

A Natural Way - interview with Ross Edwards

Ross Edwards' music may lead us from a state of meditation to a state of effervescence or buoyancy of mind. His music is by turns contemplative ('sacred') or kinetic, as when the dancing impulses of his famous *maninya* style kick in. But he's breaking out of the concert hall mindset, reaching towards a ritual which may help repair our society.

It wasn't always so. Like many others of his generation, Ross started out as a High Art *post-Webern* angry young man. As he once said:

The turning point in my early life as a composer took place in a dank Notting Hill basement towards the end of 1970. I was... living on black coffee ...and smoking gauloises...I suddenly found myself questioning the validity of this course of self-destruction and at the same time that of 'accredited' post-war European music. What ultimately was the point of all those neurotic convulsions so meticulously ordered?¹

On his return to Australia he wrote music that reflected a new tranquility. *Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist* (1973) counterpoised sounds and silence. It was written in a room opening out onto bushland as Ross gradually became sensitive to the sounds and rhythms of the natural world outside. In the 1980s Ross came up with a new, more dance-like style, still based on the periodic sounds of nature, which he called *maninya* after a nonsense word he had invented to vocalise his rhythms. "I'd like to affect audiences physically as well as psychically," he says explaining the dance impulse in this music. "But I wouldn't want them to jump into the aisles." Then he adds in his endearing undogmatic way. "Well, as long as it was spontaneous that would be fine..."

Many of Edwards' pieces now juxtapose *maninya* with 'sacred' style. Symphony No.1 *Da pacem Domine* (1992) however, is almost totally contemplative. Some have compared it to Górecki's Third Symphony. *White Ghost Dancing* (1999) is almost totally *maninya*, birdlike fragments of melody and ideas, perfectly pointed, but cohering in some underlying logic, as in nature. Ross sees similar purposes between the *maninya* and sacred styles. *Maninya* is the sacred style speeded up. Ross also calls it dance-chant. Its purpose also is to lift us up in a more spiritual way, to lighten and enlighten us, if you like.

On paper you might expect Ross's music to be the very pointillism the young man rejected, but that isn't the way Ross works. "Pointillists to me tried a sort of stylistic thing where everything is fragmented into little bits. My bits are meant to cohere, and all to co-exist. You've got a fragment of birdsong, frogs co-existing with things which imply other cultures fleetingly – it's almost like a sort of a chameleon-like surface where everything is constantly changing and interacting, bits of plainsong, aboriginal chant and all these different elements. In a way it's a microcosm for a society such as ours, made up of all sorts of different elements, different cultures all working themselves out."

¹ Edwards, Ross 'Reflections' *Transforming: Art: the arts and self-knowledge* (ed. Nigel Hoffman) 4.1 (1992): 28-30, Springwood, NSW

Birdsong? Hmm. Does he sense a relationship with Messiaen, the 20th century French composer who used birdsong to symbolise ecstasy and spiritual ardour? “I’ve never gone out and collected environmental sounds or birdsong the way he does,” he says. “Everything that happens with me is entirely spontaneous, I let the piece grow and monitor it, trying to find it for myself, and yet often I’ve found that it’s relating back to experiences I’ve had in the past.”

He says that while composing his third symphony, *Mater magna* “the piece took me by surprise repeatedly.” At the time of our interview he was working on an oboe concerto for Diana Doherty. “I’ve got as far as the Andante. Diana is sort of essence of wild bird...and the oboe is a sort of a beak.” I asked him if he had felt the need to characterise Diana in order to gain entrée to the conventional concerto form. “No, I found it happening you see. Where I’ve been conceiving the oboe concerto, in the Blue Mountains, I’d have the experience of writing something and then hearing a bird outside and realise that’s where it’s probably come from.” It was some time before he realised that the concerto itself had a sort of ‘birdness’.

Music drawing on the natural world? Where does Ross fit with classical music tradition? In the 1970s Ross Edwards sat in a London flat no doubt aspiring to make a contribution to the development of a technical language. His take on Western tradition may now seem refreshing (“I think Beethoven was the greatest western dance composer.”) But long ago he stopped writing music for angst-ridden aesthetes concerned only with the artful elaboration of music for music’s sake. If he can heal; if he can reconcile us, black and white, to the pressing environmental and spiritual needs of this land he will be doing his job. He quotes the Latin hymn to the Virgin Mary in Symphony No.3 because “we’ve suppressed the feminine side and that enables us to log forests.” But *White Ghost Dancing* also speaks of the possibility that we can become as closely attuned to the environment as aboriginal Australians. I tell him about Tim Flannery’s Australia Day address in which Flannery predicted that we would all eventually share the experience of being shaped by our environment. “I hope so,” he says, “because it’s the only hope we’ve got.” And then this most instinctual composer adds: “If we go on resisting...”

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