

## *Astrolabe–Suite for La Pérouse*

**by French-Australian Pianist and Composer, Chris Cody**

A preview performance of Chris Cody's *Astrolabe–Suite for La Pérouse* (in quartet form) was presented on July 14, 2018, at the La Pérouse Museum, La Pérouse.

The *Astrolabe–Suite for La Pérouse* world première performance was presented by SIMA (Sydney Improvised Music Association) on August 25, 2018 at the Seymour Centre, Sydney with the following artists:

Chris Cody (piano), Tom Avgenicos (trumpet), Matt Ottignon (flute/saxophone), James Greening (trombone), Vanessa Tametta (violin), Emily-Rose Sarkova (accordion) Lloyd Swanton (bass), Fabian Hevia (drums).

*The French Australian Review* recently interviewed Chris Cody about his life in Paris and his latest composition.

### **Chris, can you tell us why you decided to go to France?**

My mother was a French teacher and sometimes I helped her mark papers as I was studying French at school. We sang French songs at home and Colin Nettelbeck was a family friend—his love of both jazz piano and French culture certainly influenced me. And there was Philip Martin who came out for dinner and also spoke French and played the piano. We also listened to Brel and Piaf at home.

I studied French at high school and later at university and first became a bit of a Francophile after reading Camus and Sartre at school and discovering French cinema. Watching films by Renoir, Truffaut, Godard and Melville stirred up my romantic fantasies about the place and its people. I started imagining playing piano on the 'Left Bank' from about fifteen, being a bit of a dreamer! I even called one of my first jazz compositions 'La Rive Gauche'. I also liked the classical piano pieces I studied by French composers such as Satie, Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen. They struck a resonance in me with their blend of dissonant modern harmonic vocabulary and lyricism.

I went on to study French and Music at Sydney University where Ivan Barko was an inspiring teacher—I vividly remember his lectures on Baudelaire; they influenced my love of poetry in general and of Baudelaire and Rimbaud in particular. I always felt a connection between jazz, improvisation and poetry—the use of sound, colour, rhythm and space. Margaret Sankey, was another of my teachers from Sydney University and we were later guests together on Bernard Pivot’s<sup>1</sup> ‘Bouillon de Culture’ special Australia edition. She also recently came to the Astrolabe première.

**How did you finally make your way to Paris and what were your first impressions?**

I only knew one musician in Paris, Australian trumpeter David Lewis (Paris Combo, Manu Dibango, etc) who had sat in on a Mike Nock class at the Con where I was studying the jazz course. He offered to help if I came over so off I went on a one-way ticket via stays in New York (several months) and London. David met me at the Gare du Nord and I stayed with him for a couple of weeks while he helped me find a room, six flights up!

For me Paris was much more exciting than New York—I loved the different culture. It represented both the clichés and dreams I’d built up over the years through movies, music and ideas, just the appearances of the people, the African/Arab influence, especially in music, the smells of Paris, the cuisine and, of course, history is everywhere. I loved reading all the plaques on street corners describing historic events such as Henri IV’s assassination near the Place des Innocents, les Halles. It all fired my imagination and inspired me to find out more. In Paris there are also many more musicians and venues than anywhere else I know. There are at least six permanent full-time jazz venues, and about a dozen more part-time jazz venues, not to mention all the little bars and restaurants that have some jazz.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Pivot, OC CQ (born 1935), is a writer, interviewer and former host of French cultural television programmes. In 2014 he became president of the Académie Goncourt, having been appointed to the Académie in 2004. His television programmes included *Ouvrez les guillemets*, *Apostrophes* (2 million viewers), *Bouillon de culture* (which presented literary news plus cinema, theatre etc. and reached an audience of more than a million before its decline) and *Double je*. He also presented *Championnats d’orthographe* (spelling championships) and *Dicos d’or* (a popular national dictation competition which began in 1985 and ended in December 2005).

France has over four hundred jazz festivals now and even more *salles de concerts*, cultural centres and associations programming jazz! It was so exciting, so different to Australia, and I loved it. As far as my music career, it was sink or swim, so I joined in jam sessions with friends every night and David showed me places to meet other musicians.

**Do you remember your first gig in Paris?**

Yes, it was at Mother Earth's at 66 rue des Lombards, near Les Halles, and, embarrassingly, I even had to sing eight songs, making up half the words! One thing led to another—the Hollywood Savoy, gay bars in Pigalle. I went anywhere, into the provinces, Orleans, Marseilles. All to build up an audience and establish myself in France.

**What were some of your most exciting experiences once you became successful?**

I've had so many exciting experiences all over France and Europe, but still vividly remember playing a gig with jazz great Herb Geller at Folies Montmartre, also my first Fête de la Fraternité in front of thousands of people. Other memorable gigs include doing a piano residency in Casablanca, a concert at the Oran Opera in Algeria (Camus's home town), accompanying Michel Jonaz in a Paris masterclass, and doing concerts and recording with Brel's accordeonist Marcel Azzola. Playing a gospel concert with Joe Lee Wilson in the cathedral for Marciac jazz festival was also pretty special, especially as the Catholic priest tried desperately to stick to his mass plan with diminishing success. We were having too much fun!

**You spoke about being a guest on Pivot's 'Bouillon de Culture'? How did that come about?**

It was in 2000 and Pivot presented a special show on Australian culture, as part of the Sydney Olympic Games Cultural Programme.<sup>2</sup> I met Pivot

---

<sup>2</sup> Eds: Pierre, baron de Coubertin, originally Pierre de Frédy, (born January 1, 1863, Paris, France; died September 2, 1937, Geneva, Switzerland), was a French educator who played a central role in the revival of the ancient Olympic Games in 1896, after nearly 1,500 years of abeyance. He was a founding member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and served as its president from 1896 to 1925. He suggested the Olympic Games should include 'athletes, philosophers, scholars, poets, musicians, sculptors and high-profile leaders displaying their talents, in what he (de Coubertin) called the spirit of Olympism'.

through the Alliance Française and the Australian Embassy in France who had suggested the idea of introducing Australian artists to the French viewers. It was interesting to compare cultures and how they are experienced in Australia and France. I also spoke about my life in Paris, we tasted some great Australian wines and I ended up playing on *Bouillon de Culture*, a very popular TV show at the time.

I played some of my compositions live and my music was used for the soundtrack. The show was broadcast on France 2, ABC TV in Australia and TV5 in the rest of the world.

### **How long did you stay in Paris and where did you live?**

I was in Paris for twenty-one years overall. We had an apartment near Beaubourg and it was great because it was in the centre of Paris and close to the clubs and my teaching.

However as our two girls grew older we began to think it was time for a change. At first we thought of the provinces and then we began to think ‘Why not go back to Australia?’

### **How did you find the move back home?**

The girls love it and my wife, Hélène, who is French, is very happy with the life here. For me it has been more difficult because, after being really busy in France playing three or more gigs per week, I have had to slow down. At the same time I love the blue sky, the beaches and the lifestyle in general. However, the different attitude to music and culture is striking—for example, there is little or no music in schools here whereas in France there are lots of subsidised local conservatoriums for children who want to learn music. In France music is part of the cultural identity and is discussed frequently at home and on the radio and TV.

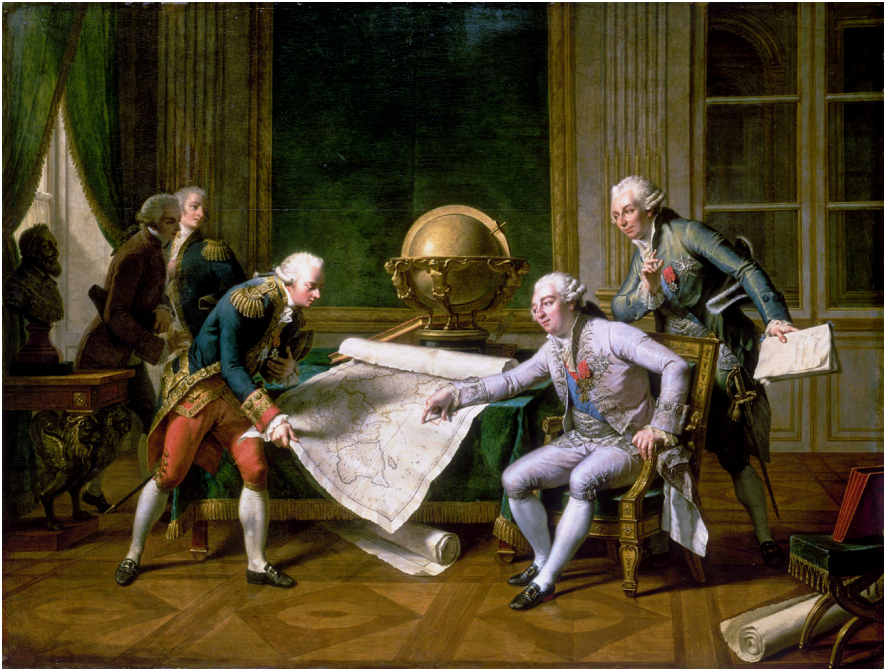
Australia’s best jazz musicians are as good as anywhere else. There are a few good clubs and good organisations putting on concerts, and a few good festivals. There are some wonderful performers and composers who deserve more attention. It’s sad that they are largely ignored and a great shame that there aren’t more serious playing and recording opportunities: more clubs, festivals, labels, jazz programs on radio and TV, with accompanying media coverage and reviews.

It has been difficult rebuilding my career—I had built up a following in France and was playing a lot as well as recording and travelling. It was like

beginning again here but, on the other hand, it has given me more time for composing and this has been wonderful.

**Tell us how you came to compose *Astrolabe–Suite for La Pérouse* ...**

When we returned to Sydney we lived at Maroubra, not far from the suburb, La Pérouse. I became intrigued with the story of the great French navigator La Pérouse and began researching his story. I discovered that La Pérouse was from Albi, a place I knew well. In 1785 La Pérouse set out from the French port of Brest in two ships, *L'Astrolabe* and *La Boussole*. He landed in Botany Bay in 1788, just a few days after Captain Arthur Philip, whose First Fleet was at anchor.



Louis XVI giving Lapérouse his instructions on 29 June 1785, by Nicolas-André Monsiau (1817).  
(Château de Versailles). Public domain.

Having witnessed the beginning of European settlement of the continent, La Pérouse sailed away six weeks later and was never seen again. Decades later the Frenchman's shipwrecks were discovered in Vanikoro, part of the Solomon Islands.

I found this story inspiring; the idea of his journey and its purpose, to expand human knowledge, struck me as very different from the English aim of conquest. He travelled with 250 people—botanists, astrologers and cartographers, none of them soldiers. Looking for ideas for a composition, La Pérouse's journey struck a chord with me and I thought of my own journey to and from France which led me to think about questions of purpose and meaning, identity, migration, the Old World (*Mundus Vetus*) versus the new. And there were Japanese and Spanish elements from the voyage that I could use musically ...

I talked about these ideas and my new composition and, after some interviews in newspapers, someone even sent me a special edition of La Pérouse's two-volume ship's journal in French, *Voyage Autour du Monde*, which contained his account of the journey, maps, engravings and even some musical transcriptions. Someone else sent me a poem they had written about La Pérouse. I realised I was not the only one interested to hear more about this fascinating voyage.

**Could you tell us about the completed work, *Astrolabe–Suite for La Pérouse*?**

The suite *Astrolabe* is made up of nine pieces and uses jazz, classical and world music to represent the journey of La Pérouse from France to Vanikoro. Although there are eight musicians, eleven instruments are used to convey the colours and sounds evoked by the journey and that period in history—piano, double bass, percussion and drums, trombone and didgeridoo, trumpet, saxophone, bass clarinet and flute, violin, and accordion.

I have mixed jazz with classical French music elements in the harmonies and there are touches of Spanish and Japanese influences, for instance in the scales and rhythms used. At one stage you hear the didgeridoo with piano improvisation to suggest the meeting of different cultures.

*Astrolabe* opens with a loud ship's bell ringing three times to signal the start of the voyage.

Then comes '*Mundus Vetus*', or 'Old World', where I imagine a dark kind of medieval jazz in an odd meter. This is followed by 'Departure' a joyous and up-beat signal of hope and adventure.

'Stone Figures' refers to Easter Island and uses rich brass figures to convey a sense of awe and austerity.



‘Becalmed’ is a meditative piece with a beautiful violin solo (played by Vanessa Tametta at the first performance).

In ‘Oku-Yeso’ I created echoes of Japanese and Korean temple music with the flute solo producing shakuhachi-type sounds, using Japanese scales and rhythms. I played inside the piano and added various gongs and bells with the bass playing in its higher range.

‘Pacifique’ introduces the idea of trouble ahead with its violent percussion solo and increasingly complicated counterpoint parts. This is followed by ‘Père Receveur’ which evokes the chaplain’s death through the use of Gregorian chant and more sombre sounds while ‘Vanikoro’ is a ballad with a sparse reflective trumpet solo (a nod to Miles Davis).

The final piece, ‘Espérance’ is a waltz of hope featuring a haunting and nostalgic accordion solo.



Chris Cody plays inside the piano.

### **How was *Astrolabe* received by the audience?**

The audience was incredibly enthusiastic and the reviews have been terrific ... one reviewer wrote of ‘rapturous and prolonged applause’.

I think it tapped into this longing Australians have to feel both connected to their continent but also the rest of the World, especially Europe and Asia. We all want to know where we came from, and why we are here. I think La Pérouse's journey and his arrival in Australia at the same time as the First Fleet, and then his subsequent disappearance at sea, provoke contemplation of that period, of conquest, exploration, discovery but also colonisation.

It has inspired me to adapt it for stage, with an actor/narrator reading extracts from La Pérouse's voyage, accompanied by projections of image and film. I will record the work and am also performing it in Paris in July.

### **Some of the reviews:**

*Beautifully meditative...sublime... wonderful... an enthralling musical voyage.* Steve Townshend, Loudmouth magazine

*Rolling left-hand ostinato figures carrying whiffs of North Africa underpinned and interacted with right-hand lines bearing vague echoes of Ravel, Debussy and Satie, and more overtly a wistfulness suggesting veiled regret or loss. Cody's touch and dynamics were as telling as an exceptional singer whispering poignant lines of lyric in your ear.* Sydney Morning Herald

*Full of music and future...* Le Monde, France

*Exhilarating ... a feast of melody... an inspiration never at fault.* JazzHot, France

*'These musicians guarantee a performance full of colour, humour and rhythmic movement.'* Sydney Morning Herald

*'Polished composition and pianism doesn't get much better or more enjoyable than this and Cody proves he is the master of form.'* Fine Music Magazine

*Melbourne*



**Further reading and listening:**

<https://www.chriscody.com>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAjoSBX4Y1s>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/the-mystery-of-la-pérouse/11173810>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A22FGsznnhM&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/southern-courier/jazz-musicians-new-show-inspired-by-french-explorer-la-perouse/news-story/c05e9bfe025cea14d6f108a68ae6cd0a>

Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse, Volume 1, *Voyage de La Pérouse autour du monde*, Paris, Hachette/BNF, October 2017 (first published 1797), 424 pp., rrp 22,40 €, ISBN 978-2-01916-204-7.

*The original version may be found on the BNF website.*