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Out of the blue (TSO; Music by Nigel Westlake)

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Out of the Blue (works by Nigel Westlake)
Tasmania Symphony Orchestra
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The three orchestral works on this recording demonstrate Nigel Westlake’s versatility as a musician. He performs the solo part of his Invocations: Concerto for bass clarinet and chamber orchestra, a work which demonstrates a certain degree of modernistic intent. He shows his flair for more accessible approaches to composition in Antarctica: Suite for guitar and orchestra, a work derived from the film score of the same name. In addition, the third work on the CD, out of the blue for string orchestra reveals some of Westlake’s influences of American popular and roots styles, possibly sparked from his early days of playing in a jazz-rock fusion band.

Invocations begins with slow Messiaen-like angular melodic lines and chordal refrains and becomes more texturally active and dense as it proceeds. This movement is contrasted with the fast second movement which develops the angular melodic material in strongly rhythmic ways. The more serene third movement begins with a powerfully emotional long-line for bass clarinet over a soupy chordal texture. As this movement progresses, the soloist takes on material using more rhapsodic approaches (which may be influenced by bird calls), before recapping the static opening material. It is an excellent vehicle for Westlake’s expressive and virtuosic playing. The mostly quick final movement seems initially to pay homage to Ravel’s piano concertos using materials that are almost like transformed quotations of certain passages, but advancing the musical language in an individual way. This movement also shows off Westlake’s mastery of extended instrumental techniques such as slap tonguing and growling.

The opening movement of Antarctica, “The Last Place on Earth”, vacillates between quiet and static material for a few instruments and powerful forte chordal passages for full orchestra designed to capture the remoteness and the grandeur (respectively) of the polar ice cap. Oddly enough the full-on sections are reminiscent of some of Peter Sculthorpe’s depictions of the remoteness and grandeur of the Australian desert. The beginning of “Wooden Ships” will come as a shock to the listener of this CD because of its contrasting diatonic harmonic language (not hinted at on the first five tracks), although the ensuing guitar solo introduces almost jazz-like chordal ideas. Although “Penguin Ballet” also uses conventional tonal means, the compositional approach is more diverse and very inventive in its attempts to capture the comic aspects of penguin movement (One can almost imagine the scenes in the film). The final movement, “The Ice Core”, is the most diverse musically of the work and features a guitar cadenza, magnificently performed by Timothy Kain.

A large part of out of the blue is based on musical riffs that are given very repetitive and energetic treatment, perhaps indicating an influence from American minimal composers such as Reich or Adams. This ten-minute work seems also to derive some of its musical ideas from blues and other American musical genres. Parts of it even remind me of
Gershwin. Regardless of its possible sources, it is for me the most compelling work on the CD.

The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra is to be congratulated for yet another superb addition to its growing catalogue of Australian music recordings. The playing is excellent from both orchestra and soloists.