

Jean Coulthard. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. \$20.00 Two compact discs. Disc 1: Coulthard documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: Concerto for piano and orchestra (Robert Silverman, piano; CBC Vancouver Orchestra, Dwight Bennet, conductor) – Sketches from the western woods (John Ogden, piano) – Twelve essays on a cantabile theme (Purcell String Quartet, University of Alberta String Quartet).

It is a curious anomaly that while Jean Coulthard remains one of Canada's most recognized composers, the bulk of her compositions remain largely unknown and unrecorded. Centredisc's *Jean Coulthard* is a welcome first step in redressing the balance.

This two-disc compilation begins with a documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Biographical detail is interspersed with interviews of the composer, her daughter Jane Adams, and former student and composer, David Duke. Excerpts read from her delightful *Diary of a Young Composer* are highly amusing, insightful and brutally frank. (I particularly enjoyed her critique of a piano recital given by Rachmaninoff.) The documentary also provides fascinating glimpses of such luminaries as R. Vaughan Williams and Aaron Copland, as well as insights into Canadian cultural politics. Coulthard emerges as a woman of intellect who overcame formidable obstacles with charm and humour. Musical excerpts are carefully chosen to highlight and enhance the spoken word. At times, however, this also proves to be a distraction. Is it necessary to play virtually all of Debussy's *Jardin sous la pluie* in the background? The excerpt from "Oh Men from the Field" is so beautifully sung that I found myself speculating on the identity of the performer, rather than listening to what was being said.

The second CD contains three works written by Coulthard between 1962 and 1972,

beginning with the Piano Concerto. The outer movements of this work show the influence of eastern Europe, in particular Shostakovich and Bartok, while the second movement invokes of the darker side of the English pastoral school. Robert Silverman, not one of my favourite pianists, is a splendid advocate here, playing with structural clarity, warmth and a varied tonal palette. Perhaps the second movement could have benefited from greater flexibility of line, and passage work in the third movement could have sounded more effortless, but these are minor flaws in a performance that sparkles, particularly in the colourful third movement. A pity, then, the recorded sound lacks immediacy and vibrancy.

Sketches from the Western Woods was written for, and performed by, the late John Ogden. The three pieces in this set are less attached to western tonal traditions than the Piano Concerto. "Revelation in the Forest" is rhythmically compelling and evocative, "Silent Pool" is a study in texture and tonal colour, while "Elements" is a driving, relentless toccata. Ogden's musicianship, apart from a couple of technically untidy moments, is subtle and masterful.

The string octet, *Twelve Essays on a Cantabile Theme*, is a work of real authority. Although the writing reflects the influence of Shostakovich in the handling of string writing (and a sly reference to the second movement of his Eighth String Quartet), the work shows

an individual voice. The theme consists of four motivic elements that are expanded, combined, contracted throughout the work. Contrapuntal elements (fugue, canon, imitation) abound. The string writing is beautiful, and reflects a variety of moods from warm lyricism to sarcasm. The performers are passionate and adept, apart from the occasional intonation problems from the second violins.

The liner notes provide useful information and insights into the performances. The only noticeable omission was the failure to include the recording date of the *Sketches*. I found myself occasionally disagreeing with the

descriptions, however. For example, I would not describe the first movement of the Piano Concerto as containing “keyboard pyrotechnics,” nor do I find the opening theme of the concerto’s third movement “swaggering.”

I would strongly recommend this recording, and hope it will prompt further exploration of Coulthard’s works.

*Charlene Biggs
Music Department
Cambrian College
Sudbury, Ontario*