

**Violet Archer.** *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. CMCCD 8502. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (48:26). Disc 2: Sinfonietta (CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, John Avison, conductor) (16:00); Trio no. 2 (The Hertz Trio) (13:57); String Quartet no. 3 (University of Alberta String Quartet) (20:55); *The Bell* (CBC Chorus and Orchestra, Geoffrey Waddington, conductor) (21:51).

Montreal-born composer, performer and teacher Violet Archer (1913-2000) had a tremendous impact on musical life in Canada, an impact that has been acknowledged widely: among other special awards and distinctions, she was recipient of several honorary doctorates (McGill, University of Windsor, and University of Calgary) and the Order of Canada (1983). Most recently, she was selected as one of the first ten composers to be represented in the Canadian Music Centre's Centredisc *Portraits* series.

The sound quality and the quality of performances on the Violet Archer Portrait is somewhat mixed. All of the performances are reissues (all but Trio No. 2 from the 1983 Radio Canada *Anthology of Canadian Music* (ACM 17)), although the liner notes mention only that the recording of *The Bell* is a historical recording, taken from "original mono master tapes." The opaque recording quality of *The Bell* does contrast with the other works, most notably the very clean Trio no. 2, presumably from the Hertz Trio's 1991 release. The documentary also exhibits a range in the quality of sound, although the discrepancy in this case adds texture and a sense of historical placement of particular excerpts.

Repertoire on the CD comprises four substantial works ranging over a thirty-year span in Archer's compositional output: a cantata, *The Bell* (1949), from

her student days at Yale; Trio no. 2 (1956-57), from her professional years in the United States; Sinfonietta (1968) from her University of Alberta years; and String Quartet no. 3 (1981) completed after her retirement. While Archer herself suggests in the liner notes that the Sinfonietta, performed capably by the CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, "may possibly be classified as neo-classic," the straightforward metric, phrase and formal organization places it certainly in that camp. Perhaps most noteworthy is how Archer's eight-year experience as percussionist in the Montreal Women's Symphony, founded in 1940 by conductor Ethel Stark, reveals itself in her playful and precise writing for the snare drum and triangle. As one might expect, Trio no. 2 receives a solid and confident performance by the Hertz Trio, who performed it on an extensive tour in 1982, including London, Rome, Moscow, Leningrad, Israel and New York.

The least convincing performance is *The Bell*, by the CBC Chorus and Orchestra, conducted by Geoffrey Waddington. Balance between the orchestra and the chorus is rather heavy on the side of the orchestra, the diction is poor and intonation at the beginning of the second movement is weak. But the work itself is compelling. Based on John Donne's *Sermons and Devotions*, the cantata uses baroque rhythms and a contrapuntal texture within a non-tonal harmonic environment (described by Schulman in ACM 17 as bearing Hindemith's "neo-baroque thumbprint").

Although in shape and rhythm the melodic writing evokes baroque gestures, the frequent use of unison octave passages in both the orchestra and the chorus, sounds rather chant-like. Through orchestration, Archer achieves a large-scale ternary form overarching the four movements of the cantata: the first movement and the linked third and fourth movements of this twenty-minute work comprise for the most part orchestra and chorus together, while the sizeable (eight-minute) second movement is completely *a capella*.

The most exciting work and performance on the CD is also the most recent representation of Archer's output on the disc, her String Quartet no. 3 from 1981. Abandoning a strict sense of metric organization, but retaining a rhythmic vitality and contrapuntal craft, Archer embraces an expressionistic aesthetic. The energetic and thoughtful performance by the University of Alberta String Quartet is the highlight of all four recordings on the CD.

Perhaps most valuable on the Archer Portrait is the documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Employing numerous excerpts from Archer's works and commentary by Archer's friends and former students (notably composers Robert Rosen and Allan Gordon Bell, Jean Coulthard-scholar William Bruneau, and pianist and Banff Music and Sound administrator Isobel Rolston), Cornfield provides a vivid context for Archer's own words, mostly edited selections from Michael Schulman's interview in ACM 17. Compared to other sectors of the music profession, except for perhaps conducting, women are still greatly

under-represented in the field of composition. Hindered by attacks on their virtue (Barbara Strozzi), lack of access to professional positions (Elisabeth Claude Jacquet de la Guerre), fathers who thought the profession unsuitable to women (Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel), and the demands of motherhood (Ruth Crawford Seeger), the most insidious of all barriers has been the much discussed "Woman Composer Question," debated in print as recently as 1973 in *High Fidelity Magazine*. Although no one today would suggest in print that women are biologically unsuited to the profession of composition, the question still lingers in the woman-composer label. In Schulman's interview, excerpted in Cornfield's documentary, Archer's surprise and impatience are apparent with a description by a Montreal critic of "veritable masculine strength" in her music, rather than the "feminine" qualities one might expect:

It never even occurred to me for a minute that I was writing feminine music or masculine music, I just felt that I was writing music and I still feel the same way. I am just writing music.

In the Cornfield documentary we are fortunate to learn more about Archer's attitude, from her students. We hear an echo of the same impatience, this time with the 'woman composer' label. When asked in class one day what it was like to be a woman composer, she apparently answered:

I'm a composer. I happen to be a woman and that's one thing, but I'm not a woman composer. I'm a composer. I'm an artist first. That drives my life.

We also get a sense from Archer's students and friends what she was like as a teacher ("a dynamo"), a friend ("loyal"), and a person ("lonely").

The accompanying booklet to the CD-set is good, particularly the commentary about the works presented (again, most of which is quoted directly from the notes of ACM 17), but more detail would improve its usefulness. For instance, track numbers for the works are located on the back of the CD case, but are not provided in the liner notes beside the tempo indications and timings for the individual movements. Although incipits are given for the documentary, track numbers and timings are not provided at all. More information about the sources for the documentary would be most helpful for those who would like to follow up on items they have heard. The notes could provide reference to

Schulman's interview with Archer as well as short lists of the people interviewed for the documentary and of the works from which musical excerpts are taken. I would also like to see more detail about the actual recordings, specifically an indication of when the recordings were made, particularly since the four recordings included are reissues.

Since the recordings are all reissues, the set will be most useful for those who do not have already, and cannot now get, the Radio Canada Anthology. But the context provided by the documentary makes the Violet Archer Portrait a valuable acquisition for any collection.

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