

Didjeridu virtuoso Stephen Kent to appear on FUZE! Series and at SPACES

by Mike Telin



How does a man born in Britain, raised in East Africa, and trained on the French horn come to play an instrument developed by the Aboriginal people of Northern Australia? “I was inspired to play the didjeridu while working as music director for Circus Oz in Australia in the early 1980s,” Stephen Kent said during a recent telephone conversation.

On Saturday, March 18 at 7:00 pm at the Akron Art Museum, Tuesday Musical will present [Stephen Kent](#) and the San Francisco-based [Del Sol String Quartet](#) as part of the [FUZE!](#) Series. The program will feature Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe’s 12th and 16th works for string quartet and didjeridu. On Sunday at 7:30 pm, Kent will perform a solo concert at [SPACES](#) Gallery in Cleveland’s Hingetown neighborhood.

“Peter’s very politicized in his support for indigenous people’s rights in Australia, and environmental rights,” Kent said. “Both pieces are interesting — the 12th is a reduction of a piece he wrote for orchestra and didjeridu called *Earth Cry*, and I premiered the 16th with Del Sol in 2006 at the Other Minds Festival in San Francisco.”

Kent noted that it is fitting to be playing the latter work at this moment in time, when the plight of refugees is in the news around the world. “The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 precipitated an outflow of refugees. Many of them made their way to Australia, where they were put into camps on islands off of Papua New Guinea,” he said. “Peter was inspired to write the piece after he came across the book *Letters from Nowhere* — it’s the writings of the Afghan refugees. He based the piece on musical themes of Afghan love songs. It’s an extraordinarily beautiful work.”



Kent, who previously studied French horn and composition, said that when he was appointed music director of Australia's Circus Oz in 1981, he was a "renegade" classical musician. "Joining an organization that had an interest in promoting indigenous life, and especially the aboriginal people, I felt that as music director it would be good to find a way to reflect that in the show's soundtrack. One of the members of the band could circular breathe, a technique essential to playing the didjeridu, so I composed music for the sousaphone that sounded much like the didjeridu's low drone. And that's how I began my journey to becoming a didjeridu player."

As Kent's interest in the instrument grew, his journey began to take him deeper and deeper into Aboriginal communities to find out if it would be appropriate for a non-Aboriginal to play the instrument. "It took a lot of time to get into the communities — you can't just go, you have to get permits first. Luckily I was traveling with a member of the Circus who had a lot of experience staying in Aboriginal communities, and because of him we were able to get the permits."

Kent said the experience of traveling into Aboriginal communities was the biggest lesson of his life — "to realize that I was of absolutely no relevance to those people whatsoever. In certain communities it was almost an affront to them that I was there at all. It was a lesson in humility, and it took a long while before I was able to ask if it was okay for me to play the didjeridu."

In the end, Kent was encouraged to play the instrument, although he is always careful to credit Aboriginal people its origins, and he does not perform Aboriginal music. "I am playing entirely contemporary music, though it has references to the traditional techniques."

Though Kent has performed in a number of musical settings, he says the best way to experience the instrument is during a solo concert. "People say that it's just a drone, with

one note, but within that note there is a whole orchestra of color and possibility. And hearing the instrument live is very different from hearing it on a recording. There's a visceral connection that the audience gets when they're in the same room with it."

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