Beating the drum for Gravity

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It's going to be a birthday bash in the loudest sense of the word.

Defying Gravity, one of WA's noisiest music ensembles, is about to turn 20. Over the past two decades, this remarkable Perth-based musical institution has sent a small army of able young percussionists out into the world.

But when ace American percussionist Gary France first came to Perth in 1987 as artist in residence in the then Conservatorium of Music's jazz program, it is unlikely that he would have envisaged what was to grow from small beginnings into one of Australia's liveliest and most enduring musical institutions.

"I spent a great deal of time establishing a strong presence for jazz drumming. It was my primary purpose," France says about his first year.

But when conservatorium head Richard Gill told France there was to be a special week of concerts devoted to percussion music and invited him to prepare his jazz students to participate, France agreed only on the condition that all the percussion students, whether in the classical or jazz streams, could be included.

The lunchtime concert by the WA Conservatorium Percussion Ensemble in November 1987 was the first public airing of what was to become known as Defying Gravity. And while music purists at the time might have thrown up their hands in horror at the prospect of the classical stream being polluted — as they thought it — by jazz, the proof of the musical pudding lay in what emerged.

After that 1987 concert, France was invited to apply for a full-time position at the conservatorium. "I applied on the understanding that both classics and jazz students would participate in the percussion ensemble," he says.

France points out that the ensemble didn't just fall out of the sky — and he warmly acknowledges the pioneering work "and absolute passion" of David Pye, Paul Tanner and many others in bringing percussion music to Perth audiences in the years before 1987.

One of the most remarkable features of Gravity is its extraordinarily consistent level of performance. This is no mean achievement when taking into account that the make-up of DG is constantly changing as new students come into the group and graduates go out into the community to seek their musical fortunes.

Maintaining these standards has been the result of the enthusiasm of the ensemble's two directors, France (who is now associate professor and co-ordinator of percussion at the Australian National University in Canberra) and now Timothy White, principal percussionist with the WA Symphony Orchestra.

France is generous in his praise for his successor.

"Defying Gravity is right up there with the best because Tim White is up there with the best," he says. "As long as there is a dedicated, passionate professional involved with a group of passionate youth, you will have a winning combination!"

Certainly, France, White and their students have placed Perth firmly on the percussion map of the world — and that is no small achievement.