Shadows and Silhouettes: new piano compositions celebrating a Chinese-Western confluence

Antonietta Loffredo, piano
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Reviewed by Alistair Noble, December 1st, 2014

This unusual CD brings together recent works by eleven Australian and international composers under the banner of 'Chinese-Western confluence', performed by Italian pianist Antonietta Loffredo.

This CD is genuinely fascinating on a number of levels, and includes several noteworthy pieces—but part of the fascination lies in the range of awkwardness and peculiarity in the varied notions of Chineseness and Western-ness expressed here. Australia has a long and rich history of Chinese settlement, but in the 19th century (and well into the 20th century), many white Australians found that they were incapable of relating to the Chinese except in terms of cartoonish stereotypes. Despite this, a few rare individuals were more seriously engaged with trying to communicate a mutual understanding and even (in places like Bendigo) learning to speak Chinese.

The musical voices represented on this CD are rather like a family gathering in a mixed-culture family (a very common situation in contemporary Australia). One hopes that the embarrassing uncle won't say something terribly inappropriate; other family members are naively romantic about the 'other' culture and indulge sentimentality and kitsch; some are mysteriously indifferent, while a few have a achieved a genuine and deep understanding.
Two pieces stand out immediately and at first listening, Bruce Crossman's *Q/Colour From Hidden Resonances* (2010) combines some attention-grabbing sounds and textures with a jazz-influenced sense of harmony and motivic development. This is only outdone by Francesco Schweizer's wonderful *Lakes Resting One on the Other* (2011), a work of beautiful sonorities and elegant simplicity. Schweizer really does seem to touch upon some form of Asian aesthetic without any cheap tricks, and the piece gradually focuses itself sensitively and poetically around a compelling repeated note on a muted/damped string: like morse code, it seems to be a text one might almost translate.

Many of the other pieces fall into a curiously predictable spectrum between pleasant pentatonic naivety and grotesque vintage chinoiserie, and this seems a significant reminder of the ambivalence of Chinese-Western cultural relations in general and also of how little has changed in many ways since the 19th century.

Michael Hannan does rise somewhat above this with *Birds Calling in Cloud Valley*, in which one imagines Keith Jarrett meeting Debussy in a pentatonic fog at Mullumbimby; quite lovely, as far as it goes. Caroline Szeto's *Moon Rhyme* overcomes an awkward opening gambit to build up into a quite impressive study in kinetic energies. Valerie Ross's *Ragasenlo*, on the other hand, is a bizarre set of pieces supposedly blending Indian ragas with Indonesian gamelan scales. There are a few brief moments of real beauty but overall it is hard to grasp what these pieces are aiming to achieve or indeed why they are on this CD. Most startling, are the utterly eccentric *Tre Contrappunti* by Massimo Priori: three little wandering counterpoint studies that are so weird they are almost good.

The Italian pianist, Antonietta Loffredo, plays rather well. Some awkward moments here and there betray a slightly 'on the surface' tone-quality—but to be fair, she understandably responds with greater pianistic imagination to the more musically interesting works (the Crossman and Schweizer pieces are especially good). A more flattering recorded sound, with greater depth and detail, would also have made the pianist's task easier. On balance, this is an interesting and enjoyable release and the very good pieces in the collection more than make up for any weaker ones.