

Songbirds: Ensemble Offspring

(works by Loader, Dean, Stanley, Wilcox, Coelho, Brophy, Moore)

Ensemble Offspring, the important Australian new music group based in Sydney, has been marking its 25th anniversary during 2020. A disastrous year for all of us, of course. For the group a major tour had to be cancelled, but they have, nevertheless, issued the celebratory album *Songbirds* and they do have a concert in November. *Great Southern Nights* is a New South Wales Government initiated series, in collaboration with other music and arts organisations, featuring over 1,000 live music events during the month, 'to stimulate the revival of the live music and entertainment sectors and in turn the visitor economy in the recovery phase of COVID-19', as their promotional blurb tells us. As I write this review on a chilly and misty 5 November the view of these uplifting antipodean activities is, it goes without saying, a generous spirited one but, as the UK goes into its second national lockdown today, weighed down by a weariness and real concern at the state of the arts here by comparison – particularly the plight of freelancers. This album, however, makes for a welcome listen: an injection of warmth and colour with new and recent pieces influenced by, and depicting, birdsong and nature all expertly played with energy and commitment.

Ensemble Offspring are a flexible *Pierrot Lunaire* line-up group: their November *Southern Nights* concert includes classics from Xenakis and Saariaho, Kate Moore's *Blackbird Song* from this album, as well as world premieres from Gerard Brophy and our own Christopher Fox. This *Songbirds* album uses just three players from the group: the ensemble's percussionist and director Claire Edwardes, flautist Lamorna Nightingale and clarinettist Jason Noble, and has a mix of solos, duos and trios plus some pieces with backing tracks and, in Tristan Coelho's *Daybreak*, live electronics.

Many of the pieces, as you would expect from the commission brief or album concept, rework birdsong in various ways. Coelho's work for solo flute uses transcribed birdsong in fragments over an ambient backdrop building to a layered multiflute evocation of the dawn chorus. Both of the Hollis Taylor and Jon Rose co-composed pieces use field recordings of a pied butcherbird: *Bitter Springs Creek 2014* for trio and *Owen Springs Reserve 2014* with solo vibraphone both use the instruments to sing with and imitate the bird. Brett Dean's very short *Notes from the Twittersphere* does birdy things for solo piccolo, cleanly and clearly chirped by the appropriately named Lamorna Nightingale. Jane Stanley's also very short *Desert Rose* is a bird-less duo, the first of a suite of 'character' pieces inspired by Australian wildflowers – calm and ruminative with undulating vibraphone and, as Stanley says in the programme note, 'breeze-like ... flute ... depicting the innate stillness of the desert'.

Two of the four trio works, Gerard Brophy's three movement *Beautiful Birds* and Fiona Loader's *Lorikeet Corroboree* (you will find a live performance of this on YouTube), are enjoyable, upbeat, lighter pieces (Loader has fun throwing in some bird-inspired musical quotes you will recognise) that work well and don't outstay their welcome. Felicity Wilcox's *People of This Place* for solo bass clarinet was written for, and in collaboration with, Jason Noble and uses some extended techniques including multiphonics. It opens with low, split

fundamentals and some key clicks but soon moves into lyrical, tonal, free-wheeling melodic lines which, as Wilcox says, 'reflect the echoes of nature'. Other rhythmic and quasi-didgeridooesque phrases, among many colourful moments in this piece, are inspired by the Gadigal people, the indigenous 'traditional owners of the land' – all of which makes up a richly expressive work beautifully played by Noble. The final piece on the album, Kate Moore's *Blackbird Song*, despite its title, is not overtly bird-like. Moore, characteristically, plays with subtly minimal falling patterns, mostly three-note and three-phrase, sometimes foreshortened, all within *piano* and *mezzopiano*, focussed and obsessive in pitch with an acute ear for combining alto flute, bass clarinet and vibraphone in an homogeneous single sonority. This is an enjoyable album and a fine example of the ensemble's work which, one hopes, will continue until at least the next significant anniversary.

Roger Heaton

ABC Classic, 0028948193615

Published 10 March 2021 by Cambridge University Press