Every country is my country: the music of Penelope Thwaites

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Context shapes and enriches the imagination,' says composer Penelope Thwaites in her notes for a new disc of her choral compositions out on SOMM, *From Five Continents* – music that refers to her travels as a musician over the world. Context is a central thread: 'I find it a very creative thing to write for particular performers or occasions. I was very lucky in this most recent recording as I had three wonderful soloists – Carolyn Sampson, James Gilchrist and William Dazeley – and a terrific choir, Ex Cathedra, under Jeffrey Skidmore.'

This is the first commercial recording of Thwaites' music – she is generally known as a pianist, particularly for her recordings of Grainger. 'The two things feed into one another. My approach to writing music is based on melody, rhythm and harmony. When I went to university (in Melbourne), I have to say that two of those factors were basically ruled out, melody and harmony. It's interesting how times change; and timing is everything. In fact, the music on this disc belongs to my whole life and it covers a long period, and it was interesting to choose – there's quite a lot more music I've written I hope will appear.' After hearing the disc I hope so too, as the variety is remarkable, as is the level of invention and the concise, effective way Thwaites composes. 'You have to be yourself as a composer. And that's quite difficult.'

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Influences come from a variety of angles, including musical theatre. 'When I was quite young, I realised that if I couldn't write music like Beethoven then I'd be inspired by Richard Rodgers; and for me the top notch is Bernstein's *West Side Story*. The rich heritage of music: Bach (may he live forever), there's everything in that music. The introduction of the chorales into his great works, so that the ordinary person was part of this fantastic piece of music: the idea of that communication ties in with my respect for Grainger's music. He had a genuine respect and response to the folk singers he met, and because he respected them they were prepared to share their tunes.'

Being authentic, too, comes across in Thwaites' disc. Her word setting is very sensitive, and there is a lovely, restrained piece of liturgical music in the *Missa brevis*. Thwaites is very modest about this piece. She refers to it, apart from the Gloria, as 'series of prayers'. A commission from the oldest church in Canberra, the music reflects Thwaites' enthusiasm for this text: 'I was suddenly captivated by the magnificence of those Latin words. It's something of a theme throughout the disc – I consider it a privilege to set some of the most marvellous words, whether it's the Psalms, or the *Missa brevis*, or Shakespeare, or John Henry Newman, or Teresa of Avila, I do respond to it on the basis of the powerful faith that comes through these words.' The disc travels across, as the title implies, the world. Perhaps, while her faith is clearly paramount to her, it is in her enthusiasm for Shakespeare that gives us the starting point (*Five Shakespeare Songs*); and here, as she says, 'it was wonderful to discover that each of those three soloists is particularly word-orientated'.

Thwaites had previously researched North Indian music. 'It was at Melbourne. Ethnomusicology was starting to take hold. To the Western ear, the rhythm is one of the things that absolutely grabs you. We were discovering other cultures. What I wrote sounded quite Bollywood-ish.' India is joined by Africa (*Kano*) and Australia (*Walkabout*): 'Every country is my country' is Thwaites' credo, and as she herself says: 'Well, it's not a bad credo.' Indeed.