

Jacques Hétu. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. 2 compact discs. Disc 1: Hétu documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: *Les Clartés de la nuit*, op. 20a (Colette Boky, soprano; Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal; Jacques Beaudry, conductor) – *Les Abîmes du rêves* (Joseph Rouleau, bass; Orchestre symphonique de Québec; Simon Streatfield, conductor) – *Les Illusions fanées*, op. 46 (Tudor Singers of Montreal, Patrick Wedd, conductor) – *Le Tombeau de Nelligan*, mouvement symphonique, op. 52 (Orchestre du conservatoire de musique du Québec, Raffi Armenian, conductor).

The first CD in this two-disc package contains a fifty-three minute documentary by Eitan Cornfield aired earlier this year on CBC Radio 2. This takes the form of conversations with the composer himself as well as others, interspersed with snippets of music by Hétu and other composers who have influenced him. The second CD features four pieces by Hétu performed by four different ensembles under four different conductors.

I decided to start my listening with the biography and I'm glad I did because it sets the scene so well. The first snatch of music tells one lots. It is lively, interesting and written with great skill. Cornfield describes the lyrical flow of ideas balanced with logic, clarity and brevity. As he says, "You get it the first time." And so you do.

Having heard some music I like I am introduced to the composer, obviously mild mannered and modest, described in the commentary as having twinkling eyes, constantly smiling, like a joyous monk and being "comfortable in his skin" (by flutist Robert Cram) and "with a stinking bloody pipe" (by conductor Mario Bernardi).

Hétu himself describes his main early influences as Schubert and Puccini, and later Clermont Pépin and Henri Dutilleux in France. He shows how his music grows out of short melodic cells lasting no more than ten to

twelve seconds, often as the core of a slow movement, around which he builds complete works, never in chronological order, always patching together bits and pieces. Sometimes the bits come slowly – three bars a week – sometimes hundreds of bars in a week. He is also able to characterize his music in a general way as using disjointed, chromatic or atonal melodies, but supporting them with solid tonal accompaniments. The result, as Cram says, is that "you recognize a voice."

Hétu paid dearly for the voice he created. Being unwilling to be sucked into the sphere of influence of Pierre Boulez, being uninterested in writing "du Boulez" as he puts it, he was regarded with suspicion by the *Société musique contemporaine du Québec*, which seemed to Hétu at the time to be taking its orders directly from the French composer. He came to be regarded as a bit of a dinosaur which he says was hard, not so much for himself but "for my music." For Hétu the actual technical language of music is just a support for the music itself. The originality is in what you have to say in the music.

Fortunately for him, he has an amazing ability to write on commission for specific artists and, ever since Glenn Gould recorded Hétu's *Piano Variations* back in the 60s, there has been no shortage of commissions. He has written twelve concertos, including works for piano, clarinet, trumpet, ondes martenot, flute

guitar and trombone, a double concerto for piano and violin and many other works including four symphonies.

The notes claim that Hétu has written only commissioned pieces since 1967, although later in the notes he does say, "Over the past twenty years *between commissions*, I have set to music thirteen of Émile Nelligan's poems" (italics added). It is worth noting that, of the four pieces on the second CD, three are settings of words by Nelligan and the fourth is *Le Tombeau de Nelligan*. Given Hétu's varied output, this seems a bit of a fixation.

I must say that I still prefer the documentary to the music itself. The nagging thought remains that, skillful and often interesting though it may be, in fact Hétu's music doesn't really grab one's attention for very long. That may well be my fault, not his. Despite the excellent quality of the performances, several times I had to take refuge elsewhere in some more familiar Tchaikovsky or Gershwin. Perhaps I just haven't worked hard enough recently to develop a taste for music that I don't know, and this isn't music that you can only half listen to. Perhaps that's the problem with other Canadian music: proficient as it may be, it doesn't reach out and grab your soul. An over-simplification, I know, but there must be some reason, other than fear of the unknown,

that prevents modern Canadian music being at the core of our listening experiences. Why do we need these special packages to get us going?

And what about being Canadian anyway? Hétu admits to being a Canadian composer because he lives in Canada, but confesses that his music would be exactly the same if he lived in Australia. Interesting thought for all you nationalists!

This is a good addition to anyone's library. It is informative, interesting and thought provoking. It is well put together and nicely presented. The bilingual booklet that accompanies the disc contains notes on the composer and on each of the pieces on CD2. There is one rather sudden musical edit in the documentary, and Hétu's voice is miked too closely, probably because he speaks softly. One can almost feel the saliva and smell that pipe! But I learned a lot. If that is repeated hundreds of times across the country and (dare we hope?) around the world, that's justification enough for what must have been quite an expensive enterprise by the CMC, the Canada Council, and various other funding agencies. One of the better ways to spend our tax dollars!

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