

Salt Spirits Program Note

My encounter with Lake Ballard, like that of most visitors, started with a long journey. Passing over several days from hectic, maddening Sydney through Perth, Kalgoorlie, and Menzies, as the populations shrank, the surrounding space expanded, and the horizon broadened, I felt myself shedding the layers of mundane care. By the time I arrived at the Lake my head was clear and my soul quiet, open and ready to absorb whatever experience Lake Ballard presented.

For the local Wangkatha people Lake Ballard has significance as one of the places The Seven Sisters came to earth. The Sisters saw the lake shining white in the moonlight and came down from the stars to play. A man chased them around trying to catch the youngest one. The Sisters hid in rock holes then came up through the lake forming the low hills which punctuate the surface. When you walk out onto the lake, you are moving into their terrain and walking amongst their spirits. For me it certainly has the feeling of a solemn, sacred place, just like walking into a large cathedral.

My preconceived notion of what a salt lake would be like was of a flat expanse baked hard in the sun, unyielding and lifeless. However, the reality is quite different – Lake Ballard is a vital, many-layered place. The salt forms only a thin crust over a deep layer of thick wet clay that sits on a bed of gravel, so that as you walk further away from shore the surface underfoot becomes increasingly boggy. Within the nutrient-rich clay life lays hidden: dormant eggs of brine shrimp and micro-organisms wait for the flooding rains that come on average only every twenty years. When the rains do come, however, the lake explodes with life – the water teems with minute crustaceans, and thousands of migratory wading birds arrive out of nowhere to feed and breed. When the waters recede the birds move on, the organisms return to their

dormant state within the clay, and the surface of Lake Ballard again stretches white and flat to the horizon.

Into this landscape the English sculptor Antony Gormley has created "Inside Australia", an installation of fifty-one human figures dotted over the lake. Each of these "Insiders" is unique, modelled on one of the residents of Menzies, Lake Ballard's closest town. Gormley's technique was to take a full body scan of each person, reduce the body mass by two thirds, then cast it in a stainless steel alloy. The result is a shrunken, semi-abstract form still oddly identifiable as an individual distilled to its essence. The figures look weathered and shaped by the environment, somehow fragile yet tenacious and resolute. They stand apart from each other, each facing away from all the others – solitary, self-reliant, yet obviously a community. They are compelling, urging you to walk out to meet them. So separate are they that only as you get close to one figure do next ones become visible. They draw you on, coaxing you from one to another far out into the lake. And as you walk your footsteps leave trails in the surface, churning over the salt and exposing the mud beneath.

The impressions from my first visit live vividly within me. The sun shone but there was rain round about with thick clouds visible in the distance. Time seemed to pass more slowly; I could sense ancient and ageless forces moving at glacial pace. From the shore the lake looked vast and quiet, and I moved out onto the surface into a strong wind that gusted and scudded over the salt. I climbed the low conical hill rising just offshore. From this vantage I could see rain falling on the horizon, and with nothing to break its careering rush the wind was like a gale, throwing occasional heavy raindrops horizontally into my face. I sat on a stone amid the low scrub that clung to the rocky hilltop, and saw a butterfly trying to alight on a bush. I was mesmerised by this beautiful delicate thing, buffeted by the turbulent wind and battling to land, determined and persevering, and ultimately rewarded with safe harbour amongst the leaves and nourishment from the small flowers.

From this knoll you also get a different perspective on the Insiders down below. You can see many of them arrayed over the lake surface, still isolated but not solitary – they are connected by the trails of footprints left by visitors journeying between them, like a filigree web gently binding them to one another while allowing each its own identity and space. It is a beautiful metaphor of the interconnectedness of humanity, showing how people remain linked to one another even when they appear to be different and alone.

Life here is tough and hard, but not cruel. You can't expect this place to embrace and nurture you, but it won't desert you. You need to bring your own grit, determination, and strength with you. If you do that, and you open yourself to the spirit of the Lake, I feel it will lend you its wisdom, join its own strength and tenacity to yours, and together see you safely through any difficulty.

These are the impressions and feelings I've tried to evoke in my music. The opening section is built on a six-note "lake" motif A-Bb-E-D-F-E. The saxophone presents it hesitantly at first, with inchoate phrases unfettered by strict meter. Set in a sparse and spacious texture, with all instruments using non-conventional playing techniques, I hope to evince a sense of the vast otherness of the landscape – strange and timeless, quiet with a latent force beneath. As it unfolds the motif expands and reveals more lyrical qualities, just as the Lake slowly reveals its secrets. The melody floats up and dissolves as the wind becomes more insistent, with the vibraphone and piano setting up a restless, swirling accompaniment to the entry of the voices. The first phrases of this vocal melody hover around the tonic, unable to find direction, moving away but always returning. This motion is echoed in the harmony which remains close to the tonic chord. When the wind gusts and the spirits of the lake are invoked, the harmony releases, the melody is freed and begins to soar. The crescendo peaks on the Wangkatha word *tamarlpa* ("prepared, ready"), but the wind quickly disperses the energy and the melody drops low on *kumpilpa* ("hidden"). Now the broad harmonic stasis and opening "lake" motif return, but here the sounds ebb

and flow, eddying, overlapping, the notes' beginning and end carried away on the moiling wind. The accompaniment swells and heaves, the harmony slowly shifts, and the voices echo the lake motif. For a moment the atmosphere seems to calm, but resurges and leads into a stronger reworking of the choral melody. The wind now carries the voices of the lake's spirits strongly and distinctly, telling us they will support and work together with us. The energy spills over exultantly on the word *iyaltu* ("together"); we finally "arrive" harmonically, and the soaring, floating melody takes on more rhythmic impetus. This final section's theme is presented in canon at the unison – individuals working together in the same direction. Then the voices develop the canon in rhythmic augmentation (with the answer starting a 4th higher), adding a sense of resolute determination, while the original version of it continues in the saxophone. Finally, with its energy spent, the wind dies down. It disperses and we hear the "lake" motif echoing distantly in very high string harmonics, slowly fading into the calmness.

I'm deeply grateful to the Moorambilla Voices singers for giving such spirit to this recording. The music makes technical and emotional demands which these young people handled with greater musicality and maturity than I could have wished for; they poured their whole heart into it. Also to the orchestral musicians, whose incredible skill and musicality drew beautiful colours and nuance from the little black dots I gave them. And, of course, to Michelle whose astonishing generosity and musicality breathed life into my scribbles and gave them true soul. Thank you all.