

interview

## Sounds of subversion

### Tinkering with the ivories is all in a day's work for musician Erik Griswold

When Brisbane musician and composer Erik Griswold started tampering with a Steinway grand piano on stage at Carnegie Hall in New York, the stage crew were understandably concerned. What the hell did he think he was up to, stuffing the piano's innards with nuts, bolts, rubber and wads of paper? It was tantamount to vandalism.

"I had these big burly technicians standing around watching me," Erik says. "They didn't say anything but their bearing was a bit intimidating."

That was in 2010 when Erik had returned to the country of his birth for a major concert. Acclaimed avant-garde musician, Margaret Leng Tan, was to play one of his compositions – *Old MacDonald's Yellow Submarine* – and he had to "prepare" the piano for her – stuffing it with the detritus that is part of his musical practice. Erik is a master of "prepared piano", a technique pioneered by legendary American musician and theorist John Cage. Prepared piano involves manipulating the sound of a piano by messing with the strings, adding things that really should not be there.

Cage was the maestro and Erik, 43, was inspired by him and was lucky enough to meet him before his death in 1992.

Putting scrap metal and such inside expensive instruments might seem like sacrilege, but that's part of the attraction. "It's incredible fun," Erik says. "You're sticking stuff inside a piano, this symbol of everything institutional about classical music. What could be more subversive?"

Downstairs in the house at Annerley he shares with wife and fellow muso Vanessa Tomlinson and their two children – George, 10, and Beatrice, 8 – Erik is tinkering with an old Lipp & Sohn piano, made in Germany in 1887. He also plays other instruments, including the melodica (wind piano).

Vanessa, who is head of percussion at the

Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, is also an experimental musician and she uses toys and found objects in her performances. Recently she has been using an empty wine bottle, polished off a little while back during her 40th birthday celebrations. The duo perform together as Clocked Out and have built an international reputation. You can see them on stage next on April 10 in *Coming Together*. Clocked Out will morph into a larger ensemble for this gig – Early Warning System. They will present classic and new avant-garde pieces from Greek composer Georges Aperghis, American Frederic Rzewski and Australian Kate Neal.

Erik's major work *Fairweather*, inspired by artist Ian Fairweather and featuring words by Australian author Rodney Hall and art by Glen Henderson, is on at the Queensland Conservatorium in May.

Erik came to Australia in 1999 and has built his international reputation from Brisbane after stints in Melbourne and Adelaide. He's originally from San Diego, California, has a PhD in music from the University of California and is steeped in the traditions of American jazz.

"I grew up listening to Miles Davis and Duke Ellington, but I was always interested in experimental music," he says. Erik's music is spare and unusual but enjoyable, particularly if you like minimalist jazz. He has released several CDs, including those as Clocked Out, such as *Foreign Objects* (2010), plus solo efforts including *Wallpaper Music* in 2007. Clocked Out collaborated with local chamber ensemble Topology for the 2012 recording *From Small Things Grow*.

#### COMING TOGETHER: EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

Ian Hanger Recital Hall, Queensland Conservatorium, South Brisbane, Apr 10, 7pm, from \$10/\$15, at the door. [www.clockedout.org](http://www.clockedout.org)

You're sticking stuff inside a piano... what could be more subversive?



with  
PHIL  
BROWN

PHOTOGRAPH: Russel Shakespeare

