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Catch (Music by Mary Finsterer)

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CATCH

Works by Mary Finsterer

Various artists

ABC Classics 476176-0

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

Mary Finsterer is a talented composer working at the extreme edge of new music. This impressive double CD is a retrospective compilation of recordings of 13 works written from 1991 to 2002. It demonstrates the commitment that many high profile performers and ensembles have made to her work over the years. These include the conductor Gunter Schuller, the Arditti String Quartet, Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, as well as a host of prominent Australians.

Finsterer's music is characterised by a kind of relentless savage intensity. I first became aware of her work when one of her pieces (*Tract* for solo cello) appeared on the same CD as one of mine. There was absolutely no doubt that her six-minute piece was the stand-out track on David Pereira's *Cello Dreaming* (*Tract* is also reproduced here). Its frenetic dynamism blew everything else away. However when you put together two and a half hours of this kind of music, it can get a little overwhelming for the listener.

What I like about Finsterer's brand of new music is that, despite the complexity and crazed activity, it often seems to have a strong pulse going through it. This can be almost a groove at times as in the jazzy ensemble piece *Nyx* (1996). I enjoyed jamming along with this track (atonally of course). But even the more abstract works have some kind of bizarre groove element working in them. The pick of these is *Sequi* for string quartet (2001). In each of its three main sections there is a set of very complex instrumental gestures that seem to be repeated and varied in different ways to create strong textural interplay. Other works that have the forward driving pulse element are *Nextwave Fanfare* for orchestra (1992), *Omaggio alla Pietà* for singers and percussion (1992), *Catch* for flute, bass clarinet and piano (1992), *Kurz* for clarinet, piano, viola and cello (2000), and large sections of *Cōnstāns* for solo violin and chamber orchestra (1995).

There is some relief from relentlessness, however, in a number of works, or at least in parts of them. For example, *Ether* for solo flute (1998) starts with gentle whistle-tone harmonic glissandi produced from the lowest tone of the flute. But as the piece progresses the same techniques are enacted on a variety of low tones, and with the inclusion in the bottom register of other techniques such as flutter-tonguing. Gradually the piece becomes a series of fast melodic passages over the full range of the instrument and incorporating techniques such as tremolo, vocalising and breathing strenuously into the mouthpiece. It moves typically toward maximum complexity and rapidity.

Two of the works, *Pascal's Sphere* for ensemble and electronic music (2000) and *Sleep* (2002), which is purely electro-acoustic, have a surprising ambient quality to them, though to be fair, it's a neurotic edgy ambience. The electronic atmospheric washes of

Pascal's Sphere soften the impact of the often frenzied instrumental textures that accompany them. *Sleep* is entirely different because it features mostly sustained sounds or extremely rapid (and therefore drone-like) tremolos on single tones, and rich surges of sound that rush from speaker to speaker simulating the Doppler effect. Yet despite its obvious difference from the other works on the double CD, its underlying principle seems strangely reminiscent of the reiterative processes of *Sequi*.

Finsterer's music is hard work for the listener, but it is also undeniably brilliant. This lavish package of her works is enhanced by illuminating annotations by new music guru Richard Toop and arty photographs (mostly of Canberra, of all places) by one of Finsterer's cross-artform collaborators, Dean Golja.