

Four from Cold Blue Music

Sunrise, Jacob Cooper & Steven Bradshaw
Three Dawns and Bush Radio Calling, Peter Garland
Arctic Dreams, John Luther Adams
Three, Chas Smith

I'm always excited to receive new CDs from California-based Cold Blue music. Their carefully curated releases are consistently intriguing and intelligent, somehow – despite the diversity and range of their catalogue – managing to stay focussed, offering a quietly experimental and different approach to contemporary music.

Peter Garland is a new name to me, although the press release informs me his music has appeared on seven previous Cold Blue CDs. As well as a composer he's also a musicologist, writer and world traveller. The latter helps explain the intriguing source material used for the two pieces recorded here. 'Three Dawns' is an exquisite triptych of solo piano pieces (a 12 minute piece bookended by two much shorter tracks) loosely based on three early twentieth century poems written by the Malagasy author Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo. Its calm and enticing sound apparently belies the difficulty of 'wide intervals and a notational problem' which has apparently 'long baffled pianists'! Ron Squibbs, who plays on both of this CD's compositions seems to have no such problem.

'Bush Radio Calling' is more strident and intriguing. It was originally written and toured as music from a play by Red Mole theatre company in New Zealand, its title referring to Aboriginal radio stations in the Australian outback. The music, like the play, documents a kind of quest, a journey from urban decay to 'The Bridge to Nowhere', with various encounters, searches and mystical experiences ('The Valley of Abandoned Dreams') en route. As music it's evocative, varied and enticing, with a splendidly energetic, uplifting and epiphanic ending as we cross that Bridge.

Most of us haven't had time for quests in the last couple of years, with lockdown severely restricting activities, human contact and, in many cases, creativity. Jacob Cooper and Steven Bradshaw decided to collaborate whilst in quarantine to produce new work. They chose to use a popular song from the time of the Spanish influenza as source material. Together they deconstructed, reassembled and reimagined the song as a half-hour nightmare seduction of fragmented song, scrapes, hisses and whispers, totally appropriate to the loss of experienced time many of us felt imprisoned in our own homes, and also to the repurposed song lyrics, where ' the rising / of heart [...] is calling / is slowing / is dreaming', because 'the world is waiting for the sunrise'. This is intriguing and complex music with many secret and hidden depths.

John Luther Adams has always composed music about and rooted in deserts, ecology and open space. His album titles reflect that, and *Arctic Dreams* is no exception.

Dedicated to the late author Barry Lopez, who was a friend of Adams, this seven-part composition draws on the sound of wind-harps on the tundra. The libretto consists of lists of Alaskan names for Arctic plants, birds, places and weather; and the four singers are heavily treated, as are the string quartet, with three layers digital delay to produce a virtual choir and orchestra. Its sometimes pretty sounds accumulate, repeat and recombine to produce a compelling cosmic minimalism that somehow describes and evokes the Arctic. Titles such as 'The Circle of Suns and Moons', 'The Circle of Winds' and 'Where the Waves Splash, Hitting Again and Again' reinforce the cyclical and repetitive evolution of this wonderfully moody music.

If John Luther Adams' music is the sound of light, emptiness, dust and detail, Chas Smith's is sonic afterburn, the long drawn out fade of a plane passing, metallic sustain and rust falling. Smith plays steel guitar for a number of more mainstream musicians (I first came across him on an early Harold Budd release) but left to his own devices he builds and plays his own instruments which have fantastic and evocative names like Lockheed, Sceptre, Parabaloid and Replicant.

On *Three*, layers and layers of drone and texture slowly evolve and change as time passes for the listener. Distant chimes ring out, metallic reverberations fade and reappear, speakers shake and tremble, and my daughter asks what on earth I am listening to. This is music to be immersed in, soundscapes which bewitch and disturb but ultimately seduce and embrace as you reach for the repeat button and hope this music will never end.

Rupert Loydell

Find out more at www.coldbluemusic.com