

Somers, Harry. *A Midwinter Night's Dream* (Heather Hudyma, Mathew Galloway, Alison McHardy, Shannon Gault, Daniel Morphy, John Michael Schneider, Claire Hughes, Claire Preston, James Westman, Michael Colvin, Larissa Swenarchuk, Alexandra Beley, Canadian Children's Opera Chorus, Ann Cooper Gay, conductor). Centrediscs CMCCD 12306.

* A review of this recording must begin with comments on the sound of the music itself. Steeped as it is in operatic and theatrical singing, children's choral singing, spoken word and vocalized sound effects, not to mention its accompanying piano and percussion, *A Midwinter Night's Dream* strikes the ear immediately and happily as a work seeking direct expression with its audience. This sense is only enhanced when one begins to make a list of the wide palette of music included in the score – allusively “Inuit” styles, American musical theatre, quotes from the likes of *Star Wars* and Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, all grounded by, for want of a better description, “real” Harry Somers music. The result is a restless, questioning musical journey full of intentional contradiction that matches the journey of self-discovery taken by the opera's main character, Inuit chief Moonwok's son, Jimmy.

As the opera opens, Jimmy returns to Mary's Bay from a trip south (to Edmonton) just in time for the start of the Midwinter's Feast. He is bored with the North and the old ways, and of the stories where “all you do is remember.” He wants to live in the present, and is more excited by *Star Wars* and West Edmonton Mall than the tales of his forefathers and of the gods. As one

might guess, he is destined to go on a quest of self-discovery, initiated (through the local shaman) by his village's need to appease the restless gods. His task is to go onto the ice alone and bring back provisions for the winter. Jimmy experiences testing adventures, dangers, and characters, including a wonderful card-playing seal and a downright chilling chorus of dead ancestors. Jimmy's redemption is never much in doubt, of course, and he winds up back at the very physical location where we first see him, and where the local shaman first begins to introduce (or reintroduce) magic into Jimmy's life.

In order to enjoy *A Midwinter Night's Dream*, Harry Somers' wide-ranging style choices have to be accepted, and this is the area most likely to disturb or even distress some listeners. Writing music for a young audience that conveys a story with a moral lesson can be problematic, and Somers has used fluidity of language to communicate this lesson. Somers has realized that these lessons as well as the narrative, with all its constituent text and action, must be crystal clear. We can almost hear the composer making moment-to-moment decisions about what type of music is best suited to clarifying a given component of Jimmy's story. Notwithstanding one or two tricky moments of possibly unintentional or at best corny humour (the quotes from *Star Wars* and *Thriller* mentioned above), this is never about arbitrary or even ironic picking and choosing of styles.

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Instead, the piece successfully uses musical languages to reinforce and not just contextualize textual situations and conceptual ideas, perhaps comparable to *letimotiv*. Other composers might have chosen faux-recitative to ensure comprehension, but Somers is wise enough to keep the young listening ear attentive to the signals that changing styles represent changing characters, situations and ideas. Stylistic plurality does not mean accepting a compromise in quality, and there are almost no examples of the composer having weak moments or lapses in judgement.

A few of the best scenes substantiate the above comments, and exhibit Somers' masterful skills as a composer. In one of the longest single scenes in Act One, Chief Moonwok, Jimmy and others sing about old stories and ways of life. Somers here combines operatic soloists with children's chorus, intricate piano writing and drums to great effect. Later in Act Two, Jimmy has fallen through the ice, and appears doomed as a chorus of the dead confronts him. Although the music here is not complex, it is highly compelling, and actually very evocative of Jimmy's predicament. Finally, throughout the opera there are many moments of well-chosen noisemaking by the chorus. Wind sounds, water sounds and the Northern Lights are among the natural elements depicted through the chorus, and in many ways this is the most powerful and memorable element? of the composition. The combination of such things with more conventional singing and speaking forms a memorable opera of great vitality, impact and enjoyment.

On the whole, the performances on this recording are excellent. Particular credit must go to the Canadian Children's Opera Chorus. In every situation, the group engages the material with enthusiasm, skill and clarity. Harry Somers has made the right choices in this regard – while writing conventional music for the children that they are bound to execute well, he has also given them “sound effects” music that is bound to engage the children, to give them an interest in music making that often resembles play. The vocal and acting soloists are excellent in bringing out their respective roles, and everyone seems to be having a good time with this work. Special mention must go to the piano playing of Claire Preston. The piano part is the closest thing the opera has to an omnipresent character, and Preston fearlessly wades into Somers' vast array of piano textures and harmonic languages to make the piano a most welcome presence, one capable of setting the tone for each scene.

Although no recording can ever replace the experience of being at an operatic performance, this CD is beautifully recorded and produced, and will be a worthy addition to any CD collection. The booklet includes what appears to be the original text, not the actual libretto of the opera. That aside, Centrediscs, and the *Window on Somers* project can be very proud of this addition to their catalogue.

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