

SWITCHED-ON STRINGS

Richard Tognetti is about to lift the roof in concert halls across the nation with Brett Dean's new composition for electric violin, writes **Nick Cater**

It is a violin, but not as we know it: elegant in its own way but as alien to its acoustic cousin as the Fender Stratocaster is to the flamenco guitar. Conductor and composer Brett Dean has scored for the electric violin before and has improvised with Australian Chamber Orchestra artistic director Richard Tognetti for years, but never has the instrument been worked so hard for an Australian audience as it will be tonight in Canberra's Llewellyn Hall.

We have known Dean and Tognetti long enough to know they rarely stick to the rules; nevertheless the thought is irresistible: perhaps this time, with the Australian debut of *Electric Preludes*, the pair will go too far.

For Dean, who crossed the electric threshold in his 2010 opera *Bliss*, digital technology opens a world of infinite possibility. "Instruments have never stopped evolving," Dean tells Review. "If you were going to be a total purist as a composer, you would write for nothing except the human voice."

It's a plausible excuse, but there is something particularly startling about the act of plugging a solid lump of wood into an amplifier or, in this case, a computer. When Les Paul appeared on stage in the 1930s with "the log", a guitar fashioned from a piece of 4 x 4 timber, he disguised it inside the body of a familiar semi-acoustic instrument so as not to startle the audience. In the background of the recording of Bob Dylan's second set at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, when he cranks up the amplifiers and lets rip with *Maggie's Farm*, there is the distinct sound of booing. Few who grew up in the 60s could listen to the opening chords of the Rolling Stones' *Brown Sugar* even today without feeling their parents wouldn't approve.

"Well I'm obviously not a purist," Dean replies. "Having said that, I'm acutely aware of the special properties of acoustic music, that can never be replicated. But as a composer, the opportunity to take the music into a new sound world that wouldn't normally be available is enormously enticing."

The electric violin has been around for almost 90 years; jazz musician Stuff Smith was experimenting with one as early as the 1920s, and by the time American George Beauchamp in 1936 filed the first patent for an instrument fashioned from Bakelite, it was clear that amplification did not just augment sound, it changed it into something different altogether. Cautiously, Beauchamp wrote his patent not for the electric violin as such, but for "electrical musical instruments of the violin type".



Left, a **Violectra** instrument and, below, its maker **David Bruce Johnson**

By then jazz guitarist and exponents of the new genre of electric blues, like Paul, were discovering new tricks. The solid instrument could sustain a note far longer; the vibrations are not dissipated in a chamber but enhanced like a tuning fork applied to a table. The strings, and even the neck, could be bent, sometimes with a tremolo arm, to produce novel sounds; the fret board could be tapped with both hands; feedback and distortion could be tamed to become the artist's friend.

It granted the ability to amplify not just vibrating strings but the deep, and sometimes ugly, stirrings of the soul; the same technology that gave birth to the dreamy slide guitar of Hawaiian music also empowered the nihilism of Jimi Hendrix, who would gnaw on his Strat with his teeth one moment and set fire to it the next.

Such is the ability to magnify the deeper recesses of humanity that one is grateful in a way that the electric violin was not available to earlier composers. Sibelius's *Tapiola* for electric orchestra would have been 20 minutes of sheer terror; those who heard it would have emerged visibly shaking, as white-faced as the audience at the opening night of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The violin in Shostakovich's *Elegy* would not have been crying to itself, it would have been sobbing uncontrollably; concert hall cleaners would have needed heavy-duty mops later to deal with the blubbery, tear-stained mess.

Dean is relishing his newfound powers: "It gives the ability to combine virtuosity with a whole new vista of sonic characteristics. The possibilities are endless. They're limited only by the technology and the imagination for what we can do with those sounds."

The written range of the solid-bodied violin can be extended with the addition of extra strings since, unlike the delicate light-timbered version, it is not limited to four.

Tognetti modestly stopped at six, but it can do the work of a viola and cover much of the range of the cello. The instrument's maker, David Bruce Johnson, adds a seventh or even an eighth to some of his instruments. The E flat looks sturdy enough to moor an ocean liner and could, with some muscular bow work, perform some of the lighter tasks of the bass.

Johnson works with European maple, and sometimes sycamore, cedar or poplar that arrives in huge boards at his workshop in Birmingham in the English West Midlands.

The task from there is to pare back the weight to less than 400g, the maximum a



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