

ALVIN CURRAN: *INNER CITIES*

I have a life long fascination with pianist composers. The piano is emancipation itself, with the composer pianist enjoying unlimited freedom of expression through a multitude of voices; they are conductor of their own distilled orchestra. Alvin Curran is amongst a long line of quintessential pianist composers whose instrument allows them to be philosopher, poet, dancer, comedian, lover, the instrument itself. Their love of their instrument is palpable.

Alvin entered my life through his solo piano piece ‘for Cornelius’, an intense threnody written after the death of his friend Cornelius Cardew. I’ve performed this work many times around the world, solo, and in productions with dancers and actors. In August of this year, Alvin was resident composer at the Elder Conservatorium of Music in Adelaide, where the Australian premiere of *Inner Cities* took place. I subsequently followed Alvin to Melbourne with performances at Monash University, and Nick Shimmin’s *The People’s Republic* in Sydney.

My performance of *Inner Cities* comprise eleven of the existent fourteen pieces. Alvin commenced number 1 in 1993 and as far as I know, is still writing. In this work the narrative unfolds over four and a half hours with the same visceral intensity as traveling through a desert landscape, revealed in all its beauty and brutality. *Inner Cities* is at times uncompromisingly brutal: In No 10 for example, the pianist is instructed to improvise as fast and loud as possible, on the edge of being out of control, and leading to total exhaustion. But the work is also rich in delicate sounds, where one note becomes a profound transition over a gently unfolding landscape.

Curran describes each piece as ‘starting with a single idea, chord, or cellular pattern, which serves as its own source of narrative and history. The pieces are a set of contradictory etudes - studies in liberation and attachment, cryptic itineraries to the old fountain on the town square whence flows all artistic divination and groping for meaning in the dark.’ In *Inner Cities*, single ideas are unraveled and revisited at the thoughtful, immersive pace that is so alien to contemporary culture. The slowly unfolding beauty of the moment is all there is, like a flower opening itself to the world.

By Gabriella Smart
(1991-, revised 2013)