

Weering Review

Music Review: Arcko Symphonic Ensemble ...floating in the void...

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By Nicholas M Tolhurst

Arcko Symphonic Ensemble has thrown out the challenge once again to engage with the music of our time. In his programme notes to the two concerts of 19 and 20 October, Phillips quotes Gunther Schuller:

I have very little respect for conductors, or musicians for that matter, who don't actively engage with the music of their time!

Lots to engage with there. Is the challenge to engage with all the music of our time? And what is 'our time'? Gunther Schuller is a very appropriate man to cite. Still alive, he has been behind, before and across the music of our time, from Bach to Scott Joplin to jazz and back. He played French horn with Miles Davis—that is engaging with the music of his and our time.

Phillips put together an outstanding ensemble of 17 string players to present an Australian program of Barry Conyngham's *Sky* (1977), Roger Smalley's *Strung Out* (1987/88), Brendan Colbert's ...floating in the void... (rev 2005) and Lisa Illean's *Lethe* (2012/13).

The title of the concert was drawn from Colbert's work. The Colbert, Conyngham and Illean works were each alike in developing interest from imagistic sequences of colour without a unifying sense of pulse. Each composer attained a great sense of suspended beauty with quite different sound approaches.

Conyngham's *Sky* used a language familiar from Bartok, with lots of slides and shimmering bowings. Like his Colbert and Illean, Conyngham gets the most out of every type of bowing and fingering technique available to string players, e.g. playing barely on the string, or close up to the bridge, or with the back of the bow.

It is amazing what one violin can produce. Place 17 string instruments across a concert stage and write for each of them as soloists and the effects are out of this world. Colbert's ...*floating in the void*... is intended as a fairly other-worldly experience. In the program notes he invites us to listen with our eyes closed. It's hard to do that—watching each player take up his or her part and pass the music around the ensemble is too exciting.

Illean's *Lethe* was a premiere performance. Illean has really tuned into the liminality zeitgeist here. At times the sound was barely there and often it was less 'music', more sound effect; maybe for a doco on a submarine exploration of the sunken Titanic. At times you could hear old steel groaning under fathoms of pressure, especially when the double bass started detuning its lower string, with the peg creaking as the sound went down, down, down.

Talk string ensembles and it's hard not to talk film music, especially Bernard Hermann and his extraordinary score for Hitchcock's *Psycho*—all done with strings. I liked every piece in this concert, but I especially liked Smalley's *Strung Out*. A much more rhythmic piece than the other three, *Strung Out* was, at times downright funky and, like the other works, very ... hmm ... 'stringy, violiny, violery, cellish, double bassic'. Absolutely yummy. Yes, there were the paternal influences of Hermann (and, indeed, Jerry Goldsmith's score for the first *Planet of the Apes*) just as we could hear Bartok and Partch in the Conyngham, Colbert and Illean. But there is something apostolic about the way string ensemble composers take their point of departure from their predecessors. There's less of the anxiety of influence, more of 'can I borrow the car dad?' and going on to engage with existing repertoire to make something welcome and new.

I could spend my own time just engaging with music for strings alone, from any period, but a lifetime isn't long enough. So, plaudits to Phillips for this intensely satisfying concert—and to his performers too.

If you aren't a subscriber to Phillips' excellent Arcko concerts, well, look what you've been missing. So don't miss the next concert, coming up soon on November 2 at the Northcote Town Hall, with the cool and gorgeous Joy Lee as guest pianist.

The concert is called *X-ray baby!* It promises to be different in every way to the string concert just gone, except you will still get Timothy Phillips conducting a band of the best musicians in town, which means world class performances of totally engaging music. Should be a hot night.