

THE AUSTRALIAN

It's Mozart, but not as we know him

Artist Anri Sala in the rotunda at Sydney Harbour's Observatory Hill with his installation *The Last Resort*.
Picture: News Corp

MATTHEW WESTWOOD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 3, 2017

The Clarinet Concerto in A major that Mozart completed in the final months of his life is one of the best-loved pieces of classical music. It was first performed by Mozart's friend, clarinet virtuoso Anton Stadler, in October 1791, and contemporary accounts noted the similarity between Stadler's playing and the human voice. We may imagine the humanity expressed in the tender melody of the middle Adagio movement, the clarinet's interplay with the orchestra, and the pleasing symmetry of the music's classical structure as emblematic of the European Enlightenment: the rising tide of intellectual inquiry in the 18th century that would banish superstition and introduce what Kant described as "the courage to think without someone else's guidance".

Now imagine, as French-Albanian artist Anri Sala has, the arrival of this European intellectual culture on a far and largely uncharted southern land. With an eye and an ear for historical coincidence, Sala has noticed that the premiere of Mozart's concerto in Prague in 1791 coincided with the first years of British settlement in Australia, established with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. He thinks of the concerto as an artefact from the old world that has washed up on these shores.

"I was interested in this idea of what would happen to this masterpiece of the Enlightenment if it was put in a bottle in the sea, and be under the humour of the high seas, the weather and the winds, and how it would end up," he says.

Sala's installation for the 33rd Kaldor Public Art Project is called *The Last Resort* and presents the Mozart concerto as if it has washed up in Sydney. The rotunda at Observatory Hill, the highest natural point in central Sydney that overlooks the harbour, has been fitted with 38 inverted snare drums and pairs of sticks. Mozart's Adagio will be transmitted through speakers installed within the drums, while another rhythmic pulse will activate the drumsticks. It's Mozart, but not as we know him: the music is recognisable but fragmented, buffeted this way and that by invisible gales and ocean breezes. In the special arrangement of the Adagio that has been recorded for *The Last Resort*, Sala has replaced Mozart's tempo indications with markings derived from the journal of a seafarer whose daily entries each began with a description of the wind.

"All their hopes were on the wind going in the right direction," he says. "The language is very rich in relation to winds. It gave us a very broad range of descriptions, which resulted in an equally rich range of tempo indications."

On the day we meet at Observatory Hill, a light breeze is blowing off the harbour. Sala, who was born in the Albanian capital, Tirana, has lived and worked in France for many years; he was France's representative at the 2013 Venice Biennale. He has not long arrived from Mexico — he was there when the devastating earthquake struck central Mexico two weeks ago — and is supervising the installation of *The Last Resort*. The drums are hanging upside down from the rotunda ceiling like the flying foxes that Sala was astonished to see in the Royal Botanic Garden on his first visit to Sydney.

The view from this elevated setting is spectacular but the artwork is anything but monumental. Indeed, its essential quality is ephemeral: the fragmented music that will sound and the vibrations that will animate the drums.

By coincidence, the three-week showing of *The Last Resort* comes after recent debates about white settlement of Australia and the monuments erected to British colonisers. James Cook's 1768-71 voyage to the Pacific was motivated by Enlightenment ideals of scientific inquiry: to observe the transit of Venus and to discover the location of Terra Australis Incognita. Sala says the Enlightenment, while advancing the knowledge of Western Europe, also would have consequences for those people caught in its powerful survey.

"Unfortunately ... it was also a moment when Western civilisation imposed itself on other civilisations, causing therefore a loss to these civilisations," he says. "To me, it is a very intricate and contested moment in the history of humanity."

Some people regard statues of Cook and Governor Arthur Phillip as symbols of false discovery and dispossession, and would have them removed or their inscriptions altered. Sala does not venture an opinion about this particular

case but he does take an interest in monuments generally and what they represent. There's a difference, he says, between those that are merely decorative or "part of the real estate of a place" and those that are part of its "conscience".

In Albania, for example, he has documented with his friend Edi Rama, an artist who would later become the country's prime minister, the transformation with bright colours of ruined socialist architecture in Tirana.

"Monuments built during the communist regime were authoritarian," he says. "They did not represent the will of the people, they were the first things people attacked back then, to bring down the monument of the dictator, the monument of Stalin ...

"I think we are evolving towards a society where the idea of a monument — what it symbolises, what it represents — is wrong in itself."

Monuments, in so far as they represent an ideology or fixed interpretation, are antithetical to much contemporary art unless they are imbued with subversive or ambiguous meanings. Sala is happy with having *The Last Resort* described as anti-monumental because it does not so much assert a meaning as invite different interpretations. For this reason he is reluctant to assign a "character" to the solo clarinet in *The Last Resort*, such as the figure of Cook or the spirit of the Enlightenment. While other instruments of the orchestra will sound through separate designated drums, the clarinet will be more mobile and travel different routes across the assembly of inverted drums in the rotunda.

"If somebody comes over and does have this interpretation, that's completely welcome, but it's not me who assigns those interpretations," Sala says. "In the end the work has to work organically and musically as an ensemble ...

"I am not interested in articulating metaphors but the idea was how to listen to this piece of music, not necessarily as it was intended by its composer but how it could sound once it has made it ashore, having been corrupted by the weather and the forces of nature."

The Last Resort is at Observatory Hill, Sydney, October 13-November 5.

FROM THE HOMEPAGE

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ROSIE LEWIS

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George's game has backfired ♦

PETER VAN ONSELEN

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Cook gone, England in strife ♦

Alistair Cook departs for 37 with England well in truly in trouble during the first session on day three of the second Test.



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STEPHEN BROOK

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