

And blue sparks burn: music of Melissa Hui. Toronto: CMC Centrediscs CMCCD 10605, 2006. 1 compact disc (76:10). Contents: *Lacrymosa* (Aline Kutun, soprano ; Max Christie, clarinet ; Lydia Wong, piano) (6:11) – *From Dusk to Dawn* (Chamber ensemble; Gary Kulesha, conductor) (17:45) – *One Voice* (Patricia Monson, flute) (10:14) – *And blue sparks burn* (Marie Bérard, violin; Lydia Wong, piano) (7:30) – *Come as You Are* (Liu Fang, pipa; Chamber ensemble; Gary Kulesha, conductor) (14:57) – *When Soft Voices Die* (Lydia Wong, piano) (6:15) – *Changes* (Peter Pavlovsky, contrabass; Chamber ensemble; Gary Kulesha, conductor) (13:35). \$19.98

Forty-year-old Melissa Hui has risen to be among Canada's more important young composers. Her prolific output includes an impressive number of orchestral and chamber works—many of which are the result of commissions from Canada's most prestigious performing groups. In addition, Hui has received several awards, notably from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Aaron Copland Fund, ASCAP and the Canada Council. Although she taught on the composition faculty at Stanford University from 1994 to 2004, Hui now resides in Montreal.

Hui's most recent CD, entitled *And blue sparks burn*, is a compilation of seven solo and chamber works that span a twelve-year period from 1990 to 2002. The title comes from the 2002 violin and piano composition by the same name; the piece represents Hui's personal reaction to the tragedy of the 9/11 attacks.

I must admit my first impression of this CD was mixed. Despite many exquisite moments, there were also several elements that made me quite uncomfortable. For instance, the opening work, *Lacrymosa*, for soprano, clarinet and piano, is just too close for comfort to the declamatory structure and harmonic sound found in Olivier Messiaen's vocal works. I had a similar reaction to the

relationship between "Dance," the middle movement of *From Dusk to Dawn*, and some of György Ligeti's mechanistic pieces from the 1970s; while the energetic opening minutes of *Come as You Are* sound too much akin to the aggressive, frenetic minimalist statements that are the stock-and-trade of Louis Andriessen or Steve Martland.

However, repeated hearings have tempered any negative impressions I initially had. There are just too many positive aspects to Hui's writing—in particular, the subtle contrapuntal interaction of musical materials, the exquisite textures, the masterful skill of orchestration, as well as the sheer beauty of the music—to dwell too long upon matters of occasional excessive influences. One especially compelling trait of Hui's music, though, is the beautiful, haunting-like quality of her non-teleological musical narratives (in the introductory comments of the program notes, Hui suggests that the origins of this pervasive feature in her music are culturally based). Despite my enthusiasm towards these seven pieces, I do feel that this latter attribute is more successfully represented in her intimate compositions—i.e., the solo works (*One Voice* and *When Soft Voices Die*) or chamber settings of two and three players (*Lacrymosa* and *And blue sparks*

burn)—rather than the larger chamber orchestra pieces.

The program notes, written by the composer, are of mixed quality. While the comments for works such as *From Dusk to Dawn* and *One Voice* provide insight to these compositions, those for *Lacrymosa*, *And blue sparks burn* and *When Soft Voices Die* are not very useful at all. The performances on the CD are first-rate; in fact, I would find it difficult to imagine that Hui would find more committed performances elsewhere. The

sound quality, clarity and ambience all meet the excellent standards that we have come to expect from current CMC Centerdiscs releases. (It should be noted that Hui served as executive producer on the recording.)

My few quibbles notwithstanding, I would strongly recommend this recording.

Edward Jurkowski
The University of Lethbridge