

The Voice of Love

Review by Samuel Bugeja.

The new album featuring the music of Phillip Wilcher is a welcome addition to his catalogue. It is comprised of both solo piano works and works for cello and piano, and is the first to feature this combination. It has been recorded by Dr. Jeanell Carrigan, one of the most important figures in Australian music and one of the greatest proponents of the solo piano music of this country. The cello is supplied by her Sydney Conservatorium colleague, Minah Choe.

The generous two-disc set contains music composed by Wilcher between 2000 and 2015, and in addition, a premiere recording of *Legend*, composed in 1976 when the composer was just eighteen. The work is based on Edith Sitwell's poem, "The Shadow of Cain", which, according to the liner notes, is about "the fission of the world into warring particles." *Legend* is suitably doomed and cataclysmic, encompassing the full range of the keyboard. This mood is embodied by Carrigan's playing, which demonstrates a surety of touch, as well as a deep understanding of the natural contour of the music. Such could be said of all the recordings on the album, as one senses that Carrigan has quite an affinity for Wilcher's music, which is often very flowing. Though the route the music takes is often surprising, there is always a sense of inevitability – of the music going where it must and saying what it must – which is often by virtue of Carrigan's admirable musicality. Of Wilcher's earlier releases, broadcaster, Mike Smith wrote: "here are no gushing melodies or self-indulgent complexities on these CDs...his music rarely says more than is necessary." I believe this a concept with which the composer strongly identifies – the title of one of the works on this album, *Simplicity Itself*, seems to be something of a mantra for Wilcher. As a result, his voice is clear and genuine, and the music seems self-evident.

Wilcher's cursive lyricism and the strength of the melodic line is indeed prevalent in each work, but perhaps most discernible in the works that include the cello. The work *Vocalise* is aptly named, as Wilcher's writing for the cello tends to be more vocal than instrumental, employing long, weaving phrases. Minah Choe's cello dips and soars, and it communicates with the piano in exceedingly interesting and complex ways. This is certainly true of the piece *The Maiden Voyage*, the first work on the CD to feature Choe's exquisite cello playing. The piano writing cleverly captures the gently undulating waves and the cello melody encapsulates the innocence of the first voyage. It evokes Wilcher's earlier ocean-themed work, *Seachange*. However, the most effective example of the piano and cello writing is the work *Reverie*, in which the right hand of the piano and the cello are both very melodic, and yet fit together quite naturally, displaying the composer's extraordinary level of craft. It also must be said that in all cases, the piano and cello balance very well together, on account of both the performers and the recording engineer, David Kim Boyle, who has done some fine work.

The opening tracks of the second disc, which make up the solo piano work *Talatat*, similarly benefit from the Boyle's competence as an engineer. The first movement, *Hymn to the Aten*, is stark and imposing in its outer parts, like the Egyptian temples and palaces from which it takes its inspiration, and the full resonances of the Fazioli piano can be readily felt. The middle movement, *The Blue Lotus* is wonderfully sonorous and hazy, which is postponed by a monophonic line, convincingly delivered by Carrigan. The work concludes with *Scarab*,

which is zealous and sparkling, underpinned by earthy open fifths. In my opinion, *Talatat* is one of the most compelling works on the album.

The influence of Chopin is also observable on some of the works, and some of the genres that Chopin excelled in are present here, including nocturnes, waltzes and even a barcarolle. The set of five nocturnes that open the album which, I was surprised to learn, were written for the left hand alone feature both the introspection and at times, the quite yet passionate intensity of Chopin. Carrigan's variety of articulation and dynamics between just one hand must be commended here and each phrase is cohesive. Other gems which seem to be imbued with the spirit of Chopin include the touching *Starseed*, the *Walzer Rimoldi*, the glorious *Waltz Awaiting*, and of course, *His Last Breath* which was written in response to Chopin's "final, breathless hours," and is appropriately solemn. Despite the connections I make with existing composers, Wilcher's music traverses its own path, constituting its own sound world.

I found *The Sorrow of Angels* to be more reminiscent of J.S. Bach, as it recalled both the tonal movement and reverential quality of his music, in conjunction with some of the repetitive figures of Wilcher's non-Western inspired music. The second movement, *Their Sorrow*, is a restrained piece of work with a hymnal quality and very affecting, poignant harmonic changes. Carrigan's performance is similar to the music, reverential and subdued, which brings out the music's inherent qualities. It ends placidly, without any overdone effects, and due to the expert ordering of the tracks, we move into the expansive title track, the cello and piano piece, *The Voice of Love*. The work seems like an outpouring of emotion after the sorrow of the previous work, and is as close to a representation of 'the voice of love' through music as I have heard. The last work, *Without Her*, is a moving contribution to the memory of Miriam Hyde, an important composer and educator as well as a close friend to the composer. It is short, but it conveys worlds of information about the composer's admiration for Hyde, and is a wonderful tribute.

The album is dedicated to Rosemary Eather and the poem on the inside cover reveals the composer's artistry with language. This album is highly recommended – the wonderful music and performances have been packaged very well by Wirripang.