

Allan Marett. Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia

Author: P.G. Toner

Date: Dec. 2007

From: The Australian Journal of Anthropology (Vol. 18, Issue 3)

Publisher: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Document Type: Book review

Length: 691 words

Full Text:

Allan Marett. Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. Pp. 296, maps, references, plates, music notations, tables, CD. AUD75.00 (He.), ISBN [0-8195-6617-9](#); AUD34.95 (Pb.), ISBN [0-8195-6618-7](#).

Scholarship in the field of Australian Aboriginal music has typically produced a great deal of research activity, hundreds of hours of field recordings, but very few publications in monograph form. So, on those rare occasions when a new book is published, it is received with a sense of heightened anticipation. Allan Marett's book Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia certainly does not disappoint, and indeed sets a new high standard for future scholarship.

The book provides a detailed account of the place of the musical genre known as wangga within the musical and socio-cultural life of two Aboriginal communities in which it is performed, Wadeye and Belyuen in Australia's Northern Territory. Marett carefully examines the central role of wangga in mediating between the world of the living and the world of the dead in two key ways: first, in the transmission of the songs from ancestral spirits and ghosts to living composers in their dreams; and second, in the performance of those songs by the living for the deceased in the context of mortuary and other rituals. Marett documents the cosmological background and the ritual context of wangga and its musical and poetic structure, and then goes on to provide meticulous in-depth analyses of four wangga repertoires. He concludes the book with an analytical summary of the genre and an account of its performance in the wider diaspora of northern Australia. A particular strength of the book is Marett's use of archival recordings made by A. P. Elkin and Alice Moyle, among others, to supplement his analyses and provide a sense of the historical trajectory of the wangga genre.

Although Marett as a scholar is firmly grounded in the musicological traditions of ethnomusicology, anthropologists will benefit enormously from a sustained engagement with Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts. Although the stereotypical differences between the

musicological and the anthropological sides of ethnomusicology are increasingly difficult to sustain, there are still works in the field which seem to indulge in musical transcription and analysis for the sake of transcription and analysis, without relating these insights to the broader socio-cultural context. I am happy to report that this is not the case here. In fact, Marett has provided the most sustained and insightful synthesis of musical analysis and socio-cultural analysis in recent scholarship on Australian Aboriginal music, continually relating microscopic elements of musical style and form to issues of social identity and connection to country. This skillful blending of two scholarly traditions is perhaps best represented in Chapter 6, 'The Ma-yawa Wangga', which examines the singer Maurice Ngulkurr's enactment of a complex web of sociality through musical performance, and throughout the book the musical transcriptions and analyses are continually and convincingly related to matters of social context. The sole exception to this statement is the section of the book concerning dance structure (pp. 101-106), where the inclusion of labanotations (movement notations which cannot be 'read' without specialised training) contributes nothing meaningful to the text for most readers (although they may be of use for analytical purposes).

The book is accompanied by a CD containing 28 tracks of wangga performances recorded over an almost 40-year period by five different recordists. The quality of all of the recordings ranges from good to excellent, with Marett's own 1997 and 1998 DAT (digital audio tape) recordings being remarkably clear and balanced. These recordings provide an excellent complement to the text and certainly make the musical transcriptions come to life. The author should be commended for his excellent selections and for negotiating the additional logistical challenges involved in having the recording included with the book.

Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts is the latest example of some of the important work being done by Aboriginal music researchers at the University of Sydney, and I hope that the scholarly community can expect more to come. This book is certainly a welcome addition to the literature and I recommend it highly.

P. G. Toner

Anthropology, St. Thomas University

Toner, P.G.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

<http://www.wiley.com.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au>

Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

Toner, P.G. "Allan Marett. *Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia.*" *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 3, Dec. 2007, pp. 361+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A171887649/AONE?u=usyd&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1dac93ae. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

Gale Document Number: GALEIA171887649