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MUSIC

Eliane Radigue attracts younger composers



'If we are busy all the time we cannot learn from other cultures,' says Eliane Radigue. Picture: Vincent Pontet.

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The composer Eliane Radigue lives and works in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, in a one-room apartment down a side street opposite a primary school, just up from a leafy patch of park. Musicians from across the world visit her here, lugging their instruments up two flights of stairs to take tea and musical direction from the charming great-grandmother, 86, a long-time Buddhist who spends most mornings absorbed in meditation.

No matter that the lift doesn't work or that, of an afternoon, the chatter of children returning home tickles the air. Impressed by Radigue's 60-plus years of concentrated creative practice in her commitment to accessing a cornucopia of delicate sounds, these like-minded talents bunch up on a pair of cream couches arranged at right angles or, as with 30-member French improvisation orchestra ONCEIM, colonise the space between an abstract bronze statue, a cat scratching pole and several remarkably lush houseplants.

"Some instruments don't fit in here easily," says the diminutive Radigue, a classically trained pianist who in the 1960s worked as an assistant to Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, founders of musique concrète (which used found sounds to create innovative music), before going on to New York and experimenting with feedback, loops and drones. She hung at out at Warhol's Factory, met practitioners such as choreographer Merce Cunningham, and got to know minimalist composers Steve Reich and Terry Riley, who turned her on to Tibetan Buddhism. A calm, dancing spirituality has infused her work ever since.



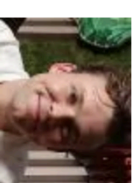
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“An organ can’t take a taxi, for example, so I meet the organist in a church,” she continues, in reference to her 25th solo OCCAM, the name given to long acoustic compositions that unfurl slowly, expanding time, rewarding deep listening. “But most of these wonderful musicians like your (Australian composer and sound artist) Cat Hope work with me at home.”



Eliane Radigue has 60 years of musical practice behind her. Picture: Marc Moreau.



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Having spent several intense afternoons with Radigue towards the end of last year, Hope, 55, will premiere their co-composed *OCCAM XXIV* for bass and flute in Sydney this week, as part of Carriageworks' sonically bold Open Frame season. "Eliane is a careful listener, and shares with you a way to find detail in your own sounds, that you then go away and develop," says Hope, whose new music ensemble Decibel premiered an OCCAM titled *Hexa II*, created with Radigue's close collaborator clarinetist Carol Robinson, at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2015. "Eliane has a unique approach to music-making that I feel privileged to be part of. Once you have an OCCAM from her it is yours, and you can teach it to others."

Before she began working solely with instrumentalists, creating her first OCCAM for progressive harpist Rhodri Davies in 2011, Radigue was one of the most important electronic composers of the 20th century. She is dismissive of the idea of being singled out for her sex: "I have had to avoid this question all my life or I would have done nothing," she says. "I come from a generation of wonderful women like Simone de Beauvoir or Simone Veil, who just did."

Radigue devoted more than three decades to developing an oeuvre comprised of variously hypnotic, impressionistic, startlingly bare but harmonically rich compositions created on her trusty ARP 2500, the hulking, hissing analogue modular synthesiser that she brought back from New York in 1974 and famously addressed as "Jules".

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“Jules used to live over there, against the wall. He is now living with a producer but he is still here, in a way. It was a very long love story. You can wave to his phantom,” suggests Radigue with a smile, so I do.

It's a longer love story than even Radigue's relationship with French-American artist Arman, a member of the nouveau realisme movement (which included Yves Klein), whom she met in Nice in 1950, married in 1954 and divorced 20 years and three children later (their son Yves died in a car accident in 1989, aged 34).

Radigue's final electronic work, *L'île re-sonante* (2000), is a sort of intergalactic bathing pool, all ripples, spirals and shimmering glissandi, a gorgeous swansong that preceded her first work for an instrument, an electric bass; in 2006, the year Jules went into storage, she crafted an instrumental with cellist Charles Curtis, who encouraged her to abandon electronics altogether.

“The shift to working with (acoustic) instruments was not a big deal. It felt like an extension of my background in classical music,” says Radigue, who has quoted the second movement in Ravel's Piano Concerto in G as a wonderful example of slow, propulsive writing.

“My work with musicians is similar to what I always tried to accomplished on Jules, alone. But now I get to share, and sharing is such a joy! To discover people who are looking for the same sounds that I want to find is so, just so ...” She trails off, beaming.

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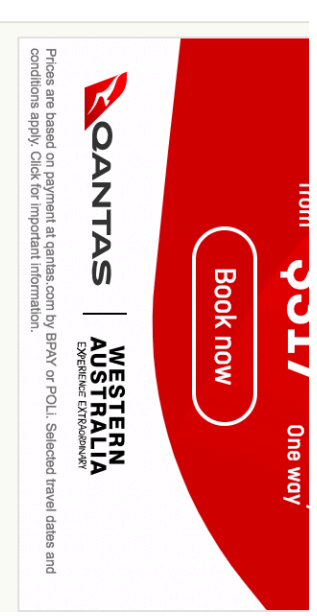
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The octogenarian works closely with her instrumentalists, composing OCCAMs for them, not their instruments. Verbal instructions and on-the-fly recordings replace conventional scores.

Each new solo piece begins with a conversation during which Radigue and the performer choose a “secret” image associated with water. From mountain springs to raging torrents, raindrops on a mossy rock to a waterfall cascading into the sea (Hope has two images pertaining to oceanside Perth and Catania in Sicily), each visual inspires and frames compositions that evolve via a shared commitment to uncovering aural minutiae.

The overriding ocean metaphor works on several levels: rendering the compositions more accessible to listeners; hinting at their worlds-within-worlds aesthetic, at the universe contained by the human body; underscoring the message in the music’s swirls and spirals, to heed intuition and acknowledge our underused potential. Radigue hopes that experiencing an OCCAM might sufficiently slow us down and open us up that we will pay attention to the wisdom of ancient cultures, with their oral traditions and dialogue with the spirit world.

Indeed, in these increasingly fractious, fast-paced times, the renewed fascination with Radigue’s work seems to indicate a want to take time out.

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