

music < forum:

VOL. 12 NO. 1, NOVEMBER 2005 - JANUARY 2006. ISSN 1327-9300 \$9.50



MUSIC COUNCIL FREEDMAN JAZZ FELLOW 2005

Matt McMahon

HOWARD GOODALL ON THE NEW MUSIC EDUCATION

INTERVIEWS WITH LAYLA, HIP HOP FEMCEE, PETER WINKLER, COMMUNITY MUSICIAN

MALCOLM GILLIES ON A NEW POSITIONING FOR ORCHESTRAS

NZ ROCK: STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

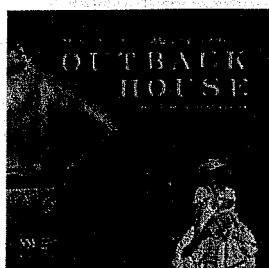
FLAME AWARDS FOR SCHOOL MUSIC PROGRAMS: YES, VIRGINIA

FOLK MUSIC REVOLUTION IN AUSTRALIA

FILM MUSIC

Outback House

Music composed by Art Phillips
ABC DVD and ABC Music 5046797412
Review by Mark Evans



The latest in a series of 'period reality' television shows, *Outback House* was touted as the "adventure of a lifetime for a group of intrepid Australians who travel back in time to spend three months running a remote 19th century sheep station exactly as our forbears

did in 1861" (DVD jacket). Participants had only the "tools of the time" with which to combat the harsh realities of life in the outback during 1861. Although not restricted to the tools of the time, the challenge for composer Art Phillips was to create a score that echoed and enhanced the rather specific context of the series.

With the commencement of the *Theme from Outback House*, at the beginning of Episode One, it is hard not to be drawn back to the archetypal 'isn't this going to be fun' frontier music associated with the movie *City Slickers* (1991). Indeed the theme works almost for this reason – it promises much. Even if the action of the show and emotional attachment to characters is still a long way off, Phillips gives us hope to believe these things are all in hand. Mention must be made too of the oft forgotten sound mixer, for as the theme rumbles on, spot effects (whips cracking etc) are neatly worked into Phillips' composition. This integration is to become a major feature of the sound design throughout the series, for which those involved must be commended.

Several traits of the soundtrack design are established within the first episode of the series. Firstly, it is clear that Phillips' primary weapon in portraying the open expanse of Oxley Downs, and the isolated flashes of drama within it, is going to be a sonorous orchestral swell that invariably crescendos with a cymbal roll. This is quite effective, especially in the first episode when little is known of the characters and any sense of leitmotifs developing seems a long way off. Phillips himself has called the score "expansive, rich and powerful with robust emotional statements", and in these full, but rather static orchestral moments one can begin to see what he means. A second feature of the sound design quickly established is that music is not going to overrun the program. Although there are usually between 27-32 minutes of score music per episode, most of it acts as the aforementioned orchestral bed and is mixed accordingly. As such the sounds of the outback – flies, whips, dogs, sheep, wind, fire etc – are prominent in the mix, and remind viewers of the 'reality' at work in the show. Silence, as you would hope, is also allowed to prevail and is quite often more startling than anything on the screen.

One interesting digression away from Phillips' music concerns the use of diegetic sound in the series – ie sound produced by characters in the world of the show. Most

prominently this comes from the maid Claire who is often singing a selection of hymns or light opera. There is also the (untuned) piano and violin music of the children and their governess. The best examples of this occur during the wedding in Episode 4. We hear a solo violin rendition of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*, and various piano/violin pieces to accompany the dancing and celebration post wedding. Most striking, however, is the a cappella duet of *Amazing Grace* between the priest, Reverend Steve Everest (who incidentally has achieved considerable success in Sydney as a singer and songwriter in his own right – see the album *Come Sing Glory* [2000]), and Claire the maid. This song, delivered in parts at a slow tempo, segues together several scenes and is the perfect accompaniment to those scenes rounding out the wedding narrative. Ultimately the piece is picked up non-diegetically by Phillips in a reverent, (again) orchestral version, with a neat tempo match to that of the singers' version (Track 3 on the soundtrack CD). Curiously the track is used again when maid Danielle decides to leave the show and is left in the bush to await transportation. Given that her character has had no affinity or involvement with song, nor did she hint at any Christian affiliation, this appeared an odd choice.

Amazing Grace also proves a useful point with which to switch attention to the CD album of Phillips' music, released separately to the DVD of the series. For on the album the track labours along, the slow tempo and computer orchestration begging for some form of textural change, which comes belatedly with the entry of an acoustic guitar. And this is symptomatic of the entire CD. Stripped of the strikingly earthy image track, the slow, repetitive actions of characters, the brief bursts of emotion and drama, and all the vagaries of the Australian outback, the music trudges wearily along with only brief glimpses of heartfelt melody (*1861 Lament*) or stirring rhythm (*Squatters' Meeting*). Indeed, after a complete listening one is left ruing the invention of the bell-tree and questioning the place of cymbal rolls in society generally. But this is not entirely Phillips' fault. For here was a score crying out for the richness, depth and variety that only a real orchestra can provide. Such a considered production and heartfelt composition deserved it. What a shame that in Australia today we still can't come at a budget for sound that would avail our artists to fully practise their craft.