

MICHAEL WHITICKER REDROR LIBRA

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REDROR:

The music of Michael Whiticker
an introduction by Anthony Gilbert

The passion and vigour of the compositions on this disc, their variety and breadth of reference and their technical brilliance are entirely symptomatic of Michael Whiticker's output as a whole. Seldom has the personality of a composer – the turn of mind, background, intellect and range of artistic sensibilities been so accurately mirrored in the music.

And what music! In the thirteen years that have elapsed since the first acknowledged compositions, around forty works have been produced, addressing an impressive range of instrumental forces and, significantly, of levels of technical ability. For Michael too, besides having an impressive and intimate knowledge of the world's contemporary music, is a committed educator. There has been a restless exploration of idiom, product of influences as different as Korean classical music and the European avant-garde. When we first met in 1978, Michael had recently moved from a successful career as a rock musician towards four years of Conservatorium study; the vigour and drive of the one influence, and the technical polish of the other, are both marked features of the

music. Indeed the technical command and professionalism are staggering. The trans-global exchanges he describes during the composing of Redror are typical. Whilst sharing his house in 1988 I was able personally to witness a similarly exhaustive preparation for the composition of *On Slanting Ground*.

But the music is not mere technique. It is in the nature of Michael's vision to require on-the-edge realisations. These works are no glib trundlings-out of easily learnt technical mannerisms, the stock-in-trade of the new complexity. Redror, for instance, is a blazingly-urgent pulling together of disparate musical energies into a compelling whole; *Ad Parnassum* has exquisite beauty of line and sonority; and *In Prison Air* is chilling – one of the most terrifying musical landscapes of our time that I know.

Michael Whiticker is one of Australia's urgent communicators. However the music may affect you, it will never bore you with cliché or empty pleasantries. Listen, take breath, then listen again; for in the music you find the man.

Anthony Gilbert, October 1995

DR ANTHONY GILBERT IS AN ENGLISH COMPOSER WHO IS CURRENTLY HEAD OF THE COMPOSITION DEPARTMENT AT THE ROYAL NORTHERN COLLEGE OF MUSIC IN MANCHESTER.

1 *Quidong* (1983)

for oboe/cor anglais, guitar and percussion 10'19"

Quidong was written in the European summer of 1983, a time in which I was living in Berlin. Although only having spent a semester enrolled as a student at the Musik Hochschule I was quite keen to work alone for a period, finding my own way amongst the myriad of possibilities on offer. (Upon reflection of course it is difficult to deny the ghosts of one's past waiting to haunt, even if surreptitiously.)

Much water has passed under the bridge since *Quidong* was composed, nevertheless it remains for me one of my most successful explorations of texture and dynamics. From the opening moments even with the cor anglais weaving its magic voice, it is the percussion which is the driving force behind this work, supplying the widest range of dynamics and colours imaginable.

I have always thought of *Quidong* as being a piece in which the listener is taken on a journey – albeit a rough one, full of unexpected twists and turns. Flung into the opening's bumpy, yet somehow focussed chaos, the listener is driven along a series of quite surprising byways (hardly as the crow

flies) and lifted finally to a point of reference, a concentration on one pitch. At this point, ideally, the listener is transported up and out of the music.

Quidong is an Australian Aboriginal word meaning 'a place of echo'. By the end of the work the listener is best able to appreciate their arrival at this 'place'

Quidong was commissioned by the Australian guitarist Ken Burns with the financial assistance of the then Music Board of the Australia Council.

It is dedicated to Justine Wilkinson.

2 Redror (1989)

for alto sax and percussion 10'38"

Redror, as the title suggests, is a gutsy piece which makes few compromises to beauty in the traditional sense.

It rips, snarls and snorts its way through a labyrinthine maze of saxophone noises and percussion cracks. Occasionally revealed is the presence of another world – a gentler pronouncement of the 13 note theme which has haunted the work from its opening minutes.

An intense period of research accompanied the composition of *Redror*. Utilising available texts and the knowledge of saxophonist/bass clarinettist Henri Bok, a number of cassettes and working scores were posted back and forth between

Sydney and Rotterdam. The study of multiphonics was of paramount importance to me at this time and although later performers confirmed my fear that each of them would play the given multiphonics differently, the essential effect of this piece – the consideration of unexplored timbres and emotional expression – remains.

I was also keen to open my expressive palette to include elements of jazz and improvisation. Improvisation however not in the traditional sense of there simply being an opportunity for the player to take a solo, but rather in allowing a point to be reached in the piece where the outcome of the musical process is such that only the performer's violent rejection of all attempts to contain the sounds any longer will suffice, resulting in an unrestrained, passionate outburst of blowing! To this end a small section of *Redror* is freely notated.

Redror is dedicated to Henri Bok and the Dutch ensemble, *Duo Contemporain* who commissioned it with the financial assistance of the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council.

3 In Prison Air (1988)

for guitar and tape 10'30"

The origins of *In Prison Air*, a work for guitar and computer-realised tape, can be found among a number of sources. Not atypically the original inspirations for this piece were put to one side as the music began to assume its own life. I found in the early rehearsals with Swedish guitarist Magnus Andersson that I was witnessing an unevenly weighted contest as the guitar fought to assert its identity, and it seemed in retrospect, even its right to exist. The emotional response from all those who heard the early 'workouts' was the same, and it is captured, poignantly, in a line taken from Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 'Bloom well in prison-air'.

The initial inspiration was an image of a massive expanse of water upon which I pictured a man afloat in a small vessel. Personally water has a quality of the eternal about it, a timelessness which I have linked to the ancient music of Korea, a particular interest of mine. Much of the music of this ancient culture has survived virtually unchanged since the 15th century, and this, as much as the sound of the music itself, suggests to me the ceaselessness and regularity of an endless stream, an eternal current of sound.

I wanted my piece to suggest that it might be part of a timeless continuum with no beginning and no end. Yet I wanted it also to be largely a virtuosic display for the soloist, a work with a sense of progression, a build up and a release of tension, with an introduction and climax, and all the dramatic qualities that I, as a composer, enjoy manipulating.

Two of the traditional musical forms of Korea, *Kasa*, a narrative song form, and *Sanjo*, a virtuosic solo instrumental form, were a strong influence on this composition. The latter, usually featuring the 12 string long-zither the *Kayago*, accompanied by the hour-glass drum, the *Changgo*, is an improvisatory six-sectioned form which gradually builds in speed and tension to a very fast final movement. *Kasa* on the other hand, is a virtuosic display by a male singer with accompaniment. It makes much use of repeated melodic figures, falsetto tones, trills, vibrati, microtonal ornamentation and glissandi. The use of these techniques is a feature of traditional Korean music and I was interested in incorporating them into my work, not merely as ornamentation but as integral elements of its style. The potential of the guitar is such that it was not difficult to take these techniques and utilise them. For example, I have re-tuned a number

of the strings of the guitar to take advantage of the possibilities that microtonal tuning offer.

Although the public reference to Korean music culture is intentional on my part, it is not done lightly. In principle I feel that it is more respectful to keep such responses on a personal level, being very conscious of the sacred nature of many traditional cultures, but on reflection it seems relevant in the light of the response people have had to *In Prison Air*, to reflect on Korea's long history of oppression, trapped as it is between the might of the Asian continent and the ambitions of the imperialists of Japan's history.

To these words of introduction I would like to add a dedication. The most direct inspiration for the composition of this work came from an extraordinarily gifted musician, Magnus Andersson to whom it is dedicated. I also hope that it might stand as a dedication to the living tradition of ancient Korean music, and not least as a reminder that many have languished, 'in prison air'.

In Prison Air was commissioned by Magnus Andersson with the financial assistance of the Swedish Academy of Music.

4 Ad Parnassum (1991)
for flute soloist, mandolin, guitar,
harp, percussion, violin, viola and
double bass 9'53"

Stored amongst the recesses of a composer's mind can generally be found the plans for a large number of works. Although knowing that they won't all be brought to fruition, the composer is usually content with the knowledge that they'll lie dormant, waiting to be brought out, dusted off when needed and slotted into some willing agenda.

The original idea for a piece for flute soloist and chamber ensemble, *Ad Parnassum* can be traced directly to an earlier work, *Ad Marginem* written in 1986. The short third movement of that piece, although successful for me in the context of a large four movement work, had always seemed a little anaemic, so I was pleased when the opportunity arose to reorchestrate it and develop it into a completely new and much larger work for the *Elision* ensemble.

Even under the influence of two very different constraints – one being a complete rethinking of the original material to suit *Elision's* unusual ensemble and the new shape I was casting it in as it was now to become a complete work in its own right, and the second being my 1991 composing

temperament which was vastly different to that of 1986 – *Ad Parnassum* is still in many ways a sister piece to the earlier concerto.

Both works take their titles from paintings by Paul Klee, and in the case of *Ad Marginem* this isn't a surprise given the musical references I found in his marine landscape. Klee was an amateur musician of some note and it has been suggested that in *Ad Parnassum* he was making a reference to the 1723 treatise on music theory and counterpoint of Johann Joseph Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum*. While this musical reference in itself is enough to interest me in Klee's painting, I am more fascinated by the constellation of colours and sense of contrast which he employs. With *Ad Parnassum* however, I made no attempt to attach any program to the music.

Ad Parnassum is dedicated to Daryl Buckley and *Elision* who commissioned it with the financial assistance of the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council.

5 Tulku (1982) for guitar 6'54"

Tulku is an Australian Aboriginal word meaning music for the whole tribe, music that can be enjoyed by all.

Although little known, (possibly because it is such an early work of mine), *Tulku* holds fond memories.

It was the first piece for which I was commissioned, and, as such is probably my first truly professional work. It was also the first I had written for what is (arguably) my own instrument – the guitar and includes, understandably, gestures particular to my own idiomatic 'rock' technique.

It also represented for me an acceptance that one can compose on an instrument as well as direct to paper, something I had been denying myself in the period leading up to its composition.

All that said and done I have never rated *Tulku* terribly highly as a piece of music and had to be convinced by *Libra* director Geoffrey Morris that it should find its way onto this disc. (As with all of Geoffrey's playing the skill and musicality he displays makes a persuasive argument in the music's favour.)

Tulku is dedicated to Ken Burns who commissioned it with the financial assistance of the then Music Board of the Australia Council.

6 On Slanting Ground (1988) for clarinet and tape 15'07"

The title of my work for clarinet and tape comes from the 1941 painting of surrealist Yves Tanguy who created a landscape awash with blues and peopled with lunar-like figures toying with spoon tools, cut with red, and standing statued as their shadows weave in and out of the 'floorground'.

The tape part of this piece was created in my home studio (as was *In Prison Air*) with what at the time was state of the art equipment – Roland D50 and Yamaha TX802 synthesizers with a Casio FZ1 sampler. The clarinet used as the basis of the sampled clarinet sounds in *On Slanting Ground* was played by Roslyn Dunlop.

Commissioned with the financial assistance of the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council, *On Slanting Ground* is dedicated to commissioner, clarinettist Roslyn Dunlop, whose enthusiasm and advice during the creation of the clarinet part was invaluable.

MICHAEL WHITICKER

Born in Gundagai, NSW, Michael Whiticker completed a degree in composition at the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney before undertaking two years of post-graduate study in Berlin. Following a substantial number of major commissions and residencies throughout the '80s with performing companies such as the Australian Opera, the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Elision, Synergy, the Seymour Group and the Song Company, in 1989 he was awarded a German Government DAAD scholarship and returned to Berlin where, amongst other things, he instigated 'The Antipodes', a festival of contemporary Australian music at which the music of twenty Australian composers was performed. This achievement was recognised by a 1991 Sounds Australian Award for an outstanding contribution to the presentation of Australian fine music overseas.

A Korean Government ICSK scholarship enabled him to spend three months of 1990 in Seoul studying traditional Korean music which was followed by a Berlin Senate commission allowing him to revisit that city later the same year.

Following a return to Australia in 1991 and the taking up of a residency with the Council of the City of Sydney, he spent 1992/93 as Composer-in-Residence with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. In 1994 he was appointed to the position of Lecturer in Composition in the newly formed Music Department of the University of Western Sydney, Nepean.

Further recognition of his work has included the awarding of scholarships and featured composer positions at the Darmstadt International Ferienkurse in Germany during the '80s. His compositions have won numerous awards in Australia and Germany; including the inaugural Fellowship of Australian Composers Award in 1989 and second prizes in the International Composition Competition of the city of Mönchengladbach, Germany in 1985 and the International Hambacher Prize in 1987. Recent successes include the selection of the flute concerto *Ad Marginem* and *Via Crucis, the Eleventh Station* as the Australian entries for the Paris Rostrum in 1991 and 1994 respectively.

LIBRA CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE

Flute/Alto/Piccolo: Suzanne Hornsby
Violin: Suzanne Simpson
Viola: Elizabeth O'Connor
Double Bass: Shannon Birchall
Percussion: Conrad Nilsson
Mandolin: Anthony King
Guitar: Geoffrey Morris
Harp: Jacinta Dennett
Clarinet/Conductor: Carl Rosman
Alto Saxophone: Tim O'Dwyer
Oboe/Cor Anglaise: Adam Yee

LIBRA Contemporary Ensemble was formed to create performance possibilities for a wide range of rarely-heard contemporary music. It was founded in 1991 by a group of fellow students of the Victorian College of the Arts and now encompasses an extensive performance base, with experience ranging from ABC symphony orchestras to local thrash bands.

Presenting its fourth major season in 1995, the ensemble is noted for its enthusiastic and well-polished performances, as well as for its support and recognition of young compositional talent. LIBRA has also brought to the attention of the

Australian public music of the finest composers working here and overseas. As well as Michael Whitticker, the group has presented new works by Chris Dench, David L Young, Newton Armstrong, Brenton Broadstock and others. In addition, it has introduced to Australia works by international composers including Brian Ferneyhough, Gyorgy Kurtag, Franco Donatoni, Richard Barrett, and Michael Finnissy.

Carl Rosman studied clarinet with Phillip Miechel from 1989 to 1993. He has performed widely as a soloist, most notably at the 1994 Darmstädter Ferienkurse, where he was awarded a Kranichsteiner Musikpreis for performance of works by Richard Barrett and Brian Ferneyhough, and as a performer in residence at the 1995 Akiyoshidai Festival in Japan. Carl has performed extensively in Europe, Japan and Australia.

Carl is a member of the LIBRA and ELISION ensembles and has also performed for Chamber Made Opera and the Melbourne Symphony. In addition to his activity as a clarinetist, Carl works regularly as a conductor of contemporary music, having appeared with ensembles including LIBRA, Klezcyn Theatre and Nachtmusique.

Geoffrey Morris is steadily developing a reputation as one of Australia's leading interpreters of the

guitar's twentieth-century repertoire. As a recipient of an International Study Grant from the Australia Council, and a Queens Trust Achievers Award, Geoffrey has studied with many leading figures in new music including Stefano Cardi in Rome and Magnus Andersson in Stockholm.

Since 1993 he has been a member of the ELISION new music group with whom he has toured nationally and internationally. Geoffrey Morris is the Artistic Director of LIBRA Contemporary Ensemble.

Suzanne Hornsby completed her Bachelor of Arts in Music at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1991. Her teachers include Mardi McSullea and Derek Jones. In addition to the many chamber works she has premiered with LIBRA, her repertoire includes some of the most demanding works written for the flute including pieces by Donatoni, Gerhard, Young and Ferneyhough.

Thanks to:

LIBRA Contemporary Ensemble, particularly Geoffrey Morris, Carl Rosman and Conrad Nilsson for wanting to take this project on and then performing at such an extraordinarily high level.

Jim Atkins for his complete dedication and engineering skills.

Stephen Snelleman for allowing this project to go ahead with the technical support of the ABC.

Craig Abercrombie for coming in at the end and adding those important final touches to the recordings.

David Hull for the inspired cover artwork.

Tim Marshall for the camera, computer and willing crew.

Martin Wright of Move for good advice.

Richard Toop for sharing a glass of red wine during the composition of some of these pieces.

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Music Department staff at UWS, Nepean – Michael Atherton, Diana Blom, Jim Franklin, Julian Knowles and Sally Macarthur for being the new kids on the block.

Melbourne Symphony management staff for their support

during 1992 and 1993 as the initial idea for this recording was taking shape.

The old Waverly Studios in East Caulfield. (This music was amongst the last recorded at this venue.)

Sound recordings used by kind permission of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

This disc is dedicated to my wife Justine Wilkinson as a small thank you for her undying encouragement and support.

REDROR

music of
Michael Whiticker

performed by
**Libra
Contemporary
Ensemble**

Recording and editing of these tracks was undertaken in January 1994.

Tracks 1, 2, 3, 4 & 6 were recorded at the Waverly Studios of the ABC in Melbourne. Track 5 was recorded at the ABC Studios in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. All tracks were edited in the ABC Editing Suite at the Melbourne Concert Hall.

Engineer for this project was Jim Atkins.

Production was by Michael Whiticker, Geoff Morris and Carl Rosman. Post production was done in the Music Department recording studios at the

University of Western Sydney, Nepean, in September and October 1995 by Craig Abercrombie.

Cover art was taken from 'Boiler', a painting by David Hull.

Cover design was by David Hull.

Photography and cover layout was by Tim Marshall and staff and students at CADRE in the Design Department of the Visual and Performing Arts Faculty at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean.

Booklet design by Martin Wright.

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