

Ann Southam. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2005. CMCCD 10505 / WRC8-7753. \$30.00. Three compact discs. Disc 1: Documentary produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield (47:50). Disc 2: *Rivers* (Christina Petrowska Quilico, piano) (62:20). Disc 3: *Rivers* (Christina Petrowska Quilico, piano) (63:31).

The *Portraits* of Ann Southam and R. Murray Schaefer stand out from the rest of the series in the same way: both are dedicated to a single work (or more accurately, a series of works with the same title). Instead of the fascinating hodge-podge resulting from the retrospective collections in the rest of the series—where variety predominates in every respect (stylistic elements, genre, performing ensembles, and quality of performance and recording)—the Ann Southam Portrait presents a fairly one-dimensional perspective on the composer. Rather than sampling from the full range of Southam’s electronic and acoustic oeuvre over a wide period of time, the Portrait presents a series of three sets of minimalist, solo piano works written over a two-year period, from 1979-81, recorded in 2005 at the Glenn Gould Studio by Christina Petrowska Quilico. Because the CD set has such a narrow focus, such brilliant performances, and such a consistent, professional sound quality, it embodies more successfully what we might expect from a commercial recording. But as a portrait of an artist, it lacks the complexity and the nuanced impression that a retrospective can offer.

The documentary, however, produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield, does provide a context for Southam, who is arguably the most prominent dance composer in this country. The documentary’s focus on feminism and its influence on her is vitally important to understanding Southam as an artist.

Whereas many “women composers” object to the label and do not want their music to be interpreted in any way as having a woman’s voice, Southam, admirably, has consciously thought about her gendered, compositional voice. She appropriates minimalism as a feminist genre, describing the constant finger-work at the piano as a physical manifestation of “women’s work.” Her dozens of electro-acoustic works for dance could be described as functional (although she doesn’t describe them this way), one of the chief genres of artistic expression open to women historically. She also seems to seek out women performers (aside from Petrowska Quilico, she has worked with percussionist Beverley Johnston and pianist Eve Egoyan), and she was instrumental in founding the Association of Canadian Women Composers. It is telling that *all* of the individuals featured on the documentary are women, such as choreographers Patricia Beatty and Rachel Browne, and pianists Christina Petrowska Quilico and Eve Egoyan, all of whom have contributed to Canadian cultural life in immeasurable ways.

Although we certainly learn a great deal about Southam in the documentary, I found the interviews rather disappointing, particularly in the description of her music as “spiritual.” Several people (including Southam) use the term, but none could define it. I was reminded of the local advocate Dennis Denuto in the 1997 Australian film, *The Castle*. Out of his depth representing a family which is trying to stop the

government from appropriating their home, Denuto argues in court that the compulsory acquisition is against the constitution. Asked which part of the constitution, he answers, “It’s the vibe. Yeah, it’s just the vibe.” As well, some of those interviewed seem to place undue emphasis on how “brave” Southam was to write minimalist music in the late seventies and early eighties, when it was a style so unacceptable to university composers. Since Southam seems to have deliberately sought a career outside academia—she never undertook a degree in music, a requisite first step to a career within the academy—the emphasis is puzzling.

The music, however, does not disappoint. In this premiere recording, the three sets of *Rivers* are played out of order without an explanation provided in either the documentary or the CD booklet. Was this a decision made by the producer, the performer or the composer? In any event, the new ordering does make sense. Because each set has its own distinct sound, intermixing the sets creates interesting juxtapositions, changing the palette just before we feel inundated by a single colour. The works of the first *Rivers* set play with a memorable and beautiful twelve-tone row against a fast sixteenth-note ostinato pattern outlining a fifth and octave. The eight works in the second set are all slow “Mediations for Piano,” as subtitled in the score. All of them use a quarter-note right hand ostinato throughout, that, like a ground, is introduced on its own at the beginning. Momentum is created by the more

variable left hand which picks out syncopated notes across the full range of the keyboard, drawing our attention to individual moments of tone colour in a pointillistic effect. The nine works of the third *Rivers* set are certainly the most virtuosic and also the most intricate of the three sets. A constant sixteenth-note rhythm between the hands and the proliferation of little melodic cells that continue to develop, together form a contrast to the more static pieces in the first and second set. Still using an ostinato technique, Southam experiments with changing the focus of the ostinato during the course of a piece, creating dramatic shifts in colour.

The accompanying CD booklet provides lists of the works featured and the people interviewed in the documentary, biographies of the composer and performer, and a useful discussion of the work by Southam herself. The only improvements I would suggest would be the provision of timings for the individual tracks of the documentary, and the inclusion of a complete list of the composers featured in the *Portraits* series. Although it would expand what the *Portraits* currently offer, for a broader sense of Ann Southam’s musical contribution it might have been interesting to include a DVD in the set, featuring one of her collaborations with choreographer Patricia Beatty, Rachel Browne or David Earle.

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