

Ovation, Volume 3. Toronto: CBC Records/Disques SRC, 2002. PSCD 2028-5. Five compact discs. \$35.00. Disc 1: Music of Gilles Tremblay (71:02). Disc 2: Music of Talivaldis Kenins (72:16). Disc 3: Music of Norma Beecroft (66:54). Disc 4: Music of John Beckwith. Disc 5: Music of Barbara Pentland (69:50).

The third in a series of omnibus anthologies devoted to Canadian composers, this collection represents a set of five very individual styles, providing insight into their range of work and stylistic development. While it is never revealed who has selected which works to be included as representative, one might speculate that many of the composers were personally involved, owing to their extensive auto-analytical commentary in the notes. With only three brief compositions for voice in the five-and-a-half hours of music, the album is effectively a history of various approaches to instrumental music in Canada over the past seventy years.

The representation of John Beckwith's output consists of four orchestral compositions, all recorded in the nineties, two of which (*Circle, With Tangents* and *Concert of Myths*) are concerti of sorts (in order, harpsichord and cello). This disc shows the widest variety in style among the five in its harmonic approach, with treatment ranging from warm and clearly tonal (in *Round and Round*) to tonally-warmed serialism (*For Starters*). As described by the composer, his fascination with geometric conceptualization is often audible in repeated circular patterns, with *ostinati* and dance rhythms, and with spatial experimentation. *Round and Round* is the most endearing work, perhaps because it is the one most approaching a tonal idiom, but also because of its prevailing warmth of sound. *Concert of Myths* is more acerbic, with linear dissonance, and is the most challenging for the listener; knowing the program of these movements is essential to understanding the

structure, and this composition presents the fewest audible patterns, in contrast to other works on the disc. It is aural ballet without the adhesive benefit of the visual.

Norma Beecroft is one of two composers in the anthology whose preoccupation with colour experiments has remained a constant across all of the works included. From the earliest work (*Tre Pezzi Brevi* (1960-61)) through to the most recent (*Evocations: Images of Canada* (1992)), the struggle to find expression through variability is a mainstay, and has lead Beecroft through sound "movements" such as serialism, musique concrète, aleatory, and electronic music. Where traditional instruments are used, either in the chamber works or in the sole orchestral example (*Improvvisazioni Concertanti No. 2*), it is always with this same goal of "colourism," the most effective example being *Piece for Bob*, which leaves no unusual flute technique unexplored. Only the choral work *The Living Flame of Love* strays from this practice, where declamation and open sounds prevail, with no vocal oddities. One senses in *Evocations* that she has found in the contemporary synthesizer the instrument which satisfies her sensory desires as a composer. It is a haunting and more mellow work which seems to struggle less with finding its voice.

In relief to Beecroft's music stands the more linear approach of Barbara Pentland. Being the senior composer by twenty-two years, her respect for formal tightness and counterpoint seems to emanate from the second Viennese school and the Bauhaus, at

least in the serially-based works *Studies in Line* and *Three Duets after Pictures of Paul Klee*. Whether typical of her entire oeuvre or not, this representative group of shorter chamber or piano works seems to show no predisposition to using colour for its own sake. Even in the sole orchestral work, *Tellus*, sound quality is used in the service of the musical architecture, and the pleasing variety in the palette is clearly just a byproduct. There is Berg-like freshness and lyricism in *Trance* for flute and harp, and Webernesque economy in the Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano. As with Beckwith, there is some evidence of geometric influence (each of the *Studies in Line* has a "sketch rather than a title"). Pentland's prevailing contrapuntal style rewards repeated listening, and is neither austere nor dry. The *Ephemera* for piano solo may stand the test of time the best, with its excellent balance of structural integrity and warmth; there is a captivating tightness and jovial nature that is convincing and genuine.

Similar to Beecroft's approach is Gilles Tremblay's fixation with the use of colour variation, and the three larger ensembles presented on the disc have provided a broad spectrum of colour possibilities for the composer. *Fleuves* and *Les Pierres crieront*, though separated by a quarter century (1976 and 2000, respectively), show a uniformity of compositional technique that is aptly described in the composer's own words: "explosion-groups and satellites." This might be analogous to a literary style based on single-sentence paragraphs which rely heavily on onomatopoeic vocabulary, separated by silent pauses. Clearly showing influences from the European avant garde composers with whom he studied, these works present few thematic ideas, and, notwithstanding the use of audible

landmarks such as quasi-tonal unisons, they rely almost exclusively on enticing the listener to follow changes in colour. These same techniques also permeate *L'arbre de Borobudur* for gamelan ensemble, orchestral instruments, and ondes martenot. Here the experiments are the most successful because of the novelty of the ensemble; this is aided by rhythmic ostinati, some enticing Eastern microtonal aspects, and occasional lyricism. The extensive notes provided by the composer explain his mystical frame of mind and are crucial to understanding what listening approach must be brought to bear.

Despite composer Talivaldis Kenins' comment, "in my writing, intellectual considerations usually take precedence over personal concerns," this collection of pieces is the most accessible and engaging in the entire album. It also shows the widest breadth of stylistic change, from a languishing warmth in Quartet No. 1 (which is described as "contemporary Romanticist"), to the energetic and dissonant Violin Concerto, to the echoes of *Pulcinella* in *Partita for Strings on Lutheran Chorales*. Also audible are clear influences from Messiaen in the harmonies and textures of Piano Sonata No. 3. The inclusion of the choral work *Bonhomme! Bonhomme!* underscores Kenins' incorporation of Canadian folk elements, but the chromatic harmony seems to stretch the capability of the performers. These various compositions show that, depending upon the style, Kenin has the ability to sound like a different composer. It is a rare quality among composers, and a sign of exceptional craft and artistic maturation on Kenin's part. He also succeeds in reaching the listener on both intellectual and emotional planes, and much of what is presented here is very moving.

The sound quality of *Ovation, Volume 3* is uniformly outstanding; unlike some other anthologies produced in recent years by the CBC and the CMC, there are no recordings which sound “old,” and the merits of the various works can be heard with ease. The performing ensembles and individuals are first-rate, with special praise going to flautist Robert Aitken, who handles difficult technical and expressive challenges in extended works on three of the five discs. In utilizing extensive commentary from the composers themselves, the notes are informative and valuable as a

scholarly source, but are also widely variable in style and content. The cover is boldly coloured and attractive. In a compilation of this sort, where the listener is often asked to engage on a sophisticated level and has to work hard to appreciate the musical values of some of the compositions, these production aspects are to be commended for allowing the music to speak.

Jon Gonder
University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown