

Interview: Julian Day

With Lucy Kippist

Composer, freelance arts journalist and sound-art performance – it could be said that Julian Day has a finger on Sydney's artistic pulse. And as presenter of New Music Up Late on ABC Classic FM he can now add chairperson of our most innovative and experimental music to the list. Loop asked him what it is to be a day in the life of a modern day master of the arts.

Loop: When did you decide you wanted a career in music?

Julian Day: I probably really hooked into writing music was when I was 12 and we saw the film Amadeus. Mum brought home the video and something clicked and I went yeah. I looked at the scenes where Mozart is sort of dictating all these parts and layers to his music and I suddenly thought this is something I really want to do and five or six years later when it came to sign up for something at university all six of my choices on our application form were all just various composition degrees so I was quite determined that that was going to be my path at that point.

Loop: That's quite funny that you mention the film Amadeus because when I was thinking about what to ask you that film sprang to my mind. The idea of being a composer this century has connotations of a bohemian lifestyle - quite dramatic and romantic. Is it anything like that?

Julian Day: (laughs) well, you would have to ask around to get a good picture. From what I understand depending on which part of the new music spectrum or world you are working in it can be quite different to that. Certainly if you are working in the more contemporary classical world or if you are writing for orchestras or chamber ensembles and make the odd piece with electronics then I think it is a much more mundane image. It's people turning up to their desk and 8 or 9 in the morning with a strong cup of coffee and, you know, furiously trying to get through some compositional problems which you may not have the answer to at the end of the day.

Loop: Would you describe composition as solitary career?

Julian Day: Good question. It is and it isn't. You tend to spend a lot of time on your own thinking through ideas and a lot of time on your own getting your ideas to the point where you can get someone else to listen or let someone else take it from there. I think there is always a social element because people are going to hear it in some form or other at the end. Chances are you either will be performing your music or being having it performed or you will be somehow involved in the distribution - so yes and no.

Loop: How would you define new music?

Julian Day: It's such a hard thing to define and I have been involved in two radio shows recently that use new music in their title - new Music in Australia and New Music up Late and in a sense I can't really give a precise definition. I mean on a base level it's just music that's being written now. Whether it's a pop song or something way out electronic that no one has ever heard before. I guess what I tend to focus on; in my program for instance, is music that says something new or tries something

out that's a bit experimental. Or perhaps, locates itself within the new music world, which is the community of composers and performers worldwide. Perhaps it may have some sort of theory underpinning it, even if it is a simple, practical theory.

Loop: Who would you say are leading in this area at the moment?

Julian Day: In terms of practitioners it is incredibly difficult to locate one or two people. You could say that someone like Louis Andriessen is one of the most influential composers at the moment, along with someone like Steve Reich from the US. Both of whom have big imaginations and are unafraid to push ideas beyond the point that other people might give up - and hopefully through that - give us an idea of where sound could go. And on the other hand the incredible army of laptop artists and of people really pushing for a new understanding of electronic sounds or intersections between acoustic sections and electronics that I think are doing some breathtaking things. Anyone whose got a big imagination and is prepared to allow it to unspool itself in public becomes important in some way.

Loop: Is there much of a network in Sydney for the new music community?

Julian Day: I have only been based in Sydney for a little over a year so I'm only just starting to get my feet around it I guess. But, it's an interesting question because I think Sydney and Melbourne - as opposed to other areas around the country tend to have larger scenes but slightly more segregated scenes. So if you write one type of music you may not get on with or even tend to meet someone else in another scene. So it can be a little - what's the word, elusive or illusory, the actual size of the scene? And I think, as with any sort of art practice, there is always going to be people in the scene versus people outside the scene and you can actually be more united and community based in your approach when you are outside of the scene and you can go, hey guys look what we are doing. When it comes to working inside the scene itself, artists have fragile egos - you can often find things more difficult inside

Loop: It sounds like an exciting area to be working in.

Julian Day: It is. But it can sometimes feel un-rewarding because it's not in the mainstream and when we talk about the music scene and the music industry in Australia, that's small enough on a global scale let alone working within an even more specialised area of that. But it really is, I mean its witnessing innovation and hopefully being involved in that innovation. I mean that stuff turns the world, in one regard.

Loop: How vital do you think it is for a composer to have a broad understanding of different types of instruments and different types of music. Is it good enough to know what you know, and work with that or should you try and know as much as you can?

Julian Day: I think different people would say different things. If you look back through the history of music some of the biggest names focused on an incredibly small area of music making. If you look at someone like Chopin he rarely ventured beyond the piano, or someone like (Claudio) Monteverdi, even further back, vocal music really seemed to be his thing: his other types of music were not necessarily as revered. So I think you really have to make your own decision. Once you have decided on the statement that you want to make in your music you sort of look at all

the things you need to realise that vision and it might mean that well, I might have to launch myself in to learning everything I can about a studio: Or it might mean that now I have to learn everything I can about the orchestra; it really depends on what you want to do. I think most people going through music schools, (which are universities) will get a fairly broad training in various instruments and will get handed a few copies of various orchestration booklets for instance. Further to that it's really up to you to a) learn what you can and b) learn what is relevant to your composition. I think there are people who know lots but don't really come up with compelling music.

Loop: Do you have a process for composition? Do you conjure an emotion or a picture in your head that you try to convey through music or is it more exploratory in that you are simply playing music and it just emerges?

Julian Day: It can be either or, or a bit of both. For instance I might have a very big vague idea of what I want to do and then the biggest challenge is what notes do I pick, what sounds do I pick, what samples do I find - which can actually be incredibly challenging because you are trying to match this often quite vague or cloudy picture in your head. On the other hand, if you have a few tools at your disposal- if you know how to play around with chords, or notes, or ideas, then you can actually plod forward and construct something out of the smallest morsel of material. For instance if you are playing around and you come up with a really nice chord and you have a few mental tools at your disposal, you can come up with a few ideas like - what if I pluck this chord upside down or slightly higher up - you can start to do it that way, it really depends on the piece actually. With two orchestral pieces I am working on, one does have a very strong sense of atmosphere and I think I had that sense of atmosphere in mind and I just had to find a way to realise that. Another orchestral piece is the opposite where I have a base line and that's all I have and I'm really scratching my head as to what to do with it.

Loop: You have had exposure to the international music scene in the context of both a student and a performer. - How would you compare the Australian experience? Do you feel cut off from what's going on overseas or do you feel just as inspired?

Julian Day: That's a tricky question. I mean more and more as in any endeavor, the Internet makes the world so much smaller. I mean when I went to New York I spent a good deal of time studying with a few figures there and I was not nearly as surprised as I probably would have been had I gone maybe 20 or 30 years ago. Having said that I think Australia has a different view of itself than how the rest of the world views it. Either we think too little of ourselves and don't give ourselves enough creative ambition or courage and so end up writing sort of poor imitations of bigger trends that are happening overseas. Or - we sort of overplay our importance and find that we are actually this small country tucked away in people's minds. One of the biggest things that I got when I was over there was when I would say to someone that I've just come from Australia and they would say, 'Oh my god, that is such a long plane trip.' And I'd never thought about it before you know, because around Australia you could commonly jump on a bus and be spending 12, 13 hours going from Melbourne to Sydney or something. It's an interesting question and I'd be interested to see how it will be played out in the coming years.

Loop: What would you say is your greatest aspiration career wise - would it be to

write a soundtrack for a film, or go on an international tour, or is it the reality of making music everyday. What inspires you? What are you aiming for?

Julian Day: I'd have to say that even though I went to university and have grown up in a notated sort of music world, I must say that I think recordings are where it is at for me. And I think I would be the happiest if I had works of mine commercially distributed on CD or widely disseminated via recordings. For me I tend to be a solitary listener. I much prefer getting a CD and listening at home and listening to a MP3 player than actually going to a concert and hearing it live. For me, the sense of community is not that I have to go and experience it with other people; I would prefer to hear it and disseminate it in my own time and in my own way. So consequentially I would like my music to act that way. I guess secondary is to have an international presence and hopefully follow the music around a bit - you know in groups of artists who want to work with my music around the world - that would be fantastic!

Julian Day presents New Music Up Late on ABC Classic FM - Saturday nights at 10:30pm.