Musica Viva: 60th anniversary selected commissions 1975-2004

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Music Viva: 60th Anniversary Selected Commissions 1975-2004
(Works by Sculthorpe, Edwards, Isaacs, Kerry and Vine)
Goldner String Quartet, Australia Ensemble and Takács Quartet
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Music Viva Australia is associated with the preservation of the European chamber music traditions of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries but throughout its sixty year history it has also promoted Australian new music composition through a sustained commissioning program. This CD presents five of the ninety-five works commissioned by the organization since 1965.

It is fitting that a Sculthorpe work is included in the selection since his String Quartet No 6 (1964-65) was the first of Musica Viva’s run of commissions and arguably represented Sculthorpe’s first big break as a composer: he secured his long-standing Faber Music publishing contract on the strength of it. The work included here, String Quartet No. 9 (1975), is typical of Sculthorpe’s unique style and his technical assuredness of this genre. The Goldner String Quartet gives a flawless and sensitive performance of the work.

The CD annotations for Laikan (1979) relate how Music Viva persisted with commissioning Ross Edwards even after a couple of early attempts remained unperformed. The commitment paid off because Laikan is one of Edwards’ breakthrough pieces. Composed for The Fires of London its middle movement is an early manifestation of his quick ritualistic Maninya techniques that have become a cornerstone of his mature style.

Mark Isaacs’ stunning track record as a jazz composer and improviser is matched by his contemporary classical composing and conducting credits. Isaac’s ensemble piece So it Does (1985) demonstrates excellent compositional craft but resides in a rather conservative corner of new music despite the use of a number of some unconventional techniques such as feet stamping and piano string harmonics.

Gordon Kerry’s Sonata da camera (1991) is also in a conservative mould, particularly the quick first section which tends towards metricality and tonal centering, but none the less demonstrates great energy and flair and employs interesting instrumental sonorities. The slower mostly static second section is more focused on subtleties of timbre and timbre combination. A wide range of instrumental techniques of violin, viola, cello, flute, clarinets and piano is inventively exploited.

The Australia Ensemble plays the Edwards, Isaacs and Kerry works with confidence, accuracy and energy, but it is overshadowed by the dynamism of Takács Quartet’s rendition of Carl Vine’s String Quartet No. 4 (2004). The work itself is a virtuosic exploration of string quartet textures and lends itself to a highly energised style of performance. Despite his obvious mastery of the string quartet idiom, Vine’s structuring of the piece could be tighter. There is an almost rhapsodic flow of one musical idea to another making it hard to get a sense of where the work is going.
Musica Viva has made an impressive selection of works and recorded performances to demonstrate its track record of commissioning new Australian works. The CD booklet augments this self-promotional agenda. Four pages are devoted to a description of Music Viva’s programs and a list of all the works that the organization has commissioned over the duration of its operation.