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Flat earth (Romano Crevici)

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Flat Earth

Works by Romano Crivici

Performers: Electra String Quartet
Inner Voices (violin, viola, sampler and percussion)
Mark Atkins, didjeridu
Philip South, percussion
Steve Elphick, double bass

ABC Classics 466 704-2

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

Flat Earth is an interesting mixture of composed pieces and improvised performances using the various possible combinations of the forces assembled. The use of the Lexicon sampler to record musical lines and replay them as backing loops for further improvisation is effective, particularly on the last track, "The Ecstasy of Clouds". This improvisation is firmly based on rapid descending string lines using one of the favoured pentatonic scales of minimalism (1, 3, 4, 5, flat 7) and its mixolydian extensions. Underlying this ecstatic texture, ambient bells and drums are employed judiciously.

Many of the other improvisations are not as effective. The piano and ambient bells of "Passing Through" are too close in spirit to the new age meanderings of George Winston; and when this idea is expanded on "Kooriwadjula Talking", the piano playing seems stylistically out of place over the spirited didjeridu and frame drum groove. The more freely improvised "Whirligig" contrasts strongly to this with its confronting lashings of heavily processed string glissandi, but more attention should be paid to textural clarity and structural coherence. Several of the openings of tracks including those of "On the Rebound", "Subterranean" and "Calling", promise a lot, but are not given the space to develop or unfold.

The composed works also involve the creative contribution of improvising musicians. In these works the basic materials and structures seem to be laid out for the players. Drones, percussive grooves and modal melodic strategies are featured.

The title track attempts to combine didjeridu, percussion and string quartet in a very repetitive groove-based composition. The listener's interest is held by the layering of melodic and countermelodic ideas over the groove. Unfortunately the effectiveness of the groove is marred somewhat by rhythmically ragged string playing.

"Nightshift" is even more improvisatory in character. Sections of the piece are based around ostinati, including one blues-like riff. The melodic material evolves through various modes including aeolian, dorian, phrygian and minor pentatonic. Ecstatic chordal and multi-layered melodic textures are used to contrast with the more rhythmical enervated passages.

Several works demonstrate a debt to Peter Sculthorpe, whether intentional or unintentional. "Ebb and Flow" reminds me of the Sculthorpe's Balinese period with its overt pentatonism, gong punctuation, contrasting dissonant elements, highly sectionalised structure, and the use of repetitive percussive patterns under ostinato-based instrumental textures. This last attribute is also a feature of the early part of "The Rolling Force". However this piece develops impressively into a dark and disturbing improvisation with heavily processed sounds and jarring dissonant textural elements.

The liner notes of *Flat Earth* promise "an organic and flexible interaction between established ideas, forms or works, and an essentially spontaneous, creative, exploratory approach to music making". This statement rings true for the composed pieces with their highly structured improvisatory elements. For me these pieces are much more effective than the tracks that are given the label "improvisation".

Michael Hannan is a composer, performer and music researcher. He is Program Leader of Contemporary Music at Southern Cross University.