

Srul Irving Glick. Canadian Composer Portraits. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2006. CMCCD 11606. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Glick documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (57:43). Disc 2: String Quartet No. 2 (Saint Lawrence String Quartet) (20:00); *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (Maureen Forrester contralto, John Newmark piano) (21:10); Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra (Ralph Gothóni, pianist and conductor, Finlandia Sinfonetta) (26:10).

*These high works of art were at the same time
brought forth as humanity's highest works of nature,
according to true and natural laws. Everything arbitrary
or illusionary falls away; here is necessity, here is God.*
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹

“I believe that a composition grows like a tree or a flower, that it has to have a certain inevitability to it and it has to blossom.” So begins the recent Canadian Music Centre’s Portrait of Srul Irving Glick, spoken with conviction by the composer himself. In raising questions on how identity is constructed and transmitted through music this recent addition to the Canadian Composers Portraits series constitutes an important contribution to a better understanding not only of the composer and his work, but also of the context within which art music in Canada has ‘blossomed’ over the past half century. The works on CD2 presented include two world première recordings (always a good thing in and of itself). The song cycle *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* and the Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra are well performed. However, the St. Lawrence String Quartet’s interpretation of the brooding String Quartet No. 2 is particularly impressive.

The Documentary (CD1) provides much useful information and is certainly enhanced with well chosen selections of interviews in which the composer is allowed to speak for himself. Unfortunately the Documentary stumbles on a number of well-meaning, but nonetheless naive observations by third

parties. For example, within the first minute, Glick’s oeuvre is divided into two apparently mutually exclusive stylistic categories: on the one hand, his Jewish music that “developed and had a great energy” and on the other, a more problematic, “so-called classical” style.

Whereas Glick was able to produce the former almost effortlessly, with the latter he “struggled for years trying to find his own voice.” But how many composers do not struggle in their attempts to achieve satisfactory results? The observation also begs the question as to the relative worth of the compositions produced within these categories: the functional music written for liturgical purposes or religious occasions that Glick could apparently churn out at will or his more personal compositions that evidently cost him more effort and investment. We learn that as a student and young composer, Glick was forced to choose between the impersonal voice of international modernism (associated with “serial...mathematical music”) and a more parochial, albeit more authentic voice. Glick is thus portrayed as a loner: an outsider in the temple of high modernism, who sought to “sing from his heart,” while all around him, the rest were selling their souls to abstract calculation. These ill-considered, superficial remarks would hardly be worth mentioning, were it not for the fact that they are strategically placed at the very beginning of the documentary, framing our apprehension of the composer and his work.

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, cited in Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, Willi Reich ed. (Byrn Mawr: Theodore Presser Company in association with Universal Edition, 1963), 11.

This contextualization is profoundly misleading and I have the following objections:

1. In the twentieth century, art and religious music should not be understood as necessarily forming antithetical categories. On the contrary, though it is true that the twentieth-century avant-garde is usually associated with the growing secularization of Western society, the works of composers from Alexander Scriabin and Maurice Ravel to Olivier Messiaen and Avro Part are nevertheless infused with sincerely held spiritual and religious convictions. Modernist music is also not inimical to a sense of 'local' identity. Like Glick, both Béla Bartók and Ernest Bloch (to mention only two) found the universal in the particular and succeeded in expressing this through their work.
2. Arnold Schoenberg's method of composing with twelve tones related to one another is only superficially related to mathematics. Charles Heller has observed that the melodic material of the chorus *Shema Yisrael* that erupts at the end of *A Survivor From Warsaw* Op. 46 is "burning drama" rather than "icy mathematics," even though the choral melody is derived from the series exposed at the beginning of the composition.² Schoenberg's music is in fact based on rigorous intellectual integrity and a unified conception of artistic form that Anton Webern expressed in the following terms. "Unity is surely the indispensable thing if meaning is to

² Charles Heller, *What to listen for in Jewish music* (Toronto: Ecanthus Press, 2006), 264.

exist. ... So in music, as in all other human utterance, the aim is to make as clear as possible the relationships between the parts of the unity; in short, to show how one thing leads to another."³ This is the very core of Schoenberg's aesthetic credo that exerted such a heady influence on composers as different as Alban Berg, Hanns Eisler, Pierre Boulez and John Weinzweig. But though he contributed mightily to twentieth-century music through the development of innovative compositional techniques, Schoenberg's aesthetics can be traced back to those of the early Romantics and specifically to Goethe's organicist theory of form.⁴ Indeed, it is on this point that the music of Schoenberg and Glick not only intersects, but is perhaps more closely related than the latter himself would have thought to admit.

To be sure, Schoenberg believed that contemporary compositional technique was historically conditioned to embrace and encompass the complete chromatic scale, but he never said that this merely mechanical aspect of composition was a requirement for aesthetic legitimacy. On the contrary, he demanded that works be rigorously worked out according to an idea, i.e. something worth saying. The idea could be expressed using different techniques and in numerous styles. The only requirement about style was that it be an integral part of the composer's identity. On more than one occasion Schoenberg referred to George Gershwin as a "real composer," capable of

³ Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, 42

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

producing new musical ideas.⁵ A cursory examination of Glick's working manuscripts, preserved in the Richard Johnston Collection at the MacKimmie Library of the University of Calgary, suggests that the same could be said of him. The truth be told, the serious side of Glick's work (well represented on CD2) has far more in common with certain aspects of Schoenberg's legacy than with much of the so-called post modern music of Glick's day in which composers mixed and matched according to the flavour of the month or, after Mark Slouka, "the vernacular of the market place."⁶

Thus in the first minutes of the documentary, Glick's work is presented so as to place it outside of a purported mainstream. As opposed to the anonymous international avant-garde consumed by its interest in cerebral experiments, Glick is identified as a composer who produced expressive, "heart-felt" music, generated from a sense of belonging to a community and of profound religious belief. By using such binary, Manichean categories, the documentary's authors are simply perpetuating the marginalization of Glick's work that appears to have plagued the reception of his music throughout his career.

The very notion of a modernist mainstream is of course a problematic myth.⁷ It is a piece of nineteenth-century musical thought that survived in a radically different context. As such, it continues to distort and confuse our understanding of what twentieth-century composers actually achieved and how they are related to each other and to their recent and remote cultural pasts. By rereading Glick's music outside of these short-sighted clichés, we may discover that his compositions are part of a large body of work that constitutes an important facet of the Western art music of the past century. Such a perspective would allow us to take proper measure of his achievement.

Despite strong reservations concerning the information and the way in which it is presented on CD1, I nevertheless recommend that academic and public libraries purchase the recording because of the two world premier recordings contained on CD2.

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⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, "George Gershwin," *Style and Idea*, Leonard Stein ed., Leo Black trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 476-477. See also "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea," *Style and Idea*, 124.

⁶ Mark Slouka, "Listening for Silence: Notes on the Aural Life," Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner eds., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 41. first published in *Harper's Magazine* (April 1999).

⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, "Geschichte und Geschichten," *Die Musik der fünfziger Jahre. Versuch einer Revision*, Carl Dahlhaus ed. Veröffentlichung des Instituts für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung, Vol. 26 (Mainz: Schott, 1985), 9-20.