

## **On Being Prepared**

### **Review by Julian Day**

**Two radically different approaches to an instrument that continues to intrigue both composers and audiences alike.**

**Erik Griswold** *Altona Sketches* – Erik Griswold, prepared piano & music boxes  
Room 40 (RM407)

**Anthony Pateras** *chasms* – Anthony Pateras, prepared piano  
Sirr (sirr 0030)

The idea of 'preparing' a piano emerged in an era when composers were trying just about everything to subvert the norms of classical performance.

Whether it was pushing our understanding of melody and harmony to its absolute limits (AKA Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg), or experimenting with the type of sounds that we might accept as 'musical' (the Italian 'futurists', Henry Cowell and Edgar Varese), the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be incredibly fertile ground for new approaches to organizing sound.

These days it's rare enough to hear the prepared piano at all, so to hear two new CDs by Australian 'prepared pianists' is a real delight. Erik Griswold and Anthony Pateras are well established within both contemporary classical and improvisatory circles, and as such these discs straddle a curious yet compelling space between tightly organized and structurally indeterminate musics – possibly one of the more relevant areas of musical research in our time.

If you're new to the prepared piano, it's a simple enough concept. Essentially you transform the sound of a grand piano by placing objects between or on top of the strings, whether its bolts, screws, bits of cardboard or whatever you can think of. When the hammers then strike the strings you hear a very different type of piano, highlighting its essentially percussive nature rather than its traditional harmonic and melodic role.

The idea of altering the piano's sound in this way is actually quite old, dating back at least to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Strips of paper would be placed on the strings to imitate the Turkish music that was all the rage throughout Europe at that time.

The most famous works, however, are those by the American composer John Cage. As one of the most inventive musical thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cage decided early on that poking around inside a piano offered far more scope than simply pressing its keys. His motivation was to "explode" the fixed nature of the piano so that one instantly had an entire orchestra of new sounds under one's fingers.

Perhaps the best known of his prepared piano works are the *Sonatas And Interludes*, a collection of short, repetitive pieces that recall the music of Balinese gamelan. Try the excellent recording by Australian pianist and composer Nigel Butterley (Tall Poppies TP025).

These oriental overtones are immediately evident in *Altona Sketches* by Erik Griswold, an American born composer and pianist now living and lecturing in Brisbane. Since 1999 he has worked with his percussionist partner Vanessa Tomlinson in the wilfully diverse Clocked Out Duo ([www.clockedout.org](http://www.clockedout.org)) as well as pursuing a solo career.

His work could best be described as hypnotic, drawing from world music, jazz and minimalism to create mesmerising keyboard patterns. His earlier disc for prepared piano *Other Planes* (Clocked Out Productions) was somewhat austere – a series of tightly focused movements each exploring a single mood or rhythmic style with some spoken text along the way. *Altona Sketches*, on the other hand, is much more capricious, a series of colourful vignettes that seem to delight in the broad sonic canvas that piano preparation allows.

The disc comprises three long movements, simply titled *Wednesday*, *Thursday* and *Friday*, which are in turn broken up by short and sweet interludes for prepared piano and prepared music boxes (I'm curious to know just how).

The approach here is not too far removed from that of John Cage, the emphasis being on creating a highly contrasting armoury of sounds – from muted plucks to bell-like tones and fuzzy thumps. This heterogeneity serves the music perfectly, which is full of contagious cross-rhythms, mesmerizing counterpoint and sharp angular diversions.

Erik is a master of the 'warped groove', creating slightly peculiar yet highly addictive riffs that immediately grip both the head and the feet. Each long movement consists of many short 'dances' that insistently twist and turn, immediately working their way under your skin. The sleeve describes these pieces as "a series of improvised musical moments"; the suggestion that these structures have simply flowed out in single sittings only adds to one's admiration of Griswold's skills.

Mind you, if I have one gripe it's that I'd probably rather hear these movements broken down into shorter tracks. Considering that each dance sounds perfectly self-contained, there seems to me to be no strong motivation to group them into longer structures where they can easily get lost. Again, Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* are instructive; each track not much longer than a few minutes, allowing a flexibility for the listener at home to approach each section at their own pace.

The recording itself, however, is simply fantastic, capturing this ensemble of percussive sounds with crystal clear precision. You could be mistaken in thinking you were hearing an entire group at work, which is perhaps one

of the great strengths of this instrument: the ability to coordinate such varied sounds in such a tight and economic way, using just ten fingers.

Likewise, as is typical for Room 40, the sleeve design is outstanding: a set of ghostly white smears set upon a sharp red background courtesy of visual artist Sarah Pirrie, one of Erik's long-standing collaborators.

In comparison to the colour and life of *Altona Sketches*, Pateras' disc *chasms* is a darker, much more sober affair. Here the model is the Transylvanian composer Gyorgy Ligeti, well known for his intense and at times quite frightening sonic explorations. The gravitas of his *Requiem* and *Atmospheres*, for a start, lent Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* much of its haunting prescience.

Anthony Pateras is a relatively young composer, still in his late twenties, who has nevertheless crammed an unusual amount of activity into his short working life. When not performing in any of up to four improvising ensembles – Twitch, Beta Erko, Pateras/Fox or Pateras/Baxter/Brown – he is either organizing concerts of other artists (his Articulating Space series being a rare Australian example of a tightly curated yet stylistically flexible performance model), writing music for the concert hall (I last saw him performing live with the Australian Chamber Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall) or performing solo at the prepared piano. He's already toured the pieces on this disc to five countries (it's released on the Portugese label SIRR).

Like the *Griswold*, Pateras' enigmatic disc features three extended movements – *residue*, *chasms* and *descent*. Yet whilst *Altona Sketches* could broadly be described as 'minimalist', drawing freely on the bright contrasts of American minimalism, *chasms* is much more 'minimal'. Each piece explores a different musical shape with an obsessive drive, content to sit with a particular idea for as long as it needs within its own musical space.

Indeed, Pateras' idiosyncratic approach to preparing the piano is to separate different registers into different timbres, an approach he has spent years tweaking and perfecting. Thus one area of the piano will feature just screws, another just cardboard, etc. It is thus possible, as he demonstrates in the third movement *descent*, to systematically shift from one timbral 'state' to another over time, a simple yet captivating technique.

A strong motivation for this CD, as Pateras confirms in the liner notes, is to replicate electronic music through purely acoustic means, again something that Ligeti attempted to do in such mind-bending keyboard solos as *Continuum* and *Volumina*. It is easy to forget that both electronic and acoustic artists are working with the same basic materials – sounds in time – and it is highly instructive when artists from either camp make this connection and draw between the two.

This disc displays an impressive confidence and an increasing sophistication from Pateras, now exploring silence and stasis more than

ever. My feeling, however, is that his best years are ahead of him. He has the fire and curiosity that should propel him into further iconic status in this country, yet I want to hear even stronger, more individual statements that transcend the conventions of both the classical and improv worlds that Pateras has grown up within.

These two discs present two sides to what is still a highly fertile means of transforming such a common instrument as the grand piano. It's interesting that what was once such a central household object – the piano – is still captivating such varied creative artists through its extended possibilities. One only has to think of, say, Ross Bolleter in Perth (he of the Ruined Piano Sanctuary fame, a nursing home for decayed or devastated pianos) to confirm the trend.

Both Griswold and Pateras are highly self-assured, virtuosic and inventive artists, and as such these two discs are essential additions to the ever-expanding Australian contemporary music canon.

Take a listen. And prepare yourself.

### **JULIAN DAY**

Julian Day is a composer and arts presenter based in Sydney. He works with both live performers and electronics and is particularly interested in exploring both the visceral and the macabre in his work. He can be heard presenting New Music Up Late on ABC Classic FM every Saturday night from 10:30pm. [www.abc.net.au/classic/newmusic](http://www.abc.net.au/classic/newmusic).

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