

Alistair Parnell and his group Equinox, Ken Morris reports:

A NEW AND EXCITING SAXOPHONE SOUND

Saxophone ensembles are, in themselves, not new. From the mid-19th century groups of players of our beloved instrument have banded together to make music with their sonority subordinated, principally, to the skills of the composer or arranger. Progressively player numbers and therefore voicing possibilities have increased from trios to massed choirs of hundreds and it is true to say that arrangers from Duke Ellington to Nigel Wood have given both performers and audiences some truly memorable musical experiences. But anyone who has attended a typical two hour two-set concert from a sax only combo will have experienced snatches of 'ear fatigue' occasioned by the repetitious voicing of soprano-bass or, more commonly, soprano-baritone, although it must be said that the addition of a soprillo to the National Saxophone Choir has brought an interesting new dimension to its sound.

Equinox, an ensemble with nine core saxophone players has, since its inception in 2005, often deployed an additional member playing kit drums which part mirrors the American trend of accompanying sax quintets-nonets with string/electric bass and a kit drummer. This procedure gives definite lift and forward momentum to appropriate sections of the repertoire. Equinox has, however, some innovative and seriously potent weaponry in its performance armoury which is the principal

subject of this article and the technical information panel provided by Alistair Parnell, their Musical Director and saxophone/EWI soloist/jazz improviser, and arranger, and website builder/maintainer, and all-round music technologist, and recording engineer/producer, and piano/keyboard accompanist and saxophone/EWI teacher – wow! Indeed, if there were such things as star ratings for creativity and competence in all of these activities Alistair would surely get five in every one.

Based in Nottingham, but drawing upon the talents of saxophonists (see their website for biographies) from as far afield as Leeds, Cambridge and Milton Keynes, the Equinox ensemble rehearses in Kinoulton each month and undertakes an average of 10 engagements a year. Members contribute to operational support duties in addition to performing and rehearsing. That most gigs are well attended and that the 'enterprise' balances the books is a tribute to the enthusiasm and hard work of members who handle their own accounting, publicity and publishing tasks and, of course, to Equinox's generous sponsor Windblowers, a Nottingham-based music retailer.

The conventional Equinox repertoire is quite diverse, encompassing all of the usual sources (folk inspired, contemporary classics, jazz, the Great American Song Book, transcriptions from classical works, original pieces, commissioned works and popular tunes from films, shows and the hit parade) all enhanced by the ability of every member to 'double' and a number to solo with extraordinary skill – take a look at the recorded works panel. But where Equinox triumphs is in their ability to embrace technology and technique with taste when harnessing synthetic sound generation facilities. Three possibilities in this area are employed: i) using the Akai EWI (electronic wind instrument) as an additional or substitute voice in the ensemble, ii) using a keyboard driven sound synthesiser as an accompanying instrument to a soloist or the ensemble and iii) using pre-recorded real or synthesised sounds as an accompanying/supplementary voice triggered during the live performance. Just for completeness of current procedures, there is one further electronically assisted technique a number of sax players have used including the late Michael Brecker. This involves loops - recording whilst playing and after a variable delay (plus, perhaps, modifying the sound) re-introducing this material into the on-going performance.

Harrumph!, I hear some readers reacting to the last paragraph. Well, in my opinion I can only say that I find Alistair's results exquisite. The secret lies in the word 'taste'. Too many early excursions into electronic music were severely trammelled by either the crudeness of synthesiser design, the simplistic make-up of the sound palette (e.g. the General Midi standard), or both. Added to these limitations was the over-adoption of electronic sound production by what can only be described as



Equinox at St Giles's Church, West Bridgford, Nottingham in March this year. Photo: Chris Smith

TING NDSCAPE

'the musically illiterate'. No such limitations encumber Equinox.

A long-time user of electronically assisted music effects, the late Joe Zawinul, (the US/Austrian leader of Weather Report), described very perceptively his own attitude towards synthesisers: "They are native instruments not yet discovered". Today's technology has enabled creative souls, like Alistair Parnell, to craft nuances into the performance soundscape which will delight audiences, inspire other players and arrangers and make a serious contribution to the ensemble repertoire.

Born into a musical family (his father plays the accordion), Alistair started on the piano at the age of five and performed with the Parnell family cabaret band on alto sax from the age of fourteen. In 1984 he was a semi-finalist in the BBC Young Musician competition and entered the Royal College of Music. He graduated with honours in 1987 having gained diplomas in both piano and saxophone teaching and began his private tuition business in Nottingham. As a saxophone soloist he has worked with the CBSO, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the East of England Orchestra, the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and, on EWI, with the National Saxophone Choir. He has also directed the 70-strong Nottingham Symphonic Winds and recorded recently with saxophonist Nicola Pennill (as her accompanist) and Flotilla (as an ensemble member with Kyle Horch, Naomi Sullivan and Andy Tweed); both CDs were reviewed in the Winter 2009 issue of *Clarinet and Saxophone*. With his musical interests ranging from the Renaissance to modern jazz it is not difficult to understand how, with such an expansive range of influences, Alistair's own arrangements involving the EWI or keyboard-driven synthesiser are so engaging.

In particular I would like to draw the readers' attention to three specific pieces in Alistair's repertoire each of which typify what is possible at the conjunction of technology, technique and taste:

Partial Eclipse composed by Nigel Wood (track one on the *Partial Eclipse* CD reviewed in the Spring 2008 issue of *Clarinet & Saxophone*) is a splendid melodic demonstration of the EWI, played by Alistair, against the backing of the full Equinox ensemble. A modern piece, but eminently accessible, surely the way ahead for sax group repertoire broadening.

Alistair Parnell



Ken Morris in conversation with Alistair Parnell



Equinox at Djanogly Recital Hall, Nottingham in April 2009 Photo: Andrew Pennill

Skylark composed by Hoagy Carmichael (track eight on *Going Solo*) gives a magnificent demonstration of the Yamaha WX7 electronic wind instrument and TX81Z sound module accompanied by a Roland 'Sound Canvas'. This track was originally recorded in 1997. Today's equipment would even further improve sonic quality and depth of tone. Alistair contributes the solo, the accompaniment and the truly beautiful wide audio spectrum arrangement.

Gabriel's Message, a Basque carol (track 11 on *Winter Solstice*) represents another triumph of digital technology with the EWI soaring over (synthetic) choirs, a church organ (or two!) and even a tam-tam and gran cassa! Wonderful! Again all 100% Alistair.

When Equinox prepare a programme for public performance much effort goes into matching content to the likely audience profile. The outcome will probably mean perhaps two or three out of twenty items involving 'the new technology'. And I for one sincerely hope that the group will, in the near future, produce a CD devoted to the promulgation of digitally enhanced pieces.

Finally, mention should be made of Alistair's contributions to saxophone education. Visiting scholar of saxophone at Nottingham University, and with a busy private studio of teaching, Alistair also directs the biannual Nottingham Saxophone Day, which this year expanded to a weekend, where more than 50 saxophonists from all over the UK enjoyed a packed programme of playing and learning about the saxophone at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick. A tutor team of Alistair Parnell, Sarah Markham, Julia Mills, James Rae, Naomi Sullivan and Nicola Pennill led course participants through a range of sessions including small and large ensembles, jazz, performance workshop, EWI, masterclasses,

extended techniques and sight-reading.

For those with an interest in the Akai EWI but unable to meet Alistair in person his website www.isax.co.uk currently carries a number of practical tutorials on 'getting the best out of your EWI' and it is strongly recommended.

I am aware that amongst 'single reed purists' there will be some who will be unable to accept the electronic wind instrument, whether Yamaha WX7 or Akai 4000S, as a genuine musical instrument. They are entitled to their opinion. Of one thing I am absolutely certain: the electronic wind instrument and its close relative, the synthesiser, are capable of superb musicality, in the right hands, two of which belong to Alistair Parnell.

TECHNICAL

The **electronic wind instrument**, or EWI for short, was introduced in the 1970s with the first production models being the Computone Lyricon and the Steiner EVI (Electronic Valve Instrument). Mass produced models, available from the early 1980s, came from Akai and Yamaha. The original instruments, similar in shape, size, weight and fingering to a soprano saxophone required an additional sound module to convert their output signals into audio sounds. Technically, the role of the hand-held device is to turn the measurement of 'analogue' (i.e. real world) sensing of lip pressure, breath velocity and tongue movements into 'digital' (infinitely manipulatable) signals by the use of very sophisticated components, called transducers, incorporated into the reed-less mouthpiece. A baffle takes the place of the reed. The latest EWI, released by Akai in 2006, the 4000S, has its own sound module built in and can be linked by wireless to any sound system so permitting full on-stage freedom of movement.

As soon as the performer's efforts are converted into digital signals any number of processing techniques can be applied. With a 4000S in the hands of a saxophonist the most usual mode is to use pitch extension, up to 8 octaves, at the same time selecting an appropriate tone. Typically a soprillo-to-alto range could be achieved without lip-shredding embouchure, but not without considerable practice

with the rollers that substitute for an octave key! In the jargon of the digital sound scene a customised sound is called a patch (from the early days when synthesisers were set up using a rat's nest or patch-up of plug-in cables rather like an old telephone exchange). On the 4000S the player can pre-select a patch at the commencement of a piece and switch effortlessly to other patches during the performance.

Where the EWI excels, however, is in the ability to fully customise output sonic quality/tone. By adjusting the parameters of wave form, pass (filter settings) and resonance it is quite possible to craft attractive sounds (patches) never before heard. On the Akai 4000S there are 100 default sounds built in plus internal effects such as reverb, delay and chorus all of which can contribute to your unique soundscape. Controls at the rear of the hand-held instrument permit both customisation and, via a midi-in connector, the downloading of additional sounds from Akai or from those developed on your own computer using the supplied Akai software. There are also a vast number of digitally sampled instruments that can be played using a PC or Mac. Other hardware connections to the 4000S include a line-out jack, a midi-out and a headphone jack. The latest Akai EWI USB Wind Instrument Controller has just one simple Universal Serial Bus output purely for playing sampled sounds from a computer or sound module.

Like all musical instruments only practice makes perfect. The EWI is a delightful device but don't expect to reach public performance standards in just weeks; budget a few years to become used to the touch sensitive pads which substitute for moving keys and to get to grips with the incredible range of pitch and sounds. Currently the Akai 4000S can be purchased for around £650 (or the Akai EWI USB around £300) but I guarantee you will get many thousands of pounds worth of fun from it.

RECORDED WORKS

- *Partial Eclipse*, Equinox Saxophone Ensemble, EQU 01 available from: www.equinoxsax.org.uk
- Solos: Alistair Parnell (EWI, soprano sax.), Nicola Pennill (soprano sax.), Daniel Christian (alto sax.)
- *Going Solo*, Alistair Parnell all instruments, APCD 01 available from: iTunes or www.isax.co.uk
- *Winter Solstice*, Alistair Parnell all instruments, APCD 02 available from: www.isax.co.uk
- *Dream with Me*, Nicola Pennill (saxes) and Alistair Parnell (accompaniment), NP01 available from: www.nicolapennill.co.uk
- *Flotilla*, music for saxophones and keyboard featuring Kyle Horch, Naomi Sullivan, Andy Tweed, Alistair Parnell available from iTunes, Amazon.com or CD Baby. See also www.flotilla.org.uk and www.bigshedmusic.co.uk
- Many sites allow extracts to be auditioned.

WEBSITE REFERENCES

Alistair Parnell: (Personal site with fascinating links elsewhere plus EWI matters including video tutorials) www.isax.co.uk
Equinox Saxophone Ensemble: www.equinoxsax.org.uk
Akai: www.akaiopro.com ■

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