

John Weinzwieg. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. \$30.00
Three compact discs. Disc 1: Weinzwieg documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: Symphonic ode (Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester, conductor) – Dummiyah/ Silence (Orchester der Beethovenenhalie (Bonn), Boris Brott, conductor) – Concerto for harp and orchestra (Judy Loman, harp; Toronto Repertory Ensemble; Milton Barnes, conductor) – Concerto for violin and orchestra (Albert Pratz, violin; CBC Symphony Orchestra; Geoffrey Waddington, conductor). Disc 3: String quartet no. 3 (Orford String Quartet) – Woodwind quintet (Toronto Woodwind Quintet) – Pieces of five (The Canadian Brass).

The *Canadian Composers Portraits* on the Canadian Music Centre's Centrediscs label is a series that documents the emergence of a distinctly Canadian music in the years following the Second World War. Each release is dedicated to a single composer, and consists of a full-length audio documentary on the composer's life and music plus an anthology of his or her most important works. John Weinzwieg, unarguably one of Canada's most important composers, is given pride of place. Of the nine composers featured so far, he alone is represented by two full CDs of music.

The story of Weinzwieg's life and career is fascinating. It is told compellingly on the documentary CD through interviews with the composer, colleagues, former students, and performers of his music. The material has been carefully and ably edited to present a seamless narrative, although at times it is unclear who is doing the speaking as interviewees are identified only at the time of their initial comments. I was disappointed in the way music is used in this context. Music is a notoriously elusive and difficult subject to describe in words, making an audio CD a potentially effective medium

for a composer documentary. For example, if one describes Weinzwieg's music as having crisp, clean textures and a strong rhythmic drive, these qualities can then be demonstrated with a musical example. In this documentary, however, the music does little more than provide a backdrop to the spoken text. Often there is no more than a superficial link between the comments in the foreground and the music in the background: a short excerpt from Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* when it is cited as an early influence, or a brief passage from Weinzwieg's *The Enchanted Hill* as the composer describes its premiere. These choices are not irrelevant, but they relegate the music to the status of a soundtrack instead of allowing it to stand on its own or to illuminate some meaningful aspect of the composer's style. In many cases it is not even clear whose music or what piece is being played, leaving the curious listener to deduce this information.

The music CDs consists of seven works written between 1954 and 1976. Keyboard and vocal pieces of any kind are conspicuously absent, but otherwise there is a satisfying balance of instrumental genres with two symphonic

works, two concertos, and three chamber pieces. The concertos are performed by two of Canada's most respected performers, both of whom enjoyed extensive and fruitful working relationships with Weinzweig. Violin soloist Albert Pratz gave the first performance of the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra as well as commissioning and premiering the third string quartet. Harp soloist Judy Loman premiered and commissioned both the Concerto for Harp and Chamber Orchestra (included in the anthology) and the Fifteen Pieces for Harp (1983). Both soloists give definitive performances that reveal an intimate knowledge of the composer's style. Weinzweig's chamber music output is represented by his String Quartet No. 3, his Woodwind Quintet, and the brass quintet, *Pieces of Five*. Again, the performances are excellent, with the Orford String Quartet and the Canadian Brass demonstrating the high standards that have come to be associated with them. Still, I found *Pieces of Five* a dubious choice for inclusion in a recorded medium. Cast as a series of sixty-five short "actions" featuring different groupings of the five instruments playing from various positions on stage, it loses much without the visual and sonic aspects that are essential to this work and implicit in a live performance of it. The Toronto Woodwind Quintet, although less familiar to listeners than the other two ensembles, was responsible for commissioning or premiering a number of important Canadian works, including Weinzweig's Woodwind Quintet. This is an outstanding performance of one of the major works in the wind quintet repertoire.

While most of the anthology's recordings are of historical interest and unquestionable merit, they are also analogue recordings dating from the 1960s and 70s with the inherent hiss and tape noise of that medium. In most cases the sound quality is less than ideal, and at times even distracting. Given the scope and importance of this project, it is unfortunate that the producers chose to use archival recordings of inferior sound quality instead of new recordings using current recording technology. Indeed, since four of the seven recordings were taken from volume one of the older *Anthology of Canadian Music* (1978), one is left wishing that the original series could be transferred to CD, thus allowing the *Canadian Composers Portraits* to serve as a counterpart to it. Newer recordings by another generation of performers could have been included to demonstrate the development of Weinzweig's music as part of a living tradition, or the repertoire of the *CCP* series could have been chosen to complement what was already available. Since the *CCP*'s mandate is to present "a retrospective of the last fifty years of Canadian composition," and Weinzweig, as the documentary makes clear, continues to compose at the age of eighty-nine, it is unclear why the most recent composition in the series dates from 1976. In the end, the most disappointing aspect of this new release is that it is not new at all. In many ways, it is little more than a reissue of the old anthology.

I found the CD booklet sadly lacking in information concerning the performances themselves. There is no information about the performers and no

indication of when the recordings were made, the source, or the nature of the recordings. Given that these are archival recordings of historical interest, the inclusion of this material would have enhanced the value of this document. I also found the organization of the CD package frustrating. Track numbers are listed on the back cover, but individual movements are not. Movements are listed in the CD booklet, but without the track numbers. In order to find a specific track, one is forced to flip back and forth between the CD booklet and back cover, or to count down from the first piece on each CD. This is a minor

inconvenience to be sure, but one that should have been avoided.

Despite my misgivings concerning what could (or should) have been, the Weinzweig release on the *Canadian Composers Portraits* remains a valuable and welcome set of CDs. It is a fitting tribute not only to one of Canada's greatest composers, but also to the performers who brought his compositions to life through their vivid and engaging interpretations.

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