

Music for Moira Jarvis, Open Studio 2017

Origin of the CD

Since 2010 Moira had asked me to provide music for her Open Studio weeks in September at the Canizzaro Park Studios. In the past we had used music which I had produced in the previous year. But this time Moira asked me to produce something longer, which didn't break off after four to five minutes. I also thought it was a good opportunity to produce music specifically created to go with the art works. We had done this on various other occasions, but never for the Open Studio event. Sadly, this was our last collaboration, because Moira died, unexpectedly, in June 2018.

Content of the CD

The original result was what I have called *Painting Music*. I chose the title because Moira found that the Open Music CDs are not only valuable at the time, but were also a source which she liked to play when actually at work.

However, we had recently begun what was to have been a project lasting over two to three years about the Fens, where both she and my wife Frances grew up. This had resulted in Frances producing several poems inspired by the topic. So I took *Painting Music* and modified it to be a vehicle for the poems. This piece I called *Mow Fen*, because this was where Frances lived until she left home.

There is an interesting contrast, which is reflected in the covers of this CD.

Moira and I had been most interested in the original wild state of the Fens, in the period before the great drainages by Vermuyden in the 17th century. This can only really be seen now at Wicken Fen and to a lesser at Flag Fen, where one of the photos was taken.

By contrast, even in summer the modern fens are bare and featureless, and in winter are simply ploughed fields, so that there is not even the green of agricultural use. (I should note that both Moira and Frances nevertheless, speak often of the great sense of vast space, and the wonderful skies and sunsets which can be seen).

The music

This was a fascinating project, which increasingly presented challenges. My first aim in *Painting Music* was to provide music which was not meant to be listened to in the way which applies to my other work. Instead the music was to be subordinate, to create an ambience for the viewing of the pictures. I decided from the outset that I was not going to use the typical filmic approach – big orchestral, sounds and so on. Instead I should use the latest version of the African American tradition which I have adopted, based on Dance and electronic music.

But such music is typically very positive and strongly projected. So the challenge was to be a backcloth to the experience, to be restrained and delicate. It then became clear that this should be an analogy to the paintings, which are in one sense restricted in the range of images, so that the viewer's attention is focussed on the detail and variety of approach – some are very precise, others very loose. I have tried to mirror this in the music.

I decided from the outset to record and use natural sounds, wind, water, the rustling of rushes, birdsong and so on. But taking my cue Hildegard Westercamp's *Vancouver English Bay Soundwalk*, in which Nature itself provides the music – or sound experience if you prefer - I decided that these sounds should not be just a bit of atmosphere. Instead they, and especially the birds should also be seen as "instruments" which make their contribution, and contrast with the various sounds which the composer creates.

There was a further discovery. In my earlier pieces tension has often been generated by the use of dissonances, as well, of course, by volume and distortion. But in this case these resources were inappropriate. However, it became clear that in a music which is in many ways very regular and predictable, the effect of even lightly performed irregularities of time or of volume was effective, and even disturbing. This latter element fits well with an element I have often found in Moira's paintings.

As I worked on the pieces a further dimension revealed itself. Because the music does not project, because it is not driven by strong themes and riffs, the music at first seemed rather without event and not grabbing. But I found at the end of a listening that I felt that I had been through an experience, and that something had happened. In this respect it has turned

out to be like *Labyrinth* on the CD *Stars Blindly Run*, which is music which sets out to draw the listener in, to get them to immerse themselves in the gentle flow of time and aural events, and so to go through a subtle journey, which changes your state of mind. It is music of meditation and a calm state, rather than of rhetorical flourish and excitement. So I recommend the listener to relax, perhaps have a glass of wine, and let the music take you into a new state.

Mow Fen suggested various ideas. My starting point was to edit *Painting Music*, to allow the words to come through. So I was using the same piece but differently. In this I am in good company, since, though I am not sure that Dance music musicians would see this as a remix, the structure and nearly all the elements are the same for both pieces.

Next, unlike music to provide ambience for an exhibition of paintings, words do of course project, and so the music should reflect this. In addition, these words, though looking back to the themes which underlie *Painting Music*, are about the modern fens. Thus it was appropriate to bring out more the potential intensity of the music, which had been downplayed in *Painting Music*.

There are a small number of new melodic elements, made possible by the fact that our vowels are pitched. I decided not to “clean these up” too much, but to keep some of the pitch drift which happens in speech, but is not normally noticeably. This gives a mournful, even bleak effect.

I shall largely let the words, given below, speak for themselves. I knew them well already, of course, but working on them made me aware of nuances and undertones which I hope I have brought out. Not least were details such as an occasional shift of internally imagined voice, and connections between the poems (for instance, between the Venus pair and the others) which are not obvious at first. They are not explicitly stated, but one comes to sense the links, emerging from below, as it were. Since this is not a literary essay, I will leave it there and present the poems.

EPILOGUE

In the land of lost opportunities
where occasions didn't arise
resides a little part of me,
that part that never dies.
Soul and body, body and soul -
an unrequited spirit that lies
untouched beneath the wide fen skies.

THERE AND BACK

If you take the road to nowhere
you must go back the way you came,
no sidetracks there or byways –
all distant prospects appear the same.....

no landmarks or topography,
no flora but willow and sedge,
nothing to follow but the onward path
stretching away from the naked eye,
no sound but the wind through the reeds in the marsh,
no other destination but the sky.

HESPEROS

A new moon and Venus in formal alignment
stark against a winter sky,
the still, frosty twilight enhances their brightness,
no moisture or wind blur their bold symmetry.

As if by enchantment, suddenly they appear –
the pale yellow crescent, the white evening star -
emblems of the heavens as seen from afar,
reigning in splendour alone at this hour,
no other bodies mar their hemisphere.

HEOSPHOROS (Dawn Bringer)

Outshining other planets but never rising high,
glimpsed in the West at nightfall then reappears in the Eastern sky,
seeming close though far away,
ephemeral yet eternal, it heralds the break of day.

A beacon to those who long for the dawn
Hail Venus! Star of the morn!