



Music

Small Town [1963], by Peter SCULTHORPE [born 29 April 1929]

With studio guest Vincent Plush, Griffith University, Brisbane

This short orchestral work springs from one of those canny and prescient observations by D.H. Lawrence. In his novel **Kangaroo**, we read the following description of the NSW coastal town where he and Frieda lived for several months in 1923, at “Wyewurk” in Thirroul, once a coal-mining town hugging the coastal escarpment north of Wollongong:

It was a wonderful main Street, and ... out of the wind. There were several large but rather scaring brown hotels, with balconies all around: there was a yellow stucco church with a red-painted tin steeple, like a weird toy: there were high roofs and low roofs, all corrugated iron: and you came to an opening and there...were one or two forlorn bungalows inside their wooden palings, and then the void... the memorial to the fallen soldiers.. had ‘Lest we forget’ for a motto. Carved at the bottom step it said ‘Unveiled by Grannie Rhys’. A real township monument, bearing the names of everyone possible: the fallen, all those who donned khaki, the people who presented it, and Grannie Rhys.

Forty years later, Peter Sculthorpe envisaged Thirroul as the quintessential Australian town, frozen in a more innocent time, rather like the towns in the paintings of his close friend Russell Drysdale. He wanted his music “to sing of all small Australian towns” which, as Drysdale knew, seemed “to dwell forever”.

Small Town began life as part of a radiophonic work called **The Fifth Continent**, some of which was composed in early 1963 during a working holiday Sculthorpe and Drysdale took together, sharing a house on the Tamar River, near the composer’s Tasmanian birthplace, Launceston. While Drysdale made a number of sketches for the series of paintings called **The Country Funeral**, Sculthorpe composed music for the piece the ABC had commissioned for entry in the 1963 Italia Prize.

With its text by D.H. Lawrence, **The Fifth Continent** was first performed live as a concert piece in the Hobart Town Hall on 13th December 1963. Thomas Matthews conducted the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, and the narrator was the eminent poet James McAuley, who, as an amateur composer in his early 20s, himself had set the Lawrence text **Green** to music.

Small Town was the third movement of the larger work and Sculthorpe re-arranged it for a small orchestra of solo oboe, two trumpets, timpani, two percussion, harp and strings. He retained the harmonic progression of that old evergreen song, **Heart and Soul**, a favourite of Drysdale’s, and dedicated the work to his painter friend. The central section of the work has two trumpets playing ‘The Last Post’ in canon. In the early MSO recording session, several senior players accused Sculthorpe of “demeaning the Anzac spirit”. Today it is often used to accompany radio and television broadcasts of civic occasions, Anzac Day processions and at the funerals of such eminent Australians as Arthur Boyd.

Perhaps the most frequently played of all Sculthorpe’s orchestral music, it was also a favourite work of Aaron Copland, whose own **Quiet City** is almost a long-lost twin. Copland’s music had been important to Sculthorpe in fashioning his own musical style and language and the connections between the two composers in these two works can now be viewed as close and intently personal.

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Kelly Trench
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