

Critic's Pick: The Australian Voices (Warner Classics 0825646548606) Gordon Hamilton, conductor

*Reviewed by David Swinson conductor, organist & Music Director
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The Australian Voices have been performing worldwide for twenty years but their recent YouTube phenomenon *Toy Story 3 = Awesome! The Facebook Song* has brought them many new and devoted followers. This showcase recording demonstrates an eclectic repertoire and it is easy to admire the group's technique and sense of identity. At the heart of their work is their distinct cultural heritage and this is immediately evident in the arresting opening track, *Kalkadunga Yurdu*. The text and music are by William Barton, and the choir's conductor, Gordon Hamilton, has worked with him on this arrangement, presumably helping to create the impressive vocal imitations of the didgeridoo and the extraordinary vocal overtones. The most powerful and moving work for me is *We Apologise* by Robert Davidson. This electro-acoustic treatment of former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd's, apology in 2008 to aboriginal Australians for past mistreatment is based on the recorded speech: the original audio was slowed down by 250 times; the singers imitate this, and their version is recorded and continually repeated, with each repetition doubling in speed until the original voice of Rudd emerges in real time. It is sonically both stunning and beautiful. I also enjoyed Hamilton's own compositions, particularly those from his choral-theatre work, *MOON*, which was performed with notable success at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2012. Hamilton clearly understands how to write for voices but he also demands much from his singers: ravishing clusters are perfectly tuned; each part is expected to cover a wide range, and voices are not merely used to articulate text but also to create colours. His 'Facebook Song' is the final track and is best described as confectionary; but it no doubt provides the

perfect conclusion to a concert, and only a scrooge would quibble with its inclusion, following as it does Peter Clark's eight part atonal *Pessoa Chorus 1*. Many listeners will skip Clark's track but Hamilton is to be commended for introducing this effective setting of Pessoa's eccentric text and it is worth a repeated hearing. Alongside these virtuosic contemporary works stand a small number of choral staples, including Rachmaninoff's *Bogoroditse Devo*. The present CD, released in 2012 on the Warner Classics label, is a compilation of various sessions at several venues, and one track can feel quite different to the next. This is a shame as the singing is excellent throughout and the repertoire value is high. Australian choral singing has truly come of age.