

THE PHYSICS ROOM

A CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT SPACE

A Sonic Arts Review

Dr Malcolm Riddoch

On this particular sunny mid-winter's day, walking up to the ruins of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Lyttelton, Aotearoa New Zealand, one would have been met with a peculiar *mise en scène*, framed through the wire mesh barricades that have become a familiar part of the rebuilding furniture of post-earthquake Canterbury. Four speakers on stands straddle centre stage with a new (old), transplanted weatherboard church to the left; torn plastic sheets fluttering in its still glassless windows; and behind it all the lovely vistas of Whakaraupo. It's quiet apart from the mild breeze until the four speakers spark up, multilayered with laughter, people talking and what appear to be vocal exercises for a choir – and so the work begins.

A quadrasonic electroacoustic composition can be heard in four sections, over about 20 minutes; the first three building on one another as the makeshift choir slowly comes together as it constantly falls apart, as rehearsing choirs do, until a more traditional music form begins to emerge from the textured and at times beautifully dissonant chaos. After a short silence the fourth and final section suddenly resolves as the choir lifts into a surprisingly sublime rendition of Thomas Tallis' 16th century polyphonic choral anthem 'If ye love me'. The aural effect of the whole composition as it works towards its resolution is very engaging, an engagement amplified by its installation in the sacred grounds of the ruined but rebuilding Church of the Holy Trinity.

Olivia Webb's 'Voices Project' is both a performance and installation produced over a month of recordings with three different choirs drawn from both the secular and religious communities of three parishes and installed for a day in three church grounds, in and around Ōtautahi Christchurch. Each version of the recorded work features the choir from that parish singing in their newly displaced churches and reproduced in the grounds of their ruined church; the same four sections resolving into the same sublime anthem. The intimately site-specific nature of the work however brings a distinct sensibility to the listening experience at each church; a fractured sublime reflecting the fractured divinity of each ruined and rebuilding sacred place.

St Francis of Assisi Church in Mairehau lacks the wire barricades, as its old church site provides a clean concrete surface to walk up to and around the speakers while an active parish life fills the old community hall – now a devotional space – that forms the backdrop. The busy hum of midday traffic from the road opposite completes this sense

of activity and renewed life of the parish, a sense reflected in the exertions of their choir as they work towards their own communal, anthemic transcendence.

It is here that the resemblance with Janet Cardiff's sonic artwork '40 Part Motet' is for me the most striking, and Webb acknowledges its influence on the development of the 'Voices Project'. Being able to walk around and between the spatialised sounds brings a new intimacy to the work, allowing one to isolate and focus on the different aspects and voices of the composition, albeit with 4 speakers rather than Cardiff's 40. Likewise, Cardiff's work begins with an intermission in which you can hear the individual choristers of the Salisbury Cathedral Choir whispering to one another and preparing for the next recording session before launching into a glorious rendition of Tallis' masterwork 'Spem in Alium'. However, where Cardiff allows us a brief moment of intimacy with the choir, Webb immerses us in the life of her choirs, off-pitch warts and all, and takes us on an aural journey that revolves not just around the sublime nature of Tallis' musical compositions but also around the rebuilding of community, of the communal musical relations between choristers, and of the parish communities they represent within the wider regional community of Canterbury.

The third and final version of the work takes place that eve in front of the monumental ruin of the Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Christchurch Central City. While listening once again from behind the wire barricades, this time with a large-scale video projection over the Basilica's walls to light our way, the choir (now located in the nearby St Mary's Pro-Cathedral) laughs and diligently works their way through to their own sublime quadraphonic crescendo. The sense of place here is monumental, it reminds me of Rome, and so too are the sounds themselves with the Pro-Cathedral's lovely acoustic reverb lending its own smooth weight to the final recording.

The 'Voices Project' functions as a documentation of a performance project, as well as a site-specific sound art installation and an electroacoustic composition in its own right. This versatility is evident irrespective of one's own belief or otherwise in a god or gods. And beyond the quiet humility of the parish, or the ongoing secular difficulties of post-earthquake Canterbury, Webb's sonic artwork speaks to the transcendence of human frailty – the transcendence of life and its constant dissolution in the sublime and its all too human divinity.