

Magic sounds from the wilds of Alaska

Inuksuit

Antarctica Music Festival
National Gallery of Australia.
June 25.

Reviewer: Daniel Sanderson

Inuksuit was the opening performance of the ANU School of Music's Antarctica Music Festival.



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A number of cultural commentators have suggested that, in these secular decades, art can fill the space left by the retreat of religion. The performance last Saturday morning of John Luther Adams' *Inuksuit* at the National Gallery of Australia left me hoping that they might be right. Adams has lived in the Alaskan wilderness for many years. His work takes its name and inspiration from the stone sentinels constructed there by the Inuit: "Inuksuit" means "to act in the capacity of the human". The piece itself is a kind of vigil for the fragile environment in which it was conceived. As the sun rose over a frosty capital on Saturday, the Alaskan tundra felt surprisingly near. The performers were distributed seemingly at random across the gardens that surround James Turrell's Skyspace, *Within Without*. The rugged-up audience were able to move among them as the performance progressed, making each audience member a participant and each listening experience subtly different. The piece began with wind sounds – what looked like stones rubbed together, the eerie whine of spinning tubes, and Aboriginal bullroarers. These were joined by hoots and yelps from trumpet and conch and pieces of plastic tubing. Later bells, drums, gongs and shimmering cymbals brought movement and further expansiveness before giving way to one of the most magical musical experiences I have experienced – five or six glockenspiels, scattered across the garden, reproducing the exquisite cadences of Arctic birdsong, gradually fading to nothing. The long silence that followed was broken eventually by sustained and cathartic applause. Adams scored the work for nine to 99 percussionists. The Canberra ensemble was just shy of 30, and was made up of musicians from the ANU School of Music, Sydney's Synergy Percussion, Melbourne's Speak Percussion and distinguished visiting percussionists Allen Otte and John Lane. The performance's artistic director was ANU School of Music Head of Percussion Gary France. He, and everyone else involved, should be very proud. *Inuksuit* was the opening performance of the ANU School of Music's Antarctica Music Festival and Conference and was a rare and exciting opportunity for Canberra audiences to hear the Australian premiere of a significant new work. More than that, however, it was a chance for a new kind of community to form around a shared and (not to put too fine a point on it) transcendent experience.