

Remember Your Power: Music of John Burke. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 10104, 2004. One compact disc. Contents: String quartet (Lafayette String Quartet); Remember your power (instrumental ensemble). \$19.98.

Born in 1951, John Burke has developed into one of the more significant composers of his generation. His CV includes important commissions and performances from such organizations as La Société de musique contemporaine du Québec, Les Événements du neuf, New Music Concerts, Vancouver New Music, the Esprit Orchestra, the CBC Vancouver Orchestra and the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. Prominent among Burke's many awards and prizes is the 1995 Jules Léger Prize for New Chamber Music, which he won for his 1994 String Quartet (one of the two pieces on this CD).

Despite Burke's emerging reputation during the 1980s as an important Canadian voice, he had begun to grow dissatisfied with the compositions he was writing or had experienced. To that end, 1995 marked a watershed in Burke's career. Specifically, it was at this time he perceived that the compositional aesthetics and influences of early twentieth-century modernism (notably, that of Schoenberg and Stravinsky) had waned to the point that new roles for art music needed to be considered. Burke notes two influences that were paramount for his change in compositional orientation. The first was his long-standing involvement with religious choral music. The second major focus of Burke's attention was the exploration of the relationship between sound and consciousness, based upon the writings and philosophies of, notably, Don G. Campbell (author of *The Mozart Effect*) and the French musician,

acupuncturist, and bioenergetician Fabien Maman. As Burke notes in the CD liner notes, "This proved a turning point, and with it a new world of sound, music, healing, and consciousness began to open up as a potential field of inquiry that could be informed and intensified by the sophisticated musical resources developed by the contemporary music avant-garde."

The present CD contains two works—the one-movement String Quartet (the last work of note that Burke composed before his musical epiphany of 1995) and *Remember Your Power*, a three-movement composition written between 1998 and 2000 for an instrumental ensemble of eight musicians. The two pieces could not be further apart in sonic experience. The String Quartet is a thirteen minute edge-of-your-seat dynamo of relentless energy; it begins aggressively and never allows one to relax throughout. The Quartet's harmonic and textural sound demonstrates a strong influence from the middle-period Bartók quartets or some of the early Ligeti pieces—i.e., music in which the pitch language is largely based upon the saturation of chromatic aggregates.

Remember Your Power began its life as a one-movement work of twenty minutes with a 1997 commission from Vancouver New Music; it was Burke's first composition to utilize his new creative aesthetic. The work was extremely well received at its 1998 premiere, no doubt affirming for Burke his new musical orientation. In 2000,

Burke expanded *Remember Your Power* into an hour-long work. Its three movements, entitled “The Call,” “Remember Your Power” and “Return,” are modeled after the three phases of the archetype of personal transformation that mythologist Joseph Campbell called “The Hero’s Journey.” Minimalist textures underscore a decidedly more tonally-focused work, when compared with the String Quartet. Imaginative melodic and harmonic writing pervades each movement, as does the composer’s full understanding of orchestral colour and sonority. However, despite the many attractive features, at sixty minutes the work is simply too long: to be forthright, many sections meander and seem unfocused (in particular, the slow, meditative portions), making it difficult to ascertain what role they play within any one movement, as well as the design overall.

While the biography is informative, I must say the program notes are not very helpful to comprehend the pieces. Consider, for instance, the following description of the String Quartet:

The technical challenges facing the performers are an expedient to force them to drop their hesitation and be in a place of no-concept,

just as the Zen koan is used to confound the discursive mind in order to access supra-mundane insight. Once that threshold has been crossed and a channel opened, the music can come through as a truth-telling energy beyond ego, inscrutable yet passionately lyrical.

While it is not my place to question the sincerity of the composer’s comments, I’ve read this passage several times and am still not at all certain how it corresponds with the ternary design of the piece.

The performances of both works are outstanding (the performances are by the Lafayette Quartet, the ensemble for whom the String Quartet was written; *Remember Your Power* is played by an assemblage of West Coast musicians). The sound quality, clarity and ambience all meet the excellent standards we have come to expect from current CMC Centrediscs releases.

My quibbles with *Remember Your Power* notwithstanding, I would warmly recommend this recording.

Edward Jurkowski
University of Lethbridge