

The Lethbridge Sessions. The Rubbing Stone Ensemble. Toronto, ON: Centrediscs CMCCD 19213, 2013. 1 compact disc (73:55). Contents: *Cycle 4* / Alain Perron (10:53) — *Resound - Soundplay5* / David Eagle (4:26) — *Infolding* / Laurie Radford (11:49) — *Ikos: kun tu 'bar ba* / Arlan N. Schultz (19:21) — *Merge* / Shelley Marwood (6:10) — *UnRavel* / Anthony Tan (8:12) — *Wayfaring* / Nova Pon (13:04).

The Rubbing Stone Ensemble (RSE), a Calgary-based new-music group formed in 2007 under the artistic leadership of the saxophonist and University of Calgary music professor Jeremy Brown, has released its first commercial CD. As the resident ensemble for New Works Calgary, the RSE's instrumentation varies according to the forces required by different compositions, though its primary instruments are saxophone, piano, harp, and percussion. In its brief history, the RSE has already commissioned and premiered a number of new works, mainly by composers from the Canadian west. This album features music by four established composers and three younger ones; all have strong ties to the prairie provinces, and six of them have significant connections to Calgary. The group takes its name from a Calgary landmark.

Ten musicians participated in this recording, which, in addition to the core instruments noted above, includes voice, woodwinds, strings, and a conductor, as well as four of the composers, who contributed both real-time and pre-recorded electro-acoustic elements. The range of musical styles on the disc is broad. Post-romantic modality and lyricism are represented in Nova Pon's *Wayfaring* (2011) for tenor saxophone and harp, which evokes the sound-world of late-nineteenth-century French salon music, though the combination of saxophone and harp is unusual in that context. (I found myself imagining a cello or viola instead.) It may have been a deliberate strategy by the producer or audio engineer to ensure the harp was fully present in the final mix, but the audio pick-up of this composition actually favours the harp, with the saxophone sounding distinctly off-mic. The result, though quite euphonious, is not exactly a dialogue between equals.

Shelley Marwood's *Merge* (2008) for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (the *Pierrot lunaire* instrumentation used by many new-music ensembles today), plus saxophone and percussion, is another work in which the harmonic and textural palettes harken to earlier times—in this case, the mid-twentieth-century tonal idioms of Robert Turner or Morris Surdin, whose music was inextricably linked to the Canadian prairies. The title was meant to evoke the melding of melodic, harmonic, and timbral elements in this charming and, at moments, even wistful-sounding work. Here again, certain instruments (violin, piano, and especially saxophone) are more present in the mix, while others (flute, clarinet, cello) sound farther away, which could be the result of either too few microphones or the less-than-ideal placement of those used.

Another attractive but more avant-garde work also based on the concept of convergences is Laurie Radford's *Infolding* (2010), for soprano saxophone, violin, piano, percussion, and electronic sounds. In addition to real-time audio processing, the instrumental parts are recorded, fragmented,

transformed, reintegrated with the ensemble, and diffused throughout the performance space via an eight-channel sound system. The execution and sonic mix of this work are excellent.

The longest and perhaps most intriguing work on the disc is *Ikos: kun tu 'bar ba* (2009-10) by Arlan Schultz, which was commissioned by New Works Calgary for the RSE. Scored for soprano voice (both reciting and singing), tenor saxophone, harp, piano, percussion, and processed audio, it incorporates pre-recorded chanting by Buddhist monks. In the second section of the work, texts assembled by Schultz—meditations on light from Tibetan philosophy and Eastern Orthodox liturgy—are sung by the soprano. The slow pace and minimal instrumental support in that section seemed to work against the singer, Martha Remmer, whose pitch and vibrato were not always completely secure.

Two works on the disc call for solo instrument and electronic processing: David Eagle's *Resound – Soundplay 5* (2006) for saxophone and electronics, and Anthony Tan's *UnRavel* (2008) for violin, digitally sampled ondes Martenot, and electronics. *Resound*, a very attractive work, was conceived as a “game” in which electronically generated sounds, soundscape materials, and processed saxophone sounds, spatially diffused via tape delay, are combined in various ways. Tan's *UnRavel*, compellingly performed by David Seidle, for whom it was composed, comes across as a virtuosic cadenza for solo violin with accompanying electronics. The electro-acoustic elements extend the range of the violin and comment on its contributions, as well as enriching its colours and textures. The title conveys two levels of meaning: first, Tan employs an arpeggio from Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, but develops it in a clearly un-Ravel-like manner; and second, rhythmic modes derived from Indian talas are used, but the composer's strict adherence to them “unravels” as the piece progresses.

One of three works on the disc for acoustic instruments only, *Cycle 4* (2010) by Alain Perron, is scored for four saxophones, played consecutively by Jeremy Brown, plus piano and percussion. Brown is a sensitive and stylish saxophonist, though his tone on the tenor and baritone saxophones sounds less characteristic than the sound he achieves on alto and soprano, the instruments he presumably plays most. There are also a few examples of flat altissimo notes, late-speaking low entries, diminuendos going sharp, and exposed passages that could have used more intensity and/or vibrato to maintain interest. But apart from these few minor issues, Brown is more than up to the demands of all the music on this disc, including extended techniques such as multiphonics.

As a debut recording, the Rubbing Stone Ensemble's *Lethbridge Sessions* sets the bar high on both the repertoire and performance fronts. We can look forward with anticipation to the pleasant surprises their next recording will bring.

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