

# Unyazi III: More than one way of skinning the electroacoustic cat

*by Cameron Harris*

Unyazi III, “Lightning Strikes Thrice” was, I can truly say without irony, an electrifying listening experience for all. This included many people indeed, as I’m glad to say audience numbers were extremely good throughout the four days of the festival in mid-September. The range of approaches to electronic music was striking, which I guess is to be expected when one considers the different times and places that the music came from.

Music from the four continents of Africa, America, Asia and Europe was contributed by composers and performers of a variety of types: there was completely improvised music; music where live performance must be accurately synchronized to the fixed-sound backing; music for performers and triggered sounds and music where live electronics processed and manipulated live performance. For me, regardless of these different means of skinning the electroacoustic cat, there was something gripping in all of the concert programmes.

The festival was expertly curated by Jürgen Bräuninger, composer and Head of Music at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with much administration and practical support by Fiona Tozer. I also helped with the admin and I must say that it was great to work with the “Durban Duo”. This project has been one of my best experiences since beginning to work on festivals here in 2007.

I won’t summarise the whole festival now as the details of what we heard are on the [Unyazi 2012 webpage](#). This page, like the pages of all our festivals, will now exist as an archive resource of this unique event into perpetuity and, if the previous two Unyazi pages on our [events page](#) are anything to go by, will be frequently visited by people all over the world who are interested in what goes on here.

It is worth mentioning, however, a few highlights of the consistently strong programme that we heard in Durban. One of these was on show every night: the high-quality 5.1 surround sound system provided and run by SAS Productions. Even for those works that were in stereo only, the effect of hearing the sound all around the audience, and with such clarity was great, as the system complimented the acoustics of the Howard College Theatre remarkably well. Those works that made use of the system’s full capabilities really sparkled, these were performed by violinist Darragh Morgan and the intense multinational improvisation group Die Schrauber.

In Die Schrauber’s main concert, Mario de Vaga, Joker Nies and Hans Tammen routed their three separate instruments (Joker’s circuit bent omnichord, Hans’s ‘Endangered (hybrid) guitar’ and Mario’s conglomeration of deliberately unstable sound circuits) through the sound system in an incredibly immersive way. Hans Tammen’s solo concert was truly surround-sound and included one of the most striking experiences of the festival as what can only be described as a plume of high-

intensity sound thrust upwards right from the middle of the audience while the rest of the musical texture dotted and swirled about us.

I had been lucky enough to hear a fair amount of the music presented at Unyazi in other concert situations. This included Nothing is Real (Strawberry Fields Forever) by Alvin Lucier, performed by Jill Richards on piano and teapot with Shaughn Macrae on electronics. In this work, fragments of John Lennon's famous song are performed on piano and then played back through a miniature speaker inside a teapot. The performer is then instructed to raise and lower the lid of the teapot to create a filter effect for the play back. It was effective the first time I heard it, but it was magical in Durban: a great performance supported by good front-of-house gear in a sympathetic space. This piece wonderfully complimented Morton Subotnick's The other piano (also played by Jill Richards) and music by Lukas Ligeti and João Orecchia to form an incredibly memorable concert.

This year the Growing Composers events took the form of presentations, lecture demonstrations and workshops by many of the artists who performed in the festival. The sessions were fascinating and were attended by a substantial cohort of workshop participants who came from across the country including Cape Town, Durban, Potchefstroom and Johannesburg.

The festival included substantial input by South African artists, which provided a good balance to the sounds brought to Durban from overseas. This is an important priority for NewMusicSA and Into, Warrick Sony and Daniel Hutchinson produced fantastic performances during the festival.

With this in mind, it is fitting that the piece that most affected me musically and emotionally was a collaboration between a South African and an international artist. Carl Stone, a renowned American sound artist based in Japan teamed up with South African vocalist Nina Mkhize to perform a version of his piece Al-Noor. In the programme note Stone told us that for this piece he had written a computer programme "so as to create an ambiguous combination of several different pieces of music, where the outer shape of one piece of music is "filled-in" with the harmonies and spectra of another, almost like an injection moulding process, or perhaps skinning, as realized in sound." The result was an extremely moving and beautiful performance that I shall remember for a long time. It was proof, if ever it was needed, that electronic music is not some dry domain dominated by techno-geeks who prioritize the technology over the music but a wonderfully verdant place inhabited by many talented artists whose aural acuity is something to be envied.



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