

# Perpetual motion

by Elizabeth Kerr



PHOTOGRAPHS: HELENA HUGHES

The NZSO under Francisco Feliciano in Kit Powell's *Les Episodes (Part 1)*: premiere.

**H**ISTORIANS MAY see Wellington's 1987 Sonic Circus as something of a watershed in New Zealand composition. Ringmaster extraordinary of the 12-hour event was composer Jack Body who put together the first Sonic in 1974 and whose formidable organisational skills have brought us other such festivals, most recently Asia Pacific at the end of 1984. Principal among Body's many talents are his unflappable good humour and his unobtrusive ability to persuade almost anybody to do the impossible.

It is, though, the breadth of his imagination which made this Sonic such an overwhelming experience — it was not merely a demonstration of available indigenous music, but the stimulus for the creation of many new works and performing ensembles. Over 60 New Zealand composers were represented, and the more than 120 compositions included some 40 premieres. Many of these first performances were major works commissioned especially for the Circus, funded by the QEII Arts Council, the Composers' Foundation, and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra who sponsored the event as the last of their 40th birthday celebrations.

The seven works presented by the NZSO at the Michael Fowler Centre in the afternoon provided some of the first excitement of the day. Appropriately they began with Douglas Lilburn's *A Birthday Offering*, composed for the NZSO's 10th birthday in 1956 and still full of a rather exotic energy. *Diffractions* by Nigel Keay was premiered in September by the Dunedin Sinfonia, and here given a fine second performance by a smaller orchestra from the NZSO with pianist David Guerin. It is, as the composer suggests, an abstract work, appealing in its subtly shifting colours.

The first orchestral premiere was *Les Episodes (Part 1)* by Kit Powell, a New Zealander now living in Switzerland. In this work he continues a long association with Christchurch poet Michael Harlow, setting five of his poems for soprano and bass. Powell has referred to Harlow's "curious imagination", a characteristic he seems to share — *Les Episodes* is an extraordinary and original work, full of theatrical whimsy and gentle humour. In the third episode — "Where are the

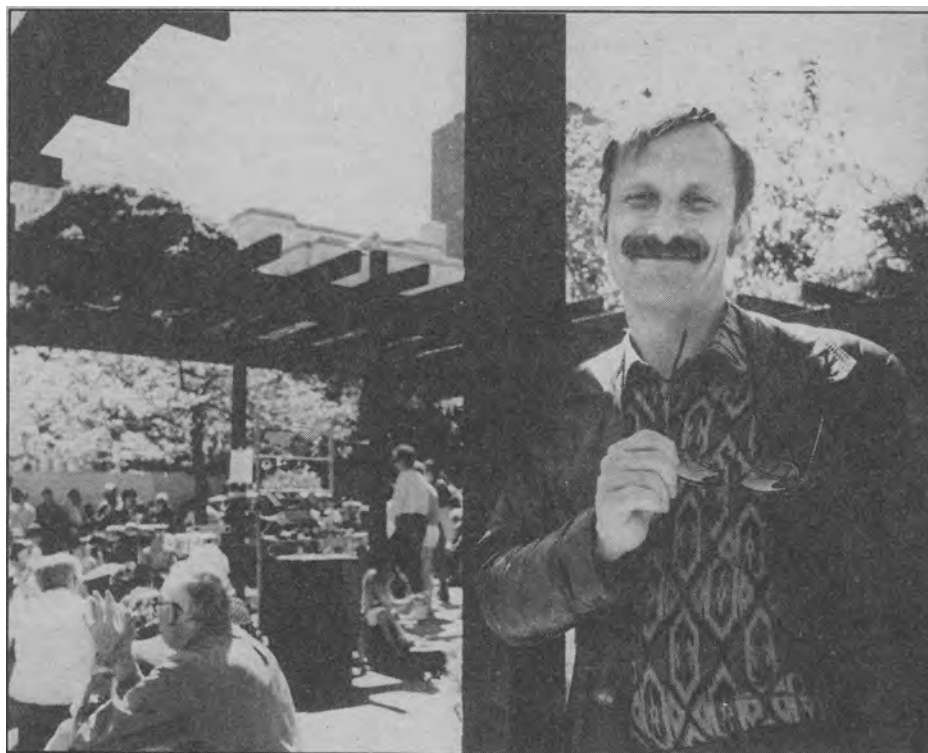
twins?" "They're on the wall", or was it "In the jar"? — Powell continues a long interest in chance procedures, permuting an already perplexing and witty poem with computer techniques.

The "stonepoem" of Episode 4 has been set several times for different ensembles, and demonstrates another interest of the composer, the use of "found" sounds. The resonant stones tapped together by percussionists was a highly effective feature of a beautifully transparent orchestral texture. The singers did a magnificent job with a challenging score and soprano Jan Barrington coped most successfully with the dramatic demands of the piece. Unfortunately not all the words were clear, perhaps because of some balance problems in work or performance. The five settings we heard represent the first half of *Les Episodes*; it is hoped that funding will be found for the completion of this intriguing piece.

Australian-based Noel Sanders wrote *Marram* in 1980 but its performance at the Sonic was its first. *Marram* is "shore grass that binds sand with its tough rhizome", and the composer was also attracted by the word itself, which reads the same backwards or forwards. The variations of the opening motive also have this palindromic structure. It is a tightly constructed piece, full of timbral variety and uncompromising strength.

*A Modern Ecstasy* was commissioned from Lyell Cresswell for the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the full seven-movement work will be performed in Scotland next year. We heard a premiere performance of the last two movements, "The War", and "Amar's Lament", the latter including text by poet Patrick Maguire, movingly sung by Flora Edwards and Derrick Miller. It is becoming clear that Cresswell is one of our most important composers — many found this work one of the day's highlights, its spacious time-scale and sustained power unfolding to a climax of shattering proportions. The emotional content of the piece made entering the fray at the sixth movement less than satisfying and many people expressed a desire to hear the complete work.

After a forthright and energetic performance of Ken Young's *Sinfonietta* under the composer's baton, we were flung into the last of the NZSO pre-



Sonic Circus's ringmaster Jack Body: imagination and experience.

ieres, *Black and White* for orchestra and tape by Chris Cree Brown, who describes his work as "a documentary piece about the Springbok Tour of New Zealand in 1981". It had an extraordinary impact, the tape a skilful collage including tour commentary from news media, politicians, protesters and rugby supporters, the orchestra perhaps a less important player in a piece of aural theatre which never flagged. Musically it is crude and perhaps a little too long, but the audience was riveted and few would deny its raw power.

The NZSO was conducted by Francisco Feliciano from Manila, whose impressive work with new scores made a great impact at the Asia Pacific Festival. Attending orchestral rehearsals during the week, I was struck by his utter professionalism, his integrity and the easy way he provided the link between composers and orchestra.

The NZSO contribution was enormous but perhaps the real spirit of the Sonic Circus came later. With six hours still to go, exhaustion was taking over. So was anxiety about what to choose. I missed *The Chafing of the Stump* by Helen Bowater, a piece of political music-theatre (I think) which included hanging carcasses of meat, but was greatly impressed by her *Skeleton Souvenirs*. With a small ensemble of various percussion-



Composer Kit Powell (right) and poet Michael Harlow: five settings.

ists and oboe, slides and vocal lines of medieval beauty, she offered "fragmentary recollections of my journey never far from Italy where I registered the impact of the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe".

Later in the evening came a more difficult choice, between two commissioned premieres on the same theme. I missed Jonathan Besser's *Migration Music* to hear Ivan Zagni's *Migration Music No 1, The Koehoea*, for solo clarinet, chamber orchestra and singers. Victoria University's orchestra and six singers from the Phoenix Choir under Peter Walls gave a marvellous performance of this vast and evocative work, with clarinetist Peter Scholes a dazzling soloist. Scholes was one of the exciting performers of the Sonic; straight after this virtuosic "concerto" he performed three more demanding and evocative works for clarinet, including his own fascinating *Wireless*.

My evening ended with works for solo voice. Soprano Nicola Jansen sang the beautiful and wide-ranging atonal lines of *Four Poems from Aftonland* by Noel Sanders with an easy lyricism which belied their difficulties. *Writing on the Sand* by David Farquhar, seven Haiku settings of words by Raydia d'Elsa, was given a restrained and not entirely satisfying performance by Deirdre Elliot and violinist Gavin Saunders. With rich and expressive singing from Glenys Taylor, and Douglas Mews in full command of the big Town Hall organ, Gillian Whitehead's skilful and romantic *Requiem* was a marvellous conclusion to the evening, the rather whimsical choreography of Bronwyn Judge adding an unexpected lightness to the solemnity of the piece.

For Jack Body, the Circus offered a premiere of his own, *Three Rhythmics* (1986) for piano duet, a tour de force performed after months of dedicated preparation by pianists Diane Cooper and Danny Poynton. Particularly exciting was the third movement, described by the composer as a "relentlessly furious moto perpetuo". The Sonic Circus was itself 12 hours of perpetual motion, multi-layered, diverse, exhilarating, frustrating, exhausting, and thrilling. And I haven't mentioned the street band, the experimental videos, the puppets, the live electronic music, the jazz, the brass bands...