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All instruments were created equal

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Musical democracy in action ... the Splinter Orchestra performs in Newtown's King Street ahead of this week's NOW Now festival.
Photo: *Marco Del Grande*

Musicians come together in Newtown for a symphony of improvisation at the NOW Now festival.

When double-bassist Clayton Thomas embarked on the creation of a 55-piece orchestra three years ago, he decided to do what he does best: improvise.

The result is the Splinter Orchestra, which boasts some of Australia's best free jazz, electronic and experimental musicians, and swears by a creed of pure improvisation.

But if the thought of 55 harpists, guitarists, laptop artists, saw players, saxophonists, horn players, flautists, bassists and percussionists playing their own tune gives you a headache, relax.

"As improvisers, you might think, 'Oh well, they just get together and jam.' But that gets incredibly unsatisfying very quickly," says Thomas, the orchestra's facilitator.

Instead, the group aims for a graceful tension - an excruciating competition of soft sounds and gentle interaction.

The result is something new and spontaneous and, though quiet, individually distinct. "Most people really want to hear an orchestra go off. They say, 'I want the climax. I want to hear what 50 people going off their heads and then stopping suddenly sounds like.' Well, that's actually really easy," Thomas says.

The hard bit is listening to each other. "I can be playing and decide that I don't have to play for half an hour and just listen to the band and be really happy not to play. Or I can just decide to do something incredibly quiet for 15 minutes and just wait until someone stops and it will be there, and suddenly it will have a whole new context and meaning."

The band are trying to create a sound they can't find anywhere else - a challenge that requires a radical change in the way musicians relate to their instruments. "There's a really amazing jazz saxophone player who for a long time struggled for what to do in the band," Thomas says.

"And one day he came along, pulled his flute apart and decided he was just going to play sections of his flute. Man, it went off. He loved it, and the sound was incredible.

"It took a kind of instrumental revelation, a technique revelation, for him to realise what was necessary for him to enjoy himself in this band."

The group aim to experiment with sound, but the Splinter Orchestra is also an experiment in musical democracy - giving every player and every sound equal worth.

"When you have a look at how orchestras have functioned throughout history, they have always existed for God, for the king, for the court; as social structures that say, 'These are the virtuosos and they deserve to be nourished and pushed by the second-fiddle players, and at the end you have the dumb bass player and drummer. They are supposed to just keep the wheels going so that our heroes and our gods can shine.' It's important that that gets broken down. I think it's irrelevant in our society now," Thomas says.

The Splinter Orchestra is a feature act at this week's four-day NOW Now festival, a showcase of the nation's best spontaneous and experimental music. The group's members play in a variety of incarnations, but Thomas says the orchestra is a concentrated mix of the best new music makers.

"The NOW Now is a means of showcasing all these really focused smaller groups and looking at solo playing, but this orchestra is an amalgamated idea of that," he says.

Experimental music is usually burdened with polite adjectives such as "interesting", but the Splinter Orchestra meets the challenge of creating something new that is also beautiful. "I love it. It amazes me. The experience of playing it amazes me and listening to the recordings astounds me," Thomas admits. "It's just so exciting how you can do something beautiful and engaging that will constantly surprise you."

The NOW Now festival starts tonight and runs until Saturday at Petersham RSL @Newtown. The Splinter Orchestra performs on Friday. \$15 a night (\$10 concession) or \$40 for festival pass. Tickets 9550 3666.

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