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Classical music

The world's most complex music: Richard Barrett's Opening of the Mouth

It's composer Richard Barrett's 50th birthday this year - and Huddersfield contemporary music festival his celebrating it in style



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Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Thu 12 Nov 2009 22.45 GMT



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A disused railway foundry on the edge of the desert outside Perth, Western Australia, March 1997. Inside it is dark and airless, and stiflingly hot. The confined space is filled with the stench of rotting fish. In the decaying heart of the building, amid rusting machinery, dozens of bottles of putrid milk and other surreal detritus, sit an audience and a small ensemble, playing music of an uncompromising but eerie beauty. One reviewer is nearly sick.

This was the world premiere of *Opening of the Mouth* by the British composer Richard Barrett, whose 50th birthday is being celebrated at this year's Huddersfield contemporary music festival. And among the works being performed is *Opening of the Mouth*, which will receive its UK premiere from the Australians of the ELISION Ensemble.

Opening is a daunting undertaking for its players. It stretches performing technique and musculature to their utmost, with levels of musical complexity that few ensembles could even begin to attempt. It is the sort of challenge that few British players have chosen to meet. Barrett's fortune with ELISION is having players who will rise to any challenge he sets them. So how was this partnership forged? When ELISION was formed in Melbourne in the mid-1980s, official arts culture in Australia had long been plagued by a post-colonial inferiority complex, and Australian new music, it was believed, was not up to much. Those with any talent were expected to relocate to Europe.

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It was in this context that Daryl Buckley, ELISION's guitarist and artistic director, first encountered Barrett's music. A friend returned to

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