

R. Murray Schafer. *Canadian Composer Portraits.* Toronto, Ont.: Centrediscs, 2002. CMCCD 8902. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Schafer documentary produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: *Wolf Music* (R. Murray Schafer, music, text, narration; Michael Cumberland, alphorn, tuba; John Dewirst, trombone; Wendy Humphreys, soprano; Stuart Laughton, trumpet, cornet; Tilly Prudhom, clarinet; Ellen Waterman, flute) (64:16).

I must begin by freely confessing to be a keen admirer of the music of R. Murray Schafer, as well as an avid collector of the *Portraits* series. Not surprisingly, therefore, I had high expectations of this recent recording, and can happily report I wasn't disappointed.

Producer Eitan Cornfield has followed the established format: the first CD is a concise overview of the composer's life, philosophy and compositions: the second presents a performance of excerpts from a mammoth cycle entitled *Wolf Lake*.

The documentary relies heavily on Schafer himself, although there are welcome, if brief contributions from friend Robert Walsh, the composer John Weinzwieg, and the late Greta Kraus, a pioneer in the harpsichord revival movement. Perhaps because of this reliance, biographical detail is relatively scant, and a good deal of time is spent on Schafer's musical, educational and environmental philosophy, much of which is already available in print. This is not to say there isn't much of interest here. Schafer is generous in allowing the listener a glimpse of his inner self. We learn of his wretchedness at school as a result of bullying, his disappointment at not being physically able to indulge his passion for playing football, and his early dislike of authority in a formal educational setting. He is unflinchingly self-aware and unafraid to define his own character as "neurotic with an imperious streak." Interesting, also, is his assessment of Alberto Guerrero (and the

extensive influence he exerted on both Schafer and Glenn Gould) and his indictment of the musical establishment at the University of Toronto.

The musical opening of the documentary is stunning, grabbing the listener's attention immediately. Other musical excerpts that connect segments of the documentary are appropriate and generous in length. However, the practice of inserting background music continues to detract from the spoken word. Playing a work that quotes Schumann's "March of the Philistines" while Schafer discusses the "musical reactionaries" at U.of T. is clever and amusing but also very distracting, for example. Another minor irritation is the failure to identify the musical excerpts, not all of which come from *Wolf Lake*, in the liner notes.

Wolf Music is not only a composition: it is an annual ritual music-drama involving sixty to seventy people over eight days, taking place on a lake in the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve. The composer and six professional musicians each lead small groups of people whose very presence are part of the performance. So, too, are the flora and fauna, the lake, the wind and even a passing jet. This description of the work could be very unappealing to those who are not attracted to ecologically-based spirituality, or those that feel this style of composition is passé. However, apart from Schafer's narrative (which, frankly, I could have done without)

the listener is easily able to bypass the philosophy to get at the music, which is beautiful and imaginative.

The work begins with *Tapio* for alphorn with echoing instruments, a haunting work that employs older Lydian and Mixolydian modes, and has an opening reminiscent of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. What is truly innovative is the use of the outdoor acoustic to allow the instruments to interact with their own echoes, as well being echoes of the soloist. This interplay is also used to great effect in prolonged repeated-note passages in the "Aubade" for trumpet, and in "Ariadne's Aria," where the soprano sings cascading glissandi timed so that it is virtually impossible to tell the voice from the echo.

Schafer exploits the colour possibilities of his solo instruments and although the writing is difficult technically, it is almost never unidiomatic. He explores the darker qualities of the clarinet in the "Aubade" for solo clarinet, which has a somewhat Middle Eastern flavour and makes use of trills, bird calls and "bent-notes" that create a Doppler effect. The writing for solo flute emphasizes beauty of tone rather than brilliance, although there is bravura playing aplenty in the Nocturne, which is centred around a B-D-C# motive, while the trumpet solos demonstrate dexterity, particularly in rapid repeated-note passages .

For me, the most fascinating aspect of this recording is the reaction and interaction of the wildlife to the music. In the Nocturne for clarinet, crows react excitedly, while the loons create call-and-response to the trumpet solos. Further, in the trumpet Nocturne, a bird punctuates the solo at rhythmic intervals that occasionally create recognizable intervals and even a unison. Amazing!

The composition is served splendidly by passionate and adept performers. It is possible to quibble that soprano Wendy Humphreys allows her pitch to sag slightly at the bottom of descending runs, or that some of the clarinet *fioritura* aren't always quite as even as they could be. These are of little importance in realizations of such difficult music in exceptional circumstances.

Congratulations are due also to the CBC for the inventiveness needed to record the sound so very well. The methods used are documented in the liner notes, which also present other information complementary to the documentary. I would highly recommend this recording.

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