
BOOK REVIEW

Elliott Gyger. *The Music of Nigel Butterley*

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Reviewed by Timothy McKenry

Published to coincide with the eightieth birthday of the composer, Elliott Gyger's *The Music of Nigel Butterley* represents a significant contribution to the analytical writing that surrounds contemporary Australian concert music. The work forms part of the 'Australian Composers' series presented by the new scholarly publisher Wildbird Music, the aim of which is to reveal the creative processes that sit behind various important Australian composers' idiosyncratic styles. In eschewing biography in favour of rigorous musical analysis, the series is targeting a highly educated readership. Gyger's book does include a brief note explaining the use of musical examples and terminology in the text, but an in-depth knowledge of serial process, set theory and the nomenclature surrounding modernist musical practices is nevertheless a prerequisite to effectively engaging with the text. That being said, the tone of the work is appealing and successfully avoids dry analytical monotony. Gyger achieves this via regular asides that function to position Butterley's work in the broader discourse surrounding contemporary concert music, and by offering a reading of the significance of Butterley's output.

Rather than dealing with Butterley's works strictly chronologically, Gyger considers his output by its instrumentation, and works systematically through his solo and chamber repertoire, his orchestral and choral works, and finally his vocal compositions. An introduction, which provides an overview of Butterley's career and describes the development of his compositional voice, functions to contextualise the analysis that then populates the book. Through the course of the various analyses Gyger does not attempt to construct a large-scale narrative to definitively 'explain' the music of Nigel Butterley, but instead allows a picture of his practice to emerge. From a sustained engagement with serial technique, to complex

issues of structure, to the emergence of what Gyger calls a 'latent lyricism' (p. 172), Butterley is revealed as a thoughtful, understated and sometimes misunderstood composer who through the course of his career has refined his compositional practice and made a lasting contribution to Australian music.

Gyger deals with every work that Butterley has so far composed, and his analyses range from a cursory consideration of issues of, for example, pitch determination in the case of small-scale pieces, to sustained essays examining a broad range of factors evident in Butterley's major works. Works including *Laudes* (1963), *In the Head the Fire* (1966), *Sometimes with One I Love* (1976), *Lawrence Hargrave Flying Alone* (1988), *From Sorrowing Earth* (1991) and *Spell of Creation* (2000) are identified by Gyger as creative watersheds that represent pivotal points in Butterley's career. Though Gyger does not seek to be a biographer, he nevertheless divides Butterley's career into periods punctuated by these major works. *Laudes* and *In the Head the Fire* are representative of an early Modernist period; the mixed ensemble composition for soprano, baritone and male speaker *Sometimes with One I Love* heralds what Gyger refers to as Butterley's mature style or 'Whitman period' where lyricism and technical eclecticism underpin an interest in Whitman's poetry; and the major work for choir and orchestra *Spell of Creation* is identified as emblematic of a 'refined late period' (p. 5) where Butterley draws on and synthesises materials from across his career.

The Music of Nigel Butterley provides scholars of Australian music with an invaluable resource that functions to contextualise, analyse and even advocate for Butterley's music. The analysis of each work is accompanied by information related to the circumstances of its commissioning, the intertextuality that links Butterley to poets such as Whitman and Kathleen Raine, and often charming vignettes that add colour to Gyger's discussions of the technical processes evident in Butterley's output. Gyger's love of Butterley's music is clear from the rhetoric that frames his analyses. However, he studiously avoids hyperbole: when Butterley's music is lauded, the praise arises from clearly observable musical phenomena. For example, in his appraisal of Butterley's *Explorations*, a work for piano and orchestra written in 1970 to commemorate the bicentenary of Captain Cook's arrival at Botany Bay, Gyger suggests the entry of the piano part near the beginning of the piece is 'one of the most audacious passages in all Australian music' (p. 103). The superlative seems exaggerated until the piano entry—a series of 114 simultaneities that gradually change under a reiterated pedal note—is contextualised as a musical evocation of the 'prosaic ... drudgery involved in charting an unknown continent' (p. 104).

Gyger's exegesis of the aesthetic and structure of Butterley's only opera *Lawrence Hargraves Flying Alone* is particularly enlightening. Gyger calls the work a 'portrait opera' and identifies three themes that run through the work: Hargraves's achievements as an aviator, ethical issues surrounding scientific endeavour, and alienation and isolation in Hargraves's personal life. In addition to revealing Butterley's idiosyncratic scheme for pitch determination in the work—a cryptographic alphabet that musically encodes significant words and phrases in the motivic material of the opera—Gyger also charts the interaction of these motives to reveal the structural symmetry of the work across its two acts. The musical examples that accompany the analysis of the opera, and indeed all the analyses in the book, are well conceived, clear and effectively elucidate the text.

Gyger's book is highly instructive to composers and musicologists alike. As the discourse surrounding contemporary Australian concert music moves away from tedious discussions framed almost exclusively by a questionable modern/postmodern binary that favours ideology over repertoire and politics over practice, the book is a template for a type of music research that has the capacity to reveal much about the people and practices of Australia's musical present and recent past. Some readers may criticise Gyger's reticence to overtly interrogate the modes of analysis he employs, but he adopts internationally-accepted nomenclature and uses well-trodden analytical methodology. Furthermore, his use of analysis never oversteps itself: it seeks to reveal compositional process and elucidate the internal workings of Butterley's *oeuvre*; it never makes claims beyond its power. The work is a fitting tribute to an important Australian composer whose understated temperament and enigmatic, reserved aesthetic has perhaps, as Gyger suggests, resulted in a lower profile than some of his contemporaries.

About the Reviewer

Timothy McKenry is a professor of music at the Australian Catholic University whose research interests include issues of ethics in music, Australian art music and cultural identity, music pedagogy and music theory. Recent research projects include studies of the pedagogical inheritance that informs the teaching of composition in Australian secondary and tertiary institutions, a major survey of contemporary Australian opera and a study of the ethical practices that inform music practice in Australia.



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