

Silent

Hand

Catches

Silver

Bell

25 Years of Speak Percussion

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RIGHT *Silent Hand Catches*
Silver Bell, hero image, Speak
Percussion 25th Anniversary
Exhibition, Grainger Museum,
(2025–2026). Image: Jeff Busby



Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Melbourne and Speak Percussion acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Peoples of the Kulin Nation.

Grainger Museum, The University of Melbourne

Established in 1938, The Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne is a heritage-listed, internationally recognised museum documenting the life and work of composer Percy Grainger. The University of Melbourne is Australia's leading university, ranked #1 in Australia and #19 in the world (QS World University Rankings 2026).

Speak Percussion

Speak Percussion has redefined the sound of 21st-century Australian percussion through bold artistic projects of scale and vision. Internationally acclaimed as a leader in experimental and contemporary classical music, Speak continues to push the boundaries of what percussion can be, expanding its creative and expressive possibilities.

Foreword

Director, Grainger Museum,
The University of Melbourne

Ryan Jefferies

For the past twenty-five years, Speak Percussion has forged a unique place in contemporary music, transforming the role of percussion from accompaniment to a boundary-breaking artform. From a nimble collective of young musicians emerging as alumni from the University of Melbourne to one of Australia's most internationally recognised experimental ensembles, Speak Percussion has continually pushed beyond the conventions of chamber music. Now led by co-artistic directors Eugene Ughetti and Kaylie Melville, their commissioning record is formidable, premiering multitudes of works and offering composers a platform to realise ambitious and unconventional outputs and redefine what percussion can be.

What distinguishes Speak Percussion is not simply virtuosity or precision in performance, though both are in abundance. Instead, it is their restless curiosity and appetite for creative risk. Their practice sits at the intersection of music, sound art, and performance installation, expanding the idea of percussion into realms of movement, theatre, visual art, and even science. The ensemble embraces an expanded sonic palette—found objects, robotics and electronics—alongside percussion instruments. Audiences are invited to rethink the very definition of music in contemporary culture.

Equally important is Speak Percussion's role in fostering new generations of experimental artists. Through their Bespoke Artist Program, they have mentored composers and performers, seeding future practices that will extend their legacy, and Sounds Unheard, a free music education program for Victorian secondary music students.

Silent Hand Catches Silver Bell is a proud collaboration between Speak Percussion and the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne that showcases the organisation's legacy and celebrates a quarter of century of avant-garde music experimentation. Speak Percussion's partnership with the Grainger Museum has been one of ongoing creative reciprocity. Percy Grainger's radical vision of music—as a boundless field of sonic exploration and 'free music' instrument invention—has provided impactful inspiration, while the Grainger Museum itself has served as both a site and resource for artistic experimentation.

Most recently, Speak Percussion performed *Before Nightfall #14* with Alon Ilzar at the Grainger Museum, deployed a combination of AirSticks and unique instruments from the Grainger Collection, and participated in a creative research residency that will culminate in the forthcoming commission *The Museum*. Composed by Steven Takasugi in collaboration with Speak Percussion, the work delves into sound archives drawn from the Grainger Collection—positioning these sound objects in conversation and prompting reflection on the politics of collecting, preservation, and legacy across artistic and institutional realms.

I encourage you to delve into this immersive anthology of custom-built instruments and experimental performances and celebrate Speak Percussion's inspiring legacy and post-instrumental approach.



Speak Percussion at 25

Louise Devenish

In the early 2000s, leading contemporary percussion ensembles were celebrating milestone anniversaries worldwide. Les Percussions de Strasbourg (est. 1962) celebrated its 40th anniversary, while Canadian group NEXUS (est. 1971) reached its 30th. Australia's Synergy Percussion (est. 1974), Switzerland's Eklekto (est. 1974) and Percussion Instruments Ensemble of Russia (est. 1976) each passed 25 years, and the Ju Percussion Group from Taiwan (est. 1986) celebrated 15 years. By this time, it was very clear that percussion ensembles were no longer the new kids on the classical music block, as the ensembles mentioned here represented a fraction of successful professional groups that were active in cities all over the world. It was in this milieu that Australian group Speak Percussion began. Although the organisation had been around for only a few years at the time, they were already part of a wider global conversation.

I first came across Speak Percussion as a student in the early 2000s, during an Australian Youth Orchestra season. When the percussion section was given parts consisting entirely of directions to tacet (Brahms was a repeat offender), we would cluster offstage to talk about music where our parts were free of tacet. **Silent.** These conversations frequently led to new percussion ensemble and solo repertoire. When snare drum solo pieces came up, they usually fell into one of three categories: technical studies based on orchestral excerpts, rudimental solos, or more recent concert pieces composed by percussionists. The latter tended to be roughly equal parts stick tricks and something along the lines of 'play single strokes as fast as possible'. Eugene Ughetti's *Frenetic Fantasy Etude* (2001) was something else. A work for snare drum and electronics that was full of technically challenging material, irregular rhythms, sudden changes in character, all lining up meticulously with a pretty weird (frenetic) digital track. Eugene had composed *Frenetic Fantasy Etude* a few years earlier, to meet his student recital snare drum solo requirement and bypass the constraints of existing recital repertoire at the same time. It both acknowledged the lineage of technical snare drum studies, and was free of the limitations of that lineage. It was a concert solo piece, with no stick twirling required. I immediately programmed it for my own undergraduate recital the following year.

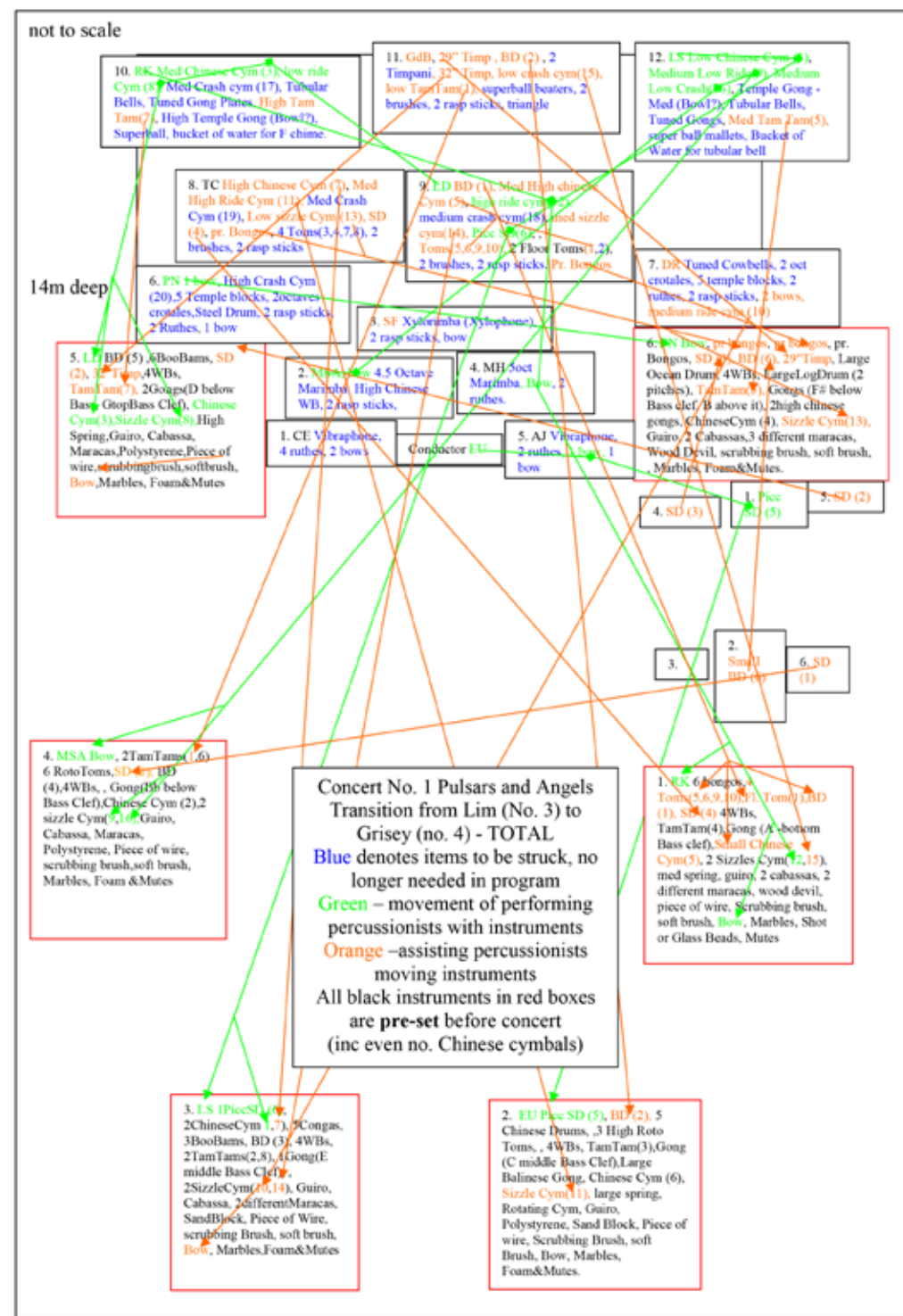
It was not until five years later, in January 2011, that I worked with Speak Percussion for the first time, as one of twelve percussionists brought together for two colossal programs at MONA FOMA in Hobart to mark the organisation's tenth anniversary. The project featured a range of works, each representing a percussion ensemble music milestone in a different way. It was a remarkable mix of twentieth century international works that had changed music practice through their approaches to instrumentation, concept, or audience experience (Varèse's *Ionisation*, Grisey's *Le Noir de l'Etoile*, Xenakis's *Persephassa*, Tenney's *Three Pieces for Drum Quartet*), and new works by Australian based composers that challenged these ideas again (Griswold's *Strings Attached*, Pateras' *Refractions and Flesh and Ghost*, Lim's *City of Falling Angels*). The two programs signalled Speak Percussion's ambition, and they were completely undaunted by the logistical scale of the project. Players travelled

Right: Excerpt of the stage plan for *Pulsars and Angels Speak Percussion* 10th Anniversary Concerts, MONA FOMA, outlining how the performers would move instruments between two works in the program. 14 January 2011, Princes Wharf Shed No. 1, Hobart. Image: Daniel Richardson.

from Sydney, Perth, Basel, New York and Melbourne, and over 400 instruments were loaned to the project from the collections of performers, as well as from other Australian ensembles ELISION, Synergy Percussion, Ensemble Offspring, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria and beyond. The meticulous stage plan included a matrix of instruments, setups, and highly specific details outlining how they would be moved by hand over the one-hundred-metre long performance area in under five minutes during the concerts. **Hand.** Just looking at the booklet of stage plans and imagining it smoothly unfolding was thrilling. (Someone running back 100 metres to look for a missing instrument in the event of an error in the stage plan, was not going to be an option).

Like that student recital snare drum piece, *Speak Percussion's* tenth anniversary programs demonstrated deep knowledge of and respect for the history of contemporary percussion music, while simultaneously questioning and challenging its legacy in a contemporary context. This approach has guided much of their work, providing a rich foundation for their creative practice. In the years since, the organisation has continued to both build upon and dismantle the ideas surrounding contemporary percussive practice through their ground-breaking body of work. *Speak Percussion's* 25-year anniversary happens to fall near the 100-year anniversary of the earliest western percussion ensemble compositions by Roldan, Varèse, Cowell, Beyer and their contemporaries, providing a timely opportunity for reflection on the evolution of the artform itself. In reflecting on *Speak Percussion* at 25, we are also reflecting on an overarching question that has driven the evolution of percussive practice: What is percussion?

This is not a question that can be easily responded to with words. Percussionists revel in the fact 'percussion' cannot be readily defined, although it doesn't stop us from collectively trying as we try to analyse and explain what we do. This is well-intentioned, and also motivated by the aim of sharing the potential of an artform that brings us so much joy. As a result, 'percussion' is a term used in many different ways, with existing definitions referring either to instruments, performance practices, the broader artform, or a combination of all three. Percussion instruments are 'almost anything' (Pham 2023), they are 'any physical object that can be sounded' (Ughetti in Devenish 2019), 'no instrument' (Schick in Oteri 2004), and 'more of a practice than an instrument' (Esler 2014). Attempts to describe percussion practice are similarly expansive and elusive: it is 'characterised by exploration' (Devenish 2019), 'a conceptual mutation' (Stene 2023), 'an attitude, an investigation of sound' (Tomlinson in Huang 2017), and 'a system of knowledge acquisition' (Schick 2015). Program notes, websites, and interviews with practitioners are peppered with statements about the possibilities of percussion as a discipline that is limitless, open, boundary-less, free, indeterminate. Equally common in the lexicon is what is often described as some kind of search for newness: new sounds, from new instruments, sounded through new techniques, performed in new works. But this is not quite the full picture. John Cage's familiar and



often-repeated mantra ‘percussion is revolution’ (Cage 1939) speaks to how the artform was perceived in the twentieth century. Steven Schick updates Cage’s words to ‘percussion is evolution’ (Schick 2024), and here we come closer to understanding a practice whose definitions include almost everything and specify almost nothing, that looks backwards to what was, in order to leap forwards into what might be.

Percussive evolution at its most simple, can largely be characterised by expansion of materials. The history and lineage of this expansion has long included the re-imagining of objects and materials as musical instruments, a practice known as instrumentality. This hallmark of all percussive practice centres around developing techniques to draw sounds from objects, and to be able to repeat these sonic discoveries in performance. ‘Percussion is revolution’ saw late nineteenth-century objects like brake drums, railway spikes, paper, and flowerpots sounded into the twentieth century, challenging and rejecting conventional modes of music-making. Twenty-first century percussing continued this approach, by sounding twentieth-century inventions such as polystyrene, wireless microphones, LED lights and plastic credit cards into new contexts. ‘Percussion is evolution’ celebrates the transformation of these materials into something new through sound.

This transformation offers a new perspective on the world around us. In this context, newness is not about the newness of the object itself, or rejection of its original purpose. Rather, it is about the way we engage with and understand it via new percussive languages. Percussion is a practice of expansion, and a practice of story-telling. The expansion of the vocabulary of percussion language used to tell sonic stories now goes far beyond its idiosyncratic striking, shaking, scraping and fractioning techniques. Following the words of choreographer Jonathan Burrows describing dance technique (2010), I now describe percussion technique as whatever you need to do, to do whatever you need to do. The contemporary percussionist breathes, electrifies, ignites, bounces, pulls, dampens, and amplifies. She launches, splashes, flicks, and spins. **Catches.** They throw, drop, and twist.

Speak Percussion has played a pivotal role in the evolution of percussion in the twenty-first century. Their rigorous investigations have sought to expand our understanding of what percussion could be, as an instrument, a practice and an artform. Established ideas that have been embedded in western art music practice for centuries, such as technique, authorship, concert presentation, musicality and virtuosity, are dismantled, reframed and presented anew for a twenty-first century context. The organisation frequently engages with questions or concerns arising in the everyday life of the artists and their audiences at the time. How this has been achieved is best understood through their expansive body of work, which traverses a wide terrain of performance work developed with teams of musicians, instrument designers, audio technicians, technologists, set designers, engineers, architects, chefs, and dramaturgs.

The artists and collaborators of Speak Percussion have applied basic

principles of wind and brass instruments, drawn on choreographic methods, and transformed the offstage tools and props of the theatre through percussive thinking. This is illustrated by the following examples. In Eugene Ughetti’s *Pyrite Gland* (2015), a corrugated plastic tube snakes from a footpump at one end to the air vent of a drum at the other: the drum is a wind instrument that comes alive, breathing with each step. How long is the life of a human-made object?

Assembly Operation (2017) features long rolls of paper sliding across an amplified table. The paper sounds the table with the same friction principles that allow a bow to sound a viola. As the paper shifts, gathers and falls, the detritus transforms into a set that grows slowly around the performers. Where does the waste produced by our everyday actions go when we’ve finished with it?

In Damien Ricketson’s *Rendition Clinic* (2015), strobe lights fulfilled a plurality of on-stage roles. The click of the globe flashing on and off was amplified and sounded as an instrument, the rhythm of the flash was manually manipulated to interact with the human performers’ phrasing, and these actions simultaneously served as the compositional design and the lighting design for the work. Blink and you miss it. What is your attention span like these days?

Commissioned for the Filament project, Josephine Macken’s *Vessel Song* (2022) featured soft yarn, woven and knotted into long lines of material. Short pieces of coloured cotton and simple knots distributed through each line added to the variety of whispery drones and accented rhythmic events produced as each line was slowly drawn over the lip of amplified metal vessels. **Silver.** The lines were a mallet while also serving as a form of short-hand notation in performance, their movement marking the gradual and constant passing of time.

Together, these are examples of works that prompt reflection on production and waste in a closed system, and our collective attention spans in the digital age. The themes explored in the works—including power, community, violence, consumerism, mass-production, and automation—bring together radical and interdisciplinary approaches to music creation. Speak Percussion’s catalogue epitomises the concept of post-instrumental practice, which is characterised by instrumentality, plurality, technique transferral, and integration (Devenish 2021). It is work that is rooted in percussion, but reaches beyond. **Bell.**

Silent. In the imaginations of many who haven’t visited there, Antarctica appears as vast, white, and open. Some artists have described Antarctica as a silent continent (Barlow 2010), while others, such as sound artist Philip Samartzsis, recognise its rich soundworld. *Polar Force* (2019), a collaboration between Samartzsis and Speak Percussion, led to the creation of science-laboratory-like wind, water and ice instruments and a bespoke inflatable performance space to sound them in. With the structure breathing around the audience and performers, the behaviour and the sounds of natural phenomena became percussive tools, transformed in the hands of the performers into rhythms, textures, and melodies.

Hand. A spinning, circular, textured table served as the centrepiece for Matthias Schack-Arnott's *Annica* (2016). Covered with a tessellation of pieces of shell, bamboo, metal and wood set in mechanical motion, the sounding of this instrument was achieved by a dance between human and machine, as four hands gently held objects to the table's surface to produce singing harmonics and phasing patterns through the friction of their contact.

Catches. *TRANSDUCER* (2013) did not require the percussionists who performed it to use a single stick or mallet. In one moment, four performers rhythmically and robotically swing, catch and hold SM58 microphones above a row of speaker cones to create feedback harmony that pays homage both to Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) and the hocket of chamber music quartets. In another, the chaos of ping pong balls bouncing from an activated speaker cone creates a rhythmic energy as their trajectories are only just contained by a performer.

Silver. *Fluvial* (2014) was the first of Matthias Schack-Arnott's solo works that tested the potential of percussion as a kinetic sculpture, embracing the behaviour of an object activated through sound. Aluminium tubes, rods, plates and chimes were assembled *en masse* in suspended layers, creating a vibrating landscape with an identity of its own, that was both instrument and stage design.

Bell. In *Pigeons* (2025), the percussionists became both caged pigeons and free pigeons, and launched clay pigeons at oversized decorative bird-cage bells, which became gongs as the clays made contact. Wind wands were extended and amplified into wing wands, their rubber bands replaced with long feathers that vibrated at low frequencies as they moved through air.

Silent Hand Catches Silver Bell brings together instruments, recordings, artifacts and stories stemming from the prolific activities of Speak Percussion over 25 years. The exhibition traces the history of the organisation and their chronology of works, revealing innovations in instrument design, techniques, creative processes, repertoire, and presentation. The post-instrumental practice of transferral is particularly prominent, revealing influences from and connection to disciplinary worlds beyond percussion. Creative works are developed that contribute to percussive language, and also contribute to creative dialogues present in architecture, theatre, comedy, field recording, installation design, and more. The feeling of shared sound and silence, the actions of a performer, or the recognition of a metal object in a new way create perceptual shifts. Is it a prop, an image, or instrument? Speak Percussion's body of work prompts us to reflect and reconsider the materials of the world around us, and new meaning is made through the experience. More recently, under Kaylie Melville's leadership, Speak Percussion projects have begun to include communities of student, amateur and professionals performing together in major arts festivals, effectively interleaving community and professionals, performers and audiences. This builds on the 2017 realisation of Michael Pisaro's *a wave and waves* (2006/2007), which featured 100

performers of all ages and levels of experience, dropping seeds, stirring rice, bowing metal plates, brushing sandpaper and more. The performers stood in a grid format, with audience members seated on single chairs between them. This setup created a field of percussion, as waves of quiet sounds were sent from one side to the other.

When viewed together, the Speak Percussion's body of work and its reverberations through the sector tell a story of percussion in Australia in the twenty-first century. Traces of Speak Percussion's influence is visible in the solo practice of Australian artists beyond the organisation, through works such as Matthias Schack-Arnott's *Everywhen* (2021), Niki Johnson's *Shock Lines* (2024), Zela Papageorgiou's *Tidelines* (2025), and in my own work co-created with Stuart James and Erin Coates *Alluvial Gold* (2022). These works and others feature percussive mobiles, tapestries, sculptures, and installations, each taking their own post-instrumental approaches to making music.

Like all music, percussion music reflects the time and context in which it is made, not only through the concepts and ideas that inspire new works, but through the materials and gestures within them. Instead of asking the question 'what is percussion?', Speak Percussion asks 'what can percussion become?'. This question will never be adequately answered using the language of words. It is an embodied knowledge, communicated through sound and its makers, changing over time. Percussion is a form of thought, it is a system of acquiring knowledge that can be applied to anything, and perhaps most importantly, it is a way of communicating that thought and knowledge that sits outside and beyond words. Responses can only really be found in the creative works themselves, through the experience of thinking and listening percussively. The name 'Speak Percussion' points to this: it's impossible to verbalise what percussion is, but it is definitely possible to 'speak' percussion through practice. Percussive knowledge lies in our practice, and it is communicated in our music. This exhibition offers a glimpse behind the scenes as to how some of these explorations have taken place in Australia to date. It brings together twenty-first century responses to an evolving question, leaving open a range of possibilities for inspiration to follow. ***Silent Hand Catches Silver Bell.***

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TOP LEFT Formation of waldteufels from *Atlas of the Sky* by Liza Lim, Melbourne Recital Centre, 2018. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM LEFT Crowd performing with spinning tops during finale of *Atlas of the Sky* by Liza Lim, Melbourne Recital Centre, 2018. Image: Bryony Jackson



* overleaf

TOP LEFT 10th Totally Huge New Music Festival, hero image, 2011. Image: Jeff Busby

BOTTOM LEFT Design development of inflatable performance space from *Polar Force* by Philip Samartzis and Eugene Ughetti, 2017. Image: Clare Britton

RIGHT Close up of *groene ruïs* by Cathy van Eck for a small box tree, hairdryer and live electronics, from *Filament*, with Kaylie Melville, Melbourne Recital Centre, 2023. Image: Bryony Jackson.



TOP RIGHT Slapstick section of *Welcome* by Johannes Kreidler from *Scream Star*, Featuring (L-R) Eugene Ughetti, Hamish Upton and Kaylie Melville, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2022. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM RIGHT *Anicca* by Matthias Schack-Arnott, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2016. Image: Bryony Jackson



*overleaf

10th anniversary concerts, hero image, featuring Eugene Ughetti, MONA FOMA, Hobart, 2011. Image: Jeff Busby



In Conversation

Louise Devenish with Eugene Ughetti, Kaylie Melville, and Matthias Schack-Arnott.

Between February and July 2025, a series of interviews, conversations, and email exchanges with Speak Percussion artists took place, reflecting on Speak Percussion at 25. Pivotal moments, reflections on creative influences, and their community of practice were discussed, alongside their vision for the future of the artform of percussion. Founder of Speak Percussion, Eugene Ughetti, has been Artistic Director since 2002, and Co-artistic Director since 2025. He shares the rationale behind the organisation's structure and reflects on percussion as an interdisciplinary practice.

Kaylie Melville has been the Co-Artistic Director of Speak Percussion since 2024. Kaylie has held roles as Assistant Artistic Director (2023), Artistic Associate (2020–2022), Education Coordinator (2015–2024) and Young Artist in Residence (2015). Kaylie discusses the way Speak Percussion's artistic practice connects with community, and ways to share experimental music practice both on stage and off.

Matthias Schack-Arnott is an Australian artist, composer and percussionist, whose works span live performance, public art and installation. From 2010–2018 Matthias was the Artistic Associate of Speak Percussion. He speaks here about the role of interdisciplinary collaboration, the thrill of the creative process, and how his interest in kinetic percussion was kindled during his time at Speak Percussion.

Louise Devenish is a percussionist and artistic researcher. Her work with Speak Percussion as a performer, collaborator and researcher since 2011 informed the questions posed to Eugene, Kaylie and Matthias. Excerpts of their responses are presented in the following pages. The complete interviews are available at <https://www.speakpercussion.com/work/silenthandcatchsilverbell/>

On Speak Percussion as an interdisciplinary practice (excerpts)

Louise Devenish (LD) and Eugene Ughetti (EU)

LD: What are the key creative themes in Speak Percussion's work?

EU: 25 years of activity means you've got a body of work. You can see a kind of artistic evolution. You can see questions like 'what is an instrument', 'what does contemporary practice look like', and 'what is percussion,' being addressed in the body of work. One of the most consistent lines of inquiry for Speak has been a kind of material inquiry, a conceptual one, and a constant searching beyond music, with the idea that a project might have multiple ways of approaching the same artistic investigation. When I think about our works, particularly the last 15 years, many of them are materially or conceptually bound up in one bigger investigation. There's not a specific through line there. There's some electroacoustic works, some that are more visual art orientated, and some that are more theatrical in their orientation. I say *material* inquiry because some of the projects were explicitly driven by physical materials—and at other times the materials might not be singular or physical in nature, but the instrument as material becomes critical to how the work is formed.

LD: Can you talk about a breakthrough sound discovery from one of these investigations? A moment of 'what's that sound?', followed by 'what's the technique that produced it? How can we learn that, replicate it, and share it with others?'

EU: The first time I used an electromagnetic coil pick up microphone in *TRANSDUCER*, with Robin Fox and Byron Scullin, started off as a question: can we turn a drumstick into a microphone? That was the starting point. We did some naive things, like wrapping copper coil around a stick, trying to turn it into a microphone. We did a fair bit of experimenting with other types of mics, some hydrophones, condenser microphones and dynamic microphones and so on. Eventually the electromagnetic coil mic came up. I remember the process of using it on an old PC computer. It was like archaeology or something, where you see a computer in front of you... the motherboard, fan and the power supply, using this microphone to traverse it and uncovering these glorious, hidden electroacoustic sounds. I remember playing a PC computer on stage, just loving the kind of power and beauty of that sound world. The coil mics became an important tool that I've used from then on in *Pigeons*, *TRANSDUCER*, and *Polar Force*.

LD: Can you describe what those microphones could offer that made them so important in your future work? A world of sound that was revealed through this process with Robin and Byron. What possibilities did you imagine when you heard these sounds, and how did you use them?

EU: With the PC computer and the coil mics, there was a bit of fiddling around with the phone and the laptop, so I sort of understood the principle of how they worked. But I realised that after a while the sounds that were giving us the most back were the fans. At first, the last thing you want to do is touch a fan while it's spinning fast, but eventually I became more confident and would slow it down using my fingers. They were low powered plastic fans, so they didn't hurt. I realised I could modulate the pitch and so these performance practices evolved around this broken up PC. What was also really interesting was how those microphones were used and processed through Robin Fox's Max patch. One of the mics was just doing the work of listening to the electromagnetic sound of that system. The other mic was spatialising that sound. So one of the mics would detect the level, and basically take it from a zero point and then move it around the circle of an 8-channel surround audio setup. The hotter that other mic became, the further around the circle the sound would move. You could never hear that mic, but you could sense its movement in space, which I think was another really exciting prospect. Realising that sound and performance doesn't have to just be about the production of acoustic or even electroacoustic sound, but it can feed into a system. That was really liberating.

LD: Engaging electronics and new digital technologies has been a part of Speak Percussion's work over the past 10 years. The rise of digital literacy, and prominence of new technologies in everyday life, has influenced the artists and audiences engaging with Speak Percussion. What are some other ways that Speak's artistic practice reflects on, responds to, or relates to the context and time within which it's composed?

EU: For me, art has always been about helping us to see ourselves as clearly and with as fresh eyes as possible. What has attracted me to new ideas, innovations, experimental practice in general, is that it can often be, if not confronting, then at the very least disorientating. Sometimes we need those moments of surprise and confusion to then reassess who we are as people. It's those moments that grab your attention, that make you rethink your place in the world. And that's always really motivated me. I've always wanted to make work that asks those existential questions such as: how do we listen, how is culture formed and navigated, what is creativity?

On Speak Percussion as a community of practice (excerpts)

Louise Devenish (LD) and Kaylie Melville (KM)

LD: Let's start with a memory to set the scene, a Speak Percussion story that you'd love to share.
KM: Our performance of Liza Lim's *Atlas of the Sky* at Sydney Festival in 2020. The Speak works that involve community have always been dear to my heart. That particular performance came during the 2019–20 bushfire season. Eugene and I drove a van full of instruments to Sydney through horrendous smoke. When we arrived, we learned a few of the community volunteers who were going to be performing with us had pulled out because of the bushfires. People had family commitments, emergencies that they had to deal with. But a lot of them came back into the project later on. The power of these kinds of projects to create moments of connection and healing, it was so beautiful and inspiring. Even in this awful, chaotic time, we could come together and make music.

LD: A long-held ambition of Speak Percussion is to play a leading role in defining the sound of twenty-first century percussion music. That is a goal that requires innovation in the materials, the methods, and the community—asking what, who and how these things come together in meaningful ways. Creating community through music is one of the ways this happens, and embracing ways that percussion can offer a uniquely inclusive form of music making is an important part of Speak's work to date. What does this mean to you?

KM: Percussion projects can be a vehicle to bring communities together. Almost anyone can pick up a percussion instrument and make a sound immediately. Or you can spend a lifetime mastering that instrument. So, there's a really quick buy-in to being able to play, but [at the same time], how far you can go with it is an endless rabbit hole. We've really lent into this in our professional, community and education projects, like *Atlas of the Sky*, *a wave and waves*, *Bell Curve*. What's beautiful and important about these projects is that art and community are not separate activities. They're brought together in major festivals, they've been an opportunity for everybody involved to be on a big stage. That new music can and should be for everyone, is an important aspect of our work.

LD: New music projects can emerge from a wide range of different influences and communities of practice. What are the other key creative themes in Speak Percussion's work?

KM: Speak's work is driven by innovation, curiosity and expanding the potential of percussion. It's about expanding the idea of what percussion is, what other things we can use. So, looking at instruments that have historically been part of what a percussionist would be expected to play, but also looking at the idea of building or sourcing new instruments, really being curious about what kind of sounds and techniques are out

there. There's always a really deep dedication to a specific concept that grounds the project. For example, *Atlas of the Sky* deals with ideas of crowds, power, protest. *Fluorophone* was about light, sound and how those play off each other. It's also about expanding the idea of who's working on a percussion project. We often collaborate with people from outside the music world, which has included scientists, chefs, all kinds of other artists as well, people working in literature, in video, in dance. There's always these tendrils reaching out in different directions, looking for new ideas, new ways of thinking, new input into the projects.

LD: Thinking about the conceptual ideas informing new work, and how this relates to the here and now, what do these concepts mean for the musicians, audiences and everyone who engages with this work? When you look back over the 25 years, what do you think are Speak's key contributions to 21st century music practice?

KM: One of the key contributions Speak has made, in my eyes, is taking percussion beyond the traditional concert setting. Most of the musicians who work with Speak are classically trained, but the classical recital format is something that Speak rarely does. There's more emphasis on incorporating other elements, what you might think of as 'music in the expanded field' lighting, staging, costumes, choreography. It's this attention to detail across every level of a performance and experience that I find so thrilling and unique in Speak's work.

LD: When you talk about expanded field I'm reminded of various Speak projects drawing on both sonic and non-sonic materials as sources of musical composition or performative ideas. Whether or not Speak's goal of redefining the sound of twenty-first century music will be achieved—I guess we don't know, we're only 25 years into the twenty-first century! But at 25 years, we are allowed to reflect a bit. Are there any moments or works that you think have been significant contributions to the music scene in Australia or beyond, and can you tell us why?

KM: Significant in Speak's output is our most recent work *Pigeons*, which works with ideas of power, control, and AI—things that mean something to the time that we're living in. It stands out for really pushing the boundaries of what we expect a percussion performance to be. We're working with three traps machines, which are clay target shooting machines, and reimagining them as instruments for use on the stage. This is fascinating because they are certainly not [designed to be musical] instruments. They're quite dangerous. I feel like this project has tested us in ways that no other project has. There's been a level of physicality, of strength, endurance, maintaining a kind of poised performance focus on stage while running around as things are fired at you. It's a level of virtuosity and performance that is a whole body experience. In this project, we're almost thinking more in the way that a dancer or actor might about your body on stage, compared with how a musician might think. Musicians often try not interfere with the sonic experience for the audience with our body movement too much. Because of that, *Pigeons* has been a leap forward in percussion performance, and how it could be for an audience.

On material exploration with Speak Percussion (excerpts)
 Louise Devenish (LD) and Matthias Schack-Arnott (MSA)

LD: Materiality of sound and sound in motion are themes that appear in your own work, and these concepts are also very much entwined with Speak Percussion's history, because of your long period of time with the organisation. Looking back over the Speak Percussion body of work, what do you see as the key creative themes in Speak's work? Where do these align and diverge from your own?

MSA: Speak's output has taken many forms over the years and Eugene (along with the creative team around him) have brought a real appetite for exploring new conversations with different artists, not being just limited to working within percussion, let alone music. This means Speak's work ends up in all kinds of contexts, from galleries to performance halls and everything in between. I would say the unifying theme is a laser focus on the potential of percussion as a medium. On the one hand, this is an exploration of percussion's materiality, pushing that forward in a very focused way. On the other hand, it is the poetic, historical, conceptual ideas that bubble up around the many forms of percussion. That's been a hallmark of Speak Percussion's work, a real passion for exploration, of not just sound, but of ideas. And openness to where those ideas can take you.

LD: What do you think are some of the most important outcomes from this approach?

MSA: Speak has created an incredible body of work, creating worlds of music and performative action in new works that have percussion at their core, and moved beyond the composer-performer dynamic, which is where it started. It must be more than 100 commissions, by leading composers from around the world. But they've also forged a path that has been influential globally, in terms of thinking about what a contemporary classical, new music, or percussion ensemble can be when it thinks expansively.

My time at Speak was completely formative for me as an artist. As a young artist, my first couple of years with Speak were really special. I was the first young musician that Eugene mentored. It was just an incredibly generous gesture from him, a complete mentorship, that ranged from sitting in on rehearsals to being part of making new works and seeing the different ways that a musical collaboration might take place. Also outside of music, cross-disciplinary, and the way conversations can shift and the way a work is formed, things that now I take for granted, but at the time this access to another artist's way of being in the world was completely transformational. I know that mentoring has continued with many other artists since.

One of my earliest memories was seeing Speak Percussion perform at Next Wave Festival in 2002. I was 13. I'd just started at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School and Eugene was my teacher. They played a range of interesting pieces. There was sort of a mixed media approach to new music performance

back then that they had developed. It wasn't called for in the scores, but there were some strong curatorial decisions being made. Seeing a bunch of Speak's shows around that time shaped me as a young musician. I was studying in a classical and jazz based high school program, and Speak concerts would consistently open up the horizon for me, in terms of composers I hadn't heard about, or ways of creating music. I think I've always been sort of quite a visually driven person, someone who has always thought a bit differently about music than most people. So it was inspiring to be exposed to a form of music making that sat within a broader artistic context rather than just purely playing repertoire by dead composers.

It's hard to say what kind of artist I would have been if I hadn't had that time with Speak. The questions we were asking and the collaborators we were engaging with helped me work out what was of interest to me. There were so many different conversations we were having, and you notice yourself being pulled in certain directions. Definitely my interest in the spatiality of sound emanates from that time. That concept of being a percussive artist, Eugene led the way in that respect. It was a path that I could then begin to envisage myself on.

A project or series that I think of often is the *Before Nightfall* series, which was a concept that Eugene and I developed together. It was based around the idea of working with an artist for one day only—meeting for breakfast in the morning and creating something together during the course of one day to be finished before nightfall, at which point the audience arrives and we have to perform something. What was great about *Before Nightfall* was that we were able to capitalise on the presence of artists being in town on a tour or whatever. We could work with people that we admired, spend a day together, share food, share ideas and have this very distilled time together. The pressure that comes with that is always kind of thrilling—arriving at something at the end of the day and sharing that with an audience. The sheer breadth of the artists that we worked with on that series... Steven Schick, Tony Buck from The Necks, Claire Chase, Robyn Schulkowsky, Jane Sheldon... very contrasting artistic beings that we would have the opportunity to collaborate with in an intensive way.

LD: Can you tell us about one of the *Before Nightfall* projects that was particularly meaningful, and why?

MSA: *Before Nightfall #7* with Claire Chase. Meeting for breakfast at the start of the day, we talked about art and music, and also about how music intersects with politics. She's such an inspiring figure in terms of thinking about not only what she wants to do in the world, but how musicians can be of service, transforming musical culture and pushing things forward in terms of equity. Spending the day at the Mission to Seafarers, which is in itself a really beautiful architectural space, working with Eugene and I playing these air-based instruments that ended up making their way into *Polar Force*, we made a 50-minute piece together in one day. That was a good time.

LD: The *Before Nightfall* series is unusual in Speak's output because of the very short development time. A lot of Speak projects emerge over many years. The challenges in *Before Nightfall* are shaped by the timeframe. What are some of the other ways that working with Speak Percussion challenged you as an artist?

MSA: It's hard to choose which of the many challenges to hone in on. For many years, Eugene and I were key performers in projects that would be touring, whilst also trying to keep the organisation afloat in an administrative sense, raise funds, curate the next year's program, and everything else. That gave me a real respect for the importance of good communication, and openness of dialogue and conflict resolution, things that Speak is still good at. We had tough moments, and we just had to develop skills around how to resolve things, hear all the different voices, and implement changes. That was one of the strengths of the organisation, and the key to its success during the years I was there. The willingness to thrash it out and tackle issues head on, and in doing so achieve a lot with a small team is something the audience never gets to see. They see the polished performance, but there's a lot of negotiation and experimentation that goes into the development of all of that.



TOP RIGHT *e* by Simon Loeffler, as part of *Fluorophone*, featuring (L-R) Matthias Schack-Arnott, Leah Scholes, Eugene Ughetti and Louise Devenish. Singapore, 2015. Image: La Salle College of the Arts

BOTTOM RIGHT Foot pumps, corrugated tubes, funnels, balloon, mixing bowl with water. Floor shot of *Pyrite Gland* by Eugene Ughetti from *Fluorophone*. George Town Festival, 2019. Image: George Town Festival

BELOW Pendulum structure from *Transducer* by Robin Fox and Eugene Ughetti. SONICA Festival, Glasgow (UK) 2015, featuring (L-R) Louise Devenish, Matthias Schack-Arnott, Eugene Ughetti and Leah Scholes. Image: Robert McFadzean





Shadowbox by Hanna
Hartman. INLAND concert
series, featuring Zela
Papageorgiou, Meat Markets,
North Melbourne, 2019.
Image: Bryony Jackson



TOP LEFT Fipple Control instrument from *Polar Force* by Eugene Ughetti and Philip Samartzis, Arts Centre Melbourne, 2018. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM LEFT *March Static* by Thomas Meadowcroft, the brass section, Four Winds Festival, Bermagui, 2023. Image: David Rogers



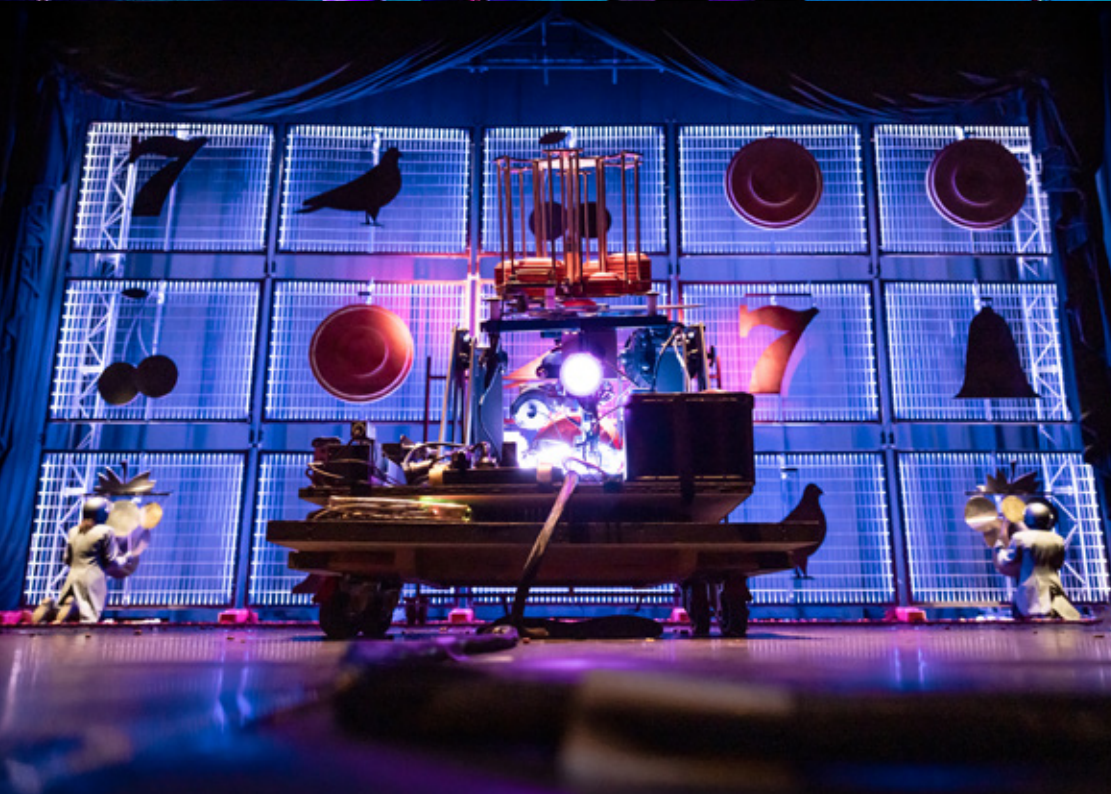
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TOP LEFT *A Dream of Flight, or at least, lurching forward a few inches* by Jessie Marino, lighting by Bronwyn Pringle, from *Scream Star*, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2022. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM LEFT *Trap machine 2* standing before set in finale of *Pigeons* by Eugene Ughetti, featuring (L-R) Kaylie Melville and Eugene Ughetti. *RISING Festival*, Melbourne Recital Centre, 2025. Image: Darren Gill

TOP RIGHT Close up of Radiobot from Matthew Gardiner's *Radiobots*, presented by Aphids, Etheira Technologies and Speak Percussion, Shepparton Art Gallery, 2009. Image: Matthew Gardiner

BOTTOM RIGHT *Before Nightfall #14*. Percy Grainger's metal anklung, featuring (L-R) Eugene Ughetti, Alon Ilsar and Kaylie Melville, Grainger Museum, 2021. Image: Bryony Jackson





← previous

LEFT Wing wands, work in development from *Pigeons* by Eugene Ughetti, featuring (L-R) Kaylie Melville and Eugene Ughetti, Circus OZ, Collingwood, 2023. Image: Jeff Busby

TOP RIGHT Dissolving Stupas, Mvt 2 from *Assembly Operation* by Eugene Ughetti, featuring (L-R) Kaylie Melville, Matthias Schack-Arnott and Eugene Ughetti. Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2017. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM RIGHT Lusca section from *Polar Force* by Philip Samartzis and Eugene Ughetti, featuring (L-R) Matthias Schack-Arnott and Eugene Ughetti, Arts Centre Melbourne, 2018. Image: Bryony Jackson

TOP RIGHT Assembled Stupas from *Assembly Operation* by Eugene Ughetti, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2017. Image: Bryony Jackson

BOTTOM Crushed music stands from *The Museum* by Steven Kazuo Takasugi, image 2024 work premiere (2026). Image: Jebbah Baum

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TOP LEFT *Digital Echoes* by Aaron Wyatt, featuring (L-R) Eugene Ughetti and Aaron Wyatt, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, 2024. Image: Darren Gill

BOTTOM LEFT Rasped knitting needles on woodblock and closed mouth solo soprano from *Atlas of the Sky* by Liza Lim, featuring (L-R) Kaylie Melville and Jessica Aszodi, Melbourne Recital Centre, 2018. Image: Bryony Jackson

TOP RIGHT *Before Nightfall* #16 performance, part of Percussion Conversation Degustation by Duré Dara, La Mamma, Carlton, 2023. Image: Darren Gill

BOTTOM RIGHT Large rasp sticks on Victorian ash planks from *Before Nightfall* #4 with Steven Schick, featuring (L-R) Matthias Schack-Arnott, Steven Schick and Eugene Ughetti, Collingwood Arts Precinct, 2017. Image: Bryony Jackson





Thunder tubes trio from
Atlas of the Sky by Liza Lim,
featuring (L-R) Eugene
Ughetti, Kaylie Melville and
Matthias Schack-Arnott,
Melbourne Recital Centre,
2018. Image: Bryony Jackson





Paper assembly line tables,
Part 1 of *Assembly Operation*
by Eugene Ughetti, featuring
(L-R) Eugene Ughetti,
Kaylie Melville and Matthias
Schack-Arnott, Arts House,
North Melbourne Town Hall,
2017. Image Bryony Jackson

Exhibition list of works and floorplan

01 *Pigeons* (2025) Eugene Ughetti

Trap machine, wind wands, temporary fence panels, percussion-set-pieces in aluminium and pine, clay target hards, recorded audio excerpts, video teaser.

02 *The Museum* (2026) Steven Takasugi

Modified music stands by Jebbah Baum.

03 *Metal Marimba* (c1930) RH Mayland and Son, United States, New York, NY

Audio recording, Speak Percussion live performance (2000) of Percy Grainger's *Shepherd's Hey* (1913) Grainger Museum, The University of Melbourne
Accession number: 00.0065.

04 *Meadowcroft* (2011/2013) Thomas Meadowcroft

Select instrumentation from *The Great Knot* and *Cradles*: wine glasses, ping pong bat, egg shaker, metal mixing bowl + marble, recorder, midi keyboard, revox machine, melodica + footpump.

05 *Anicca* (2016) Matthias Schack- Arnott

Revolving 2.4m diameter table on pottery wheel. Bamboo, aluminium chimes, shells, temple bowls, stones, tiles, wooden ring and Chinese hand cymbals.

06 *Fans* (2025) Mel Huang Buntine + Eugene Ughetti

Computer fans, micro-controllers, rotary dials, electromagnetic coil transducers, haptic wearables, sound interface, aluminium and loud speakers. School of Computing and Information Systems, Faculty of Engineering and IT, The University of Melbourne.

07 Jeff Busby Photography (2011–2025)

10th Anniversary (2011), *Atlas of the Sky* (2018), *a wave and waves* (2015), *Between Two Parts There is An Intermission of A Hundred Thousand Years* (2015), *The Black of the Star* (2013), *Chrysalis* (2012), Europe and USA Tour (2013), *Fluorophone* (2015), *Polar Force* (2018), *Quasi una Fantasia* (2012), *Strings Attached* (2014), *Transducer* (2013)

08 *Transducer* (2013) Robin Fox and Eugene Ughetti

Video of performance, PC with electromagnetic coil section.

09 *Assembly* *Operation* (2017) Eugene Ughetti

3 x Stupas: traditional Chinese percussion instruments, ceramics and polystyrene. Video of performance.

10 *e* (2015) Simon Løffler

Fluorescent lights, work from Fluorophone project.

11 *Atlas of the Sky* (2018) Liza Lim

Photograph of crowd with waldteufels, red chairs.

12 *a wave and waves* (2015) Michael Pisaro

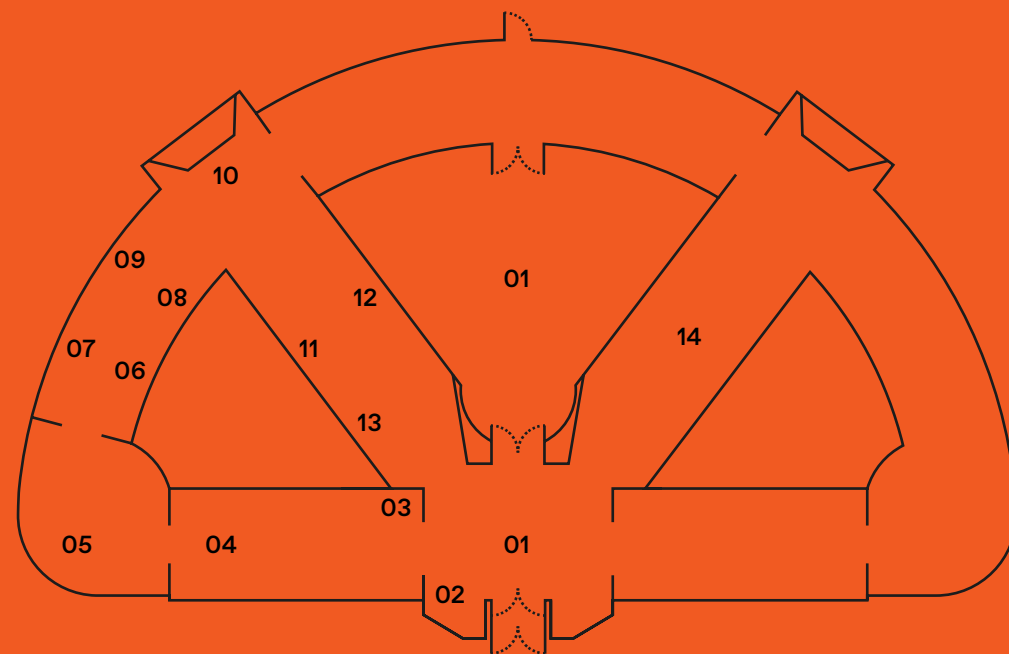
Photograph of rehearsal, trap tables, parts and various instruments.

13 *Archive film* (2000–2025) Cobie Orger

Speak Percussion archival audio visual footage including interviews.

14 *Polar Force* (2018) Philip Samartzis & Eugene Ughetti

Instrumentation: fipple table, trough, Lusca, control panels. Art book, vinyl record, audio recordings (room40). Video of performance.



Silent Hand Catches Silver Bell
25 Years of Speak Percussion

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 Grainger Museum,
 The University of
 Melbourne and
 Speak Percussion

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Speak Percussion has redefined the sound and scope of percussion in the 21st century. After a quarter-century of avant-garde, boundary-defying experimentation, the Melbourne-based organisation marks its anniversary with a major exhibition at the University of Melbourne's Grainger Museum. *Silent Hand Catches Silver Bell* showcases the ensemble's visionary scope and features contributions from leading voices in contemporary music and performance.

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