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Star chant (Ross Edwards' Symphonies 1 and 4-Adelaide Symphony Orchestra)

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Star Chant

Works by Ross Edwards

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra conducted by Richard Mills

ABC Classics 476 6161

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

Ross Edwards has carved out a unique set of stylistic and structuring characteristics in his music, so much so that one could not mistake his work for anyone else's. This recording of his Symphony No. 1 'Da Pacem Domine' and Symphony No. 4 'Star Chant' provides the listener with two wonderful examples of his slow and static contemplative music. Edwards didn't always compose music like this. In his early years as a student and graduate he wrote dissonant music of great complexity and virtuosity in the European modernist tradition. But after an artistic crisis in the early 1970s he turned to the contemplation of Australian bush ambient soundscapes for his inspiration. These two symphonies, although written more recently, are clearly products of this stylistically formative period.

Symphony No. 1 (1991) is in one monumental movement of more than 27 minutes duration. It is based on the 'Da pacem Domine' plainchant ("Give peace, Lord") and was a response by Edwards to the Gulf War and to conductor Stuart Challender's fatal illness. It begins with a dirge-like low repeated string tone which grounds the motif (flat 2 falling to 1 and flat 7 rising to 1) that permeates the work. The listener is forced to contemplate this simple idea for more than two minutes before a more varied texture is introduced. The plainchant idea is revealed bit-by-bit starting with three note phrases, moving to four notes and finally a whole descending aeolian scale. Although the melodic ideas are simple and presented in a very repetitive way, the rich orchestrations and the subtle contrapuntal approach to the modal harmonic textures brilliantly maintain the listener's attention. Having built up into some very majestic full orchestral moments, the music eventually subsides to its simple textural beginnings.

Like Symphony No. 1, the first movement of the two-movement Symphony No. 4 (2001) begins very low and soft, this time using contrabassoon and low brass sounds as a backing drone for voices singing the familiar falling semitone motif. A similar process is used as the choral forces develop the motif into longer repetitive melodic ideas against the drone. In this movement, however, the music moves slowly away from its austere beginnings into a kind of sparkling energetic orchestral embellishment of the static drone accompaniment which underpins the chanting of the names of the constellations. Rather than being invited to meditate on the beauty of serene slow-moving music we are now, over a period of four and a half minutes, compelled to focus on a rainbow of rapidly changing vibrant timbres within the confines of a single chordal area.

The second movement is an entirely different affair although it begins in the same kind of way with the falling semitone motif over a drone and its gradual development into melodic figures with more notes. However the structuring of this movement involves much more frequent changes of contrasting sections and more textural variety such as

call-and-response between a cappella choral and orchestral elements. Basically these changes follow the introduction of the chanted text for each newly-introduced constellation name. Here we encounter the full range of Edwards' characteristic musical ideas and sounds.

Conductor Richard Mills and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra should be congratulated for deciding to record these important works and for doing such a good job. As a bonus the excellent CD booklet notes by Gordon Kerry quote a wonderfully poetic text written about the 'Star Chant' Symphony by astronomer Fred Watson.