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Rabid Bay (Michael Kieran Harvey)

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Michael Kieran Harvey
rabid bay
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Reviewed by Michael Hannan

In this collection of Australian piano music Michael Kieran Harvey continues his impressive commitment to commissioning and playing Australian works. Harvey refers in the notes to “an exciting younger generation of Australian composers”, although the creative line-up on this CD includes Laurence Whiffin (b. 1930), Carl Vine (b. 1954) and Nigel Westlake (b. 1958) and only two composers under the age of forty. I would venture to say that to write music suitable for the pianistic virtuosity and sensitivity of Michael Harvey requires more than a little technical maturity.

And there is a trap here even for the experienced. There is the temptation demonstrate here to write a lot of rapid complex passages that show off Harvey’s phenomenal technique, but at the expense of lyricism, space, resonance and clarity.

Indeed, the more introspective, gentle and sonorous sections of the various works included are arguably the most creatively effective on the recording. These include the “Widening Ripples” movement of Kate Tempany’s *The Promise of Water* (2003), the two “Still” movements of Tim Dargaville’s *Negra I* (1999) and the central movement of Westlake’s monumental *Piano Sonata No. 1* (1999). It is worth buying the CD for these few tracks alone.

Of the blindingly virtuosic music, Harvey’s own short toccata-like work, *Pink Nautilus* (2003) is the most rhythmically engaging and structurally coherent. Of the rest, it is difficult to criticise the brilliant idiomatic piano writing of Westlake’s frenetic outer movements even if one does not particularly relate well to the gratuitously decorative textures of the first and somewhat directionless repetitiveness of the third.

And although Laurie Whiffin’s *Sonata for Piano* (2003) often sounds as though he is plundering an exotic compendium of scales, melodic and chordal patterns (and maybe even some tone rows), there is a mysterious sonic logic to his music that makes one want to study the score to uncover his secrets. Whiffin’s virtuosic four-movement work is by far the most challenging listening of this collection.

The inclusion of Carl Vine’s disco parody *Rash* (1997) for electronic backing track and solo piano is problematic. It seems temperamentally out of place in the present company of works and, in any case, it is not really as satirical as it purports to be.

The inclusion, also, of a lone ensemble piece on a recording of solo piano music is programmatically peculiar. Although Kate Neal’s *Rabid Bay* (2004) demonstrates a developing assuredness of craft, it is a rather relentless and jarring listening experience, made the more so by the raw quality of the recording and some unruly woodwind and brass playing.

