

**Oskar Morawetz.** *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. CMCCD 8702. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Morawetz documentary produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield (55:42). Disc 2: Concerto for Harp and Chamber Orchestra (Gianetta Baril, harp; Edmonton Symphony Orchestra; Uri Mayer, conductor) (26:31); String Quartet no. 5, "Tribute to W. A. Mozart" (Orford String Quartet) (17:43); Suite for Piano (Angela Hewitt, piano) (9:50); *The Railway Station* (National Youth Orchestra of Canada, John Lubbock, conductor) (11:30).

Oskar Morawetz has been recognized often for his outstanding achievements. He is a member of the Order of Canada, he was the first composer in Canada to receive the Order of Ontario, and he holds two Juno Awards. He is also one of Canada's most recorded and performed composers. This two-disc set in the Canadian Composers Portraits Series combines a full-length documentary on Morawetz's life and career with recordings of four of his compositions.

The documentary is constructed from interviews with family members, friends, performers (notably, Anton Kuerti), and former students (Bruce Mather and Larysa Kuzmenko). It begins with an account of Morawetz's formative years in his native Czechoslovakia and his subsequent emigration to Canada. His harrowing experiences as a Jew fleeing Europe at the beginning of the war are gripping, and they are related powerfully by Morawetz himself. The profound impact this must have had certainly provides insight into the sombre and tragic nature of many of his compositions. Particularly fascinating are the excerpts in which Morawetz's daughter Claudia leads a tour through the family house. While showing the composer's studio, she discusses her father's work habits. Later, in an

adjoining room, she reads passages from the composer's correspondence with the Holocaust survivor Otto Frank, father of Anne Frank whose diaries inspired Morawetz to write one of his most moving works. The various speakers are carefully identified at their first statements, although sometimes it is difficult to recognize a voice when it reappears later in the documentary. Many of the comments are of a personal nature providing the listener with a moving and intimate portrait of the composer.

The second CD contains four works written between 1969 and 1991. With one work from each decade, it is apparent that the repertoire has been carefully and aptly chosen to represent the composer's oeuvre. Although vocal music is absent, there is an otherwise satisfying balance of genres: a concerto, a symphonic work, a chamber music work, and a piece for solo piano. Oddly, despite the stated mandate of the series to present the composers' "most important works", none of the pieces listed in the liner notes as being among Morawetz's "most highly regarded" (the Piano Concerto, the Sinfonietta for Winds and Percussion, *Memorial to Martin Luther King*, and *From the Diary of Anne Frank*) are included on the CD. Since these works (with the exception of the Sinfonietta) are those discussed most

prominently on the documentary CD, their absence on the accompanying CD is even more conspicuous. Nevertheless, the works that are included also represent Morawetz at his best.

The performances, for the most part, are outstanding. Harpist Gianetta Baril and the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra under Uri Mayer give a compelling performance of the Concerto for Harp and Chamber Orchestra. The Orford String Quartet, in its final incarnation, gives a moving rendition of the fifth string quartet, "Tribute to Mozart". The work was commissioned by the quartet to mark the bicentennial of Mozart's death and its premiere was given as part of the group's last public performance. Morawetz draws heavily on Mozart's Requiem, making this work a fitting tribute to the Orford String Quartet as well. Angela Hewitt's playing in the Suite for Piano is bold, polished, and nuanced. The only track that disappointed me, albeit only slightly, was the National Youth Orchestra of Canada's performance of *The Railway Station*. To be sure, this is an orchestra that I hold in very high esteem, but it is, by nature, a training orchestra that meets for a short time each summer with a constantly changing personnel. Although the performance is good, it lacks the precision of a professional ensemble of seasoned players. There is obvious merit in the inclusion of what one assumes is the first performance of this work by the ensemble for which it was written. However, since this version is already available on the *Anthology of Canadian Music*, and since, as the liner notes state, the work

was performed shortly after its premiere both by the Toronto Symphony and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, an alternate recording would have been welcome.

My prime concern with this CD is the packaging. I was frustrated by the lack of background information on the recordings themselves. At the very least, given the historical value of this compilation, the dates and venues of the recordings should be provided. For example, the liner notes state that the premiere performance of *The Railway Station* was given by The National Youth Orchestra of Canada on 14 August 1980. Is this the performance included on the CD? Was the recording even made in 1980 or does it date from a subsequent year? The design itself is unwieldy. Since track numbers are only listed on the back cover, and individual movements only listed in the CD booklet, I found myself switching back and forth constantly. Track numbers are not provided at all for the documentary material. Instead, the cues are indicated with bullets and there are only ten bullets for eleven tracks (the opening cue has been omitted). Moreover there is a discrepancy in the timing of the documentary CD. The back cover states, incorrectly, 55:42 whereas the booklet gives the correct time of 58:18. These, however, are minor complaints. Overall, this set provides a fascinating glimpse into the life and music of one of Canada's foremost composers.

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