



EDDIE'S WALL

2002 saw the premiere of John Cousins's magnum opus, *Eddie's Wall*. This intermedia project is the culmination of all that has gone before in the life and work of John Cousins and, as Ian Dando writes, it deserves to be recognised as the masterpiece that it is.

WHEN I ASKED John Cousins if his large new intermedia work *Eddie's Wall* was unique, his answer was unequivocal: "Absolutely. There's no way it could be cloned by someone else, let alone the techniques in putting it together." There speaks a dinkum pioneer, one of our most profoundly original artists.

Outside the composing fraternity, Cousins is little known to the general listener. This is to be expected if you abandon concert hall composition. Listeners here have not caught up with Cousins's more esoteric fields—not that intellectual abstruseness is the barrier; his new works are very direct in appeal. It is simply that the broader public finds Cousins's areas such as performance sculpture, performance installation and intermedia too novel and outside their experience. Also his lack of self-promotion (more on this later) makes him a shadow figure to the general music lover, even in his home city of Christchurch.

Eddie's Wall, launched in Christchurch in December 2002, is his magnum opus, a glorious summation of all his past work in non-traditional composition. His road to *Eddie's Wall* is circuitous to follow even for those who have tried to keep abreast of his development.

Cousins cites two key works before he abandoned the concert hall altogether. "The first piece showing the real 'me' was *The Reason Why*—three songs for voice and strings written in 1968." A huge influence in the use of voice was Berio's *Circles* (1960). The other was his commissioned work *Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori*—a Wilfred Owen anti-war poem, written for the Christchurch Harmonic Choir, vocal soloists and the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dobbs

Franks. But by the time he completed it in 1977, Cousins had already broken the concert hall shackles.

He pinpoints the years 1970–77 as his "crossover point" with three new developments. The first was two months studying electronic music in Toronto and Sweden. *Christmas Music* was his first full-blooded electroacoustic work, written between 1973–4. The other two new developments were mixed media and use of body, both developed from the teaching of Kenneth Gaburo with whom he studied in 1972 at the University of California. Gaburo was the most liberating influence on Cousins's post-'70s direction. Gaburo's mixed media courses involved actors, dancers, architects, musicians and poets making a collaborative work together which they could all perform. Gaburo's advice, "If you can't make me cry it's no good", struck a chord with the emotional honesty of Cousins.

Gaburo broke down inhibitions among pupils by promoting the idea that anyone can dance and making them do so. In 1977 Cousins applied Gaburo's body ideas to his university teaching and his own works. From Gaburo's body-based ideas Cousins then founded a group called *Co-active Play* which toured New Zealand with *From Scratch*.

From there Cousins went direct to performance installations using the body as a principal medium. He sees performance installation as an exciting form incorporating process as well as finished product.

The sensational *Membrane* of 1984 was his penultimate performance installation. From the video clip of it that Cousins showed me, it looks more like performance sculpture than performance installation. Visually the arrangement of the materials—suspended glass perspex tubes, clear polythene and the seven drums surrounding

Cousins's naked body reclining on a tilted bench—makes an innovative but elegant piece of mobile sculpture. Likewise impressive is the beauty of sound that flows through the sculpture via Cousins's body.

The sound of raindrops falling from leaky spouting was a starting point, which Cousins sublimates into art. He reclines in his tilted bench linked to plastic tubes that catch his breath and irregular swigging of distilled water. This inevitably flows out as urine through tubes into a pump where he releases its contents via a foot pedal, to create the random sound of droplets of urine landing on the membranes of the seven drums. The juxtaposition of excreta exploited to create beautiful sounds was intentional. "I am linked to the sounding systems in a direct and personal manner. I am biological material in the work."

Says Cousins: "For me the most expressive element of all is the random durational regularities of the seven drums. They never repeat themselves, and yet, within the continuum of their constant change, they always seem, to my ears, to be totally convincing"

The open-minded reception to its premiere at Dunedin's Hocken Gallery prepared no one for the *succès de scandale* it caused at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Blinded by the means rather than the end artistic result, critics slammed it. "The work of a piss artist", claimed *The Guardian*; "Kiwi wee-wee", huffed *The Scotsman*. Nudity and urine were simply too much for British critics to stomach. Cousins, by contrast, claims it as his best work, a perfect marriage of body, sculpture and sound. "It's totally abstract, totally pure, very rational."

There are two more fields he worked on after *Membrane* that became important mortar for *Eddie's Wall*: shadows and stones. Cousins began working in the natural environment at Birdlings Flat near Christchurch and in West Coast locations. These works often focused on contemplating his own shadow and relocating found stones on beaches. Cousins's use of stones and shadow reach artistic fruition in two movements from *Eddie's Wall*, *Aria* and *The Necessity for Consolation*.

All these ingredients—intermedia, performance installation, performance sculpture, *musique concrète*, body (*Membrane* especially), shadow and stones—form the circuitous road Cousins followed to reach an integrated apotheosis in *Eddie's Wall*. They are key steps to understanding a remarkable work.

Eddie's Wall is a digest of eighteen extant pieces about his father and family written in the last twenty years. He carefully chose eight of these works constructing them as a related "tetralogy" (his little Ring cycle, you might say) that produces more than the sum of its parts. It was started in 2001 and completed in 2002. Sub-titled *a work for eyes and ears*, each part of the tetralogy has an audio work as its first section followed by an audio-visual one. You could abbreviate them as 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, etc. This order is reversed in part 4. The work's main components are video and electroacoustic sound (including recorded

spoken narrative) as well as a further component of ritual presentation.

Cousins modifies a small University lecture room and reduces it to a totally black tent interior completely free of visual distraction. Eight outstandingly good state-of-the-art speakers project these sounds as "octophony" in the room with a black screen in front for the visual aspect. There is seating for nine only—"one would be the ideal," says Cousins—otherwise the spatialisation of sound, an essential component built into the work's structure, would be compromised. The precise seating to hear the spatialised sound is as important as that for Boulez's *Répons*.

The work ran in December 2002 for a full week, with an additional show later the following week to accommodate demand. Over a hundred people witnessed all or parts of the work. Starting at 4pm you could hear the entire tetralogy in an evening finishing at about 10.45pm with breaks after each of the four works. You could also choose to hear two per night as I did, or one per night.

Eddie's Wall is concerned with the cycle of birth, life and death as seen through Cousins's increasing awareness of his family lineage emanating from Ireland and the ramification of this family background on his life. The concept of lineage is represented through stones, which preoccupy him not only in New Zealand's coastal environments but also on a visit to Ireland with its vast number of stone walls demarcating properties. He was surprised at the huge size of the foundation stones and the width of the wall analogous to "one generation settling on the shoulders of the previous one and forming an ever broadening wedge of individuals back through time".

Part 1 of the tetralogy opens with the audio work *Sleep Exposure*. The work is based on a dream Cousins experienced concerning his grandfather Eddie. In the dream Eddie is about to die. He lived in Ireland for his first 20 years before relocating to New Zealand to die in Gisborne aged 88. Cousins' episodes of clear factual narration are interspersed by more private dreamlike sections of speech. Like the scherzo from Berio's *Sinfonia*, partial perception of speech heightens the emotional impact. The grandfather gives his life to Cousins. Through the desultory snatches of song and semi-intelligible speech we share in the sleep-dream-death cycle of mankind—a past-present-future for us all.

The audio-visual 1b, *In the Hands of*, is purely the portrayal of one obsessive action without narrative. Cousins holds a family portrait of four male generations scrunching it up into a ball then uncrumpling it carefully only to savagely scrunch it up into a ball again. This circular process repeats until the portrait is so mangled as to be almost unrecognisable. Cousins may well claim a need to scrunch the paper 48 times as the process must be a slow and gradual one to get his conceptual point across. Yet the reality of over-repetition courts monotony.

We all interpret this sharp alternation between love and hate of lineage by personalising it with our own experience. To Cousins the piece is an analogue of what happens in a

family. As soon as you are born you are going to be hurt. It's a paradox between love and hurt common to all family life. Assertion of individuality dictates that.

My interpretation was totally different. When the child grows up and separates from family to become himself, the process is both hurtful (on the parents) yet loving. We are ready to destroy habits and mores of past home love to revolt and become ourselves, yet we intersperse this with loving memories of that past. No matter how wilfully we revolt to become ourselves, our lives become a permanent but fragmented distorting mirror of our childhood past.

Part 2 opens with *On Listening In*. This violently contrasted piece of *musique concrète* is real compositional bravura. It is so outstanding it could stand on its own if it were lifted from the cycle and presented without its background programme. Cousins presents himself as an eavesdropper in a transparent imaginary dwelling recalling everyday actions as he wanders dreamlike through the house. This tour through the house drags up a whole kaleidoscope of memories and subjective resonances.

It is the longest work at 36:45, but sustains this length convincingly. It is technically outstanding in its spatialised sound, quick bouncing of sound between speakers, reverberation and overlay effects. Everyday sound sources such as narration, TV, piano practising and family talk trigger off a highly active virtuosic tape composition. This piece is a musician's paradise—one of the most impressive *musique concrète* pieces I have ever heard.

Part 2b, *Aria*, is a requiem for his father who died in 1991. Cousins works with the symbolism of stones, and an obvious connection to his turning over of stones on the West Coast. Even the stones of the actual Eddie's Wall, photographed in Ireland and used for his programme cover, possess vague face shapes. There are three slowly rotating stones on the screen. They transform gradually into indistinct faces each affected by the patina of the host stone, and rotating separately without turning full circle.

The programme note provides information regarding each stone 'character'. Cousins (left hand stone) struggles with the unidentified difficulties isolating him from the two people he needs most during his childhood. The mother (right hand stone) contemplates her choice of husband and muses over what binds her to such a painful marriage. The father Edward (central rear stone) gains self-respect from the experience of army life. He looks forward to war service. These gyrating stones symbolise the dynamics and tension you get within any family.

Cousins told me that when his father died he requested no formal burial, nor rites of a deceased person. His body lay in the house over the weekend. Cousins left the house to walk along the wet sand of the coast during low tide, following his shadow across it and stopping now and then to relocate a stone found by his moving shadow. The resulting line of stones formed an azimuth contour across the low tide zone.

Suddenly he picked up one of these stones, took it into his father's workshop—strictly off limits during his childhood—and carved out a mahogany box to put the stone in. He then put this in the hand of his dead father. Much later he redeemed the ashes from the undertaker and was thrilled to see the stone among them. The burnt bones

of his father had discoloured and merged with the stone—a perfect example of stones representing family lineage. He took it and put it into a small shrine in his studio.

Many years later, he persuaded a Maori Kuia to allow him to record her voice for use in another work in this series (*Birth Circle*). When he took her into his studio she immediately began to weep, pointing at the stone in the shrine: "This person has not been farewellled." She did not previously know Cousins nor his father nor about the latter's death. The closing part of *Aria* merges into a karanga she sang in the studio, blessing the spirit of Cousins's father.

3a, *The Quarter*, relates to Cousins's return to Ireland, where his grandfather was born. Before immigrating to New Zealand, Edward had spent the first twenty years of his life at a small rural holding called *The Quarter*. Through field recordings, narrative and conversations with the locals, Cousins goes "back to his roots" focus on his sense of New Zealandness and Irishness. He quizzes the older locals about their knowledge of old Edward and what sort of personality he was. His emotional reactions to these discoveries are integrated into powerful electronic music interludes.

3b, *Bowed Peace*, is the dark expressionistic underbelly of the cycle. Its sinister nature forms the climax of emotional memorability in the entire tetralogy. John is lying semi-naked upon a piece of timber, held in a bowed shape by a taut, stainless steel wire. It's akin to a torture chamber. The letter he is to read to his father is placed upside-down so that he must contort his body to read it. His heart is connected by a stethoscopic device to a mallet which strikes a bow string and therefore monitors the physical effort needed to read the letter through the speakers on to tape.

The heartbeat is therefore reified through music, as a direct, physiological triggering of the work's sonic substance, a logical extension of his earlier *Membrane*.

Physical effort is exerted to attempt personal communication—the very quality his father lacked. The letter he reads to his father confronts the latter in an emotional tirade as his father's inhibition of feeling and insecurity does not enable him to communicate. "I tried to break through to you", Cousins bursts out. "I loved you yet I was also fearful of you as I never saw any honest emotions flowing from you." The letter is a masterpiece in reasoning through one's feelings. Cousins does this devastatingly, probably because he is so emotionally in tune with himself. His ebullient emotional vitality has always been one of the most pleasurable aspects I find in his personality.

Part 4a, *The Necessity for Consolation*, I found to be one of the most subtle and profound—my favourite. Likewise the profundity of Cousins's succinct programme note. It's a masterpiece in itself:

Sooner or later we all join the dust of the corporeal universe. At this moment, when we are eclipsed by the inexorable trajectory of our own shadow, the "zoom lens" of consciousness, continually changing focus between the significant and absurd, is revealed not as a marvel of the human condition, but rather as the mechanism of our own downfall. Somehow then it becomes necessary to

renegotiate our idea of mortality so that our death is as miraculous as our birth.

Nearly all aspects of Cousins's previous experiments—stones, shadows and body—reach a synthesised fruition in this piece to show us we are an integral part of nature. Body becomes objectified as landscape. Photographed parts of his body—navel, arm, throat, nipple and navel—dissolve into landscape at a rate of change of shadow speed. This is exactly what Cousins was experimenting with during his walks along the beaches in the nineties.

He discovered that shadow speed allows us to discern change, but not its actual process because of its slowness. I tried this out by turning away from the screen then refocusing a minute later. I observed a clear change, but could not follow the slow metamorphosis if I continually watched the screen. A nipple transforms into a stone, a cliff face slowly becomes a throat, monochromised to a basic sandy yellow of landscape and geological formations. Body becomes part of the "corporeal universe".

At the same time, we hear mundane audio anecdotes of bells, childhood tunes, childhood experiences, like meeting his father at the train station, being hoisted up onto Dad's shoulders, or standing in the sink with a tap in each hand looking out the window. The monotony of the audio images contradicts the profundity of the visual images, showing our place as "dust in the corporeal universe."

Part 4b, *Birth Circle* (audio only), functions like a coda which summarises the commonality of human experience. An actual recording of a birth brackets field recordings of a multitude of people speaking in their own tongue accompanied by an English translation. They speak of details of their own birth, that of their children, early childhood memories, plus the songs they learned as kids.

Cousins sees three basic types of creation in this cycle. Type 1 stems directly from his performance sculpture and task operations, such as *Bowed Peace*; it is the emotive and expressionistic underbelly. Type 2, which he terms "Elegiac", consists of more slow-moving and even-handed works with soft and floating soundtracks. These are personalised recollections which tend to become generalised and seen at its deepest in *The Necessity for Consolation*. Type 3 he calls "Dramatised Documentaries", which feature his voice speaking in the first person. Typical examples are *On Listening In* and *The Quarter*.

Music alone is clearly not enough for Cousins. You feel the narrowness of one art would confine him. Many parts of the work would become two-dimensional in impact if limited to music. His expertise with sculpture, photography, electroacoustics and spatialisation techniques makes him the ideal intermedia exponent. He seems to need this range of art forms to encompass the work's breadth of universal human experience. Its span is enormous.

At its heart, I see *Eddie's Wall* as ritual. The broadest ritual arch is the universal cycle of birth, life and death. Within this is another broad arch: our relationship to our own lineage. Within these arches are the mundanities and interactions we experience. In *Consolations*, for instance, the ritual of life-death-afterlife and mundane trivia of life

ride parallel with video and audio process. This multi-layered thinking could not be achieved within the confines of one art form.

Although the end result of the work is both broad and profound, its impact is emotionally direct and lucid. There is no complicated discourse, complex techniques nor formal justification acting as barriers to a direct and moving reception on first hearing. Like Debussy, form emerges unobtrusively from the nature of the materials.

The fascinating thing about *Eddie's Wall* is how the seemingly desultory tangents of experimentation in Cousins's career—shadows, rocks, use of body, sculpture, narrative, photography and electroacoustic writing—all converge so naturally into one perfectly integrated work. *The Necessity for Consolation* is the best example of this, a perfect marriage of idea and technique.

The uniqueness of *Eddie's Wall* is not so much the wide field of art forms it embraces in intermedia; Cage pulls in far more in some of his multimedia happenings as from 1952. But whereas Cage's chaotic array of art components lack integration, Cousins's integrate in a very selective and well-planned manner. Here the difference between Cousins and Cage is one of art and anarchy. Two of Cousins's techniques are unique: shadow time and physiological function of the body as the trigger for sound.

Technically, Cousins' tapes always strive for meticulous clarity channelled through the best possible speakers. His *musique concrète* bears his fingerprints in a clear preference for speech and narrative, often of an emotive kind encountered in works like Berio's *Visage*. No wonder Cousins greatly admired Berio's *Circles* in the way it perfectly echoes e.e.cummings' logical fragmentation of speech from words as meaning to words as phonemes. Indeed, in their versatile breadth of resource channelled into works of considerable emotive directness, Berio and Cousins would seem to be soulmates.

Will other main centres get a chance to see and hear *Eddie's Wall*? I hope so, but we are up against Cousins's own indifference. "The conventional me says I should get off my arse and promote the work in other centres. The realistic me says it will sink like a stone and not be performed in other centres. *Eddie's Wall* now has a life of its own and is separated from me. I have neither time nor interest to promote it. Life is too short and valuable. Time to move on to my next project."

Nor can he expect any help from music critics. Cousins knows they're generally not interested in him. They put his intermedia work in the "too hard to handle" basket.

As a result Cousins is a composer in isolation. He's out on a limb like Varèse in his pre-war years. But there's one difference. Where Varèse's negativity over his lack of recognition and lack of the right musical resources almost forced him to abandon composition altogether in the thirties and forties, Cousins bobs up resiliently like a cork. I admire his positivity. "I am driven by an inner necessity to make sense of my life experiences. It is self-actualisation of work—a fundamental to my belief in art." There speaks a man of guts and vision who will never abandon art, no matter how little or much public recognition he gets. ■

