



Q&A with Phil Boniface: MATARIKI 2018

Last June, double-bassist Phil Boniface joined with Alistair Fraser (taonga pūoro), Bridget Douglas (flute), Rangimoana Taylor (Kaikōrero) and Ed Davis (videographer) in a fantastic concert for Matariki. We caught up with Phil to ask him about his music-making and working with ngā taonga pūoro.



Phil Boniface Double Bass

1. What was the catalyst for your interest in ngā taonga pūoro?

My interest in *ngā taonga pūoro* began while I was living in Vancouver, Canada. I always enjoyed listening and observing the work Al Fraser had been doing in New Zealand.

2. You have a background in jazz, how do you think this influences your approach to playing double-bass with ngā taonga pūoro?

To a large degree free improvisation plays an integral first step, especially when initially developing a concept for a piece with *ngā taonga*

pūoro. Many compositions from 'Ponguru', the duo album featuring Al Fraser playing *ngā taonga pūoro* and myself on double bass, released earlier this year through Rattle Records, evolved from improvisations. Although my musical background is in jazz, as a double bassist I draw on many extended cello techniques used in contemporary classical music for compositions with *ngā taonga pūoro*. This has been successful (I hope) in developing engaging, creative and original pieces, especially with rhythmic *taonga* such as the *tumutumu*. Perhaps a more accurate description of the music from 'Ponguru' would be 'Contemporary New Zealand Art Music'.

3. When you were in Canada did you have contact with the music of indigenous and First Nation Peoples?

Unfortunately not. Vancouver is a densely populated multicultural city, however, speaking only from my experiences, I didn't hear or see any

cross-cultural collaborations within the jazz community in the eleven years I resided there. I feel that first nations people could be given the opportunity to be better represented in mainstream North American culture.

4. The Matariki concert *Te Korekore* incorporates video art, jazz, Western music elements, as well as music from ngā taonga pūoro. How did the group approach tying all these elements together and how do you think that works for an audience?

The story of *Tinirau and Kae* has definitive points where the music chosen complements the narrative. The pieces selected from 'Ponguru' have proven to integrate well with this story. Ed Davis produced video art that in many ways reflects so many aspects of the story. Additionally, *Hineraukatauri* is a character who is featured in this story, so it felt natural to include Gillian Whitehead's piece 'Hineraukatauri', performed by Al Fraser and Bridget Douglas. These



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combined elements of storytelling, video and music create an immersive live show that enables the audience to experience *the story of Tinirau and Kae* from multiple perspectives.

5. What do you hope an audience will take away from the performance? How are you hoping they would respond?

I hope these performances are received positively, resonates well with the audience, and inspires curiosity in individuals of all ages to explore future performances and recordings that feature *ngā taonga pūoro* either solo or in collaboration with other musical instruments in various contexts.

6. How has the process been for you with creating music with *ngā taonga pūoro*? Were there any surprises, things which you didn't expect in that journey?

The process of creating music has been a steep learning curve, enormously rewarding, but also a challenge.

The surprise for me was just how many *ngā taonga pūoro* are in the *kete*. It is my understanding that the *Pūtōrino* is the only pre-colonial hybrid musical instrument in the world, very fascinating. These instruments inspire

me and make me want to continue learning about and composing music with them.

7. What can Aotearoa be doing more of to increase the awareness of our rich heritage in music-making?

Continued support of performances that feature *ngā taonga pūoro* in solo or in collaboration with other instruments. Tours supporting Matariki celebrations like **Chamber Music New Zealand** are organizing are incredibly important for the development of projects where *ngā taonga pūoro* is in collaboration with western musical instruments. I also feel studying *ngā taonga pūoro* in schools is a great place for younger musicians to learn about New Zealand's pre-colonial musical heritage.

This could have positive implications for future projects, collaborations, as well as, music making that has a uniquely Aotearoa voice. Personally, this is something I am working hard to incorporate in my own teaching practice.

8. When playing a western musical instrument with Māori musical instruments what are challenges, concepts, as well as musical considerations you have encountered?

Many of the *taonga* have a relatively small melodic range in comparison to western musical instruments. The challenge is developing melodic ideas while allowing space in the music that will enable the *ngā taonga pūoro* voices to sing. From my experiences, pizzicato and arco playing can be used for many different instruments. Bassist **Paul Dyne** was an inspiration in the way I approached several pieces when playing pizzicato with *ngā taonga pūoro*. His 2011 duo recordings with **Richard Nunns** ('Hikoi' – Rattle Records) demonstrate great use of space and melody when the double bass improvises with *ngā taonga pūoro*.

When developing a piece for a specific *kōauau* for example, Al and I would freely improvise around a concept and the tonal centre of that instrument to develop a direction specifically for that musical instrument. Learning about the *taonga pūoro* we are composing music with is hugely important. I feel the *pūtōrino*, because of the variety of voices it can produce, is an instrument that presents many opportunities for creativity.



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TE KOREKORE

THE STORY OF TINIRAU AND KAE

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