

Feature

Cutting Edge: What the River Doesn't Say About Itself

Sound artist Daniel Portelli explains how an art music/video essay about our relationship with mangroves is a form of forest therapy.

by Daniel Portelli on 21 August, 2023



During COVID lockdowns, when gathering in public places to hear music felt impossible, I began to imagine works in unusual spaces. This was a time when I, like many others, rediscovered our local waterways, including the Cooks River (in Gadigal and Wangal Country). Those of us who went there enjoyed an unspoken sense of community as we passed each other on the river's path.

Our collective gaze was drawn to the river and its mangroves, prompting the idea of framing it as a stage. Unlike the sanitised concert hall, these spaces are unruly worlds within worlds; sites of decomposition and restoration, which allow us to reflect on the ecological conditions and resilience, as well as the mangroves' mitigating effects on the climate crisis.



Elizabeth Jigalin performing in *What the River Doesn't Say About Itself*. Photo supplied

These reflections were the seed for an art music/video work, *What the River Doesn't Say About Itself*, created with three musicians: [Elizabeth Jigalin](#) (accordion/melodica), Danica Hobden (zither) and Joseph Lisk (trumpet).

Surrounded by the branches and root systems of a mangrove forest, the musicians drift along the river on a boat, performing music and engaging in eco-acoustical awareness, sensory activation and perceptual openness as a form of forest therapy.

In the video essay, we explore how a mangrove forest can affect sensoriperceptual meaning and lead to the production of thoughts and sounds, and how humans can listen, relate, correspond and synthesise with living systems.

Each musician was given distinct score fragments, poetic descriptions and photographs to inform their instrumental choices, bodily consciousness and geological imagination. They were instructed to take in the habitat's spatial characteristics and mirror them sonically on their instruments. These novel methodologies were a way of communing with the river.

It may appear in the video as if the musicians had freedom, but they were under a lot of constraints. In a sense, they were subservient to the conditions in and around the mangroves, flipping the power dynamic. Danica Hobden said of her experience, "The amount of wind made you feel like you were a weathervane . . . The elements [were] controlling us because we were so vulnerable on this boat. We [processed and discussed a lot of instructions], but in the moment, something else took over."

It is this blurring of self/space/other, this coupling of mangroves, boat and performer, that the players drew on in creating the work. Danica is seen using a collection of objects: percussion mallets, milk frother, piano wire, guitar pick, and wooden skewers for bouncing and altering the pitch. The zither is in a weathered tuning, resulting in infinitesimal tonal differences, much like the archaic, intersecting curvatures of the dense mangrove wood.

Mangroves are a communal system of flowing energies, like the coded exchange between the musicians' bodies and their emanating sounds. Elizabeth Jigalin said, "[The piece] challenged us to become extremely receptive and aware of our context. The score composed our observations, fields of view and experience of a place. Translating and engaging with the environment through our instruments felt complex and equally natural and artificial – much like the Cooks River!"

Joseph Lisk performs microtonal palindromes, using trumpet mutes, objects, hands and subtle lip bends to alter the timbre.

The performers switch between two counterposed ways of thinking and being: the focused mode and the diffuse mode. This is applied to their instrument, body and their perception of the river. The performers are in syntheses with their environment. The instability of the boat is matched with the instability of air pressure and lip positions on the trumpet mouthpiece, for example.

"I was really trying to highlight the differences between those two modes," said Joseph. "[The second mode offered] a lot of liberty . . . to open up and respond in a less refined and less distinctively trumpet kind of way."

The music is also concerned with ‘temporal independence’. The musicians are working in their own divergent directions, using radically different systems. The footage of each of them was shot separately, then combined later in post-production, creating the illusion of three boats playing alongside each other.



Danica Hobden performing in *What the River Doesn't Say About Itself*. Photo supplied

In the video, the musicians are suspended in flowing, rippling water, framing the edgeless *mise en scène* of the natural world; a theatre of the infinite. What becomes apparent in the video is that the pollution is not visible, as the poor water quality is largely imperceptible. This juxtaposes what the viewer is seeing and the reality, emphasizing the need to inquire beyond our immediate perception.

Mangroves offset their methane emissions, storing up to five times as much organic carbon as tropical upland forests. The Cooks River is one of the most polluted rivers in Australia, mainly due to colonial-based negligence where mangroves were seen as ‘undesirable’, leading to their complete destruction on the Cooks River.

Footage of the river was combined with scenes of a more abundant mangrove, the Badu Mangroves (in Wangal Country), giving the illusion they are one and the same, offering a glimpse into what it may have been like before European arrival. The title is a paradoxical riddle, a rhetorical provocation, but also representative of these hidden aspects.

***What the River Doesn't Say About Itself* was published in the Journal of Embodied Research in February 2023, available [here](#). Thanks to the Music Box Project which co-composed the work, and Claire Britton for her boat Sally.**