

## Print Run

### New music books

#### ***Antarctica, An Absent Presence***

Philip Samartzis

Thames & Hudson Australia Hbk+2×CD 192 pp  
Sound artist Philip Samartzis first visited Antarctica in 2009–10, and again in 2015–16. Each time some compositions resulted, and in the latter case this attractive volume, featuring words, images and two CDs – an annotated audio-journal of field recordings. Samartzis travelled on the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* to the scientific station at Davis, one of Australia's three Antarctic stations, and spent six weeks there before returning via Macquarie Island. It's a godforsaken place – during the summer the population of Davis reaches 80, while in winter it's reduced to a crew of 20.

The descriptor sublime is often overused, but it applies precisely here – as the blurb says, the book combines the sublime and the prosaic, though maybe the sublime always does, in that it involves the vastness viewed from a place of safety.

Samartzis records the effects of extreme climate which must be treated with great respect – winter temperatures can fall to minus 40 degrees Celsius, though he visited in the summer – but he's also intrigued by the banality of everyday life at Davis station. He explores disused traces of human habitation, from weathered huts to abandoned machinery – in one rather sad field hut, I was amused to read, he finds a box of pornographic magazines dating from the 1970s to the 90s. The noisy, malodorous elephant seals are a favourite, and their barking recurs enjoyably on the recordings. Aquatic and arboreal sounds – including katabatic winds, downslope gusts flowing from mountains, which in the Antarctic are often gale force – are a focus of exploration.

Samartzis's project emerged from admiration of the photography of Herbert Ponting and especially Australian photographer Frank Hurley – whose

images of Ernest Shackleton's failed expedition of 1914–16 remain some of the most compelling evocations of the mysterious, alien Antarctic. But Samartzis was particularly intrigued by two photographs from Douglas Mawson's Australasian expedition in 1912, *The Blizzard* and *Leaning On The Wind* which, as he comments, "convey the ferocity and atmospheric effects of the conditions using a mix of techniques, including staged scenes and composite printing, to viscerally express something almost impossible to articulate through conventional documentary photography". He aimed to create a sonic equivalent of their evocation of embodied experience of extreme climate.

The first CD opens with a stentorian blast from the ship's horn that, not for the last time, makes you look around to see where it's coming from. Samartzis has a fascination for the operation of machinery, and despite the isolation of the location,

on these discs industrial sounds are as common as natural ones. The throbbing, thrumming sounds from the powerhouse's diesel engines are omnipresent. As with the foghorn, a helicopter buzzing overhead is so realistically captured that I involuntarily looked up to see where it was. Field recording can be criticised for its literalism – in contrast to music's creation of a world of tones – but in Samartzis's hands transcends it.

There are strikingly evocative colour photographs, some featuring Samartzis with his Nagra recorder – the microphone with a massive woolly cover. *Antarctica, An Absent Presence* is a vindication of the aesthetic as close observation of nature: the attention to detail, sonic and visual, and the compositional skill with which sounds and images are woven together, make this a memorable record of one of the ends of the Earth.

Andy Hamilton



Recording elephant seals at Davis Station, Antarctica