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# Peter Sculthorpe- Songs of sea and sky (The Queensland Orchestra)

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Peter Sculthorpe-*Songs of Sea and Sky*. The Queensland Orchestra conducted by Michael Christie, with William Barton (didjeridu). ABC Classics 476 192-1

This recording consists of some classic orchestral works by Peter Sculthorpe rewritten to accommodate didjeridu player William Barton as a soloist. In the liner notes Sculthorpe states that he realised after writing *From Ubirr* for string quartet and didjeridu (1994) that the didjeridu is “implied” in all his works. By this he means that his music is always made up of long sections with static harmonic frameworks that are usually reinforced by instrumental drones. The drone role in Sculthorpe’s orchestral music is normally taken by the double basses or low brass instruments playing long-held notes. The didjeridu can easily take on this role but of course its typical playing techniques add a few extra musical dimensions such as rhythmic patterns and complex timbre variation. The other feature of traditional didjeridu playing that is in keeping with Sculthorpe’s compositional practice is animal call imitation.

The works included on this CD (*Earth Cry, Songs of Sea and Sky, Mangrove, Kakadu* and *From Ubirr*) use the didjeridu as a drone instrument and as a solo instrument. Each piece features at least one section where the didjeridu is playing solo. Sometimes the didjeridu is in the background subtly decorating the drone note of the music and at other times it takes a more active role in providing elaborate rhythmic content or animal calls.

In re-organising his already existing pieces for orchestra, Sculthorpe has opted to disturb their structures by adding solo sections for didjeridu. This is surprising since he is renowned for the symmetrical structuring of his work. In *Mangrove*, for example, Sculthorpe adds the didjeridu to the three slow and static sections of the work that use melodic material appropriated from *saibara*, a vocal form of the Japanese Imperial Court music (*gagaku*), but after the second of these sections the didjeridu continues with a solo for a period of 1’45’’. The solo begins with the gentle pulsations that underlie the *saibara* sections, but then develops a new groove (accompanied by a regular percussive beat) that accelerates to an impressive climax. Despite the effectiveness of the solo I find its intrusion into the original *Mangrove* structure to be somewhat problematic (it takes up approximately one ninth of the duration of the work). I admit I may be guilty of conservative listening here (*Mangrove* is one of my favourite Sculthorpe works in its original form).

Another issue I have is with tuning. Although Barton employs an array of different length didjeridus to accommodate the various pedal notes of Sculthorpe’s music, these instruments are generally not precisely in tune with the pitch standard used by The Queensland Orchestra. With a few listenings one can begin to get used to the pitch discrepancy in many of the pieces: it is uncomfortably highlighted in some sections more than others, for example in the cor anglais melody sections of *Earth Cry*.

It is clear that the collaboration that Sculthorpe has developed with Barton is an important one for both parties. In principle I don’t have a problem with a composer trying to make the combination of didjeridu and western instruments workable, but maybe this needs to be done from the ground up rather than by adapting already-written works as is the case

with all the works on this recording. Even *From Ubirr* in its “original” form for string quartet and didjeridu was a reworking of an earlier work called *The Song of Tailitnama* for high voice, six cellos and percussion (1974). It is typical of Sculthorpe’s practice of recycling that *Earth Cry* is also closely derived from the same work.

Generally speaking this is an interesting experiment that deserves some serious critical consideration.

Michael Hannan is a composer, performer and music researcher. He is the author of *Peter Sculthorpe: His Music and Ideas 1929-1979* (1982) and of *The Australian Guide to Careers in Music* (2003).