Michael Askill is a name synonymous with Australian Percussion. His commitment to Australian music through performance, composition, education and research has established a benchmark of artistic endeavour for us all.

In May 2012, I had the pleasure of reconnecting with Michael for performances at the Carriera International Music Festival. His dedication to our craft, generous spirit, and passion for “all things percussion” inspired both the musicians he performed with and audiences alike.

This article documents Michael’s journey so far as a percussionist/sound explorer, a journey of “unlikely detours and encounters” that leads to where “sound eventually resolves into silence”.

Born in Durban, South Africa, Michael and his family moved first to Birmingham, England, and then, in 1957 when Askill was five, to Australia. (“The Australian Government were offering passages from the UK to Australia for 10 pounds!” Askill remarks.)

While undertaking percussion studies with legendary teacher Richard Smith at Adelaide’s Elder Conservatorium, Michael performed with the then South Australian Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Youth Orchestra. During this period he had the opportunity to meet with and perform new compositions by Peter Sculthorpe, Barry Conyngham and Richard Meale.

In 1971, Michael moved to Sydney to join the ABC’s National Training Orchestra. Instead, he was invited directly into the position of Principal Percussionist in the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust Orchestra. While playing in the AETT Orchestra he met the members of renowned Les Percussions de Strasbourg who invited him also to further his studies in France. In Strasbourg he performed with the Orchestre de l’ORTF and L’Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg while studying with Jean Batigne at the Conservatoire where he was awarded a Premier Prix de Percussion “avec félicitations du jury” (translates as: ‘Honours, with Committee Praise’, and is the highest distinction awarded in the French academic university system).

In Strasbourg he also had the opportunity to experience the full potential of percussion as a form of musical expression and had the opportunity to work with composers such as Olivier Messiaen and Tona Scherchen. And it was in Strasbourg in 1972 that he first met the Australian dancers Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon who were touring with Les Ballets Flea Blaika. Graeme would later become Artistic Director of Sydney Dance Company and form a creative relationship with Michael that has resulted in a number of important collaborations involving dance and percussion.

On his return to Australia, Michael re-joined the AETT Orchestra in time for the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973. In 1974 he formed a percussion group with Colin Piper, Ron Reeves and Ian Blossom called Sydney Percussions. Sydney Percussions’ first concert was presented by David Ahern as part of his A-Z music series in the Recording Hall of the Sydney Opera House. The group went on to become Synergy Percussion and membership over the years has included a virtual roster of Australia’s leading percussionists such as Ric Miller, Ian Cleworth, Rebecca Lagos, Graeme Leak, David Hewitt, Philip South and many young percussionists who now continue Synergy’s legacy.

Synergy became well known for it’s role in actively commissioning many new works for percussion and for the many imaginative collaborations with international drummers and percussionists including David Jones (Australia), Fritz Hauser (Switzerland), Aly n’Doye Rose (Senegal), Hossam Ramzy (Egypt), Dave Samuels (USA), Glen Velez (USA) and others. (See our article in this issue, Synergy The Early Days)

An interlude in Melbourne in late 1974 saw Michael appointed as Principal Timpanist of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Hennyke Leake. During this period Michael also taught at the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium.

In 1976 Michael returned to Sydney to take up an appointment as Principal Percussionist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. During his ten year career with the SSO he was also an active performer of contemporary music with Synergy Percussion, the Seymour Group, Fiederman and Nigel Westlake’s Magic Puddin’ Band. He performed as soloist with the Sydney, Adelaide and Queensland Symphony Orchestras on a number of occasions including performances of Richard HK Gruber’s Rough Music.

In the mid-80s Michael left the Sydney Symphony to concentrate on his passion for new music and his performance activities with Synergy Percussion and Fiederman. He was invited by Michael Atkinson to form a new group to explore the burgeoning interest in the multi-cultural aspects influencing Australian music. This new group, eventually called Southern Crossings, became one of Australia’s most important educational assets in Australia as well as being frequently invited to tour for the Department of Foreign Affairs to Korea, Canada, India, Philippines, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Mexico, Italy and the USA. During this period Michael began to explore composition from the perspective of a performer and composed music for Synergy Percussion and Southern Crossings.

It is rare to find a musician who dedicates so much of his time to his fellow musicians and does so with such enthusiasm. Askill is in turn an artist recording his colleague’s music, a producer sharing his experience and expertise in the recording studio, and in an informal but very effective way, an ambassador-at-large for his country’s culture.”

By Gary France.

Photo by Grant Mildura

Michael Askill
photo by Sharka Bosakova
Aly n’Diaye Rose & Michael Askill contributed again in the role of performer/composer Michael Askill with the cream of London session musicians. Once septet Attacca. Attacca featured leading Australian guitarist John Williams to join his new ensemble as Head of Percussion at the Canberra School of Music (now ANU School of Music), then invited by Australian guitarist John Williams to join his new septet Attacca. Attacca featured leading Australian musicians such as Nigel Westlake and Timothy Kain with the cream of London session musicians. Once again in the role of performer/composer Michael contributed Lemutu Eludes, Missing Things and To a Stranger. Attacca toured the UK in 1992 culminating in concerts at the Brighton Festival and the Barbican, then the Sydney Opera House. In the period between 1992-1999 Michael was involved in a series of intensive collaborations as composer, performer and musical director with now legendary Australian choreographer Graeme Murphy and the Sydney Dance Company. These collaborations, Synergy with Synergy, Free Radicals, Salome and Air and Other Invisible Forces provided a unique opportunity to explore music and dance interactions featuring percussion. While Synergy with Synergy used a suite of works (Elliot Carter, John Cage, Iannis Xenakis and John Luther Adams) with new percussion sequences, this time for the Opening Ceremony of the Asian Games in Doha, Qatar. In 2007 he won Best Original Score for his music composed for the short film Eclipse. In 2008 Michael led Synergy Percussion to Tucson, Arizona for their American debut at the Tucson Winter Chamber Music Festival and later that year performed his final concert with Synergy Percussion at Sydney’s City Recital Hall in a program of music by Percy Grainger, Peter Sculthorpe, Gerad Brophy, Ross Edwards and Karinstein Stochostchak. Michael had led Synergy on concert tours around Australia as well as New Zealand, France, England, Sweden, Hungary, Germany, Hong Kong, China and the USA and the Far East.

Since 2009, Michael has re-focused his activities in Brisbane. He is Lecturer in Percussion at the University of Queensland and Percussion Specialist at the Queensland Academy of Performing Industries. He is completing a PhD in composition at the University of Queensland – an exploration of his own compositional and processual approach in relation to the ongoing discourse and development of percussion music, recording and electronic processing. He is frequently invited to be a guest teacher and ensemble director at the Queensland Conservatorium.

In 2010 Michael curated 1000 Gongs as part of the Australian Percussion Gathering held at the Queensland Conservatorium. 1000 Gongs demonstrated the immense power and magic of these instruments as channelled through visionary composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Karheinz Stockosthakken, James Tenney and Jony Jom and John Luther Adams performed by a line-up of percussionists that included Sylvie Gualda (France), Steve Schick, Kunio Kato (Japan), Phil Treilou, Tom O’Keally and Vanessa Tomlinson (Australia) and guests. This was a unique concept from around the world. In 2011 he invited 3 percussion graduands from the Queensland Conservatorium (Rebecca Lloyd Jones, Stephanie Mudford and Cameron Kennedy) to join him in the performance of a re-creation of highlights from Graeme Murphy’s Free Radicals and Synergy with Synergy with a new percussion company called Mod Dacoz. In 2012, Early Warning Systems performed John Luther Adam’s epic percussion quartet, Strange and Sacred Noise.

Recent commissions include Morning Song for string orchestra with vocal and instrumental soloists for CHQGOM 2011 – 3 pieces for percussion and a composition 140 – a percussion duo for Sound Collectors (Louise Devenish and Leah Scholes). Michael is also working on films with the New Zealand director, Mark Lapwood and the Los Angeles-based director, T. Arthur Cottam.

One of Michael’s most fruitful collaborations over many years has been with the German record producer, Eckart Rahn. This has resulted in a significant discography, particularly as a soloist and composer on Eckart’s Celestial Harmonies and Black Sun labels.

In recent years Michael has begun to explore the sounds and properties of gongs and singing bowls. He has formed relationships with gong makers in Wuhan, China and singing bowl makers in Kathmandu, Nepal. He has assembled a significant collection of these instruments and has integrated them into his performance practice, recordings and compositions while researching their origins, history, vibrational qualities and effects.