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Music for federation (MSO)

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Music for Federation by Sculthorpe, Edwards and Broadstock
Melbourne Symphony Orchestra conducted by Markus Stenz

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

The three composers represented on this CD have close connections. Edwards worked as an assistant/apprentice for Sculthorpe in the late 1960s and has been part of Sculthorpe's close-knit circle of friends in Sydney since the mid-1970s. Broadstock was a post-graduate student of Sculthorpe's before moving to Melbourne in the early 1980s. The works on this CD were all commissioned for the Centenary of Federation celebrations. It appears however that the Edwards' *Symphony No. 3 'Magna Mater'* was performed at a concert rather than as part of the parliamentary ceremony.

Broadstock's *Federation Flourish*, at eight and a half minutes, is a far more substantial composition than its title suggests. It owes a debt to Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* in the angular trumpet lines and timpani at the beginning, and, once it gets going, also to Ives with respect to its orchestrative language, its forward-moving energy and its developmental techniques. Despite these resonances, the work shows an assured individual technique and a gift for the creation of exciting textures within a fairly conservative harmonic framework, undoubtedly appropriate for the audience of the occasion.

Sculthorpe's *Music for Federation* also engages with the problem of writing something accessible for the intended audience and the ceremonial purpose of the music. However Sculthorpe's style and set of structuring procedures do not lend themselves to the upbeat and joyous, at least not in an obvious way.

The work is divided into nine movements corresponding to various stages of the proceedings. The opening dissonant brass chorale music intended by the composer as symbolic of "turbulence of our early history" sets the scene for a strident tonal melody reminiscent of the *Burke and Wills* film theme. These two themes recur throughout the subsequent movements in various guises beginning with the second and third movements respectively. The fourth movement, "Incantation" is typical of Sculthorpe's fast, percussion-laden ritual movements. In the fifth and sixth movement Sculthorpe works some of his thematic material through a pop-balladish I-vi-ii-V chord progression (which he first used in his 1960s *They Found a Cave* film score). The next movement contains resonances of Sculthorpe's deeply moving *Irkanda* series. This is followed by an engaging but busy arrangement of the Australian national anthem including its clever overlaying upon the I-vi-ii-V progression. The work ends with a return to the big tune of the opening movement as well as an ethereal version (for strings) of the dissonant brass chorale idea.

Although much of this music is tonal and sumptuous, there is always some disturbing dissonant element lurking in the texture recalling the duality of the composer's string orchestra classic, *Port Essington*. One wonders what the audience of politicians and dignitaries thought of it.

Although Edwards also has an immediately identifiable style, to my ears his recent music is strongly influenced by the generation of mystical composers typified by Arvo Pärt. There is an immediate sensual appeal most of Edwards' writing for orchestra, even though the compositions sometimes seem somewhat structurally dislocated. His *Symphony No. 3* is no exception.

Although it is a work in three movements the divisions are not clearly articulated. The first merges seamlessly into the second and the third begins like a cadence to the second. In the two largely static opening movements the music oscillates between woodwind solo birdsong gestures over drone-like backgrounds and ecstatic textures that explore the cluster-like harmonic potential of pentatonic and diatonic scales. There are a few obvious motivic ideas such as the falling semitone, but for the most part the music does not explore extended melodic development. None the less the orchestral colours and textures are exquisite. There are also some delightful surprises. The use of a static texture of bells near the end of Movement 2 provides a meditational break from orchestral sonority before some blatantly modal harmonic textures conclude the section.

The last movement is clearly an example of Edwards' quick joyous 'Maninya' style. This too uses a kind of static modality exploring various scalic decorations of several dominant seventh chords with extravagant energy and bold orchestrations. Although it is a rousing example of the 'style' it is perhaps also a little disappointing that Edwards has not taken this idea in another direction by now (the Maninya style evolved in the 1980s).

The CD is good value on the whole. The works are well crafted, interesting and enjoyable (if not groundbreaking) and the performances by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra are highly polished.