

**DART** Triptych.1 Four Short Songs.2 Traceries.3 Birdtalk.4 Of heaven and earth5 • 1–3, 5Daniel Herscovitch, 1Clemens Leske (pn); 3Geoffrey Gartner (vc); 5Sally Walker (fl, picc); 4Alison Pratt (mmb); 5Brad Gill (perc); 2, 5Jenny Duck-Chong (sop) • TOCCATA 0592 (76:25 📖)

It is always a joy to discover composers who have something substantive to say. One such is Peter Dart, born in Sydney in 1953. It is fair to describe him as a late bloomer: Although a composer in his early years (and a student of Peter Sculthorpe and Don Banks), he turned to performance on the clarinet and then to head of music at a school in Sydney. After leaving teaching to join the ministry, Dart returned to composition, taking up an unfinished opera on the Faust legend, and writing other pieces that might more realistically enjoy performance. This is just the sort of composer the Toccata label would champion, then.

The **Triptych** for two pianos of 2011 is itself substantial, lasting some 26 minutes. The three movements are described by the composer as “sound-pictures inspired by Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey.” The piece is stunning. Dart has a language all of his own. This is particularly evident in the central movement (entitled “Circles”; a reference to the dancing circles on the shield of Achilles). The finale has a sort of jittery rhythm at its heart, perhaps the potential energy of the sea (it is called “Poseidon”), and includes a representation of an earthquake. Perhaps most impressive is the quiet of “Sirens”: high up, a piano sings seductively. We hear their more vicious side, too. The performance is brilliant, with two pianos providing all of the color one could ever want in this performance by David Herscovitch and Clemens Leske (seasoned performers of this score).

The **Four Short Songs** for mezzo and piano of 2017 set lyric poems by William Carlos Williams. This recording actually represents their first performance; the premiere was sadly cancelled (delayed only, one hopes) by the COVID pandemic. The texts are light and frivolous: a written apology for purloining a piece of fruit, a cat creeping around a kitchen cupboard, a locust tree in flower, a boy playing with a ball. Duck-Chong and Herscovitch capture the spirit of the writing perfectly: light, scampering piano lines (occasionally nodding to Ligeti, perhaps). The pieces are over before one knows it (total duration is just over four minutes).

The solo cello opening to the first movement of **Traceries** for cello and piano (2016) takes us to another, more reflective, world. Performed here by the musicians it was written for (cellist Geoffrey Gartner and pianist Daniel Herscovitch), the first movement is ingenious, comprising a solo cello cantilena which when repeated is garnished with piano arabesques. A fugue seems the ideal contrast (a “linear tracery,” if you will). Blues and octatonicism fuse in a remarkable celebration of the form, with an astonishingly vibrant performance from Gartner and Herscovitch positively bringing the movement to technicolor life. The third movement is entitled “Tarantella,” but initially does not seem like it: Instead, it sounds like a sort of Peter Dart Night Music, with chirrupings and grumblings heard in short bursts. But then the tarantella proper is launched. Inspired by Louis de Bernières’s description of the 1953 Greek earthquake in

Captain Corelli's Mandolin, that opening section, then, is the calm before the storm (or in this case, earthquake). The two performers are clearly well known to each other as they play as one (there are many tricky corners of ensemble here); we hear that rapport in the wonderfully quirky Samba that follows before the finale, a Lullaby inspired by the birth of the composer's granddaughter and also by lines from Hamlet, gently swinging its way, inviting us to slumber.

Marimbist Alison Pratt is multi-tracked in **Birdtalk** for two marimbas and pre-recorded sounds (2018). The composer says of the piece that "no meaning is intended, only enjoyment," and it is certainly a piece to kick back and let go; but again, one cannot ignore the performance skills, and Alison Pratt is magnificent.

Finally, there comes of **heaven and earth** for mezzo, flute, percussion, and piano (2020). There seems to be an extra layer of joy in creation here, as if the four texts by E. E. Cummings found particular resonance with Dart. Perhaps most impressive is the interior world of the second song, "from spiraling ecstatically," a meditation on the nativity of Christ, although the deceptive simplicity of "I am a little church (Aeterna Christi munera)" with its references to American music of the likes of Copland is equally impressive. The final "nobody loses all the time" is wit in Modernist guise, with all its attendant challenges to the players. All credit is due to Duck-Chong for negotiating the tricky vocal line, and to all concerned for coordinating the score so well.

This disc is a bit of a revelation. I say "a bit," as the excellence of the music sort of creeps up on the listener, a result of the compositional confidence of Peter Dart. Fabulous. Colin Clarke.