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## Mara! review: Odd time signatures gather head of steam

• John Shand



Mara! the band (from left) Llew Kiek, Mara Kiek, Paul Cutlan, Sandy Evans and Lloyd Swanton. *Photo: Karen Steains*

**Mara!**

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★★★★½

Few players can sit on one chord and lend the music such momentum as Lloyd Swanton does.

This makes the Necks' bassist invaluable in Mara!, because the band's favoured music, primarily drawing on that of Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, tends to place more emphasis on complex rhythms and snaking melodies than on modulating harmonies.

Of course, odd time signatures are not complex to those who grow up with them, and in a way that is what the husband-and-wife team of Mara and Llew Kiek and their many associates have now done, having spent three decades performing this music.

So Mara (vocals, percussion), Llew (assorted strings), Sandy Evans (saxophones) Paul Cutlan (clarinet, saxophone, percussion) and Swanton (double bass) could tackle a Bulgarian piece like *Sandansko*, and make the 22-beat rhythm gather steam and become as unstoppable as a train.

The band has also flirted with other influences, and among the highlights was the traditional Italian *Riturnella*, which they recorded 26 years ago.

An enchanting introduction from Sandy Evans' tenor saxophone and Kiek's opulent-sounding acoustic guitar led to what was almost like a little one-song opera about unrequited love, beckoning Mara's most impassioned singing of the night and Evans' tenor at its most massive.

Among the original pieces Cutlan's *Bad Kop* (in 11/8) had such in-built sonic mayhem that it seemed on the verge of spiralling out of control, a thrilling quality from a band whose Achilles' heel can be to prioritise exactitude over raw energy.

Meanwhile different sound-worlds kept opening up like fresh vistas on a maritime journey.

The Bulgarian *Troitsa Bratya* was eerie and ominous with bowed bass and clarinet swirling about the braying singing, before a desolate tenor solo from Evans.

Two Turkish pieces were also highlights, one lit up by Kiek's solo on the ringing baglama, and the other featuring dancing, sinuous lines from Cutlan's clarinet.

Ultimately it is the collective imaginative responses to its influences that makes Mara! such a bright jewel in Australia's world-music crown.