1986

Ross Edwards: A Unique Sound World

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Publication details
Articles from APRA Journal, Courtesy of APRA.
ROSS EDWARDS

A UNIQUE SOUND-WORLD

by Michael Hannan

Ross Edwards (b. 1943) is one of the most original and talented of Australia's contemporary composers. Especially in the last decade he has consolidated his creation of a sound-world which is unmistakably his own. None the less Edwards' music has never lacked interest even in its most derivative phases or when, because of the pressure of deadlines, he has been forced to produce music too quickly for his liking.

Edwards' early development was blessed by contact with a series of brilliant teachers. After experiencing a performance of Richard Meale's Las Alboradas (1963) in Sydney, he established regular contact with Meale. Some time after, Peter Maxwell Davies persuaded him to move to Adelaide where he enrolled in a B.Mus. degree in 1966. Davies, who was a visiting composer at the University of Adelaide, based his teaching strongly upon analysis and a close scrutiny of every detail of his students' work. In 1967 Edwards came under the guidance of Sandor Veress, who had been a student of Kodaly and Bartok. During some of his vacations in this period Edwards worked as an assistant to Peter Sculthorpe, often with compositional responsibilities. In his honours year and the first year of his Masters degree his composition tutor was Richard Meale who had by this time been appointed as a lecturer at the University of Adelaide. At the end of 1969 Edwards received permission to continue his candidature in London under the supervision of Peter Maxwell Davies. In 1971 he also benefited from contact with Bernard Rands in York.

Despite the considerable influence of all these strong musical personalities, Edwards' early work does not appear particularly derivative. His serial works like String Quartet No. I (1968) and Sextet for flute, clarinet, horn, harp, viola and cello (1966) are stamped with many of the unique rhythmic qualities of his mature output. Moreover, the works which were written in London as fulfilment of the requirements of his Masters degree are remarkable explorations of instrumental technique. Monos I for cello solo (1970) is particularly impressive. Apart from being a virtual compendium of virtuosic gestures involving multiple stopping, all kinds of harmonics, rapidly changing oscillations and complex note proportions, this piece displays a delicate balance between limited intervocalic resources and unpredictability of structural design. There is a thorough vertical and horizontal exploration of ideas involving major and minor seconds and perfect fifths, but with very little sense of musical return or obvious motivic development. The piece is an early manifestation of Edwards' painstaking brand of structural intuition. In spite of the inordinate toil of his work methods, he claims that many of his compositional decisions have no rational basis.

After Monos I Edwards wrote the companion piece, Monos II for piano solo (1970). This shows a similar concern for virtuosity and a flamboyance probably inspired by the fact that it was written for Roger Woodward. Soon after, the composer received a grant from the Australian Government to write a work for piano and orchestra (also for Woodward) and a string quartet. He moved to Yorkshire to be near his Australian friends, Anne Boyd and Martin Wesley-Smith who were post-graduate students at The University of York, but also because he thought that the rural environment might assist him with his task. Instead the bleakness of the countryside had a paralysing effect on his productivity. The orchestral work, Chorus, never settled into a satisfactory mould and remains unperformed. The quartet, MBOC, is a very effective indeterminate composition but its significance could not be equated with his prior major works. Edwards considers, however, that towards the end of his sojourn at a farmhouse outside the city of York, he made a discovery which was crucial to his subsequent development. He was awakened to the external environment as a source of stimulation in composition. Previously he had operated purely in terms of abstract sound structures but suddenly the visual and the aural aspects of nature became inspirational.
Ross Edwards, aged 22 . . .

On his return to Australia Edwards composed his seminal Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist for orchestra (1973). This represents a radical departure in mood and procedure from all his previous music. Its inspiration sprang from the call of the eastern whipbird (Psophodes olivaceus) which consists of a long piping tone gaining in volume and terminated by a sharp crack. Although this is heard fairly literally at the outset, the piece is predominantly very subdued in volume and gesture and has a mysteriousness well captured by its title. Nonetheless, the composer has distilled from the bird call his idea of long-held orchestral sonorities and shorter punctuating musical events. The continuity of the piece is ensured by the overlapping sonorities which focus the listener's attention on continuously varying subtleties of timbral combinations. The beauty of each moment is paramount. In a visual sense the score has an uncanny resemblance to Meale's early orchestral works but it sounds very different because of its dynamic level and complete lack of dramatic effect. In sound it is somewhat akin to Takemitsu's The Dorian Horizon (1966), an influential work in Australia at that time.

The new direction suggested by Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist was not immediately consolidated. From 1973-1980 Edwards was employed as a teacher, firstly at The University of Sydney and then at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music. He found this activity largely incompatible with composition and was initially unable to progress easily with the development of his style. For the 1973 John Bishop Memorial Award commission he produced Anifon for large chorus, brass sextet, organ and percussion. Although the work lends itself to spectacular staging it is essentially modelled on the indeterminant principles of Cardew's "Paragraph 7" from The Great Learning. In 1974 Edwards' burgeoning interest in environmental sounds informed the composition of Kantoouk I for tape, voice, two pianos, harp and percussion. The tape was of insect sounds compiled from field recordings made by the composer. Kantoouk II for tape was an exercise in analog synthesis, realised with the assistance of Jane Fitch. Both these experimental pieces have been withdrawn by Edwards, although the tape of Kantoouk I might in retrospect be considered important as raw material for future refining or transformation. Five Little Piano Pieces (1976), though ostensibly designed for the enjoyment of young players, hints at Edwards' later obsession with manipulating limited sets of tones. This trend is best represented in the Maninya series of pieces, begun in 1981.
After more than three years of some confusion about his direction, Edwards composed Shadow D-Zone for flute, clarinet, bass clarinet, percussion, piano, violin and cello (1977), the first piece of the series he refers to as being his sacred music. Considering the nature of these works, it is odd that this title should have been chosen for its meaninglessness. Yet in attempting to avoid a specific meaning, the composer has invited a Zen-like emptying of the mind, helpful if not essential to a deep appreciation of the very static but profoundly subtle qualities of the style. Like Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist, the emphasis is on unique timbral combinations and prolongations of sonorities. The approach is, however, much more austere, the number of different musical ideas employed is far less, and the phrases are more elongated. There is little melodic content, the clarinet and bass clarinet sharing the most obvious lyrical roles. These lines involve long-held tones, quick grace-notes and an angular intervallic motion, dominated by major sevenths.

The Tower of Remoteness for clarinet and piano (1978), the next in the series of sacred pieces, is remarkably similar in style to its predecessor. Composed soon after Edwards moved to the village of Pearl Beach on the central coast of New South Wales, it represents an intensification of the austere meditational quality he was trying to achieve in Shadow D-Zone. In the isolation of the bush setting he became acutely aware of the sources of his inspiration, and more obsessive about the compositional process. The opening musical idea is distilled from a bird call, but the whole piece is, according to the composer, concerned with the chance-like intersection of different environmental sounds. In particular he became fascinated by the balance of predictability and unpredictability in the rhythms of nature, for example in the starting, stopping and sudden volume changes of a chorus of cicadas. Months were spent refining the musical material and its elongated temporal organisation. In ordering the events of the piece the composer was trying to achieve an asymmetrical quality without disturbing the flow.

Other works in Edwards' sacred series are Kumari (1980-1) and Etymalong (1984), both for solo piano. These are extremely similar in mood and design to the piano part of The Tower of Remoteness. It is as if he has been able to carry the reduction of his musical language even further, excluding any conventional notion of melody in favour of an emphasis upon sonority and rhythmic gesture.

A new phase of stylistic development began, perhaps by accident, with the writing of Laikin I for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, violin and cello (1979). While teaching the composer Michael Whiticker, Edwards chanced upon a recording of a Madagascan folk song and suggested that an examination of its texture might have a liberating effect on his student's work. The quick dance-like song appealed to Edwards so much that he transcribed it and reworked it for the third movement of Laikin I. The piece is in five movements, the first and last of which are also quick and dance-like. Although the composer feels that the mood of Laikin I is a kind of light relief from the intensity of The Tower of Remoteness, these outside movements are essentially speeded-up versions of the Tower style. It was, however, the Madagascan movement with its strong tonal character, its constant dynamic level, and the engaging rhythmic counterpart of its texture, that presaged the more recent Maninya series of pieces.
Constituting a quite original approach to minimal composition, *Maninya* I for voice and cello (1981) was informed by a variety of quick repetitive musics. Apart from the Madagascan song, Edwards acknowledges the possible influence, at a sub-conscious level, of Sculthorpe’s *The Song Of Tailitnama* (1974) as well as African mbira music. He also maintains that the Maninya style is a further compositional abstraction of insect and bird sounds. The opening of *Maninya* II for string quartet (1982) is, for example, derived from the sound of an insect Edwards heard at Pearl Beach. Like the virtually motionless sacred music, the Maninya pieces subject a small number of musical ideas to minute and subtle variations, but they do so in a very energetic manner. *Maninya* I, in its original form, is a single-movement piece with a constant tempo and no breaks in the rhythmic continuity. It appears to be a set of evolving melodic variations, decorating two chords (B’ and E) which alternate in asymmetrical ways. The composer, however, denies the suggestion that either melody or chords are intended in the *Maninya* style. Certainly *Maninya* II seems more concerned with textural interplay of the essentially rhythmic fragments in the four string parts than with any melodic impulse. It also has quite involved modal changes from section to section of its sometimes bewildering single-movement structure.

Edwards’ characteristic cellular material becomes more fragmented and its textural intersection, more complex, in *Maninya* III for wind quintet (1985) and *Maninya* IV, for bass clarinet, trombone and marimba (1986). Both these pieces have a quick first movement and a slower second movement. The composer has also recently extended *Maninya* I by adding slow outside movements. The principles of construction applying to the fast movements are maintained in the slow.

The *Maninya* style has dominated Edwards’ output since 1981. Besides the pieces bearing the title, it has been employed to varying degrees in *Marimba Dances* (1982), *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1982), and the chamber opera, *Christina’s World* (1983). Both the concerto and the opera also employ an idiom seemingly derived from the English modal tradition. Although the composer has ostensibly intended this style to imbue these works with an accessible charm, he has not yet honed its obvious lyricism and rustic harmony down to something that fits comfortably into his sound-world. Recognising, however, Edwards’ inclination to struggle with the refining of musical ideas, it is not unlikely that another unique personal idiom might eventually evolve from this exploratory move.