

BOOK REVIEW

Rhoderick McNeill. *The Music of Carl Vine*
Kingsgrove, NSW: Wildbird Music, 2017
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Reviewed by Peter Campbell

Any scholarly addition to the literature on music in Australia is welcome, and this volume, the fourth in Wildbird's 'Australian Composers' series, is as welcome as any. It takes as its subject the music of Carl Vine, one of Australia's 'great composers' (as the advertising rightly asserts), and follows volumes on Peter Sculthorpe, Richard Meale and Nigel Butterley, all from the previous generation of composers who came to prominence in the 1960s.

Vine, born in 1954, has now written seven symphonies, five string quartets, six concertos, several large-scale choral and ballet works and much other orchestral, chamber and solo-piano music. It is right and proper that he take his place in the list of our most important composers, and this is the first extended study of his work outside half a dozen research dissertations. (David Pereira's 2002 interview with Vine, published in *Context* volume 23, is listed in an appendix as one of only sixteen items for 'further reading.')

Disappointingly, there is only a selected list of works in the back, while the reader is directed to the composer's own website for further details.

Following the guidelines for the series, Rhoderick McNeill, Professor and Head of School of Arts and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland, has here provided an analytical and scholarly account of most of Vine's important works (and numerous of the smaller works, too), rather than concentrating overly on biographical detail. Yet glimpses of Vine's working life, and a little of his private, are found in the short 'Introduction' and scattered amongst the dense analysis; enough to form at least some rounded picture of the how as well as the what. McNeill's book, then, is aimed at the serious, trained musician, although the writing is always lively and approachable despite the often complex subject matter. The insights offered by McNeill into the inner workings of the pieces under discussion are amplified and supported by sometimes extended quotations from direct conversation with the composer undertaken in 2015.

McNeill has chosen to discuss the works by genre, rather than strictly chronologically, but—as perhaps is the case with many composers—the large-scale works are clustered later in a career that had earlier concentrated on works for Vine’s own instrument, the piano, and on chamber music. Thus, the first chapter, on the music for solo piano, does present us with more of Vine’s early works, while the last work discussed is the recent *Five Hallucinations*, essentially a trombone concerto, premiered in Chicago in October 2016. Each of the works discussed is subjected to rigorous, careful harmonic and structural analysis, with detailed description of the forces and compositional devices being employed. Here is a typical example in relations to the Piano Concerto No. 2:

The internal section (bars 490–504) is dominated by the piano with a stormy web of sextuplet, demi-semiquaver arpeggio figures with melody in the top voice, harp, and glockenspiel decorations and strong brass, lower woodwind and string chords. It concludes with massive piano chords over a bass descending slowly by semitones that settles into a disguised dominant-like chord over G for an extended restatement. (p. 214)

This is vibrant, illuminating prose that allows the reader immediately to ‘hear’ the music being described, but it rarely takes the next step into true analysis of the ‘why’. While the formal analysis is beautifully done, the underlying purpose and function—perhaps even meaning—of the elements being discussed has not often been revealed. Such a limitation does not detract from the overall usefulness of this book as a resource for anyone interested in Carl Vine’s music, but it does feel incomplete. Each work is unpacked to an extent that the reader can form an understanding of how it works. In fact, Vine himself is wary of offering too much of a poetic or extra-musical explanation for his music, noting that:

I really like music just to stand for itself ... You have a complete open slate, and so there is the idea of music that is simply called music ... I go to great pains to give no indication as to how you should interpret that. (p. 9)

The volume is beautifully produced, elegant and striking, with hundreds of intricately drawn score examples (typeset by the author) illustrating almost every movement of every work discussed. This makes it all the more disappointing that several infelicities have made their way to print: a missing semi-colon on page 3; the awkward tautology in a ‘short ... three-minute work’ on page 14, and the unfortunate transposition in the title of Ravel’s *Miroirs* as *Miriors* on page 24. To a small degree, these detract from the otherwise superbly presented work, both physical and scholarly, of this volume. Nevertheless, this is a wonderful addition to the output of Wildbird Music, an organisation taking up the reigns from the mainstream publishing houses that are rarely bringing forth such volumes these days. McNeill has succeeded in providing us with a rich reading of all the major compositions across Vine’s career so far, an output deserving of such attention and even greater prominence in Australia’s musical story.

About the reviewer

Peter Campbell is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Conservatorium of Music, the University of Melbourne, and Registrar, Trinity College Theological School, the University of Divinity. He has published widely on aspects of music in Australia.