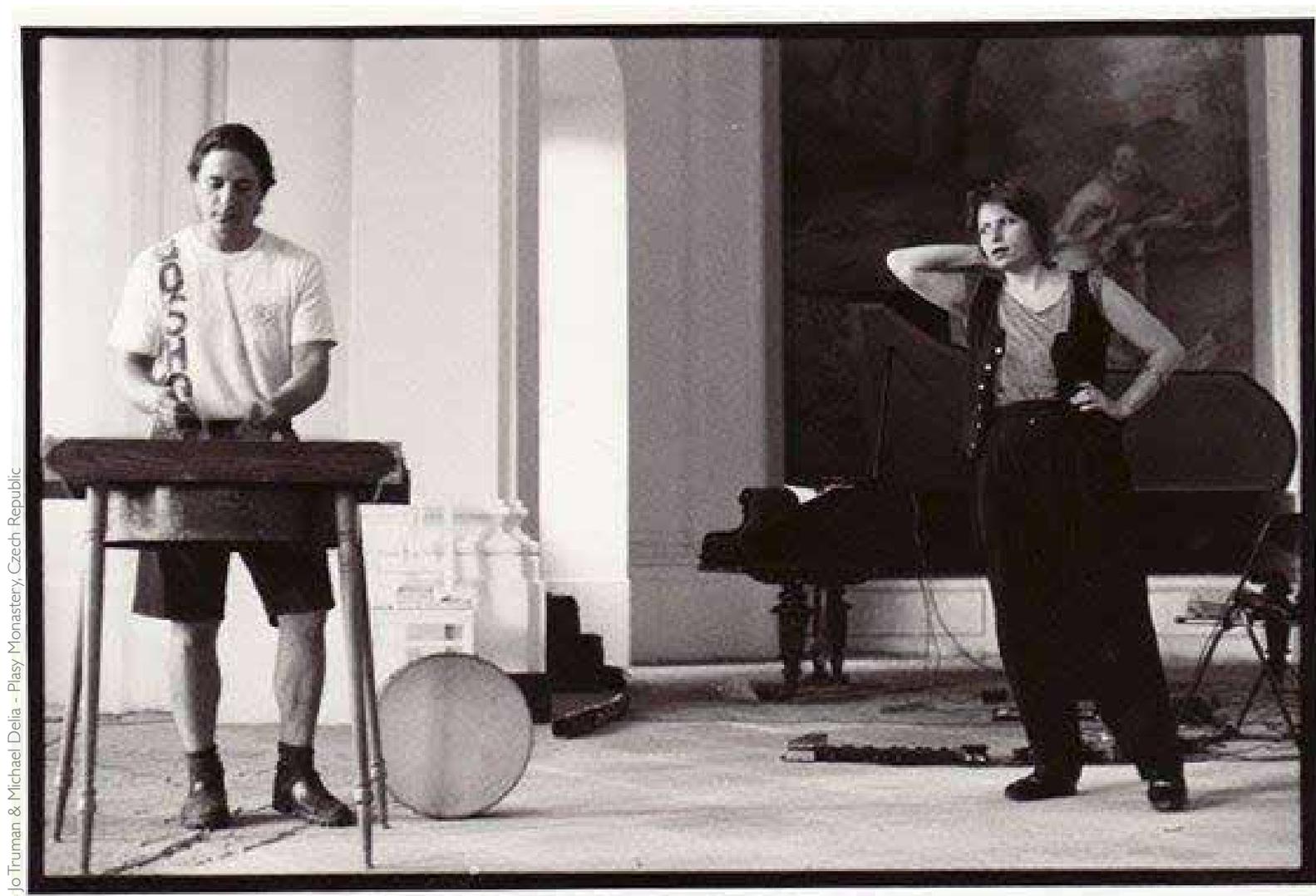


THE SOUNDS OF MY LIFE

JOSEPHINE TRUMAN



Jo Truman & Michael Delia - Plasy Monastery, Czech Republic

Josephine Truman is a composer, performer, sound and multimedia artist, producer and synaesthetist.

In January this year Jo Truman took part in 'This is a Voice', an exhibition and performance program held at The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, which 'traced the material quality of the voice by looking inside vocal tracts, restless minds and speech devices in order to understand its complex psychological and physiological origins'.

Another recent laurel was being commissioned by the music curator of MONA FOMA (the Museum of Old and New Art's annual festival in Hobart, Tasmania) to present her own compositions.

To many in her home community Jo Truman is known primarily as a teacher and highly regarded visual artist and the other aspects of her extraordinary career will be revelatory. Jo was invited by Oz Arts to share her unusual story. Here is the first of two parts.

Synaesthesia is the subjective sensation of a sense other than the one being stimulated. For example, a sound may evoke sensations of colour, or colours evoke an odour.

'This is a Voice', a Wellcome Collection UK exhibition produced in collaboration with the MAAS The Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 2017-18, supported by the British Council

The two compositions at MONA FOMA were Princess Wharf and Morning Meditations at the beautiful domed St. Mary's Church cupola - in collaboration with Lennie Marks and Daniel & Alia Grinvalds, 2013.



A COMPLICATED CHILDHOOD

One of my earliest memories is of leaning out of my bedroom window and engaging in conversation with the neighbourhood birds. I knew crows were birds but liked to imagine them as boys and developed my own special dialogue with them. I liked to think they were calling back to me. Perhaps they were.

I was quite highly tuned to the sounds around me and prone to mimicry. This ranged from the sounds of birds, opera singers from my father's records and a favourite squeaky toy. I worked at a convincing rendition of this last sound particularly, and soon found, as the last child in a large family, performing this particular sound on request guaranteed peals of laughter and a relaxing of sometimes icy tensions.

*as the last child in a large family,
performing this particular sound
(of a squeaky toy) ... guaranteed
peals of laughter*

I became fascinated with all the voice was capable of and spent hours not only in mimicry but exploring different resonant cavities of the throat, nose and torso and any other parts of me the voice could utilise as a resonant chamber. Microtonal birdsong led me to explore in time, ways I could create similarly with my voice.

These musical inclinations led to classical piano lessons at a young age and my curiosity and a fascination with musical innovation opened up a world of improvisation on the piano. I imbued the treble clef with the light qualities of fairies and the bass with the darker qualities of witches and created musical narratives around these themes. I was fortunate to have exposure to a broad palette of music through my father's then quite unconventional tastes - from Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* to Shostakovich and Gershwin.

Music and sound became inextricably linked with the environment for me - a means to connect with "the other", to bring together disparate inner and outer worlds. Another of my passions was for the visual arts and one of my career choices was to be a visual artist. However, things were not quite so straightforward.

My family life was complicated, impacted by war-related trauma and other complex issues. As a child I experienced family breakdown and illness and my closest sister became seriously ill through anorexia and consequently took her own life.

LEAVING HOME TO LIVE IN DARLINGHURST

I left home and school at 16 and continued to pursue my passion for the visual arts and music, entering an Arts Certificate course at TAFE before moving onto what was then Alexander Mackey School of Fine Arts in Paddington. However, I suffered an inner fragility due to family breakdown and the loss of my sister. I was quite shut down and experienced selective mutism, but my singing voice enabled me to soar. Living in Darlinghurst gave me access to the Cell Block Theatre where I could visit to sing and where my voice could resonate off the sandstone walls, defining me in space and time and place. There I could transcend and transform my pain and through

an improvisatory process map and draw on emotions I felt were deeply embodied, located in different parts of me, giving them sonic shapes and using my imagination to connect with the birds singing outside the high barred windows. I loved counterpointing small microtonal vocal sounds with bigger broad brush gestures. At the time I was also inspired by avant garde singers Meredith Monk and Cathy Berbarian and began to compose my own short works including the 4-track "Mother Piece" and short vocal pieces "3 Vocal Catharsis".

It was around this time that I became involved with the local improvised music circuit and found inspiration in the work of local musician Jon Rose who introduced me to a fascinating world of improvised music from around the globe.

Memorable gigs were with Rose & Henry Kaiser at The Basement, Circular Quay and The Relative Band Festival at the Cell Block Theatre. I organised a live recorded performance for improvising musicians with the visiting Circus Oz troupe at the Cell Block and dreamed of going to Europe where the improv scene was thriving. Music connected me with a musical community which, I felt at the time, became "family".

SYNAESTHESIA

I could not compartmentalise the different artistic disciplines I was involved with - singing, music, improvisation, composition and visual arts. My innate perceptual processes did not separate them, even though for purposes of identity, I thought I should. I saw patterns in sound and shape (texture, form, dimension, feeling) like a drawing in my mind's eye and I felt a strong sense of the correlation of colour with emotions and states of being which I located in different parts of my body.

I drew on this sense of colour to evoke mood and over time realised that I experienced synaesthesia. I still have this inclination which informs my life and work every day.

In my late teens I was introduced to the yedaki (didjeridu) by a friend. I became immediately fascinated, engrossed and even obsessed with the instrument, despite being aware of the associated gender taboos. I mastered the circular breathing in six months. Looking back at my attraction and involvement with the instrument, I realise that the combination of deep breathing and sound had a therapeutic

Right: Doll, pencil drawing by Jo Truman





*[of the yedaki (didjeridu)]
I became immediately fascinated, engrossed and even obsessed with the instrument, despite being aware of the associated gender taboos*

calming and meditative element to it. I loved to experiment with vocal multi phonics in the playing.

I received a Special Purpose Award from the Australia Council which enabled me to explore the origins of the instrument and in my mid-twenties I took off for a year to travel to the Northern Territory, to seek "permission" to play. In a way I felt called to these regions. I realised I was very privileged and through various contacts I eventually met with master players and makers George Djungawanga and David Blansi on the community of Bamyili (now called Barunga) near Katherine and took lessons in both the playing and the making of the instrument. I was able to make this privileged connection through my skin relationship with an indigenous woman called Nelli Camfu.

This was a fantastic experience. George took me on one of his excursions for locating suitable branch and trunk specimens which he then hollowed out and showed me how to carve the exterior down to a workable shape, and also how to paint the instrument by mixing paints from ochres and clay. David gave me some lessons in playing. From these experiences I felt I was permitted to play by those who had the authority.

I spent a year travelling and researching in the Northern Territory and worked with the composer Sarah Hopkins in Darwin for a performance involving voice, yedaki and cello at the Brown's Mart Theatre and was privileged to meet with the Gagudju tribal elder Big Bill Neidji.

Travelling through this beautiful region was a great eye-opener, a challenge which caused me to re-evaluate my sense of my country of birth and question what it meant to be an Australian. I loved sketching the wildlife I encountered there although I also felt somewhat impotent in the face of the social and cultural issues that confronted me on my journey.

A year after my return to Sydney, I was awarded an International Study Grant from the Music Board, Australia Council, which sent me in the direction of Europe where I would embark on research into the voice and improvisation.

A STUDY GRANT TO LONDON

In two years living in London I involved myself with the London Musicians Collective, working and researching extended vocal techniques, interviewing experts in the field such as Gregor Rose and working with esteemed improvisers such as Evan Parker, Phil Minton and Maggie Nicols as well as others involved with extended vocal and instrumental techniques.

I became interested in the graphic scores of Cornelius Cardew, Edgar Verese, Stockhausen and others, and I realised that my attraction to these forms of musical representation related to my inclination to visualise music and themes associated with music. During this time I was interviewed about the embodied voice, improvisation and extended techniques by Trevor Wishart for NMA (New Music Articles) Magazine. Wishart drew parallels between my experience and approach to singing and shamanic approaches to singing and vocalising.

While in London I was involved in several projects, the most memorable being "Songs From A Prison Diary" (co-composed with Phil Minton and Vervan Weston) based on a suite of poems written in a day by Ho Chi Minh whilst in a Chinese prison. This work involved a choir, "Voices from Somewhere", made up of 25 singers mostly from England who were BBC choral singers and specialist singers. The project took place in 1990 and was titled and commissioned by the Europa Jazz Festival and supported by French Telecom. It premiered at Abbey de l'Epau in Le Mans (France). The following year it was performed and recorded in the Church of Saint Paul at the Strasbourg Musica Festival. I had a significant role as the opening solo vocalist.

AMSTERDAM AND THE IMPROVISED MUSIC SCENE

After two years in London, I moved to Amsterdam where I lived for four years in 'government interim' squats and flat minding. Amsterdam was a fertile place for the New Music and improvised music scene - there didn't seem to be rigid dividing lines between genres of music and crossovers were common and acceptable. I worked with many musicians there, among them Luc Houtkamp, Wolter Weirbos and Tristan Honsinger, and studied counterpoint with Misha Mengleberg. Various projects included writing a work for filmmaker Frank Scheffer's project "...and the eareye seeshears", and played yedaki (didjeridu) in Colin Bright's "Didjeridu and String Quartet, 8" which was performed at The Ijsbrekker. I spent a year as a guest student at the Koninklijk Conservatorium in Den Haag where I worked with John Cage as a singer, performing on his "Song Book" project which was broadcast on VPRO.

And I became involved with "Gallery Oko", a small gallery curated by the Czech art historian Milos Vojtechovsky, as a performer and artist. Milos was also busy developing a project



“The Hermit Symposium of Metamedia” which involved transforming a beautiful and, in places, crumbling twelfth century Cistercian monastery in the small town of Plasy in the Czech Republic, into an artist’s residency and platform for performances, installations, sculpture and other art forms.

<https://www.agosto-foundation.org/hermit-foundation-and-center-for-metamedia-plasy>

I visited and stayed in Plasy on two occasions as a performer, sound and visual artist collaborating with others such as Michael Delia. My second visit involved a radiophonic commission to make a sonic portrait of this magical site with “The Europeans” (ABC Radio National). For this work I interviewed other artists on site, recorded wonderful sounds such as the ticking and chiming of an ancient mechanical clock, the underground stream and various sounds of the many musicians who performed in the beautifully resonant cupola and other sites. It was a great privilege to experience, especially at this point in history, around the time of Czech independence from Slovakia.



Jazz Musician at the Birnhuis, pencil drawing by Jo Truman

AND THE WALL CAME DOWN...

There were other interesting experiences of a Europe in a state of change and flux. A musical tour through towns of the DDR (German Democratic Republic or East Germany) with Jon Rose (violins) and Joe Saschs (guitar) gave me an insight into the DDR before the Wall between East and West came down and an invitation to perform at the 1st International Jazz festival in Vilnius, Lithuania (with trio Chekasin and Tarasov) enabled me to experience the Baltic state still very much in the grip of Russian military influence. Indeed the Wall came down while I was living in Amsterdam, creating a palpable wave of excitement that swept Europe.

My interest in sound art and radio was first realised with a commission for "The Listening Room" (ABC Classic FM). "Cell Songs" was created partly in Europe and completed during a visit to Australia and was based on the changing perception of time under colonial rule in Australia. I wrote a work for three imaginary soundscapes: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Each sequence was introduced by a different mode of marking time: water drops, a mechanical clock and a digital clock.

This work took me back to Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory where I recorded on site sounds of birds, insects, bats and waterfalls and children speaking the indigenous Gagudju language. I interviewed Big Bill Neidji, Traditional Owner of Gagudju and poet, who spoke about the consciousness inherent in trees and the sentience of all living things and warned about the consequences of white man's disrespect for nature. I featured interpretations of traditional stories by indigenous writer Pauline McLeod, colonial ballads by Phil Minton and Paul Carter's enacted convict quotes. This work was broadcast several times on ABC Classic FM and was translated into German for SWF Baden Baden.

I performed the yedaki for Aboriginal ballet dancer Roslyn Watson's solo work "Voyage to the End of a Dream" staged by her company, Brolga, in Paris in 1987. Roslyn choreographed the piece which I had composed for yedaki and voice. We were two women, one indigenous and the other non-indigenous performing with the yedaki.

'SDREAMINGS'

For a time I lived in a basement room in Amsterdam. It was the first snowy winter in seven years and people were relishing getting their skates on and taking to the frozen canals. All I had was a two-bar heater and I was homesick! Images welled up in my mind of my period in the Central Desert - the deep red ochre escarpments, vivid blue skies, dark green tufts of wanari shrub (mulga) and the purple flowers of the kurkara (blue mallee). I somehow, perhaps naively, identified my sense of displacement and grief with the people I had encountered on my travels. Inspired by the notion of the universality of grief, I wrote a poem which became the basis for my new work, "sdreamings":

*The sdreamings are finally
reversing their journey
no longer resisting the inevitable
when the moon seduces the tide
with her darker face.
The sediments of bygone years,
swirl in momentary confusion -
in each one is reflected images of her face -
they settle to form
a new mosaic.*

The work was written in seven sequences:

1 Breathings: The breath, the source, inhalation, exhalation, constriction, tension. The struggle to find one's own words and identity (multitrack voice and breath)

2 sdreamings: The streamings of dreams. The dreaming of streams. Delving into the darkness of the past instigates a journey (poem)

3 Didjeridu and harmonics: Tribute to George Djungawanga, David Blansi and the people of Bamyili (2 track Didjeridu and vocal harmonics)

4 Birds and water: The wetlands of Kakadu (microtonal and extended vocal techniques)

5 Katajuta: Homage to Katajuta (piano and text)

6 A cry for the return of the dream: Lament for the pain and loss of separation and dislocation and loss of identity. The voice repeatedly plummets - a metaphor for the plunging to emotional depths necessary to reclaim the Self, a journey which forms its own landscape. A bird appears bringing hope, transforming pain and departing (multi tracked voice and extended vocal techniques)

7 Resolution: A return to the source

This work was commissioned by WDR Koln by the Producer of Audio Akustisches Kunst. A week was spent in the studio working with sound engineer Benedict Bitzenhofer to create the contemporary Hörspiel (radio drama) 'sdreamings' which was later broadcast on WDR.

VOCAL HARMONICS

I embarked on the development of my harmonic singing with lessons with esteemed musicologist Tran Quang Hai at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. This technique fascinated me because of its parallels with yedaki harmonics, created through movement of the tongue in the same manner as the creation of vocal harmonics or overtone singing (a traditional singing technique originating in Tuva, southern Siberia).

At the Musée de l'Homme I met Jean Schwarz, a composer who worked as a sound archivist there. Jean was interested in my approach to singing and invited me to his family home for a week to record in his studio. We worked on large slabs of vocal improvisation with Jean simultaneously improvising with technology. Some of the pieces which emerged from these - "Singing In Tongues", "Keening Song" and "Flock" - featured on my commissioned CD with Staalplaat Records, Amsterdam, as well as the WDR Hörspiel, "sdreamings".

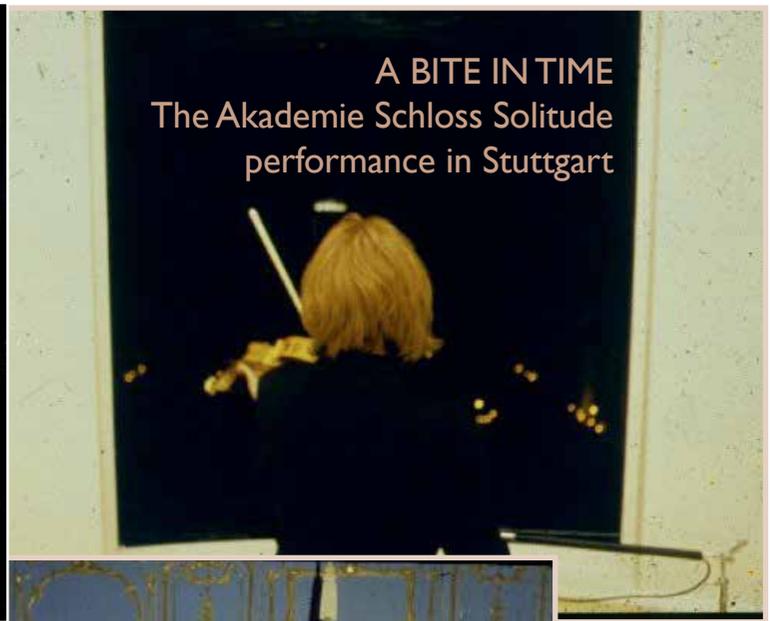
Later the jazz reviewer and journalist John Shand wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald:

Think about the spread of singing from, say Robert Johnson to Chinese Opera. Jo Truman covers such a breadth of approaches, and then some. She can also sound like a smashing crystal, a fountain playing, or a flock of birds. The music of birds is an inevitable inspiration for improvisers and composers, and Truman's ability to mimic is especially breathtaking and exhilarating. Her virtuosity is just a means to an end, which is so enthralling that her exceptional tonal control and articulation, not to mention her range, could almost escape notice.

THE AKADEMIE SCHLOSS SOLITUDE

I returned to Australia after almost nine years away from home, but only for the briefest of visits as I learned that I had been offered a one-year live-in residency at a renovated Baroque castle, the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany.





The main aim of the Akademie is to promote mainly younger, particularly gifted artists by means of residency fellowships and by organizing events and exhibitions by its residents. Once a weekender for the Earl of Wuttenberg, the Schloss had been through many incarnations until 1990 when it was renovated as a place of practice and study for young artists, from musicians and composers to visual artists, writers and others. Each artist resident is required to work towards a project to be realised over the course of their stay, usually 12 months. Up until today over 1400 people have participated in residencies at the Akademie.

A BITE IN TIME

I chose to create a work about food and eating in three 30-minute pieces, covering three different perspectives:

Mixed Salad: Baroque eating habits and rituals around the sourcing and preparation of food;



Top left:
Metaphor for greed at the end of an era - late Baroque parallels with contemporary late capitalist

Top right:
Mary Oliver

Centre: Pied Piper
Paul Plunkett

Below left:
Jim Denley bursts from a giant styrofoam pie

Below right:
The audience



The Secret Language of Hildegard von Bingen - based on the unique hybrid language between German and Latin which the 12th century abbess Hildegard von Bingen created to describe herbs; and

Food for Thought - based on contemporary attitudes and challenges particularly for women towards food and eating.

Residents had the luxury of inviting guest artists as visitors. I chose to work collaboratively with guests Lindsay Cooper, Jim Denley, Stevie Wishart, Fred Frith (a resident of Stuttgart at the time), Martin Spaink (from Amsterdam), Australian Baroque trumpet player residing in Switzerland Paul Plunkett, Florian Mutschler, Renate Frauhammer, as well as the many talented fellow artists already living at the Schloss.

Contrasting venues within the Schloss inspired the narrative of each piece and my direction and design of the performances: the massive oval Feast Hall where the Earl once held feasts during the decadent period of the Late Baroque, the Rococo Chapel and the modernised Guibashaal.

Assuming the role of Pied Piper Paul Plunkett led the 400-strong audience of members of the public to each venue with his own renditions of improvised Baroque trumpet.

For *Mixed Salad* ten large floor to ceiling mirrors inspired the selection of ten improvisers working with instruments, texts and voice. I created a graphic musical score with a different colour allocated to each artist and with each given a stopwatch. On the grid of the score I specified timings for the artists with their associated colour. Each colour indicated timed entry and exit points, scored in a way which indicated dynamics, duration, texture, intensity, volume (that is, dots of various sizes = percussive; lines = sustained pitches; thickness = volume; "scrambled" textures = free form, and so on). I was interested in the work and philosophies of John Cage with whom I worked in Holland on his *Song Books* opera as a singer. He did not believe in hierarchies and worked to empower performers' creativity and did not dictate musical terms in a top down kind of way. This inspired my decision to work with graphic scores to give space for performers to find their own voice within the context of the performance.

Other performers were offered the option of introducing their own interpretations of related themes. For instance, I researched the eating and hunting habits of the original aristocratic occupants of the Schloss which were interpreted through texts described in an improvisational manner by one performer. Another constructed a small replica in chocolate squares of the oval hall as an object of contemplative meditation in direct contrast to the cacophony surrounding her. Jim Denley was carried into the midst of the performance in a giant styrofoam pie from which he burst in a flute improvisation - a parody of the clowns and jesters employed to entertain the Earl at feast times.

Hildegard von Bingen's Secret Hybrid Language with excerpts from her texts which featured the names of herbs was sung by an ensemble including Martin Spaink, Renate Frauhammer, Ute Wassermann and myself with Stevie Wishart on hurdy gurdy. Stevie Wishart and Mary Oliver who were seated in the choristers' balcony performed a sublime duet on hardanger fele (Swedish fiddle) with Stevie Wishart on hurdy gurdy.

The audience was then directed from the chapel through the Hirschgang (exhibition space) where visual artist and cook Niko Tenten had constructed little pedestals supporting bread he had baked based on recipes from the German famine periods, the ingredients written on panels behind. The public were invited to sample the bread during the intermissions.

For the final piece, *Food for Thought*, I interviewed many of the female artists in residence and invited comments on their cultural and personal attitudes to food and eating. I wanted to explore the issues and struggles surrounding food and eating based on memories of my own family experience. With sound engineer Florian Mutschler I edited their comments into a montage of environmental sounds I had recorded in the interior of the Schloss. This montage served as a template for Lindsay Cooper (clarinet), Fred Frith (prepared guitar) and myself (voice and piano) with which to interact in real time.

Jo Truman

In Part 2 in the next issue of OZ ARTS Jo Truman returns to Australia and relates her experiences as an artist, improviser and composer up to the present.

Below: Graphic musical score and layout of Schloss showing route and performance spaces

