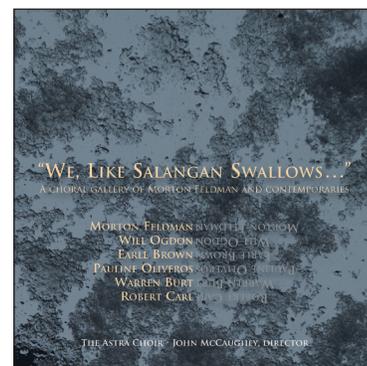


Choral Field Paintings

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Morton Feldman: Chorus and Instruments; Voices and Instruments 1 & 2; The Swallows of Salangan. Will Ogdon: Three Statements. Pauline Oliveros: Sound Patterns. Warren Burt: Elegy. Earle Brown: Small Pieces for Large Chorus. Robert Carl: The City. The Astra Choir. John McCaughey, dirección musical y producción. Michael Hewes, ingeniero de sonido. Un CD DDD de 76:06 minutos de duración grabado en la Carmelite Church y en el Abbotsford Convent de Melbourne (Australia), en noviembre de 2015, marzo, mayo y septiembre de 2016, y abril y noviembre de 2017. New World Records 80794-2. Distribuidor en España: Arsonal



“recommended for any lover of good music, both for the towering quality of its works and for the great performances”

Three decades have passed since the death of Morton Feldman (New York, 1926 - Buffalo, 1987), yet now, well into the 21st century, we still encounter among the gaps in the discography of his works something that brings us moments of delight. Such is the experience today in posting this review, in which we introduce four first-recordings of works by Feldman. The four pieces are brought together in a compact disc that is wholly recommended, both for the beauty of its musical scores and for the superb interpretation of them, as realized by the Astra Choir of Melbourne under its musical director, John McCaughey. The recording attests to the fine work of the Astra Chamber Music Society since 1951, in the dissemination of European and North American repertoire, along with its parallel encouragement of Australian musical creativity.

The earliest of the Morton Feldman scores here recorded is the one that, conversely, concludes the CD – namely *The Swallows of Salangan* (1960). As John McCaughey outlines in his excellent notes for this edition, we are dealing with a work rarely played outside the United States, due in large measure to its very specific choral-instrumental requirements. Despite this, as McCaughey also reminds us, it is one that Feldman himself frequently referred to when expounding his aesthetic postulates as a composer. Little wonder that he did so, since *Swallows of Salangan* contains in a germinal way not only what will become the three other choral-instrumental pieces of this CD, but a

good portion of the stylistic routes that lead to the maturity of the New York composer. Once again the great homogeneity of Feldman is demonstrated, a creator whose first scores already exhibit their own inherent serenity and chromatic expansion – musical composition in a purely pictorial key, with the canvases of Mark Rothko as a constant and inevitable correspondence and inspiration from the domain of visual-plastic arts. Hence in this review's title we speak of Choral Field Paintings, in direct relation with the Rothko Colour Field Paintings that Feldman so often imbibed, in order to create his own musical correlates.

Such sound-painting with chorus is even more dynamic in *The Swallows of Salangan* than it will be in later pieces. Without reaching forward to the intricate nebulae that we will know only in the Feldman of the 1980s, but simply by hearing the first piece of this CD, *Chorus and Instruments* (1963) – just three years after the *Swallows* – there is already another world in terms of balance between chorus and ensemble. The difference lies in the great preponderance assumed by the instrumental part in *The Swallows of Salangan*, with Feldman using the voices as one more colour within the aggregate, practically in the manner of a veil. Set before such a choral veil, the instruments seem to transubstantiate those weightless swallows that Boris Pasternak refers to in his autobiography, taken up by Feldman as a textual basis for his work – which is why their sounds revolve around the choir. And

even around the listeners themselves, since the live performance that we hear in this recording was executed in a spatialized way, creating, as John McCaughey tells us, an individualized perception of the work and its acoustic-spatial synthesis, according to the location from which each hearer was listening. In the recorded edition of New World Records this spatialization is lost, converted to an audition in stereo, thus forming a reading of the score in a more distinct and 'extraneous' acoustic. In any case, this does not affect the wise determinations of the Astra ensemble and John McCaughey when it comes to their interpretative decisions (such as the durations of their notes), within the margins of openness that the Feldman of 1960 still allowed his interpreters. Here we have a world premiere recording of the highest level.

Chorus and Instruments is already a more static work, although, like *The Swallows of Salangan*, it is born out of an initial chord in the instrumental ensemble, very dense, energetic and mysterious, which seems to launch us into a sonic Big Bang. Immediately this is redirected to a serenity that reminds us of one of Morton Feldman's most famous choral scores, *The Rothko Chapel* (1971), a work with which it shares its vocal effects made of murmured notes and a very cloistered, non-semantic fabric. In the pages of *Chorus and Instruments* the choir acquires a more central and hazy role, now fully Rothko-esque, set against a more atomized and dispersed ensemble, whose shadings and tonings stretch out towards the sonic outskirts

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(like the vanished frame of the *Colour Field Paintings*), around the central measures of the choir, which are more dense and compact, ranging from unisons to clusters of ten notes.

Against that choral homogeneity, the seven instrumentalists of the ensemble work their isolated notes, literally crossing through the central harmony of the choir, breaking out as beams of light and colour in beautiful effects of acoustic-pictorial radiance. The measures in which the choral and instrumental bodies meet up in a more evident and vertical way acquire a weight and a captivating attractiveness. Of special note are the contrasts established between the high-register humming of the sopranos and the suspended deep notes that drift from the low instruments tuba, piano and contrabass. The fluctuations between the extremes of the harmonic spectra are a constant in the nebulous matter that *Chorus and Instruments* makes levitate throughout the score, with its dense harmonic pedals and a disturbing tension arising from the parallel profusion of passages with micro-formations of notes. This endows certain instability on the sound fabric within the compactness of the piece, capturing our attention even more. A most beautiful score, and no less fascinating its interpretation on the part of the Astra performers, truly following the Feldmanian rule of weightless gentleness in the attack of each note, and with delicacy, colour and mystery: pure *Choral Field Painting*.

The imbrication of the choral with the instrumental advances one more step in *Voices and Instruments 1* (1972), a work not to be confused with the contemporaneous *Voice and Instruments* (1972) for soprano and orchestra. According to John McCaughey, the harmonic structure of *Voices and Instruments 1* is replete with references to the tradition that includes Beethoven and Bach (whose name, in German notation, is transposed chromatically and sequentially in different moments of the score), besides making use of floating colours across choir and ensemble that recall Anton Webern and *Klangfarbenmelodie*. In any case, *Voices and Instruments 1* is not as static a score as *Chorus and Instruments*, being a faithful response to the more mobile and dynamic Feldman whom we know in his works of the 1970s. With regard to the musical text, we are dealing with a score written in standardized notation, in contrast to the other Feldman pieces of the CD, which are written by hand. In addition, it is not a graphic work such as *Chorus and Instruments*, and thus will be more unified with any future recorded realisations of the score. However, its first recording here with the Astra Choir seems to me really convincing, so the bar is already set very high.

By contrast, *Voices and Instruments 2* (1972) is a hand-written score, though the various musical parameters are more fixed, as in *Voices and Instruments 1*. This is not

a choral piece in the strict sense, since the Astra singers perform it with the prescribed three soprano voices. In any case, these are associated intervallically in such a way that, while maintaining their respective personalities, a small and very compact chorus is created by their defined registers. The instrumentation is also more sparing than in the other Feldman scores of this recording, with flute (and piccolo), two cellos and double bass. Curiously, although flute and piccolo with their high register are the instruments closer to the *tessitura* of the sopranos, the cellos will be the ones that settle in the harmonic environment of this small tripartite choir, and yet never doubling the voices (something, as McCaughey maintains, that is indeed rare in the Feldman aesthetic: a music in which voices and instruments share an acoustic space, but with their own and different personalities). This is part of the influence on the New York composer of painting: of the blocks of shapes and colours that are defined in abstract expressionism in an independent way on the canvas, no matter how much they rub and overlap, even entering shared regions while maintaining their chromatic and textural personality. Set against the sopranos and cellos who inhabit the central region of this score, flute and double bass outline the sonic frame, its edges and harmonic limits, with greater contrast and an expansion of the registers. Thus they round off another very compact, highly dynamic piece, and one that equally is sealed with the beauty and artistic transcendence of Morton Feldman.

Although Morton Feldman is the main protagonist of this CD, through the four compositions that we have presented so far, it was not John McCaughey's wish that the works of the New York composer be presented monographically or in a continuous succession. He believes that they acquire a greater impact when contrasted with creations of contemporaneous composers, allowing a place among them for other artistic personalities and aesthetic propositions. Such is the case of *Three Statements* (1956) by the American Will Ogdon (Redlands, 1921 - California, 2013), a score for choir *a cappella* that makes intensive use of the twelve-tone series to musicalize chosen poems of Walt Whitman and Thomas Campion. If Feldman in his essays shows himself antagonistic to the post-war American university environment, Will Ogdon was one of its pillars, as founder, in 1966, of the prestigious Music Department of the University of California at San Diego. A student of Ernst Krenek and René Leibowitz, Ogdon brought to the American academic world a serialism against which Feldman reacted frontally in his writings and scores, identifying the influence of dodecaphonism as a mode of European cultural colonialism. And so, if the above Feldman pieces inaugurate a new musical universe (like

the New York School in painting, the origin of a purely American artistic expression), the recurrent uses of the twelve-tone series in Will Ogdon's *Three Statements*, as well as their tone, very much transport us to that influence of both Schoenberg and Webern, making the work more academically common-place than the expression of a completely personal aesthetic, like that of Morton Feldman. Be that as it may, the reading of the Astra Choir is superb, very delicate and well-phrased, with a great refinement in the variation of the series and in its correlation with the prosody of the poems, which it fits like a glove, as does Astra's English-speaking chorus.

Pauline Oliveros (Houston, 1932 - New York, 2016) is the only female presence among the composers of this recording, whose death a year and a half ago we still mourn. The Astra Choir enhances her memory with a superb reading of *Sound Patterns* (1961), one of her first internationally recognized pieces, which earned her the Gaudeamus Prize in 1962. *Sound Patterns* lies at the core of the choral explorations of the 1960s, which count among their fullest expositions such works as Ligeti's *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962-65) or Lachenmann *Consolations I & II* (1967-68). Oliveros's piece pre-dates these and stands as a work on the technical and artistic heights, still impressive for us today in its rich use of articulation, which includes individual effects found in the European avant-garde and a close proximity to the composers of the Fluxus environment, such as Ligeti himself, or Mauricio Kagel. Hence, also, the intense theatricality that emanates from *Sound Patterns*.

The exploration of the patterns to which the title refers – be it guttural sounds, clicks, or broad chromatic fields varied across the *portamento* as auras of plasma-like vocality – synthesize a score of profuse heterogeneity, within the coherence and logic that the artistic solidity of a composer like Pauline Oliveros injects into the work. Joined with those of Morton Feldman and Earle Brown, we have here the most original and personal approaches of this disc, again performed at a level of excellence that makes your listening a real joy.

Although born in the United States, Warren Burt (Baltimore, 1949) has developed most of his musical career in Australia, the country to which he moved in 1975. There he has collaborated with the Astra Chamber Music Society on several occasions, dedicating to its choir, to take the most immediate example, the work that is sung here, *Elegy* (2013). This choral composition *a cappella* is the most recent of the CD, and carries distinctly Feldmanian echoes in its structure, devised as a continuum of four-voice chords. Most of these are seventh chords, generating a harmonic tension and a motility that, antithetically, resolves itself in a very serene and ecstatic vocal fluidity. Yet it does so with an inherent vivacity emanating from that

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constant exploitation of an interval continuously varied in its colours, something that links, again, with the Viennese *Klangfarbenmelodie*. As with most of the Feldman compositions, or those of Pauline Oliveros and Earle Brown, we have here an a-semantic work, focused on the colour of the voice itself, without textual connotations.

If Warren Burt is a composer in whose trajectory we identify various periods of collaboration with John Cage and the New York School, in the case of Earle Brown (Lunenburg, 1926 – Rye, 2002) we find ourselves directly with one of the protagonists of such a protean and decisive moment in the emancipation of American music. His *Three Small Pieces for Large Chorus* (1969) are another of the jewels of this CD, a work that in its first and third pieces comes closer to Oliveros, while the second might be positioned next to Feldman himself. They are three compositions of undeniable appeal, fascinating because of their conception of a choral medium totally removed from the literary – as pure processes of form, colour and sound.

The first of these pieces forms a phonetic poem in four voices, replete with *portamenti* that give rise to a transformation of pitched sounds, modulated in timbres by vowel sonorities and their associated colorations. This results in what we could define as prosody of a particular, non-semantic kind. The germinal homophony of the *portamento* singing, a sound that recalls the *glissando* of contemporaneous electronic and instrumental genres in Brown's own work, soon begins to disintegrate through extended vocal techniques characteristic of the 1960s in the choral medium. These are familiar to us through Ligeti, Kagel, Lachenmann, Ferneyhough and a long list that also includes the New York School

The second piece is more Feldman-like with its working of chords – in this case, two large blocks formed by symmetrical chords of eight notes. Different vowels are applied to each vocal line to expand the colour of the respective blocks and their internal contrasts (within a greater homogeneity of this second piece among the set of the three). This is also the most sculptural piece; its motions and its acoustic-visual perceptive qualities come close to an Earle Brown score from three years earlier, his legendary *Calder Piece* (1966). As in Alexander Calder's mobiles, the displacement of one of these chordal masses in the choir also hides, with

its volumetric movement, the other harmonic construct, rendering it partially opaque at the moment of transition by the intersection of pitch components, something that suggests to us a kind of 'choral eclipse'.

The third piece returns us to the forms of graphic notation, making it less compact and freer than the previous one. We are not dealing with a harmonic and textural construct, like Piece No.2, but rather a compendium of elements, again particular to the avant-garde, including clicks, guttural sonorities, air effects, whistles, and a subdivision of the chorus into twelve lines that expand the dispersion and the plurality. To give a new twist to such complexity, this is the piece in which Brown grants greater interpretative freedoms to the conductor, who can dispose the combinations of graphic blocks to his or her liking. The result that we hear from the voices of the Astra Choir is impressive, as well as marking a very interesting contrast with the more unitary second piece. Taken as a whole, these *Small Pieces for Large Chorus* thus seem to be an implosion of aesthetics – at the extremes of this album with the technical-stylistic decisions of Morton Feldman and Pauline Oliveros – a sheer joy.

And finally (although it is *The Swallows of Salangan* that closes this superb disc), we also encounter the American Robert Carl (Bethesda, 1954) and his beautiful choral composition *The City* (1983). This is an extract from the *Sullivan Songs* (1983- 93), which Carl revised in 2015 as a re-visiting of the work for the Astra Choir, an indication of the confidence of the American composer in the Melbourne choir. Based on a text by architect Louis Sullivan (the key figure in the Chicago School and mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright), this is therefore the shortest piece of the CD, lasting a little over 2 minutes. It is also cast in a completely different language from the preceding scores – tonal, although in a complex harmonic rendering in which John McCaughey cites veiled influences of jazz, as well as cubism and nineteenth-century North American hymns.

Its construction in layers of overlapping chords will also recall for us the treatment of hymns that Charles Ives recruited in such savvy ways, synthesizing tradition and modernity. As the text of Sullivan says, the city is nothing more than a screen, behind which people suffer and dream, as individualities that are so often erased or blurred in the aggregate of a totality

that transcends them (if not nullifying them). Among those dreams, some of the melodic lines of the sopranos will inevitably remind us of one of the most beautiful scores of twentieth-century American music, the 'Adagio' of the String Quartet in B minor opus 11 (1936-38) by Samuel Barber. Thus the Astra Choir leaves us in this compact disc a small nod to another compositional tradition also crucial in twentieth-century America: that of Copland, Barber, Bernstein, Corigliano *et al.* In any case, within the profusion of layers and registers of this single piece, the reading by the Astra Choir is a simpler execution than those of Morton Feldman, Pauline Oliveros or Earle Brown. It is accordingly a superb rendition, full of warmth and emotion in its singing. It rounds out an album that is recommended in itself for any lover of good music, both for the towering quality of its works and for the great performances on the part of these Australian musicians, from whom we expect more new discographic experiences in the near future, because what is offered here is a pealing of bells.

The recordings, made in church spaces in the city of Melbourne, are very remarkable in every case. They are also very well balanced in the disposition of choir and instruments, despite the fact that the recording of *The Swallows of Salangan* has the limitation of its stereo format, as we pointed out earlier, which creates an acoustic image that is somewhat more blurred and less faithful to its spatialized reality. The booklet for the CD, of 35 pages (in English only), is very comprehensive, focused on an exhaustive analysis of each score by John McCaughey. It also includes all technical data of the recording and even a short bibliography and discography for each composer, in which New World Records has the graciousness to cite various recordings issued by other labels, while also including its own discs among those works of which there are other editions of more attested interpretative value. This is something that honours the venerable Brooklyn label, as does this CD production, which is destined to appear from now in those lists of discographic recommendations, establishing itself as one of their best recordings of choral music.

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