

*Cult Figures: Electroacoustic Music from Canada*. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2008. 1 compact disc + 1 booklet. CMCCD 13908. \$17.98 Contents: *On the outer edge* / Michael Matthews – *Waves* ; *System 2.3/7* / Rolf Boon – *Cult figure* / Reinhard von Berg – *Full of stars* / Aris Carastathis – *My Dad's story* / Don Ross – *Arco/Lyrically* / Ian Crutchley – *Sailing the high C* / Helve Sastok – *Monday afternoon* / Michael Horwood – *Blue evening* / Robert Morin – *Wow (Is my cat a rock 'n' roller?)* / Piotr Grella-Możejko.<sup>1</sup>

This intriguing, sampler-style CD contains eleven electroacoustic pieces by ten Canadian composers. As the biographies in the accompanying CD booklet indicate, the vast majority of these composers are from Western Canada. Alberta composers feature prominently, a point that may be explained by the partial financial support that came from the organization, Prairie Sounds, and the Edmonton Composers' Concert Society. As might be expected with a disc of this nature, the works represent a multiplicity of styles. And while there is much to enjoy on the recording, the compositions are also of variable quality and interest. Nonetheless, the broad variety of works will provide the listener with a concrete perspective of the trends of Canadian electroacoustic music.

Two of the works are entirely computer-generated. The first, by Michael Matthews, is entitled *On the Outer Edge*. The arresting opening is followed by a series of fascinating textures and harmonies, creating a logical inevitability to the composition's calm repose. Although only five minutes in duration, it is a thrilling work—in my opinion, one of the strongest pieces on the disc.

The origin of Helve Sastok's *Sailing the High 'C'* is a Frequency Modulation composition created using the computer program, CSound. Further digital processing was achieved using ProTools. It is a testament to Sastok's deft handling of sound and texture that such a convincing composition is created using a minimal amount of material. That said, I felt that the piece was a little too long and that its narrative would have had a stronger impact if it had been trimmed.

Rolf Boon's seven-minute *Waves* features live musicians who simultaneously interact with each other and with pre-recorded electronic sounds, using attributes indicated in the performance score. This tranquil and extremely attractive work is arguably the most programmatic on the disc. By combining luxuriant electroacoustic sounds with adroitly constructed melodies and harmonies for the musicians, and cast within subtle crescendo and decrescendo dynamic patterns, the composer engenders an impressive musical metaphor of the passage of waves.

Boon's other work on the CD is entitled *System 2.3/7*. It was created using a Fairlight CMI, described as a mini-computer-based synthesizer/sampler system from the late 1970s. A variety of percussion and "found sounds" were digitally processed. Once transferred to a Tascam eight-track recorder, they were manipulated using a variety of

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tape manipulation techniques. Despite its attractive harmonic language and clear formal design, I found this work to be slightly less engaging than *Waves*, largely because the manipulation effects felt a little too forced and conventional.

Written in 1966, Michael Horwood's *Monday Afternoon* is the oldest composition on the CD. It is also the most overtly indebted to Pierre Schaeffer and Edgard Varèse's important *musique concrète* pieces from the 1950s. Horwood ingeniously splices together manipulated fragments of sound effects as well as spoken and musical excerpts from the 1950s *Superman* television series. There is a strong formal arch to the nine-minute composition, sensibly leading to the kaleidoscopic frenzy in the final minutes.

A second work that stylistically leans towards *musique concrète* is Reinhard von Berg's nine-and-a-half minute *Cult Figure*. However, despite the composer's indisputable display of a strong musical craft, I must admit to a certain amount of discomfort with the piece. Inherently, there is a relatively static arch to the work, which leaves one feeling it is just an incoherent series of finely constructed events.

Also problematic is Don Ross's *My Dad's Story*. Essentially, the ten-minute composition is a series of recitations by – yes – the composer's father. The texts are underscored by both a solo clarinet line suffused with arabesques and manipulated clarinet sounds. For me, the emotional arch of the music was too narrow, which also felt too strained upon the texts.

Simplicity, in terms of dynamic level, pitch material, and musical gesture is the operative word in Aris Carastathis's *Full of Stars*. This calm, hauntingly piece is another overtly programmatic composition—one that both captures the beauty and the sparse loneliness of space (the latter attribute wonderfully portrayed by the composer's judicious use of silence).

Ian Crutchley's *Arco/Lyrically* is derived from the development and manipulation of short melodic and harmonic gestures from, appropriately enough, given the work's title, the violin and voice. A kaleidoscope of dialogues appear in the piece, from the simplest of two-part counterpoint to extremely dense and complex harmonies and textures. There is a fantastic, visceral quality that takes the listener on an on-the-edge journey throughout.

Unquestionably the most ethereal of the eleven compositions is Robert Morin's ten-minute *Blue Evening*. The soft, meditative composition is essentially a slow moving series of subtly changing harmonies that underlie constantly evolving melodic fragments. It is evocative of a new age style of writing, albeit with far more imaginative harmonic and melodic language.

The disc's final track, entitled *WOW! (Is My Cat a Rock 'n' Roller?)*, is by Piotr Grella-Możejko. As the title suggests, the sound source for the work was a Siamese cat. The range of sounds was generated from old analogue equipment. A type of boogie bass line

underscores the manipulated cat meows. The program notes suggest humor is the basis of the piece. But for me the joke ended rather quickly and the music quickly became annoying. It is not a piece to which I expect to return any time soon.

I would be remiss not to comment on the excellent program notes by Jerry Ozipko. The booklet opens with a page-and-a-half sketch of the early trends and pioneers of electroacoustic music, which helps to contextualize the various works. This is followed by engaging notes on each composition. Short biographies of all ten composers are also included.

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