

ROD BISS

THREE CDs of New Zealand music: how different they all are, yet all with their own validity

Christopher Blake's music is severe, monumental, and always tells the listener his feelings about some other art-work or world event. His only symphony, *The Islands*, takes its title and sombre mood from three sonnets by Charles

Brasch, in particular the two lines: "Always, in these islands, meeting and parting/ Shake us, making tremulous the salt-rimmed air." Blake does not set the words, but reacts to them; his music is restless and deliberately disturbing; the tonalities and the melodies which are often based on scales stretch key centres as though they were trying to break free.

It is the cultural influences of Brasch's "meeting and parting" that Blake seems concerned with; he transplanted composing techniques from Britain of the 1960s and '70s, but the soul of the symphony is descended from Lilburn's *Landfall in Unknown Seas*. Perhaps the symphony in New Zealand is now an outdated form, but it suits Blake's expansive style well, heard at its finest in the excitements and logic of the symphony's first movement.

The three tone poems that complete the disc make their points successfully but in these smaller canvasses Blake's gestures seem more predictable; he is a composer who needs space.

Three's company



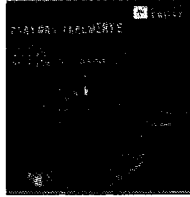
CHRISTOPHER BLAKE
The Islands and other works
NZSO, Vis, Taddei, Walsh
(Atoll ACD 403)
The last great New Zealand symphony?
★★★★



HELEN FISHER
Taku Wana, The Wheel Turns
Various performers
(Atoll ACD 203)
Gentle and undemanding
★★★

HELEN Fisher's music is gentle, respectful to its sources, and undemanding of the listener. *Taku Wana - The Enduring Spirit* started life as a music drama which was performed at the Nelson School of Music in May 1998. It presents a Maori and a Pakeha woman's perspective of the events surrounding the Wairau tragedy of 1843. What is striking is that instead of anger the poems express a longing for a resolution: "Even though there may be two paths, / Two paths have begun from one starting point and will merge somewhere."

The music drama was a critical success, seen as



JOHN PSATHAS
Fragments; Stephen Gosling,
Jeremy Fitzsimons, NZ String
Quartet (Trust MMT2047)
You can't possibly afford to be without this
★★★★ 1/2

a totally New Zealand subject using New Zealand materials, but as a concert work, recorded here on disc, the cumulative effect becomes too gentle, soothing and euphonious. I longed for a discord, a rhythm, a musical event, a conflict between Maori and European musical styles to catch my attention and drive the music forward.

It is, however, lovingly performed by April-Marie Neho and Linden Loader (mezzos), the Nevine String Quartet, and has magnificent contributions from Richard Nunns on several Maori instruments.

JOHN Psathas's music is known for its rhythms and brilliant effectiveness. And it's more as well; the opening track, "Fragment", in effect a short prelude, is harmonic, quiet and wistfully makes the point that Psathas is a composer of many talents and moods. In the Piano Quintet (tracks 3-5), the longest work on the disc, Psathas reveals himself as an extended thinker, an almost classical composer who loves and understands jazz and who can extract new and wonderful sounds from a string quartet.

In the 2000 New Zealand Festival the premiere of this piece was one of the most memorable events. Psathas writes music that is very much of now; it's beautiful, fashionable, successful, and though it is in no sense crossover, it is music that could well appeal to rock devotees. He is superbly served by Stephen Gosling on piano, the amazing percussionist Jeremy Fitzsimons and the New Zealand String Quartet enjoying themselves as never before. This is a CD you cannot possibly afford to be without.

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