

The Music of Ross Edwards:
Aspects of Ritual

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Abstract

This thesis examines aspects of ritual in the music of Australian composer Ross Edwards. After an overview of Edwards's significant compositional output, an exploration of the relationship between music and ritual is made. The term 'ritual', when applied to music, is often used in a conveniently vague manner and without qualification. Rather than discount the term, it will be shown that 'ritual' may be a rich and useful metaphor when it is defined closely.

The idea of ritual is suggested in the music of Ross Edwards on a number of levels: firstly through the concept of ritual as an artistic intention, expressed in various ways, such as extra-musical symbolism, musical quotation and association. Underlining this is a philosophy contrary to the doctrine of art for its own sake; rather the composer aims for the music to be meaningful on a broader social level, and to be 'functional' or useful in a spiritual dimension as was the music of, for example, the medieval Christian church. On a second and more abstract level, Edwards employs a ritualistic method of composition, in which a number of characteristic musical figures, through constant re-use and repetition behave like rituals themselves. In addition to having a purely compositional role, these musical 'icons' also appear to have a personal imagery attached to them. Detailed analyses of two important orchestral works—Yarrageh (1989) and Symphony Da Pacem Domine (1991)—are offered as supporting evidence for the argument, as well as more general analyses of other works.

A folio of original musical compositions is submitted in addition to the thesis.

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Chapter One

Ross Edwards: A Biographical Introduction

1.1 Early life

Ross Edwards was born in Sydney in December 1943. His parents had no formal training in music, although his father, an engineer, played a number of instruments 'by ear' (Murdoch, 88). As a child, Edwards expressed an interest in music, although there was no music at school, and his home did not even have a record player (Nettheim, 23). He was given formal piano lessons at a young age, but soon became bored with them: he could already play the piano by ear, and did not see the necessity for reading music. Despite the rejection of formal lessons, Edwards was, nonetheless, obsessed with music and with the desire to become a visual artist.

At age thirteen, with a single-mindedness which worried his parents, he began to take theory and piano lessons once more. Edwards recalls that it was an inner urgency that drove him to pursue music with such vigour. This urgency, according to Murdoch, was "galvanised by hearing the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven, and the First Piano Concerto of Liszt" at about this time. Edwards entered the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, at age fifteen, studying piano, oboe and theory.

1.2 University studies

In 1963, Edwards enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree at The University of Sydney. That same year, Edwards came into contact with Richard Meale, hearing his Las Alboradas at an ISCM concert. This was to be a profoundly important event since, according to Murdoch, "Las Alboradas defined for [Edwards] the kind of sound that haunted his inner ear" (88). Meale became Edwards's first composition teacher, a

suitable figure, since Edwards had also come into contact with the music of contemporary European composers such as Stockhausen and Webern, and had read articles by Pierre Boulez. Meale was the one figure at that time to truly embrace a modernist, European approach to composition and the younger Edwards was to follow suit. Edwards met Anne Boyd in this same year, writing a piece for solo flute for her (now withdrawn).¹

In 1964, Edwards left University, without completing his degree. Instead he joined the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) as a despatch assistant, determined to save enough money to go overseas and study.² By 1965, Edwards had achieved a degree of recognition following performances of a number of works. A trio for flute, harp and viola called Mobile received a performance at an International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) concert, and, according to Murdoch, was received favourably by the Sydney critics (89). At this time, Edwards was persuaded to leave the ABC in order to copy parts for Peter Sculthorpe and Richard Meale. Sculthorpe encouraged Edwards in his own composing during this time.

In 1966 Edwards began a Bachelor of Music course at The University of Adelaide, where he had won a scholarship. Here he worked closely with Peter Maxwell Davies who was composer-in-residence in 1966, and who had earlier been impressed by Edwards's Mobile. Edwards worked with Sándor Veress in the following year, graduating in 1969 with First Class Honours. He then commenced a Master of Music degree at Adelaide. A Commonwealth Postgraduate Award enabled Edwards to complete this degree in England, where he continued studies with Peter Maxwell Davies in London.

Edwards's compositional style up until this point was aligned with the established avant-garde of the 1960s. Serial techniques predominate, as do highly structured forms and pointilistic mannerisms. Critics in 1965, for example, accused Edwards of using “the fashionable ‘tricks’ of the avant-garde, [and] it was noted how easily and naturally he moved among these devices” (Murdoch, 89). Roger Covell, writing in 1967, also

¹ This piece was an attempt at spatio-temporal notation, influenced by Berio's Sequenza I.

² The ABC is now the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

labels Edwards's music as 'nervous', 'pointillistic' and 'European' (234). Nonetheless, as a young composer, Edwards caught the attention of performers and critics alike. He was fortunate enough to have international performances of works at ISCM Festivals in 1966 at Stockholm and again at Basel in 1970. Most of the works composed before 1970 have since been withdrawn by the composer. The exception to this is the Five Carols from Quem Quaeritis, extracted from a nativity play written in 1967.³

1.3 London (1970-1972)

On moving to London in 1970, Edwards wrote two pieces for solo instruments. Monos I, for cello, was premiered by Florian Kitt in Vienna; Monos II for piano solo was written at the invitation of fellow Australian, Roger Woodward. The latter piece, with its dense harmonies and furious rhythmic propulsion, was especially suited to the flamboyant pianist, who contributed some fine details such as pedalling. The work was premiered in Queen Elizabeth Hall, London on 25 April 1971, in a concert which also featured the premiere of Richard Meale's Coruscations.

Monos II is the apotheosis of Edwards's early compositional period. In a typically modernist and often violent fashion, the work is dense in texture and departs from some of Edwards's earlier compositional practices. Serial techniques, used extensively in works written before 1970 (and exemplified by the String Quartet no. 1, 1968, now withdrawn), are abandoned and pre-compositional restraints are also relinquished. Moreover, there is a sense of parody in the stylistically inappropriate ending of this work; the texture seems to peter out in a sense of abandonment and flippancy (Hamilton, 10). This is the first hint of dissatisfaction with the modernist position Edwards had been siding with in his compositional life up to this point.

In 1972, Edwards received a composers' grant which enabled him to work on two pieces: Monos III for solo violin and Choros for piano and orchestra. Choros was

³ For a complete list of Edwards's works to date, see Appendix 1.

completed that year (later withdrawn) but Monos III was never finished. Depression set in and Edwards abandoned the bleakness of London for the quiet of the Yorkshire countryside, on the recommendation of fellow composer Bernard Rands. Edwards hoped that the rural setting might help inspire him in his compositional tasks, and also to be nearer to his Australian colleagues Anne Boyd, Martin Wesley-Smith and Alison Bauld who were studying at The University of York. Edwards, however, found little inspiration in his new setting. Apart from completing Choros and String Quartet no. 3, mboc, it was an unproductive year, and one that brought on a compositional crisis.⁴

This compositional crisis has been well covered in the literature (for example, Hannan 1986, Ford 1993a) so there seems little need to offer any large comment. A recent article written by Edwards states the composer's position at the time:

Looking back, I think the turning-point in my early life as a composer took place in a dank Notting Hill basement towards the end of 1970. I was a postgraduate student in London and I existed only for my work, living on bread and cheese, black coffee, chain-smoking Gauloises, writing music compulsively for twelve-hour stretches and taking pills to sleep. I clearly recall the moment when I found myself questioning the validity of this course of self-destruction and at the same time that of 'accredited' post-war European art music. What, ultimately, was the point of all those neurotic convulsions so meticulously ordered? Did they do anybody any good or were they just self-indulgent?

So ended my 'angry young man' phase. (Edwards 1992a, 28)

The sojourn to Yorkshire also awakened Edwards to the natural environment as a possible source of compositional inspiration (Hannan 1986, 12).

⁴Although commonly referred to as String Quartet no. 3, mboc is a piece for three or more string instruments, which deals with ideas of indeterminacy.

1.4 Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist and Antifon (1973-1974)

In 1973, after moving back to Australia, Edwards wrote the seminal orchestral piece Mountain Village in a Clearing Mist. This work is a radical departure from earlier pieces; the dense complexity of Monos II is abandoned in favour of a much quieter and contemplative stance. Edwards describes the work as follows:

[Mountain Village] is a quiescent and understated piece in which sounds and silences are counterpoised. It has no apparent direction nor any sense of climax or resolution: the concept of music as psychological drama, as structured time, is quite foreign to its aesthetic and it ends as inexplicably as it begins. (1992a, 28)

Edwards deliberately abandoned the many self-imposed rules and regulations of his earlier works. The composer later realised that it was the sounds of nature—the insects, frogs, birds and other creatures—that influenced the sound-world of this piece.

It is not so much the harmonic material that makes this piece ‘seminal’, but rather the whole philosophical conception of the work. The indebtedness of Mountain Village to Eastern influences is clear. The title, for example, is borrowed from a painting by a thirteenth century Chinese monk. Moreover, Edwards wanted to somehow create the musical equivalent of a Zen-influenced calligraphic art style: “I wanted to evolve a musical equivalent of its technique of revelation through extreme economy of gesture” (Edwards 1992a, 29). Michael Hannan points to some possible influence of Toru Takemitsu’s piece The Dorian Horizon (1966) which was an influential work in Australia at the time (1986, 13).⁵ Mountain Village, with its absence of harmonic goals or climaxes, lack of a sense of development as normally occurs in the European tradition, and emphasis on timbre is, moreover, close to an Eastern conception of music (cf. Skarecky 8, 56). At this stage in Edwards’s career he was being influenced mainly by literature associated with Zen Buddhism, and also by the music and writings of

⁵ Hannan also points out that in a visual sense “the score has an uncanny resemblance to Meale’s early orchestral works but it sounds very different because of its dynamic level and complete lack of dramatic effect” (1986, 13).

Cage, Feldman and, as mentioned above, Takemitsu. Some of the Eastern philosophical undercurrents of Sculthorpe's Sun Music series were probably also influential, although at this stage, Edwards was not interested so much in the appropriation of Asian music.

That Mountain Village is a work which later ushered in a whole series of works with a similar sound-world is well established (for example Hannan 1986; 1990; Hamilton; Edwards 1992a). The importance of the work that directly followed Mountain Village, however, has not generally been seen. Mountain Village was completed in April 1973 and is dedicated to Helen Hopkins, whom Edwards married the following year. It was premiered by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra at the Adelaide Festival in 1974, and was greeted with a generally favourable response. Antifon, Edwards's next work, was also premiered at the same festival, provoking extreme reactions from enthusiasm to disdain. Edwards recounts that some members of the audience started jeering and breaking up into laughter at the spectacle, whilst others who were infuriated with them started cheering wildly.

Antifon, the John Bishop memorial commission for the Adelaide festival of 1974, has been described by the composer as "an immensely impractical piece" for large chorus (48 or more voices) brass sextet, organ and two tam-tams (Edwards, personal communication). In performance, the composer's intentions were not entirely met: the brass players were upset with the demand of playing long and high sustained notes, after also having to perform a programme of other brass music for the same event. The problem of conducting was also a difficult one; the composer's idea of having a flashing light to synchronise the instruments proved impractical. As a compromise, the brass players were taken outside, and their sound was amplified through speakers set up in the appropriate places.⁶ It was also the composer's intention to have the chorus moving about with candles, in a slow ceremonial fashion, but the fire brigade enforced a ban on naked flames. In retrospect, the composer sees great possibilities for choreographing this quasi-liturgical procession of the chorus.

⁶ The performers were also upset by this. Edwards now jokes that it was like playing a Beethoven quartet in a phone booth--theoretically it is possible, but also insane!

Antifon was, in many ways, a doomed project and a sound recording was not made. It has remained neglected in performance and musicological discussion. Yet this work foreshadows future developments in Edwards's musical language in its use of long sustaining pedal-points and modality. The interest in ritual and an overtly religious subject matter (the text is from the Gospel of St John) also foreshadows some of the ideas presented in the more recent ritual pieces such as Yarrageh (1989) and Symphony Da Pacem Domine (1991). Antifon, along with Sculthorpe's Koto Music I (1973/1978) and Boyd's Anklung (1974), is one of the first Australian pieces to experiment with minimalist techniques of composition.

1.5 Influence of Peter Sculthorpe

In 1964, Peter Sculthorpe was appointed Lecturer at the Music Department at The University of Sydney, where he gave lectures on Asian music (Hannan 1982, 13). Sculthorpe increasingly allied his music with Asian music in the 1960s and 1970s, which is evident particularly in the Sun Music series, where timbre and rhythm are seen as the most important musical qualities.

Ross Edwards, meanwhile, retained a staunch modernist aesthetic throughout his time working as Sculthorpe's musical assistant during the 1960s. Sculthorpe's interest in Asian culture led to frequent exposure of Eastern music, philosophy and fine arts. At this time Sculthorpe regarded himself, vaguely, as a Zen Buddhist, although he encountered Buddhism in a rather second-hand fashion, reading Alan Watts and John Cage (Sculthorpe, 5). Edwards's interest in oriental philosophy, as we have seen, did not obviously penetrate his musical aesthetic until composing Mountain Village in 1973. Whilst studying at Adelaide, Edwards would return in his holidays to continue working with Sculthorpe and other student assistants such as Anne Boyd, whose interest in Asian music has dominated her compositional career.

In early 1971, both Sculthorpe and Edwards were in England. Sculthorpe was the visiting Professor of the University of Sussex while Edwards, at that time, was living in York. Edwards and other Australian musicians occasionally met at Sculthorpe's house on weekends. Sculthorpe also visited Edwards and Boyd at York several times. Edwards recalls much discussion at that time about Rites of Passage, Sculthorpe's planned opera. It is possible that the discussions about the nature of Rites of Passage had some influence on Edwards, perhaps bearing fruit in Antifon. Edwards acknowledges that, at the time of writing Antifon, it was Sculthorpe's encouragement that maintained the younger composer's enthusiasm and determination for this piece. For Edwards it was a radical departure from his previous work, but it seems that Sculthorpe perceived its vision.

During the 1970s, Edwards's key attitudes toward composition were solidified. Many of these bear the mark of Peter Sculthorpe. The necessity for economy of gesture is, for example, influenced by Sculthorpe, as—it seems—is Edwards's tendency to re-use material. Moreover Sculthorpe has not been shy about confronting matters of personal spirituality in works such as Requiem (1979) and Threnody (1992), both for solo cello, and also the recent orchestral work Memento Mori (1993). David Matthews writes, for example, that in the “personal preoccupations of Requiem, . . . Sculthorpe attempts to come to terms with the impending fact of his own death (he has no orthodox religious faith, but he is religious by nature and believes profoundly in the importance of ritual).” (14) Edwards has developed—in parallel to Sculthorpe—an interest in aspects of religion and ritual in music.

1.6 1974-1977: A period of Silence.

During the years 1974 to 1977 Edwards was silent in terms of compositional output, apart from the Five Little Piano Pieces of 1976. This is partly to do with the composer's new teaching position at The University of Sydney and later at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music. Edwards found his teaching activities somewhat incompatible with consolidating the new direction his music was taking. At the heart of Edwards's inability to write was a growing repugnance to the concept and direction of the Western Art music tradition.

Instead of keeping abreast of developments in Western music, Edwards instead took solace in the sounds of the natural environment:

During this time my only serious listening was done sitting in the bush, listening more carefully than most of us get a chance to do to the natural sounds . . .

It helped me come to terms with the fact that all of the world's music must have originated, in some way from the sounds of nature And later, when I started writing again, it was especially the insect patterns and rhythms I'd heard that helped me. (Quoted in Skinner, 42)

During this time, Edwards worked on two experimental pieces, called Kan Touk I for voice, tape, two pianos, harp and percussion, and Kan Touk II for tape, which utilised insect sounds. The composer later found these pieces unsatisfactory, and consequently withdrew them.

1.7 The Sacred Series

In 1977 Edwards wrote Shadow D-Zone for instrumental sextet. This piece is the first of a series of quiet, contemplative works that all relate to the musical language pioneered in Mountain Village. Shadow D-Zone and its successors—The Tower of Remoteness for clarinet and piano (1978), Kumari for piano solo (1980), Etymalong, piano solo (1984), Reflections for percussion quartet (1985), Yarrageh for percussion and orchestra (1989) and Pond Light Mantras for two pianos (1991)—bear a striking resemblance to each other, in terms of their musical language. The language of this ‘sacred’ series, as it is known, is characteristically austere, still, quiet and contemplative in nature.⁷ A sense of timelessness is given by a lack of pulse—replaced by a quirky sense of periodicity. A sparse texture is characteristic, as is the focus on the use of space between sounds. A non-Western (or at least non-dualistic) sense of structure means that, as with Mountain Village, the sacred pieces have “no apparent direction nor any sense of climax or resolution . . .” (Edwards 1992a, 28).



In 1978, Edwards moved to Pearl Beach on the New South Wales central coast. It was this setting that provided much of the inspiration for most of the sacred music. The proximity of natural bushland with a nearby national park meant that the sounds of the insect chorus were a constant influence. The sound-world of the sacred pieces—the bell-like harmonies and characteristic periodicity—is said by the composer to have been distilled from the sounds of the natural environment. Edwards's intention is not necessarily to catalogue or imitate the sounds of the environment (although this also occurs) as with Messiaen, but to respond to the way in which the sounds occur.⁸ This can be heard in near (but never exact) symmetries, subtly varied repetitions of similar sounds and occasional interruptions to a musical texture.

⁷The term ‘sacred music’ was first applied to Edwards’s work by Corinne D’Aston (1985). The composer has, since, adopted its usage, considering it a convenient label, which is also accurate in terms of the music’s implied function.

⁸ The opening of The Tower of Remoteness is, for example, a virtual transcription of a bird-call which Edwards had heard at Pearl Beach. It was not until years after composing the piece that Edwards realised this had happened (Powles, 14).

The musical language of the works in the sacred series is highly inter-related. Typically to be found are bell-like sonorities on the piano, which Edwards calls ‘archetypes’, often played in the extreme high and low registers of the piano. Example 1.1 shows a number of these ‘archetypes’:

Example 1.1:

<p><u>The Tower of Remoteness</u></p> 	<p><u>Etymalong</u></p> 
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The sacred music also has a predominantly spiritual or meditative focus. The Tower of Remoteness, for example, has been compared with the eighteenth century Kinko tradition of Japanese music for the shakuhachi. Here the influence of Zen Buddhism is obvious. The composer is inviting a Zen-like emptying of the mind, which Hannan suggests is “helpful, if not essential to a deep appreciation of the very static but profoundly subtle qualities of the style” (1986, 14). Edwards considers this piece and the other sacred works to be “musical contemplation object[s]” (1992a, 30).

1.8 Transitional works

In 1979, Edwards needed to find a slightly different solution to composition than his two previous “sacred” pieces. Hartley Newnham’s commissioning of a song-cycle required a more expressionistic approach. For this work, Edwards set four poems by the poet Michael Dransfield, which deal with the relationship between humanity and landscape; themes found in the majority of Edwards pieces.⁹ Hamilton points out that accompaniment figures such as a minor ninth acciaccatura are also used in other sacred pieces such as Kumari (37). Edwards also introduced a degree of modality in this work, and occasional irregular ostinato figures, both features of the later ‘maninya’ series (see further Hamilton, 37-38).

Laikan, written for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, violin and cello, was written in the same year for the Fires of London ensemble.¹⁰ ‘Laikan’ is, according to Edwards, a Gothic word that is associated with liveliness, leaping, and dance. Despite the title, the outer movements display many of the austere and still qualities of the sacred music. Hannan, for example, claims that the first and last movements are “essentially speeded-up versions of the Tower [of Remoteness] style” (1986, 14). The second and fourth movements also have a sinuous, quasi-Oriental quality about them which hint at non-Western modalities. It is the exuberant third movement that proved to be prophetic in Edwards's stylistic development. This movement is a transcription of a Madagascan folk song, which has a strong tonal and modal leanings, a fast tempo and rhythmic vitality.¹¹ It paves the way for the musical language of the ‘maninya’ style.

⁹ Michael Dransfield was an Australian poet who died in 1973 at the age of 24.

¹⁰ Previously known as Laikan I. Edwards also wrote a Laikan II for the Flederman sextet, but this piece has been withdrawn.

¹¹ Edwards, while teaching the composer Michael Whiticker, discovered the recording of the Madagascan song. It appealed to Edwards so much that this was incorporated into the central movement of Laikan (Hannan, 1986 14).

1.9 The Maninya Series

In 1980, Edwards resigned from his teaching position at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music in order to compose full-time. This was a courageous step, considering that few Australian composers are able to make a sufficient living from composition. Perhaps buoyed by his recent compositional successes, Edwards embarked on a new compositional path with Maninya I for voice and cello in the following year.¹²

The composer writes:

About 1980, recognising my inability to work solely on a disembodied spiritual plane, but unwilling to relax the gnomic severity of the Sacred Series, I responded with enthusiasm to my own impulse to leap in a new direction and compose exuberant dance music. (Edwards 1992a, 30)

The word ‘maninya’ originated in the nonsense text Edwards devised for the first work of this series. Edwards now uses the term to denote a whole genre of his music whose essential musical characteristics are similar to Maninya I.¹³ This work for voice and cello spawned a whole series of chamber and vocal pieces also with the title Maninya. These include Maninya II for string quartet (1982), Maninya III for wind quintet (1985), Maninya IV for clarinet, trombone and percussion (1985), and Maninya V for voice and piano (1986). Maninya I was revised in 1986, with the composer extending the work with an introduction and coda. This new, quick style of music dominates Edwards's output in the 1980s.¹⁴ Other pieces in this style include the Piano Concerto (1982), Marimba Dances (1982), Flower Songs (1987) and the Violin Concerto Maninyas (1988), which is partly a re-working of material found in Maninya I and Maninya V.

The maninya music employs a number of techniques that have been likened to those used by American minimalist composers, such as Steve Reich. These musical

¹² The idea of Maninya I, first occurred to Edwards as early as 1971, while he was in England.

¹³ Hannan also suggests the possible influence of Sculthorpe's Song of Tailitnama (1974) on Maninya I (1986, 15).

¹⁴ Although the maninya music is mainly of a fast tempo, there is also a slower maninya style. A fast movement is often juxtaposed with a slower tempo movement in pieces such as Maninya III, Maninya V and Flower Songs.

techniques include a use of a simple modality, the use of prolonged drones, and a repetition of a small number of musical ideas. Edwards's unique musical personality guarantees that his use of 'minimalist' techniques are very much his own, by subjecting musical material to a constant variety of unexpected permutations in order to achieve asymmetrical structures also found in the sacred series.¹⁵

Edwards also claims that various non-Western musics are influential in the maninya pieces:

African mbira [thumb piano] music, for example, may have contributed to the characteristic terseness and angularity of the melodic shapes; the heterophonic interweaving of the lines sometimes produces a gamelan-like texture; the harmony is static and drone-based; and there is much use of scales from India, Indonesia and Japan. (Edwards 1992a, 30).

On the whole, the instrumental works in the maninya series are based on cell-like repetitions shown as follows (see Example 1.2).

¹⁵ Edwards was aware of some surface similarities between the maninya music and the American minimalists. He had never studied in detail works by composers such as Reich or Glass and was only superficially aware of the types of techniques they used.

Example 1.2

From Maninya II for string quartet (1982)

From Maninya IV for clarinet, trombone and marimba (1985)

The instrumental pieces also have a busier texture than do the vocal works. Edwards's approach to Maninya I and Maninya V is to write an impulsive melodic line over a series of accompaniment drones. In the central, fast section of Maninya I, for example, Edwards composes “a set of evolving melodic variations, decorating two chords (B7 and E) which alternate in asymmetrical ways” (Hannan 1986, 15).¹⁶

¹⁶ Edwards does not think of his harmonies in conventional western terms, such as used here by Hannan. The harmonies result from verticalisations of pentatonic scales.

Edwards maintains that the essential compositional and structural principles are the same in both the maninya and sacred idioms of music and that the maninya series uses rhythms that resemble accelerated insect sounds. Andrew Ford comments that “like the serial Schoenberg insisting he was still writing in the same style as Transfigured Night, the similarities have not always been apparent to Edwards's listeners” (1993a, 99). Jonathon Powles attempts to show structural similarities in the maninya and sacred music by means of relating both styles to patterns of sound found in the wilderness near Pearl Beach. He finds four main patterns in the insect sounds: accelerating (which he calls an ‘opening pattern’), decelerating (‘closing’), ‘circular’ (a combination of the previous two) and irregular patterns. Examples of these patterns are given in The Tower of Remoteness and Maninya V. The deficiency of this theory lies in the rather basic and inadequate entomology. Despite Powles’s assertion that there are ‘opening’, ‘closing’ and ‘circular’ patterns in each piece, irregular patterns seem to be predominant throughout the sacred series.

Rather than look to the source of Edwards’s inspiration—and it should be remembered that Edwards claims his music is an interpretation or ‘distillation’ of environmental sounds, and not those sounds themselves—other similarities can be found between the two styles. Edwards claims that his working methods are essentially the same in each style and that the maninya music is a step further from the resemblance to natural sounds than is the sacred music. It can be seen in both styles that Edwards maintains a similar attitude, in terms of using a very small number of musical gestures and subjecting them to small, asymmetrical variations or repetitions. Both styles are essentially non-dualistic. Smaller fragments—either the cell-like motifs of the maninya style or the archetypes of the sacred music—are organised into larger tableaux.

Although Maninya I was the first example of Edwards's new compositional style, its public face was the Piano Concerto (1982). A studio recording of the work was produced in 1983, and broadcast on ABC radio with Dennis Hennig the soloist, and Myer Fredman conducting the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. In following years this work received acclaim from the general public, but condemnation from some

critics. This piece, with its virtuosic flamboyancy and three movement structure, in many ways fulfils the traditional expectations of a concerto. Edwards was strongly criticised for ‘selling-out’ in his strong use of tonality and simple repeated motifs. After the concerto was performed at the London Proms in 1988, for example, a critic from the Times wrote that it was “the sort of piece that gives A major a bad name” (quoted in Ford 1993a, 100). Roger Covell’s more balanced appraisal of the piece suggests that Edwards “may have become distracted by the term piano concerto and its conventional three-movement layout” and that a smaller work “may be waiting to be rescued from a relatively uncongenial format” (1990, 14).¹⁷

It appears that Edwards was aware of the controversy this piece would create, insisting in the original programme note that this overt use of modality would be a once-off eccentricity, and that there would be nothing like it again.¹⁸ Despite the sometimes negative reviews in the Sydney papers, Edwards persisted with the maninya idiom, and far from being an eccentricity it was the main force in Edwards's music for the decade of the 1980s.

¹⁷ In an earlier review, Covell shows less reserve, writing that “the concerto has some nice jumping metres in the finale, much agreeably spread keyboard writing . . . and many melodious phrases” (1984, n.p.)

¹⁸ In recent years, Edwards has distanced himself somewhat from the Piano Concerto, claiming the piece is flawed. He has not, however, distanced himself from the musical idiom.

1.10 Christina's World and Other Developments: 1980 to 1987

In 1983, Edwards was commissioned by The Seymour Group to compose the chamber opera, Christina's World, with a libretto written by Dorothy Hewett. In that year, Edwards was also composer-in-residence at the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. He was given only eight months to write a sixty-four-minute work; for a confessed slow composer, Edwards found this extremely difficult work (Webster, 3). Nevertheless, he considers it one of his best pieces. The musical language of Christina's World is largely derived from his maninya idiom: there are many dance-like sections that are obviously derived from the types of instrumental flourishes found in the Piano Concerto. The necessities of a staged production and the treatment of a text meant that Edwards also drew on various other styles:

I had to therefore. . . choose an idiom that was appropriate [to the libretto]. I came up with a kind of Anglo-Celtic folk music style. It would have been impossible to use, say, Aboriginal, or European music, as it's a simple story on the surface. . . . The music couldn't have a sophisticated or atonal idiom. (Quoted in Webster, 3)

Little musicological comment has been made on this, Edwards's longest work. It stands somewhat outside his oeuvre, which may explain its lack of attention. In its original version, it received only a small-scale production, with the Seymour Group sextet as instrumentalists with two mezzo sopranos, a baritone and a bass. In 1989, Edwards, with the financial assistance of the Don Banks memorial fellowship, fully revised the score for a larger chamber ensemble of twelve instruments for a proposed workshop production by the Australian Opera, that year. To the original line-up of flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin and cello, Edwards added more strings, a trumpet, trombone, cor anglais and bassoon. He also augmented the vocalists with the addition of a tenor.

In an unfortunate incident, the planned Australian Opera production of Christina's World was cancelled before its season began. Edwards was, at the time, holidaying in

the country when the decision was made to dismiss the producer, Peter King. A recording of the revised score was made, although this was not entirely to Edwards's satisfaction. This work is yet to receive the production it deserves.

In 1984 Edwards returned once more to writing pieces of a still, contemplative nature. Etymalong, a piece for solo piano, was written for pianist Sally Mays, and is the first sacred piece since Kumari (1980-1981). Another sacred work for the percussion quartet Synergy followed in 1985. Although written for percussion quartet, this work is dominated by the piano, the instrument used in each of the sacred pieces.

By 1985, Edwards had moved from Pearl Beach to a house in the Sydney suburb of Paddington. Here he did not have the direct contact with the natural environment, which had been a constant source of inspiration. Etymalong is, in many ways, a farewell to Pearl Beach, while Reflections is just that; a reflection on the natural wilderness from the busy pace of the city. Passages of a more complex texture found in Reflections may have been influenced by the return to a city environment. Edwards had completed his Maninya cycle with Maninya V for voice and piano in 1986. This work is written for Hartley Newnham, and uses a re-arrangement of the text in Maninya I.

Apart from the series of orchestral works that preoccupied Edwards in the late 1980s, he also wrote Flower Songs for sixteen voices and two percussionists (1987). This work, which is recognisably a maninya piece, uses as its text the scientific Latin names of Australian native flowers. Edwards prefers to use an abstract text (as he also has in Maninya I and Maninya V) than to make musical comment on a literary text (Mills and Edwards 1988, 56).

1.11 ABC Orchestral Commissions: 1988-1993

For the Australian bicentenary, the ABC awarded a number of orchestral commissions to Australian composers, including Ross Edwards. The terms of commission were for a violin concerto with Dene Olding as soloist. Edwards, who had only occasionally re-used material up to this point, decided upon orchestrating Maninya I and the first movement of Maninya V for the outer fast movements of the work, hence the title Maninyas. The orchestration is lush and the vocal line in the chamber pieces is replaced by a flamboyant solo violin part. An Intermezzo quasi Cadenza was written for the middle movement, which makes some reference to Monos I (Johnson 1988, 7). The string 'chorale' in the second movement also evokes the pastoral quality of certain passages in Christina's World. This work has a retrospective quality about it, in its re-use of material. Like Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards has shown an increasing tendency to re-use material, a trend that dominates Edwards's works from 1988 onwards.

Maninyas was received well by the public, and has received repeat performances in 1990 and 1992. It has also received a sometimes vitriolic reception from certain critics, for example:

In encouraging short-range listening, Edwards makes the three-movement format of the piece [Maninyas] feel like an empty shell. It in no way grows from an inner necessity of the style but is rather a convenient mould in which to pour idle sonic doodlings reminiscent of the harmless but inconsequential ramblings of Hare Krishna street dancers. (McCallum 1990, 12)

Others, however, have been more open to its idiom, and perceive a sense of timeliness for the piece.

It is a fresh, original work, unmistakably of our time but calling on elements and qualities many contemporary composers believe to be exhausted. . . . He uses consonance with respect and dissonance with affection and sets up and teases out harmonic ideas with enough ingenuity to restore to minimalism the good name it had before its infinitely reflective possibilities became besmirched in grubby hands. (Silisbury, 2)

In the following year, apart from revising Christina's World, Edwards wrote Yarrageh, subtitled 'Nocturne for Percussion and Orchestra'. The terms of this ABC commission were for a percussion concerto. Rather than respond with another flamboyant piece, such as the Violin Concerto, Edwards went to the opposite extreme, resulting in one of Edwards's finest pieces in the sacred style. The percussion part, far from being flamboyant and concerto-like, is subtle and mysterious. The piano is also given an important role in this work, consistent with the rest of the sacred series.

For this work, Edwards requests that the lighting be dimmed and the orchestra given pit-stands. This idea was one Edwards had been keen to experiment with since 1983. This time, he wrote his intentions on the score, and was delighted when they were taken seriously.

In 1990, Edwards received an Australian Artists' Creative Fellowship, which guaranteed an income for four years. This has liberated Edwards from financial constraints, and has resulted in a prolific output in the years up to 1993. Edwards next work, Aria and Transcendental Dance for Horn and Strings received a mixed reception from the critics. Despite the obvious commitment of the soloists, Hector McDonald and Robert Johnson, the New South Wales performances were not helped by an unflattering acoustic at Cuff Hall, Blue Mountains Grammar School, and at the Everest Theatre in the Seymour Centre, Sydney.¹⁹

In 1991, Edwards moved to Leura in the Blue Mountains. Here, Symphony Da Pacem Domine was written. Begun about the time of the Gulf War in January 1991, the Symphony is a large work, thirty minutes in length, and of an overtly ritualistic nature.

¹⁹ McDonald performed at Cuff Hall, while Johnson performed in the Everest Theatre concert.

Its Latin title, which means ‘Give Peace, Lord’ is taken from a fragment of plainchant which Edwards uses in the pivotal section of this work. The brooding and quiet nature of this work align it with the character of the sacred series, and its subject matter is also primarily spiritual. The musical language is, however, more like the maninya series in its use of modality. This work, far from being a traditional symphony, is a single movement work that has a basic arch shape, and is more architectonic than most of Edwards's output since his ‘modernist’ pieces of the 1960s and early 1970s. The work is dedicated to Stuart Challender, the chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, who died after a long illness in 1991. As such, the piece is, on one level, a threnody for Stuart Challender. On a more universal level, it is a public ritual, confronting issues of death and inner peace.

The most recent ABC commission is a dance work for Television, with Graham Murphy’s Sydney Dance Company and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra entitled Sensing. Much of the musical material relates to past pieces, such as Laikan and Yarrageh. Complex textures are built up from the free alignment of parts and the incorporation of recorded sounds from the natural environment.

1.12 Other Developments

In addition to the large orchestral commissions, Edwards has worked on a variety of other projects on a smaller scale. In 1988, Three Children’s Pieces for piano were completed; only the first two pieces are published. Edwards also re-arranged three recorder duets to form the Three Little Piano Duets (1982). Ecstatic Dances, completed in 1990, is a work for two flutes in two movements, the second of which has recently been re-arranged for viola and cello for the Brisbane-based Perihelion ensemble. This second ‘dance’ is a revised and extended version of a flute duet written to mark the occasion of Peter Sculthorpe’s 50th birthday in 1979. This piece (written in 1978) is a pre-cursor to the maninya series and one that pre-dates Laikan.

In 1991 Edwards composed Prelude and Dragonfly Dance, which was the John Bishop memorial commission for 1992. Its first performance was at the Adelaide Festival of 1992. Although no new ground is broken in terms of harmonic language, the opposition of styles in its two parts is an innovation. The 'Prelude' is essentially in the sacred idiom; the use of Japanese temple bowls and the marimba is very much like Yarrageh, although without the use of the archetypal piano sounds of this style. The 'Dragonfly Dance' uses the pulsing rhythms and drones of the maninya style in a very well crafted movement. The marimba writing in both movements is reminiscent of the idiom found in Marimba Dances (1982). Edwards composed the first movement as a 'mind-clearing exercise' so that the dance-like style may be heard in the light of the meditative style.

Two 'Mantra' works, written between 1991 and 1992 form a conceptual pair derived from the different sides of Edwards's musical personality, and deal with ideas of transcendental meditation and ritual. These two works are about radical notions of constant repetition and reduction of musical material. Pond Light Mantras is a work written in collaboration with video sculptor Joan Brassil for an installation in the NSW Art Gallery in May 1992. Edwards has expressed a desire to compose music for certain contexts other than concert hall. Here he used the opportunity to write a work where he could experiment with music on different temporal planes, in order to release the strong hold on structure that he maintains on most of his other works. Pond Light Mantras is a work for two pianos, which reduces the sound material to only three motifs derived from the earlier sacred pieces The Tower of Remoteness and Etymalong. The two piano parts are of unequal length and are repeated constantly so they form the equivalent of musical mobiles, constantly overlapping and intersecting. Dance Mantra for six voices is a one-page piece for six voices and drum, written for the Sounds Australian awards in 1992. As its title implies, Dance Mantra is a maninya style piece but one (unlike Pond Light Mantras) which does not re-use musical material from previous pieces. These works imply private and public rituals, respectively, and are a part of Edwards's desire to produce music of a more utilitarian nature, outside the context of the concert-hall.

Other recent works continue Edwards's retrospective outlook, as well as a continuing search for the sacred. Black Mountain Duos (1992) for two cellos re-uses material from Christina's World and displays some textural similarities with Maninya II.²⁰ Here also, fast and slow styles are opposed. Veni Creator Spiritus, for String Octet (1993) was written for the St Martin-in-the-Fields octet and received its first performance in Sydney on November 5 1993. It continues the harmonic idiom of the Symphony, synthesising it with a dance style in its second movement. Here Edwards's recent renewal of interest in European modality and plainchant is developed with the Veni Creator Spiritus used as a cantus firmus in the first moment.²¹ As with many of Edwards's recent works, a faster second movement is juxtaposed against the more meditative first movement. Although Edwards claims that his works are essentially non-dualistic, a duality of styles—present separately in the maninya and sacred music—has more recently been drawn together as opposing halves to form the one work.

²⁰ A Black Mountain overlooks the ACT home of cellist David Pereira; thus, appropriately, both Pereira and Dorothy Hewett's Christina live 'under Black Mountain'.

²¹ Edwards's nativity play, Quem Quaeritis (1967) makes much use of European modality and plainchants as canti firmi.