

Le signe du lion: musique de / music of Gilles Tremblay. Louise Bessette, piano; Aventa Ensemble; Bill Linwood, conductor. Centrediscs CMC CD 12507, 2007.
Contents: *Le signe du lion* (5:10) ; *Solstices* (or *Les jours et les saisons tournent*) (13:40) ; *Envoi: concerto pour piano et quinze instruments* (38:29).

Gilles Tremblay is a composer who is intensely interested in sound and sonority. His music explores the rich possibility of colours and combinations and often extends the notion of timbre beyond the usual limits of individual instruments. Unusual techniques and combinations produce unusual sounds and, in some cases (according to the scores) “invisible” notes that result only through the convergence of multiple sounds. Despite an awesome complexity, Tremblay’s music often speaks strongly to trained and untrained listeners alike. This lies, perhaps, in Tremblay’s fascination with the sounds and rhythms of nature. He admits to being affected profoundly by the rhythms of rippling water, the leaves of trees, and water rushing over rocks. These sounds are incorporated not in a superficial or imitative way, but in a way that evokes the power of the natural world and our place within the cycles of life.

The compositions presented on the Aventa Ensemble’s *Le signe du lion* demonstrate the rich philosophical range of Tremblay’s music. The first work, which gives the CD its name, was composed in 1981 as part of a series of works by different members of the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec to honour its president, Maryvonne Kendergi. The title refers to the zodiacal sign of Leo (Kendergi’s birth sign) and is concerned with the Lion as an inspirational sign. The scoring for horn and tam-tam was chosen because of the grandeur and energy conveyed by both instruments. A Hindu rhythm, “simahvikridita”, meaning “pounce of the lion”, provides two important symbolic elements that shape the musical lines: the horizon and the curve (a leap limited by the horizon followed by a fall). The second work, *Solstices (ou Les jours et les saisons tournent)* (1971), reflects the opposing seasonal progressions of the year. The music, like the terrestrial year, is divided into four sectors or seasons. Each season is assigned a specific instrument and the entire piece is governed by two opposite and complementary poles (the solstices) that determine minimum (winter solstice) and maximum (summer solstice) contrasts, intensity, density, and movement. Since the time of day or season in which the work is performed determine the departure point and thus affect the way in which the work unfolds, any performance is literally in tune with nature’s cycles. The final work, *Envoi: concerto pour piano et quinze instrumentistes* (1982-83), features the piano not only as soloist, but also as catalyst. The piano, in the opening solo, throws off ideas and launches the music. The ensuing music results as the consequence of this initial gesture or “envoi” (send off).

The performances of these works by the Aventa Ensemble are welcome additions to body of Tremblay’s recorded works in that they represent the world premiere recording of *Envoi* and the first commercial releases on compact disc of *Le signe du lion* and *Solstices*.

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They are also sensitive and nuanced performances that capture the full range and colour of Tremblay's writing. *Le signe du lion*, because of the demands placed on the performers—especially the horn player—in terms of range and endurance, is an extremely challenging piece. Both performers meet the challenges to convey vividly the strength and grandeur of the composition. The remarkable nature of *Solstices* is captured vibrantly. The music, at times, seems to shimmer and glow with the various combinations of woodwind and percussion instruments. Tremblay's marvelous affinity for sonority is most apparent in *Envoi* and brilliantly realized by the ensemble. Soloist Louise Bessette displays a stunning technique and a wonderful ability to draw a full range of colours and effects from the piano. The interaction between soloist and group, an integral part of this composition, is carried out effectively. The sound quality is excellent although all three pieces sound as if they were recorded closely. The result is an extremely transparent recording that allows the listener to hear all of the effects with clarity. At times, however, I felt added ambiance would have lent the performances more warmth and provided a more realistic concert-hall experience. This was especially apparent in *Le signe du lion* because of its sparse texture and in some of the high flute passages in *Solstices* which had a tendency to sound shrill.

My only significant complaint about this recording concerns the liner notes. Although credited to Tremblay in the booklet, the notes appear to be excerpts compiled from previous liner notes, program notes, and prefaces to the scores. Tremblay is an eloquent writer and his descriptions of these pieces are thoughtful and insightful. Still, the cited passages mostly concern his compositional methods and do not provide the guidance most listeners will need to approach these pieces. An overview of each piece, incorporating some of Tremblay's descriptions in a way that gave listeners some helpful signposts, would have been more effective. Given the complexity of Tremblay's music and philosophical ideas, this would make the music more accessible and allow the beautiful intricacies of this music and these performances to be more widely appreciated.

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