

The Fool / The Death of Enkidu. Music by Harry Somers; libretti by Michael Fram (1st work) and Martin Kinch (2nd work). Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 14209, 2009. 2 compact discs. (A Window on Somers.) Contents: The fool (47:00); The death of Enkidu (40:22). Participants: Tamara Hummel, soprano; Sandra Graham, mezzo-soprano; Darryl Edwards, tenor; Gary Relyea, bass-baritone; Robert Cram, flute; Lawrence Cherney, oboe; Max Christie, clarinet; Nadina Mackie-Jackson, bassoon; Annalee Patipatanakoon, violin 1; Carol Fujino, violin 2; Doug Perry, viola; Roman Borys, cello; Ed Tait, bass; Jamie Parker, piano; David Currie, conductor (1st work). Amanda Parsons, actor; Julie Nesrallah, mezzo-soprano; Martin Houtman, tenor; David Pomeroy, tenor; Doug MacNaughton, baritone; Alain Coulombe, bass; Robert Cram, flute; Max Christie, clarinet; Barkyhl Gievori, Dan Gress, French horn; Robin Engleman, Russell Hartenberger. Beverly Johnson, percussion; Erica Goodman, harp; Andrea Grant, piano; Les Dala, conductor (2nd work). \$30.00*

This new addition to the series entitled *A Window on Somers* – a CD project produced by Pierrot Concerts for Centrediscs in commemoration of the lifework of Harry Somers (1925-1999) – consists of two one-act operas: the 1953 *The Fool* and *The Death of Enkidu* from 1977. While it probably goes without saying that any new recording of the music of one of Canada's major composers deserves attention, this spectacular two-disc set is a milestone. Not only does it mark *The Fool's* long-overdue return to the catalogue of recorded performances, it also contains the world premiere of the curiously neglected *Death of Enkidu*. The recording is a winner in terms of its stunning, exhilarating performances. And by filling a significant gap in the Somers discography, it is to be strongly recommended to anyone with an interest in opera or contemporary music.

The first disc contains a forty-seven minute performance of Somers' most frequently staged opera, *The Fool*. Based on the libretto by Michael Fram, the work had to wait three years following its completion before receiving its premiere in 1956. Set in a medieval court, the opera tells the tale of a court jester ("the fool") who announces to the king and queen, who love him as a son, and to the lady-in-waiting who loves him as a man, that he intends to jump off the castle wall and fly. After realizing that for the first time ever the fool is serious, the king tries to avert what he believes will be certain death. The ensuing eight-minute argument between the king and fool (track nine) culminates with the fool's suicidal leap from the tower. The musical dialogue is a model of text setting: the increasing agitation of the dialogue is matched by the gradual escalation in instrumental texture (primarily the strings) and feverish melodic activity. The remainder of the scene is a beautiful lament by the queen and lady-in-waiting, followed by a brilliant short monologue in which the king questions whether the fool fell to his death or, in fact, flew.

In the program notes, Somers suggests that *The Fool* can be interpreted in different ways. On one level, the opera is about the four characters. Yet, on another, it can also be seen as representing the four inner emotional states of one person. Finally, the four characters can be

* © 2009 The author and the Canadian Association of Music Libraries, Archives, and Documentation Centres/L'auteur et l'Association canadienne des bibliothèques, archives et centres de documentation musicaux.

recognized as an allegory for different aspects of our society. For instance, the conflict between the king and the fool can be read as the inherent tension between authority and the right to criticize or satirize such power. In Somers' words, "*The Fool*, then, is a stylized music drama of the conflict that exists in both our inner world and the external world during a time of crisis."

The Fool may be best described as pluralistic in style, ranging from overt tonal references to extremely atonal material. The variety of harmonic styles underscores the dramatic elements of the work. Somers also employs an array of vocal styles including *Sprechstimme*, dramatic recitation, and traditional sung lines, again to accentuate the text.

Despite a gripping musical score, *The Death of Enkidu* has not received the same attention as *The Fool*. Composed in 1977 to a libretto by Martin Kinch, *The Death of Enkidu* was intended to be the first of a trilogy of one-act operas. Although there were plans for a production, they never came to fruition and the opera was not heard during Somers' lifetime. Indeed, this premiere recording is also the first complete performance.

Derived from the epic of Gilgamesh, arguably the oldest written story on record, *The Death of Enkidu* is in two scenes. The setting is the camp of the invading army of Chaldea. In the first scene, Enkidu, who is King Gilgamesh's chief captain, is dying. The plot essentially divides between two contrasting realities: that of Enkidu, who recounts on his deathbed his glorious past and the many battles in the land in which his soldiers are now fighting; and that of the soldiers, who identify only with their current harsh conditions and the futility of their fate.

In the second scene, a courtesan bathes Enkidu's forehead in an attempt to relieve his fever. This induces Enkidu to recall his seduction by a prostitute during his youth. While he curses the prostitute for destroying his early days of peace and joy and alienating him from his soldiers, Enkidu also relives the passion and lust that the encounter brought. Enkidu's memories are matched by the seduction of one of the soldiers by the same courtesan that bathed Enkidu. A brawl ensues between the soldier and two others over the woman; at the same time, Enkidu begins to curse what his civilization has become. The clash ultimately results in the soldier's utter defeat and humiliation. The present reality is matched by Enkidu reliving a similar experience that occurred to him ("I touched my forehead to the ground. I called him Master."). The opera ends with Enkidu's three cries of "Gilgamesh," followed by silence.

Compared with *The Fool*, the vocal writing in *The Death of Enkidu* is generally more virtuosic; the actual use of the voice also more traditional. Further, the harmonic language of the work is far less heterogeneous and more consistently atonal in character than in Somers' earlier opera. While this is an impressive opera with many strengths—there is energy, passion and astonishing writing on virtually every page—the conflicts established in the work are more psychological than dramatic. In my opinion, future performances of the composition may be more successful in a concert medium rather than as a staged production.

While accolades must go to all the singers, it is the riveting performances by bass-baritone Gary Relyea and tenor Darryl Edwards, in the roles of the king and the fool respectively, and tenor David Pomeroy, for his dazzling presentation of the demanding role of Enkidu, that impress the

most. David Curie (in *The Fool*) and Les Dala (in *The Death of Enkidu*) expertly direct a rock-solid group of select chamber musicians in these two recordings (ten musicians are needed for *The Fool*; *The Death of Enkidu* is scored for nine, three of which are percussion).

The sound quality and clarity meet the standard of current CMC Centredisc releases. A small criticism is the slightly forward balance of the voices, particularly in *The Fool*. The accompanying booklet contains brief synopses by Somers and the librettos in English with French translations, as well as informative background details about the operas and the performers. One quibble I have with the booklet is the failure to identify the tracks (ten for *The Fool*, two for *Enkidu*) within the libretto, rather than just the back of the CD case. Although space was no doubt an issue, it is also unfortunate that the conductors and singers are all listed on the outside of the CD case, yet the chamber musicians for each opera are only listed inside the booklet.

As noted at the outset, the present recording is a landmark and an important step forward for Canadian music. One can only hope that recorded performances of other operas by Somers (is it not time for a new recording of *Louis Riel*—a piece that many commentators regard as Canada's greatest opera?) will appear in the not-too-distant future.

Edward Jurkowski
The University of Lethbridge