

Harry Somers. Toronto: Canadian Music Centre CMCCD 11306, 2006. Canadian Composers Portraits. 4 compact discs. \$30.00. Disc 1: Documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (57:43). Discs 2-4: *North Country* (National Arts Centre Orchestra, Victor Feldbrill, cond.) (14:29); *Symphony No.1* (National Arts Centre Orchestra, Victor Feldbrill, cond.) (30:47); *Picasso Suite* (CBC Vancouver Orchestra, Mario Bernardi, cond.) (19:45); *Suite for Harp and Chamber Orchestra* (Jennifer Swartz, harp; National Arts Centre Orchestra; Victor Feldbrill, cond.) (21:45); *Five Songs for Dark Voice* (Jean Stillwell, mezzo-soprano; Esprit Orchestra; Alex Pauk, cond.) (12:50); *Lyric for Orchestra* (National Arts Centre Orchestra, Victor Feldbrill, cond.) (7:10); *Of Memory and Desire* (Esprit Orchestra, Alex Pauk, cond.) (17:53); *Elegy, Transformation, Jubilation* (Esprit Orchestra, Alex Pauk, cond.) (16:48); *Concertante for Violin, Percussion and String Orchestra* (Lorand Fenyves, violin; Russell Hartenberger and Bob Becker, percussion; Chamber Players of Toronto; Winston Webbers, cond.) (22:01); *Third Piano Concerto* (James Parker, piano; Esprit Orchestra; Alex Pauk, cond.) (30:50).

One of Canada's most significant composers, Harry Somers (1925-1999) was the recipient of three honorary doctorates and a Companion of the Order of Canada. He produced an astonishing number and range of works, embracing an eclecticism rarely encountered at such depth, and even more rarely executed so convincingly. Studying piano in Toronto with Reginald Godden and Weldon Kilburn, and in San Francisco with E. Robert Schmitz, Somers studied composition primarily with John Weinzweig. But he also spent a year in Paris studying with Milhaud (apparently on a hockey scholarship!).

Following the format of the series, the first CD comprises a documentary by Eitan Cornfield on Somers' life and music, while the subsequent CDs feature a cross-section of his music ranging from his first "hit," *North Country* (1948), to his *Third Piano Concerto* (1996), written three years before his death. This Portrait is the first four-CD set in the series, rather than two or three.

Cornfield's documentaries are consistently illuminating and this one is no exception. Particularly fascinating and varied are the descriptions of how these composers supported their compositional careers. In Somers' case,

the length that he went to carve out time makes it clear he was utterly devoted to his craft. In this documentary Somers describes one of his jobs as a commercial copyist:

I remember sitting there for fourteen-hour stretches and the first few days I was violently ill to my stomach simply from the unaccustomed position. And the first week it was like child labour of the last century... I don't know, I'd work, oh, I can't name the hours, and I maybe drew in about \$32 from that whole week's work. But over a period of about six months, I really learned how to copy... Well, it got to the point I could go in a few years later one day a week, go in for a twenty-four-hour stretch and that would be my week's wages—and it would leave me free to compose.

Clearly this was a man who had to compose!

We learn through numerous recollections that Somers was a handsome and charming fellow who was rather fond of champagne, characteristics that contrast heavily with his

serious, intense and, as it is often described, angry music. We also learn about his difficult relationship with his father and his first wife's suicide, an event that could not help but colour the rest of his life.

Unfair as it is to focus on what was not included, several omissions in the set leave me puzzled. In the documentary (and in every biography I have read), no one ever speculates on the influence of the Second World War on the young Somers. Surely it had a major impact since, by the end of the war, he was verging on his twenties. I'm also curious to know why no part of *Louis Riel* (1967), Somers' most well-known work, is featured on discs two to four.¹ Cornfield does include some excerpts in the documentary, notably an extended passage from *Kuyas*, a lyrical and spine-shivering solo for soprano. I would like to have heard more. One other performance excerpted for the documentary that would have offered a riveting addition to the music CDs is that of Somers himself performing *Voiceplay* from 1971. Though written for Cathy Berberian, Somers' rendition is brilliant and humorous.

The discs contain first-rate performances by the Esprit Orchestra conducted by Alex Pauk, the National Arts Centre Orchestra conducted by Victor Feldbrill (who started collaborating with Somers in the 1950s), the CBC Vancouver Orchestra conducted by Mario Bernardi, and

¹ *Louis Riel* was commissioned for the Canadian centenary and received international acclaim as well as subsequent performances at Expo 67 in Montreal and at American bicentenary celebrations at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC in 1975.

soloists such as James Parker (piano), Lorand Fenyves (violin), and Jean Stillwell (mezzo-soprano). A musical chameleon, Somers explored many different styles in his works. Yet at all times his music is convincing and assured. In Somers' output, experimentation with style does not equate with dabbling. In the *Picasso Suite* (1964), his eclecticism is put to highly appropriate use. Derived from music originally written for a television documentary, each of the nine movements encapsulates a different period from Picasso's oeuvre. Ranging from a ragtime parody to juxtaposed chordal "cubist" blocks to Stravinskian neo-classicism, the work reflects Somers' masterful appropriation of twentieth-century styles and techniques.

In the other works in the set usually just a single style prevails. Somers himself, apparently somewhat grudgingly according to the notes, describes the voice and orchestra work, *Five Songs for Dark Voice* (1956) (written for Maureen Forrester, but performed here strikingly by Stillwell with Esprit), as neo-Romantic. Other early works such as *North Country* (1948) and *Symphony No. 1* (1951) share an atonal and contrapuntal language. The *Suite for Harp and Chamber Orchestra* (1948) often sounds somewhat neo-classical, particularly in the dance-like melodies of the second movement. *Lyric for Orchestra* (1960), which receives a compelling performance by the NAC Orchestra conducted by Feldbrill, is a round-up of Second Viennese School techniques.

Both works from the early 1980s, *Elegy*, *Transformation*, *Jubilation* (1980) and *Concertante for Violin*,

Percussion and String Orchestra (1982), begin with thinner, simpler textures that gradually become undone—becoming thick and chaotic as various elements move independently, seemingly in no relation to each other. After the dark colours of the low brass and strings in *Elegy* and *Transformation*, the five orchestral groupings in *Jubilation* shift to independent tempos. In *Concertante*, which begins with solo violin, the three elements (solo violin, percussion and strings) begin in relation to each other (e.g., the strings echoing or continuing the violin gestures). But again, the music becomes denser and the individual elements become independent with a resulting chaotic, noisy and thick texture.

Although stylistically different from each other, the two works from the 1990s, *Of Memory and Desire* (1993) and the Third Piano Concerto (1996), share a characteristic that I wouldn't attach to any of the other works collected here: stunning beauty. *Of Memory and Desire*, for strings alone, uses long continuous single pitches with overlapping crescendos and a gradual expansion of range. The Third Piano Concerto focuses primarily on colour. Each movement opens with the piano playing minimalist-influenced, diatonic flourishes and gestures, blurred with pedal against a backdrop of dissonant sustained intervals in the orchestra. In the first movement the soloist and orchestra become more integrated as the texture thickens and activity increases. The second and third movements return repeatedly to minimalist gestures, sometimes supported by and at other times at odds with the orchestra.

The liner notes are good and follow the standard of the series. There is one small error: in the Epilogue, it states that Somers died at age seventy-four, but in fact he was seventy-three (born September 1925 and died March 1999). There is also one small omission: Jennifer Swartz, the harp soloist, is not listed in the liner notes as the other soloists are, although her name does appear on the back of the CD. It would have helped to have the texts for the songs included, and I would have liked to see more detail on the origin of the recordings. For instance, *The Spring of Somers*, a CBC disc recorded by the NAC Orchestra with Feldbrill in 1995 (the year of Somers' seventieth birthday), is reproduced in its entirety in this collection without mention. Several of the performances came from the opening concert of the 1999 Massey Hall New Music Festival. The tribute concert (broadcast live) was devoted entirely to the music of Somers in November of the year that he died. And, it would have been helpful to discuss, in the description of the Harry Somers Recording Project, why none of the recordings from *A Window on Somers* were reproduced here.² But what this Portrait offers far outweighs any shortcomings. It provides a fantastic recorded selection of the music of Harry Somers.

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² After six releases, the project—spearheaded by Somers' second wife, Barbara Chilcott and flutist Robert Cram—seems to have come to a halt, although the notes suggest that more are in production. The web site has not been updated since 2004 and most of the links are dead. Perhaps only the web site is in hiatus, not the project.