung.

**Session 4**

12/7/18

00:00:00

(audio excerpt) cicadan Rhythms 2006. The process capturing the forest around Northcliffe, working out rhythms of cicadas. Capturing the essential quality of cicadas. Percussive sounds. Indonesian bamboo rattles Angklung. Limited to the sounds of the laptop. Not limited by the number of people. 24 percussionists. WAAPA. The Fremantle Symphony Orchestra. Defying Gravity directed by Tim White. Structure for the piece. Moving away from traditional structures.

00:04:24

Heavily numerical forms. The golden ratios. The balance of the parts. Inspiration for the work walking through the forest. cicadan rhythms. An odd way to structure a work. New ways for developing formal structures. Capturing the essential quality of the place interested in environments. Ducks at Dusk.

00:07:35

Using elements of environment in works. Using environmental recordings in the works. Live musicians improvising on the sounds. Putting ensemble in interesting environments. Bringing the environments into the ensemble. Karakamia suite. The Karakamia Sanctuary in Chidlow. The Western Gerygone Bird. Rotating the bird song. Generating harmony. Trying to capture the energy of an environment

00:10:18

Panchavadyam piece. Inspired by India and Java. Daksha Sheth Dance company collaboration. The way of structuring performances. Religious rituals are theatrical. Five instruments street parade. Transcribing peace. Garamut log drum and a series of rubbish bin lids. Rotating rhythms. pravachambalam Village piece. Topology.

00:13:18

rebana Loops. The small Rebana hand drums. Western Java musicians intricate interlocking patterns. Members and tuned concert Toms. Morphing sounds from patterns on marimba and tom-toms. Taking the audience on a sonic shift. Interlocking rhythmic patterns. New music adopted and adapted by popular music. Constant cross-fertilization. France and America at the beginning of the last century. Gershwin and Ravel swapping music. Earlier 20th-century jazz music on the French seen. French harmonies go back to America to influence bebop. Creative musicians looking for something fresh. Bruckner

00:17:07

New technology and experimental musicians influenced by pop music. Technology being built to the pop market. Technology explodes. Feedback loop. Technology and lo-fi combination. The early days of MIDI. Pushing the

technology past the point that it was designed for. Rediscovering love for acoustic music. Linking notated music and improvised music. Concerts have no preparation

00:20:22

Current projects. Money dries up. Getting commissions and doing community music and ensemble work. Directing orchestras. The Fremantle Symphony and South-West Philharmonic based in Bunbury. Performing in community ensembles. Knowing ensemble from the inside. Writing for the people in the ensemble.

00:23:20

Awarded the Instrumental Work of the Year (2003) for the Gilgamesh Drummers piece. Peter Sculthorpe and Richard Meale. Receiving recognition. Pieces of music that do make an impact on our culture and society. Growth of new music. Musica Viva concert. Pieces listened to with interest. WASO. Conductors coming from overseas. Healthy ecology of new music in Western Australia. Classical forms of new music and the wacky off the wall pieces

00:26:27

An ecology and a bubbling arena of new music. The legacy of EVOS, Tura and Tos Mahoney. Fermenting new things all the time. Exploration. Whether a work has a life not. What the impact is now. Inspiring others. The kick on effect of ideas. Musical memes. The scene is still relatively small. A lots of cross fertilization. Mark Cain, Ross Bolleter, Cathie Travers, Lee Bubble, Ian Grandage, Lindsay Vickery, Louise Devenish. what was happening in Perth prior to 1980.

00:30:07

New music archive. The sense of West Australian musical history. The technology has changed incredibly. Studios lacking instruments. An enormous focus on technology. running the risk of losing contact with musicians. Working with electronic and acoustic instruments and an uneasy fit. Working in surround sounds. The emotional impact. The physical component to music making. The sound of the drums in your guts. Nightclubs. Emotional and visceral feelings. The development of new music in Western Australia. Very proud and extremely lucky. The introduction of new music. Minimalist side of music. Making a difference.