

**Jean Coulthard: A Life in Music.** By William Bruneau and David Gordon Duke. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2005. xiv, 216 pp. ISBN 1-55380-023-0 \$22.95

A life in music. It is difficult if not impossible to imagine a more apt title for a biographical study of composer of Jean Coulthard. Beginning at a very young age and continuing until her death, she composed regularly and prolifically for eighty-five of her ninety-two years. She made sense of her experiences through her compositions and thought of her own biography as her music. Indeed, many of her compositions reference the people, places, and events she encountered. Her compositional style was decidedly conservative, yet she developed an appealing and enduring voice that made her one of Canada's best-loved and most-recognized composers. Despite her devotion to composition, she was also a dedicated teacher, family member, friend, and an ardent advocate of Canadian culture. This book captures the significance of her life and the range of her music making. It is a fitting tribute to an extraordinary woman whose life was remarkably rich and resolutely musical.

The book's organization is logical and easy to follow. The chapters are organized linearly to cover the stages of her life and the development of her artistic voice. The first chapter, "A Musical Family," describes the Coulthard household and follows the composer's early training including a year's study at the Royal College of Music in London. While Coulthard's compositions from this era are, understandably, of lesser significance, the environment of her formative years and the references to her mother, an accomplished musician in her own right, are enlightening. The second, third, and

fourth chapters trace her maturation as a composer. During this time she pursued studies in the United States, returned to Vancouver to begin her career as a teacher at the University of British Columbia, and spent a fruitful and inspiring year in France. One sees the single-mindedness with which she pursued her own ideals while drawing on a variety of influences. The fifth and sixth chapters show her finding a voice of her own and the realization of her independence as a composer. The years covered in these chapters – the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s – were prolific ones for Coulthard during which she wrote in all of the large forms of classical music. Although her music was initially marginalized by partisans of new music, the personal style she developed at this time eventually established her place as one of Canada's most prominent composers. The last chapters, "Legacy" and "Overview," trace her autumnal years and discuss her overall significance.

Although the chapters are largely biographical, each one, from the second chapter onward, concludes with a section entitled "The Music" in which one or two representative compositions are discussed. This places Coulthard's artistic output into the broader context of her life and allows the reader to follow the development of her compositional voice. Unfortunately, the level of musical analysis does not engage the compositions with any depth. For the untrained listener who has access to the recordings, the comments will provide helpful signposts, but otherwise they are too brief and superficial to be

meaningful for music professionals or students. Indeed, the analyses lead one to wonder about the intended audience of the book. The authors, it seems, targeted general readers whose understanding of music may be limited. On page 60, for example, they provide a parenthetical definition of “polytonality” (although, inexplicably, they do not provide a definition for “twelve-tone music” on the following page). While Coulthard’s life is undeniably interesting enough to appeal to a broad readership, the inclusion of lengthier and more penetrating analyses would greatly enhance the value of this book and certainly add to our understanding of the composer’s musical significance.

If scholars and students are disappointed with the lack of musical analyses in the text, they will nonetheless find useful information and guidance for further study in the appendices. There is much of interest for the general reader here as well. The first appendix, “Jean Coulthard: Life and Times,” provides two parallel columns that run fourteen pages. The first column documents important events in Coulthard’s life; the second places these in the context of political, social, and musical occurrences both in Canada and the world. The second appendix, “A Selection of Jean Coulthard’s Works” provides “a representative sample of Jean Coulthard’s music [that] has found its way into print” (181). The list is organized by genre and contains both published and readily-available unpublished works (most are available through the Canadian Music Centre). Dates and publishers are listed for each item. “Recordings on Compact Disk” lists recordings of Coulthard’s works both by title of work and title of CD. The

decision to restrict this list to works available on CD is sensible although undoubtedly limiting. To be sure, LP recordings are not readily available for purchase, but the interested reader would still find them in music libraries or at the various branches of the CMC. The final appendix, “Publications and Sources,” lists a variety of sources dealing with Coulthard’s music. These include journal articles, book chapters, and doctoral theses. There is also a detailed description of the Coulthard papers, an extensive archival collection housed in the Department of Special Collections at the University of British Columbia.

Both authors had close personal ties to Coulthard: William Bruneau, a professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia in the department of educational studies, was a long-time colleague and friend; David Gordon Duke, a composer, educator, and writer, studied composition with Coulthard in the 1970s and wrote his PhD thesis on her orchestral music. It is a shame, then, that the book provides no information on the authors. Certainly most readers would appreciate knowing the connection and one wonders if this was accidentally omitted from the cover material. Supplementing their obvious familiarity with the subject, Bruneau and Duke manage an excellent job of incorporating archival material in the text. The book is rich with photographs of Coulthard at all points in her life and there are numerous quotations from Coulthard’s own writings. Not only does this lend the book its sense of authority, it provides an unusually compelling personal touch. At almost all points, the authors manage successfully to step aside to allow Coulthard’s words and music to speak for themselves.

Overall this is a noteworthy addition to the area of Canadian studies. It documents Jean Coulthard's passion and dedication to music and the exuberance with which she lived her life. It acknowledges her place as one of Canada's finest and most highly regarded composers. It contains useful resources for readers who wish to

explore her life and her music in greater detail. Although the musical analyses are not on a sufficiently detailed level to address the needs of most professional musicians, general readers will find them easy to understand and insightful.

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