

A Feast for the Senses by Richard Whalley

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Reviewed by Denis Joe November 2012

I discovered the music of Richard Whalley having attended a concert in Liverpool given by Ensemble 10/10 last year. On the programme was a piece, specially commissioned by Ensemble 10/10, *A Very Serious Game*, which is the first composition on this album, is based around three lithographs by the Dutch Artist M.C. Escher: *The House of Stairs*, *Three Worlds* and *Metamorphosis*.

The piano opens the first movement with a feeling of walking that tries to maintain an order as the woodwind instruments threaten to undermine the pace. Yet *House of Stairs* section grabs the listener from the outset and repeated listening only reinforces the order as each instrument battles for dominance with its own melody. To that extent the piece reminds me of Elliot Carter's work, particularly the *Cello Sonata*. And like the approach of Carter, Whalley keeps a tight rein on the music.

The *Three Worlds* section opens with a meditative melody on the Cor Anglais, that is interrupted by the xylophone playing a vivacious rhythm as the strings are brought in gradually followed by the piccolo and piano. Again there is a conflict between the instruments yet the pace and the conflicting harmonies create a very dreamy feeling.

*Metamorphosis* opens with glissando on the strings and maintains a real sensuous feeling throughout with repeated scales on the piano, seemingly holding the piano the instrumental group together. This closing movement brings *A Very Serious Game* to a soft conclusion. For me the work is an outstanding example of musical impressionism. Whalley does not attempt to describe Escher's works through music, what we are given is the composer's understanding of those works where nothing is overstated as each movement intends only to suggest.

*Tachophobia* is a sonata for the solo cello, written for the cellist Oliver Coates (who is the soloist on this recording). Inspired by J S Bach and the Quentin Tarantino film, *Deathproof*. The cello presents the composer with a large palette and the best compositions for that instrument have always explored the range and depth of this instrument.

Opening with a broody, yet lyrical movement the first half requires flexibility from the soloist. There is a great deal of sliding into and out of notes (*portamenti*) that becomes more even as the tempo of the section gathers pace. We feel as if the composer is exploring the very soul of the cello.

In the second movement the cellist is allowed a freer hand to express the dance-like qualities of this section and yet one cannot help the feeling that this dance-like movement is so controlled. It feels as if Coates is exploring the whole expressive range of the cello.

The song-like third movement opens with a slow and beautiful melody. At first hearing it sounds simple (*dolce sempre legato*) and yet it too concerns itself with exploring the lyrical richness, moving into delicate playing (*Dolcissimo*) to a more aggressive display in the fourth movement (*prestissimo*).

*Ad Infinitum* This wonderful piece for solo violin (Caroline Balding) is, as the composer says, entirely built out of blocks of material, where the silences play an important

role in that each take on the characteristic of the musical blocks. Whalley allows the violinist a degree of flexibility, though his notes point out that this should not be at the expense of the tempo. The piece is beautifully lyrical: slow, but never mournful and one finds that the silences are hardly noticeable. Balding's playing, over the fingerboard of the violin (*sul tasto*), creates a feeling of tenderness and in some sections it seems as if the composer has introduced the opening three notes of the bugle piece, *The Last Post*.

In *Intoxicating Orchids* Whalley attempts to capture the scents of different orchids. The opening movement, *Stanhopea*, is a duet for saxophone and harpsichord (and includes a contribution for the clarinet). What is really interesting about this instrumental combination is that it sets the flowing sound of the saxophone against the more precise notation of the harpsichord. There is very much a jazz feeling to this section and this might be because of the freedom given to the saxophonist. It is interesting that the harpsichord maintains the tempo without creating conflict.

The second movement, *Ancineta*, brings together the rest of Vagenza Soloists. A flute and clarinet introduce the movement along with saxophone that has a feeling of improvisation, before the harpsichord joins in, suggesting a continuation from the first movement. The ensemble that has been put together for this piece makes great use of six string soloists (2 Violins, 2 violas and two cellos), which maintain the rhythm and the dream-like quality once they join in with the wind instruments. What is interesting and very effective about this movement is how relative freedom given the wind instruments in the first two minutes of this section, are made to sound like a formal composition by the entrance of the strings.

*Encyclia* again opens with the wind instrument and harpsichord. But there is less of a dialogue between the two groups of soloist and more of a confrontation, with rhythm changes taking place suddenly, presenting a rather unsettling experience.

*Gongora* is a lively piece opening with clarinet and percussion but joined by the two violins. The harpsichord plays a much smaller role in this section, as does the saxophone, and it is the violas and violins that take up much of the argument. What is impressive about this section is how aggressively expressive it is but never once sounds as if control will be lost.

There is only a minute pause before the fifth section, *Ceoloyne* comes in. opening with wind, percussion and harpsichord there is a tense feeling that is taken up by the strings, which soon bring about a calmer atmosphere, the pace is maintained by reaffirmation of the *Stanhopea* movement taken at a slower but no less tense pace as the opening section.

*Intoxicating Orchids* is an outstanding very inventive work. Whilst Whalley allows quite a bit of freedom for the soloists, particularly the wind section, the work is a demanding piece both on the soloists and the listener. For me this is contemporary music at its very best, its immediate difficulty never descends into shallow self-indulgence. It respects the audience whilst being self-assured that of the power of the composition to win over.

*Three Worlds* was intended as the first of a cycle of piano pieces inspired by the images of M.C. Escher, but became the second movement for instrumental ensemble of *A Very Serious Game*. With the composer playing on this recording we can hear that the original intent differs only in tempo. Whilst the opening bars are taken slightly quicker than the Cor Anglais opens the ensemble version, there is, in sections, a greater urgency. For me there can be no direct comparison because they appear as two different compositions.

*A Feast for the Senses* is a great collection of works by a serious and inquisitive composer

that cannot easily be dismissed as academic. A lecturer and teacher in composition, Richard Whalley seeks inspiration from diverse sources and in doing so makes his connection with the artists and the audience. Visit Richard's website to purchase the CD by clicking on [A feast for the senses](http://www.richardwhalley.com/index.htm "A Feast for the Senses by Richard Whalley").

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