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Red earth (Tall Poppies Ensemble)

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Tall Poppies Ensemble

Tall Poppies Records TP133

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

The idea of the Tall Poppies Ensemble is a good one. These well-known players have either recorded solo CDs for Tall Poppies Records or else there are plans for them to do so. So it made sense for Tall Poppies producer Belinda Webster to bring them all together to record some Australian instrumental ensemble music. The group consists of Geoffrey Collins (flute/piccolo), Cathy McCorkill (clarinet), John Harding (violin), Esther van Stralen (viola), David Pereira (cello), Daryl Pratt (percussion), Roger Brooke (bassoon), Ian Munro (piano) and David Stanhope (conductor).

The repertoire they cover is broad in style and spans a period from 1948 to 1986. Peggy Glanville-Hicks' *Concertino da Camera* (1948) displays a lively neoclassical technique that stems from her stay in Paris but also has hints of the American sound typified by Copland (They both studied with Nadia Boulanger albeit in different eras). Despite its energy and obvious compositional craft, the work hasn't stood the test of time well.

Shadow D-Zone (1977) is an important work in Ross Edwards' career because it marked his break with modernist complexity and the beginnings of his slow, static and contemplative 'sacred' style which is derived from the sounds and rhythms of nature. It is arguably the work where Edwards forged his unique voice in Australian music.

Vincent Plush's *On Shooting Stars- Homage to Victor Jara* (1981) is one of several works on the CD that mark significant political events. Jara was a Chilean folksinger/poet who was tortured and executed after the fall of Allende in 1973. Plush has based each of the three movements on songs written by Jara. The first is a straightforward folk-like adaptation, but thereafter Plush explores the darker side of the story including the incorporation of a recording of Jara's singing and a vivid musical representation of his violent death. It is a powerful classic of political music, and one that not surprisingly has had hundreds of performances.

Neil Currie's *Ortigas Avenue* (1986) celebrates the bloodless coup that led to the fall of the Marcos regime in the Philippines. Currie also draws on folk music for his inspiration. Great energy and excitement emanates particularly in the minimalistic opening and closing sections.

Colin Bright's *Red Earth* (1985) is also political in that it reflects the composer's advocacy of the human rights of indigenous Australians and the need for greater understanding between indigenous and other Australians. The exciting opening section has resonances of the distinctive repetitive style of Louis Andriessen, while the brooding slow second section is more grounded in Australian traditions of composition that depict the outback.

David Lumsdaine's *Bagatelles* (1985) is a series of eight seemingly-unrelated but well-crafted miniatures. Although composed in Australia it demonstrates more of a European modernist sensibility than any of the other works on the CD.

Generally the performances of the works are of a high standard. There are moments of untidy playing in some of the fast sections. The first movement of *On Shooting Stars*, in particular, fails to find a groove. Another criticism of the product is of the accompanying documentation. There is no indication of the instrumentation for each piece and also inconsistencies in the annotations, the worst of which is the repetition of whole sentences and phrases in the material provided on Colin Bright and his work.