

NorthWord: Choral Music of Leonard Enns. Toronto: CMC Centrediscs CMCCDD 10905 WRC8-7861, 2006. \$19.98. 1 compact disc (68:35). Elora Festival Singers, Noel Edison, conductor. Contents: *Logos* (with James Mason, oboe; Jurgen Petrenko, organ) (21:33) — *Missa Brevis* (13:40) — *God Was a Child Curled Up* (Jurgen Petrenko, organ; DaCapo Chamber Choir, Leonard Enns, conductor) (11:04) — *Three Motets* (17:53) — *The Hymn of the Cherubim* (5:05).

With the release of *NorthWord*, Leonard Enns consolidates his reputation as one of the leading Canadian composers of sacred choral music. Dating from 1980 to 2004, the works on this recording exemplify his mature idiom at its most harmonically expressive. Altogether there are five choral works performed respectively by the Elora Festival Singers and the DaCapo Chamber Choir of Waterloo.

In the introductory notes, Enns writes, “The concept of this recording is inspired partly by the paintings of William Kurelek, who set the nativity of Christ in the harsh cold of the Canadian North, rather than in a sentimentalized setting of chubby angels, smiling shepherds, and beautifully clothed rulers from the orient.”

The largest work, *Logos*, is music of dark-hued and intensely felt contemplation. The text is taken from St. John’s Gospel. From the haunting solo oboe opening, combined with the majestic voice of the organ that intersects with the gentle chant of the choir, the listener is captivated. The repetition of the word *logos*—“in the beginning was the word”—intertwines whole scale tonality with sensitive delivery of the text. The choir, oboe and organ are in close rapport, the subtleties and nuances expressed with ease.

In the second movement, “In Him was Life,” a more expressive palate is heard in the use of the diatonic scale and dance-like rhythms. In the middle section, the plaintive, “wordless” oboe solo of James Mason is poetic and poignant. In “The Word Became Flesh,” the whole tone orientation moves towards a diatonic system. This is beautifully balanced choral sound, the voices clear, moving as one. With the voice of the oboe obbligato, this movement builds to a slow, exciting climax with its arrival at the final, exultant “Gloria.” The chant-like, mystical fourth movement features breath-taking pianissimo singing. The choir’s timbre combines so perfectly with the organ that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Glorious music, gloriously sung.

Missa Brevis began as a wedding gift for friends. The Mass was premiered nearly twenty years later by the Elmer Isler Singers and won the Ruth Watson Henderson Choral Composition Competition in 1999. It consists of parts of the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Of special interest is the playful setting of the Sanctus in an energized, animated performance. As well, the Agnus Dei is notable for its exquisite execution of legato singing in Gregorian chant style, whether between male and female voices or in perfectly inflected full choir unison singing. Intonation and balance in the imitative

counterpoint are meticulously well prepared.

God Was a Child Curled Up takes its inspiration from the words of Thomas Merton, an emotionally charged tribute of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, the divine mystery captured in the open, spare writing. In this cameo performance, the DaCapo Chamber Choir, conducted by Enns himself, makes an impressive appearance. The melodies are probably the simplest on the disc, and are not as technically challenging as the other works sung by the mature, rich, and resonant voices of the Elora Festival Singers, led by its founding director, Noel Edison. However, the young choir sings with lovely intonation and blend. The DaCapo Chamber Choir was founded in 1998 by Enns, and is dedicated to exploring primarily twentieth-century unaccompanied music. Judging by the results in this recording, it is a choir to watch. What impressed me were the youthful voices' keenness, spirit and attention to the text.

The medieval meets the modern in *Three Motets*. All are text settings of

Elizabethan poets. The *a capella* singing is superb, with the high tessitura sopranos intertwining with textured bass and velvet-coloured inner voices; the meditative mood transforms into a powerful *mélange*.

Finally, *The Hymn of the Cherubim*, with its gentle opening, evokes an indescribable sacred reality, perhaps something like that implied by Kurelek's *Northern Nativity* series. With the layered alleluias wrapped up in a seamless legato, the CD appropriately ends.

Everything on the CD reaches for the same exalted artistic level. From the minimalist Gregorian melodies to the more complex, dense and demanding tonalities, the phrases and enigmatic harmonies are conveyed with an effortless sense of understanding and an unerring sense of direction and purpose. Impeccable, beautifully nuanced singing from start to finish.

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