

Sounds to bend the ear

The Now Now festival presents music composed outside the square, writes **Matthew Westwood**

Contemporary music, like other forms of experimental art, tends to take root and flourish where there is a culture to support it, and wither where there is not. Vienna, for example, was the centre of innovation in Western music — it was where Mozart, Beethoven and Schoenberg made their careers — before the Nazis stopped the avant-garde in its tracks. Manon-Liu Winter, an experimental pianist and teacher from Austria who is in Sydney this week, says the musical conservatism imposed by the Third Reich lingered in Vienna until the 1980s.

Economic forces can threaten innovation, too. Prohibitive rents have closed venues for experimental performance in Manhattan, for example, and pushed musicians over the bridge into Brooklyn, says Jaime Fennelly, who works with acoustic and electronic instruments. Brooklyn-based Fennelly, another musician in Sydney to take part in the Now Now festival of experimental music, says performers like him are now likely to be found amid the borough's lofts and warehouses.

The sixth Now Now is described by its organisers as a festival of spontaneous music, meaning music that is experimental and improvised. Clayton Thomas says the event isn't an attempt to define the state of contemporary music, but a forum in which certain groupings of musical styles have emerged: experimental pianism, for example, avant-folk and electronica. A common thread, he says, is that many of the participants are making "non-institutionalised" music outside the traditions of the conservatorium and concert hall.

"Our take on it involves a lot of other types of music and not a lineage of strict ideas," Thomas says.

Winter is a pianist who manipulates the strings of the Instrument with metal, glass and plastic objects to produce un-Steinway-like yawps and groans. *"You have the Impression of hearing electronic sounds, but they are not produced in electronic ways,"* she says. After arriving from Vienna last weekend, Winter appears slightly jetlagged as she sits under the veranda of an inner-city pub, discussing the pointy end of modern art music.

"I studied classical piano with all the old music, Beethoven and so on," Winter says. She started exploring the instrument's sonic capabilities using the prepared piano techniques of John Cage. *"I think everybody loves the Instrument he plays, so you don't want to leave it. If you play normal piano music, [the Instrument] is condemned to being 19th-century. So if you want to make it experimental, you have to improve the instrument."*

Winter released a CD last year with sound artist Klaus Hollinetz, called Soundfishing, which gives an indication of her art. In quiet, slowly evolving soundscapes, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between Winter's manipulations of the piano and the electronic sounds produced by Hollinetz.

One of her pieces, called Trains, combines a recording she made of railway noise in the US and her piano improvisations to it. The work has been performed previously at festivals in Poland and Austria, but Winter has reworked the recording for Now Now to keep spontaneity in her performance.

The musical interest, she says, is in the juxtaposition of the piano's cultivated sound and the "dirty" random noises of the train recordings.

"Of course I am looking to find something I've never heard before," she says. *"It's looking for the new thing ... Every performance I find something new. Something comes up which you didn't imagine before."* Vienna has a vibrant contemporary music scene once more, Winter says, with such high-profile events as the Wien Modern festival, instigated by conductor Claudio Abbado, and the 24-piece ensemble Klangforum. But these are comparatively recent developments following decades of cultural myopia.

"We had this Second World War, you know," Winter says wryly. "My opinion is that Austria has not really got over this."

The Nazis murdered, or forced into exile, much of Vienna's creative vanguard. Their Prohibition of entartete kunst — degenerate art in German — had an effect long after the war ended. *"In university when I started, I didn't know it, but many of the Professors came to the university during the Nazi regime,"* Winter says.

"And they didn't change; they stayed and taught. It took a long time to get rid of this conservatism."

One of Winter's triumphs has been to initiate, with others, an improvised music course at Vienna's University of Music and Performing Arts, where she had studied.

"That's something I am really proud of," she says.

Fennelly's music is a mix of harmonium and electronics — oscillators, mixers and guitar effects pedals — to add to and bend the organ-like instrument's sound. At Now Now, he will be performing with others to create live soundtracks to experimental films.

In New York, Fennelly says, the experimental music scene took root in Brooklyn after former mayor Rudy Giuliani cleaned up Manhattan and rents increased there.

"I continue to live in New York because of the groups I'm working with," Fennelly says, mentioning such events as the No Fun festival and his electro-acoustic group PSI (or peesseye). *"I'm interested in finding out what happens next."*

Other artists on the bill at Now Now include Martin Brandlmayr (drums) and Werner Dafeldecker (bass), both from Vienna, pianist Cor Fuhler from The Netherlands, and Australian composer-performers Jon Rose and Anthony Pateras.

Thomas says the festival has been mounted with minimal support: the only subsidy is from Arts NSW, and Vienna's arts funding body has supported the Austrian musicians' visit. He says Now Now failed to obtain Australia Council support because the festival appeared to fall outside funding criteria.

"I find it astounding," he says. *"This whole community [of experimental musicians] is being under-recognised by the arts council, but that would not be the first time."*

The Now Now is at the Factory Theatre, Enmore, until January 21.