

Irrelevant title, but NZ maturity confirmed



> *Landscapes*: New Zealand orchestral music; NZSO cond. Kenneth Young; Morrison Trust CD MMT 2037.

By Bryan James

Is our landscape — interior and exterior — predominantly sombre, even gloomy? It's a valid question given the implied theme of the "Landscapes" title of this fine new recording by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

To what extent is the listener entitled to draw conclusions from the musical selection, based on the

supposed theme? Frankly, I think the title is completely irrelevant, and it is pretty obvious from the composers' own comments that if there was any landscape involved in their inspiration, it was of the interior kind.

There is one very familiar work: *Drysdale Overture* by Douglas Lilburn, still sounding reasonably fresh 65 years on from its composition, but does it really pretend to be some sort of musical representation of the Lilburn family's sheep station? His own notes suggest nostalgia was a principal motive for it, nostalgia with hints of sunshine, for it was written in the depths of a London winter.

Lyell Cresswell's *Dancing on a Volcano*, (1996) is also by an expatriate, who notes that his work is about singing and dancing around the fault line "between emotion and intellect".

Hobart-based Maria Grenfell wrote *Stealing Tutunui* in 2000,



and based it on her interpretation of a Maori myth, which might, I suppose, have something to do with the cultural "landscape".

Similarly, David Hamilton's *Elysian Fields* (1998) is not about our own Elysian fields,

wherever they might be, but is instead a technical tour de force based on an inverted variation of the hymn *Fairest Lord Jesus*.

The concept of a visual landscape expressed musically comes closest in Martin Lodge's brilliant *Hinterland* (1998), in which the geographical interior of the central North Island is graphically recalled in the form of an elegy on the human spiritual condition. With this music's vivid orchestration we might easily conjure up the green desert of the pine forests, the vast depths of Lake Taupo, the boiling mud of Rotorua and the plateau's volcanos.

Of Memory (1998), by Ross Harris, is the longest work on this generous (71 minutes) recording,

and continues the overwhelmingly reflective, dark mood of the others.

Is this selection saying something to us about the true nature of the archetypical "Kiwi" spirit? I found it notable that the words "haunt", "memory", and "nostalgia" appear in the composers' own references to their works, as if the dispirited past needs excoriating before we can celebrate a joyful present.

The presence of joyfulness in the final choice might be seen as confirmation of this, for in Anthony Ritchie's *Yet Another Poem of Spring* there is deliberately "a sense of excitement and affirmation", where the composer has set out to recall the beauty of a Christchurch spring to mark the ending of a personal crisis that caused great anguish.

This disc may contain music whose darker threads will not be to everyone's taste, but I think it confirms the developing maturity of our composers, and the international quality of their work. The Morrison Trust continues its high recording standards, and the orchestra sounds in good form.