

**Jean Papineau-Couture.** *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. CMCCD 8602. \$20.00. 2 compact discs. Disc 1: Papineau-Couture documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (60:12). Disc 2: Concerto pour violon et orchestre de chambre (Victor Schultz, violin; CBC Vancouver Orchestra; Mario Bernardi, conductor) (19:20); Pièce concertante no. 3, "Variations" (Orchestre à cordes Radio-Canada, Jacques Beaudry, conductor) (15:55); Paysage (Ensemble de la SMCQ; Tudor Singers of Montréal; Serge Garant, conductor) (11:40); Concerto pour piano et orchestre (Gilles Manny, piano; Orchestre de Radio-Canada à Montréal; Alexander Brott, conductor) (16:20).

The second round of CDs from the series of *Canadian Composer Portraits* has been released and includes a two-disc set devoted to Jean Papineau-Couture, the person who may be justifiably called the grandfather of contemporary French-Canadian art music. The double CD follows the usual format of the series. The first disc contains an hour-long documentary expertly produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Papineau-Couture's early years, his studies with Nadia Boulanger and his life-long attraction to the music of Stravinsky are all carefully integrated to reveal the role they play in Papineau-Couture's development as a composer. Intercut with the narration are short interviews with such eminent composers as John Beckwith, Brian Cherney, Bruce Mather, John Rea and Gilles Tremblay, who offer comments about Papineau-Couture's music, his role as a teacher and as one of the founding members of the Canadian League of Composers. In short, this documentary is a true gem that deftly balances perspectives of Papineau-Couture the composer, the academic administrator, the teacher, and the husband and father. I highly recommend that you listen to this disc first to experience what I believe is the standard to which such documentaries should aspire. The musical excerpts throughout the documentary also subtly prepare the listener for Papineau-Couture's unique harmonic language in the works on the second disc.

Disc two provides a good cross section of Papineau-Couture's works during the 1950s and 1960s; there are four pieces altogether, two from each decade. The earliest composition (the Violin Concerto) dates from 1952; the last, *Paysage*, from 1968. The three-movement Violin Concerto is a treasure. It is expertly performed by Victor Schultz, who seems to handle the most difficult of passages with astonishing ease. Mario Bernardi handles the CBC Vancouver Orchestra with equal aplomb. My only quibble is with the balance: the violin's presence is a little too forward.

While the Violin Concerto is a new recording (and, surprisingly, a world premiere), the remaining three works are archival recordings culled from the six-LP set devoted to Papineau-Couture and released in 1979 as one of the installments from the *Anthology of Canadian Music* series. I wish the dates of the recordings were given. For instance, the Piano Concerto was premiered by Gilles Manny; Alexander Brott conducted the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for the occasion. Manny and Brott also appear on the recording that was subsequently made, although the orchestra is different. It is reasonable to assume they were guided to a certain degree by Papineau-Couture and that the recording is a faithful representation of his conception of the work. If the date had been

provided, it would have been possible to know how long Manny and Brott had lived with the piece before the recording was made.

Like the Violin Concerto, the three remaining works display Papineau-Couture's superb handling of formal design and orchestral colour, features of his style for which he has been justifiably celebrated. The works include the 1959 *Pièce concertante no. 3*, the 1965 Piano Concerto, and the 1968 *Paysage* for eight singing voices, eight speaking voices, string quintet, piano, harp and percussion. I have to admit, however, a certain preference for the *Pièce concertante no. 3*; the work is a series of variations on a theme. It is a testament to Papineau-Couture's formidable skills that this set of variations—a form that, when placed in the wrong hands, can all too easily become an academic exercise in the most negative sense—is filled with an amazing kaleidoscope of colours, textures and timbres.

While all four pieces are worthy additions to Papineau-Couture's all-too-small discography, I am somewhat confused with the choice of repertoire for the disc (a similar comment may be levied with other discs from the series). Why these four particular works? For instance, is it necessary to have two concertos, when a representative chamber work, series of songs, or a piano composition could have been chosen, thereby providing a more extensive cross section of the composer's oeuvre?

The presentation of the CD and the accompanying booklet also leave a lot to be desired. First, surely it is not too much to ask for a more extensive biography than the blurb that was pulled directly off the CMC Web site (and a fifteen-year-old one at that). Second,

there is the absence of information about recording dates and venues for any of the pieces (yes, there are many people who believe that this is valuable information!). In fact—and I believe this is a first—the industry standard AAD/ADD/DDD labels (the first letter designates whether an analogue or digital recorder was used for the recording session; the second letter refers to whether the mixing/editing was analogue or digital; and the third letter indicates that a digital tape recorder was used for the final mastering) are not provided for any of the recordings! Third, no text is provided for *Paysage* in French, much less a translation in English. Even the listing of track numbers is problematic: track numbers are listed on the back jewel-box cover, but individual movements are not; however, the movements are listed in the CD booklet, but without the track numbers.

Finally, I should note there are numerous problems with the liner notes themselves. As an example, consider the final paragraph from the notes on *Paysage*:

The whole analysis of *Paysage* lies in the shadow of Varèse [I would disagree with this statement, by the way]. This is not to infer that Papineau-Couture was inspired by him but rather that he espoused the theories of Varèse and his attitude towards musical composition.

While such a provocative statement is intriguing, it is frustratingly incomplete, for it neither states what theories of Varèse Papineau-Couture espoused, nor what this attitude actually is.

One may cry pedantic; however, the lack of information and the overall inferior quality

of presentation in a recording that is clearly intended to be a celebration of one of our country's most vital contributions to art music smacks of cheapness all around. Papineau-Couture deserves better, as do we.

My advice: ignore the booklet and listen to the documentary. While I do believe there may have been better choices, the four works provide a worthwhile perspective of Papineau-Couture's style during two of his most productive decades and, as such, are a

valuable addition to our understanding of one of Canada's most eminent composers from the second half of the twentieth century.

My criticisms notwithstanding, I would strongly urge that this disc be an addition to your libraries.

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