

## Richard Bowers: Nocturne

(Simulacrum: No number)

Richard Bowers (composition)

These three extended electroacoustic compositions are superficially a part of the "dark ambient" tradition, if tradition it is. They're full of incredibly slow-moving textures, brooding industrial grinding and horror-movie clankings and scrapings. That, at least, is what's on the surface.

Even dealt with on that level, this is very successful music. Its determinedly minimal approach helps here; it seems to try to do just one or two things at a time, and that works in its favour by intensifying those specific effects. While there is an eeriness in all three pieces, it's not an easy, Hollywood "spookiness" but a gradual, creeping sense of unease.

If that was all there was in these pieces, they would make nice soundtrack material but little else. There is, however, a lot more under the surface. What's nice is that this "more" isn't the result of additional sounds in the mix, but of the choice of sounds and the procedures they're involved in. Just about anyone can create complexity out of maximalistic, multi-layered events; simultaneity, while it can be exciting, can also be terribly lazy. It's much harder to get the right kind of complexity out of electronic music, a complexity which doesn't lean on simple complexification.

What Bowers does, then, is picks his sounds with care. The most important reference, for all three works but especially "Nocturne" and "Procession" is choral music. He samples choral music and distorts it to create some of his sounds, but that's just a clue to what's really going on. His drawn-out metallic sounds initially recall bowed gongs and cymbals, but on reflection their proximity to the spectral voices of Ligeti's choral works, or even Byrd's, becomes surprisingly obvious. These sounds are so much a part of this music that the connection with vocal music seems undeniably important, not just a touch of local colour.

The tradition of choral music, of course, is strongly associated with ritual, whether religious or secular. Bowers makes that connection, too. Again there's an obvious clue; this time it's the title of the third work here, "Procession". That piece is the most obviously ceremonial, with its largo rhythm on a gong-like sound pacing as slowly as a high church processional under the sweeping, agonisingly gradual glissandi of his inhuman chorus. "Procession" also makes reference, in its sound-world, to Chinese Gagaku music, plucked koto-like sounds punctuating, again oh-so-slowly, the gongs and endlessly reverberating bells.

If the slowness of his music sounds ponderous, however, it isn't, and that's one of its great virtues. Because of the relative lack of density, there's an airiness here which can summon up quite different images from the oppressively stuffy formalities to which Bowers is obviously indebted. That's most obvious in the central "...of Landscapes", with its predominantly high-pitched sounds and its acousmatic recollections of natural sounds, the rush of the ocean, the wind and the rustle of leaves, but these features are in all three pieces, even "Procession".

It's that duality which makes this music so interesting. Far from crude picture-painting, Bowers works his different textures together to produce open, re-interpretable compositions which resist a closed reading. The uncertainty this produces leads to stuff you can listen to again and again, and always find something new in it. While music which deals with extreme slowness and dissonance can often be unremittingly harsh or just plain boring, Bowers, through careful selection, always avoids the grinding unpleasantness which can come with the territory.

Richard Cochrane

Simulacrum records are distributed in the UK by Unsound Automatic

[Review by Richard Cochrane from his Musings website]