

**Robert Turner.** *Canadian Composer Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2004. CMCCD9704. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Turner documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (48:16). Disc 2: *Opening Night (A Theatre Overture)* (Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Bramwell Tovey, conductor) (9:40); *Eidolons* (CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, John Avison, conductor) (22:30); *Manitoba Memoire* (Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, Simon Streatfield, conductor) (16:39); *Third Symphony* (Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Bramwell Tovey, conductor) (26:40).

The most recent composer to be featured in the Canadian Music Centre's *Canadian Composers Portraits* series is Robert Turner. Born and raised in Montreal, Turner earned a Bachelor of Music degree from McGill University. After a brief stint in Toronto during World War II and additional studies abroad (Tennessee, Tanglewood, London), he worked first as a music producer for the CBC in Vancouver and later taught at the University of British Columbia, Acadia University, and the University of Manitoba. Turner is a composer with a strong sense of place. His music is particularly evocative of the Prairie environment in which he spent a significant portion of his career. However, when asked if he feels he is a Prairie composer, his reply is prompt: "No, I don't think so. I would define myself as a Canadian composer." Given his background, it is an apt description.

As with other releases in the series, the set consists of a full-length documentary on the composer's life and music plus an audio CD containing representative works. The documentary is fascinating in that it reveals not only details of Turner's personality and musical style, but also provides a glimpse into the environments in which he worked. The commentators are well chosen to provide an excellent balance between Turner's professional and personal experiences. On the professional side are friends, colleagues, and former students. Vancouver bassoonist George Zukerman describes Turner's innovative work as a producer and programmer for CBC radio

in Vancouver, citing him as being "keenly responsible for the incredible proliferation of performances of Canadian works." Conductor Bramwell Tovey describes Turner's significance as a composer and indicates the high esteem in which Turner is held in the musical community in Winnipeg. Former students Patrick Carrabré and Jim Hiscott describe Turner's teaching methods and discuss the composer's personal compositional style.

A more intimate side is provided by members of his immediate family. The composer's eldest son, Alden Turner (who also contributed the text for the CD booklet), relates his childhood memories of his father's compositional methods. The most enlightening comments, however, come from Turner's wife, Sara. A tireless promoter of her husband's work, she is also well acquainted with the main features of his style. When asked to identify the distinctive elements, she cites the sweep of form, the brilliant use of orchestration, and the ability to use instruments in an original way. Sara Turner initially considered a career of her own as a composer, but stopped writing to focus on Robert's career instead. She taught music, played percussion in the Vancouver symphony, and carried the onus of raising their children in order to provide her husband with the time and space for composition while holding full-time position with the CBC. Although she obviously admires and supports her husband's work, there is a sense that, under different circumstances, things might

have been otherwise. "In those early years" she says, "I thought he was a better composer than I was. I'm not sure that he was now. Looking back on it, I think I was a pretty good composer too."

The choice of repertoire on the audio CD is limited to Turner's symphonic writing. While this ignores his vocal music, chamber music, and works for soloist and orchestra, the four compositions, written between 1955 and 1990, nonetheless give a good indication of his eclectic style. *Opening Night: A Theatre Overture* (1955), is Turner's first important composition for orchestra. Featuring syncopated rhythms and bright harmonies, it is a light-hearted work bursting with exuberance. *Eidolons* (1972), a set of twelve images for chamber orchestra, is written in a much more contemporary vein. It represents Turner's experimental approach at this time. The final two works, *Manitoba Memoir* (1989) and the *Third Symphony* (1990), are in the mature style which Turner himself describes as "lyrical, tonal, eclectic." Indeed, in these two compositions alone, Turner draws on a wide range of sources from Scottish hymn tunes to ethnic folk dances to quotations from a Beethoven string quartet. The resulting mosaic is rich in its imagery, vivid, and compelling.

The performances are excellent. All are by orchestras and conductors with an obvious affinity for Turner's music. The only studio recording is by the CBC Chamber Orchestra conducted by John Avison, a close colleague from Turner's days as a CBC producer. The other three works were recorded live and capture brilliantly the excitement of the concert hall. Particularly notable are the live broadcast performances of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra under Bramwell Tovey. Both were recorded during the 1990 season when the orchestra featured five of Turner's major orchestral works in celebration of his seventieth birthday.

Overall, the portrait of Robert Turner is a highly enjoyable addition to the series. The documentary is informative and engaging. It establishes Turner's place in Canadian music and provides insight into his compositional style. The musical works, although limited to symphonic repertoire, demonstrate Turner's strengths as a composer. He is an exceptional craftsman who writes attractive and appealing music. "Maybe twenty or thirty years from now" jokes Turner at the end of the documentary, "somebody might start playing my music." This CD is a good start.

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