

AN INTERVIEW WITH DUO LENZ

By WILLIAM YEOMAN

THE AUSTRALIAN-BASED, Duo Lenz, is renowned for its exciting ensemble playing, dynamic stage presence and an eclecticism which doesn't preclude a substantial commitment to home-grown music, the most recent manifestation of which is a new disc devoted entirely to the works of Australian composers including Peter Sculthorpe and Richard Charlton. I recently met the husband and wife team in a restaurant overlooking the Swan River in Perth, Western Australia.

It's late December, and the unusually mild temperatures we've been blessed with for this time of the year are further tempered by the afternoon sea breeze locals refer to as the 'Fremantle Doctor' (after the nearby port city) coming in off the Indian Ocean. A short drive along a road winding through leafy suburbs illuminated by the purple, yellow and green of jacaranda, wattle and eucalyptus brings me to a restaurant looking out over the expanse of the Swan River estuary. Ruth and Richard Lenz are already there, seated at an outdoor table, looking relaxed in their summery wardrobe. Yachts and wooden dinghies are moored to the jetty on which the restaurant is built, bobbing gently under a sky whose clear blue canvas is punctuated by the occasional gull or pelican. Ruth assures me that dolphins can often be seen swimming close by, sporting with passing boats. We make our orders (ice coffees and pastries) and ease into a conversation about the life of a working musician in what has been called one of the most isolated cities in the world.

'Isolation?' asks Richard. He looks out over the river's breeze-ruffled waters. 'That has its advantages and disadvantages. To stay in work in a city of around 1.5 million with no other major centre for hundreds of miles, you have to be flexible and willing to play for all occasions. If you're willing to take on 'functional' gigs (and if it was good enough for Mozart then it's certainly good enough for us) like weddings, parties and other social gatherings, as well as concerts, then it's possible to earn a good living and have a comfortable, relaxed lifestyle. It also encourages a holistic approach to being a musician, one that includes teaching, playing and composition in equal measure. You actually start to see the guitar simply as a tool to get your message across. You're a musician, not merely a guitarist. And it makes every event special. This can be in a formal recital or as part of a function, a little interlude at a conference or maybe a concert at a school. We've played at enormous concert venues here like the



Duo Lenz.

Entertainment Centre. We've also done gigs in underground mines and old prisons. I feel the truly open-minded musician is the playing musician, the one that gets the gigs and has a career; but I think that 'having a career' (wherever that maybe) is a journey in itself and not a destination. So the musician that plays in different countries all the time (which is easier done in a country like Holland, where I'm originally from) is not necessarily more successful than someone who performs in equal measure but doesn't tour all that much. That being said, touring is great: it enables you to meet lots of different people and exchange ideas.'

Ruth takes a sip of coffee and lowers her sunglasses. 'The distances are a problem though. For example you could fly from Amsterdam to Moscow in the same amount of time it takes to fly from Perth to another city within Australia! So touring can be quite costly, which means you have to ask for good fees. Even playing in country towns not far from Perth is tricky; in the bush, night driving is hazardous because of the wildlife. A kangaroo or emu can just leap out in front of your car. So you generally have to stay overnight in the town - another expense. Not that touring overseas is without its hazards! On a recent trip to Holland to spend a week with Richard's parents, before going to the UK, I managed to break my foot. But we went ahead with our planned concerts anyway, despite my having to hobble on stage with crutches!'

I ask Richard about the duo's teaching activities. 'The school system here in Perth is great, and because the guitar is so well established, teaching at both private and government institutions provides us with a stable income while still allowing us to work as playing musicians - even to tour whenever we want. But as I suggested before, teaching is a big part of our

lives here. As far as our general methods are concerned, I guess it's fair to say we try to combine the approach taken by John Mills (with whom we both completed our post-grad studies), where musicality comes first, with that of Ruth's former mentor at the University of Western Australia, John Casey, where there's an initial focus on getting a student to feel confident about his or her playing. There are phenomenal musicians out there who, while still being inspirational teachers, nevertheless inadvertently stifle a student's creativity by expecting them to simply mimic their own style of playing. Ruth and I like to ask lots of questions to get the students to think for themselves, thereby drawing out what is already there as potential. Of course that's the literal meaning of education.'

'There are also lots of opportunities to combine both teaching and performance', adds Ruth. 'We often give lecture-recitals in schools, and sometimes have the opportunity to do so in a concert environment. For example, apart from giving a recital at a guitar festival in Frankston (which is just outside of Melbourne in Victoria) we also gave a lecture-demonstration where we played and talked about the vihuela, Baroque guitar and early 19th century instruments. The audience was very receptive, given that this was a festival primarily for folk and blues guitarists.' And speaking of guitars? 'Our main instruments are built by Perth luthier Paul Sheridan. Paul's guitars feature Smallman-style lattice bracing and Australian timbers like Tasmanian oak for the necks. They're really fantastic instruments, very responsive through all the registers and with great projection.'

Ruth and Richard recently took part in the Darwin International Guitar Festival. I ask, as a final question, what some of the highlights were for them. 'The festival was a great way to catch up with other guitarists from around Australia,' responded Ruth. 'But for us one of the highlights was exchanging concerts (as run-throughs) with Paul Galbraith and so getting a private recital from this amazing musician! Also being part of the Richard Charlton 50th birthday concert - we were invited to play two duets, including Spiral Ellipse, which Charlton wrote for us and which was featured on our first album 'Illusie'.'

After enjoying a spectacular sunset, Ruth and Richard leave me to ponder their more expansive vision of the role of classical guitarists in a city where culture is not exactly high on the list of many people's priorities, and just how important it is that musicians see themselves as ambassadors for culture, whatever the context. Just then, a ferry glides past, and in the glare of its lights I think I see a silvery shape surface momentarily...

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