

Brian Cherney. Canadian Composers Portraits. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2005. CMCCD 10405. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Cherney documentary produced by Hele Montagna and Eitan Cornfield, presented by Eitan Cornfield (43:45). Disc 2: *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing*: Six Pieces for Cello and Piano (Antonio Lysy, violoncello; Rena Sharon, piano) (15:09); String Quartet No. 3 (Lloyd Carr-Harris Quartet) (20:48); *In the Stillness of September 1942* (Cary Ebli, English horn; Members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra; Jukka-Pekka Saraste, conductor) (14:10); *La princesse lointaine* (Judy Loman, harp; Cary Ebli, English horn; Toronto Symphony Orchestra; Christopher Seaman, conductor) (18:22).

Having tracked the *Portraits* series with some interest since its inception, and always with a curious eye on who would be featured next, I welcomed the opportunity to review the Cherney set. I had heard only one of his works previously, through a recording of his *Illuminations* for string orchestra, so I was interested to hear what else has issued from the pen of an apparently introverted romantic.¹ The music on the present set served well to broaden and deepen my view of Cherney, introducing me to four diverse examples of his finely-honed craftsmanship.

I listened first to the music on Disc 2, so as not to be influenced by whatever might be revealed or obscured in the documentary. The six pieces comprising the first work, *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing* (1993, for *scordatura* cello and piano), lack individual titles; all are brief and intense, ranging from one to four minutes in length. According to the concise and informative liner notes by the composer, they take inspiration from and even occasionally quote various famous works of art (not all of them musical), and refer to history; to wit: Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*, Beethoven's

Ghost Trio, Kodály's Sonata for Solo Cello, op. 8, and the war in Bosnia/siege of Sarajevo from 1992-96. (Such overt reference and quotation is characteristic of Cherney, as the documentary reveals.²) The opening measures of the first piece reminded me immediately of Messiaen and of Frank Martin, because of the colour palette, use of *ostinati*, and rhapsodic character. While the muted agitation of the second piece suggests the demonic insects in Crumb's *Black Angels*, the Bosnian debacle is realized most powerfully in the third, where the cello calls to mind North African chant in speech-like, ululating figurations. The two instruments act as reflective surfaces to each other, but the reflections are jagged and fragmented. The fourth piece occupies the sound world of Ernest Bloch in his Suite for Viola and Piano (1919), though the Cherney approaches Webern in brevity and intensity. Bloch and Eastern mysticism make another appearance in the fifth piece, with *glissandi* and sustained tones in the cello against sepulchral interjections by the piano. The sixth suggests one of Bartók's night-music pieces, though

¹ Performed by the dedicatees, I Musici de Montréal, on CBC SMCD5131, 1993 (SM 5000 series).

² Sandy Thorburn discusses eloquently the significance of Cherney's quotation of tonal music in a non-tonal idiom in "Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing: Melodic Quotations as Recognizable Signifiers in the Works of Brian Cherney" (Toronto: Institute for Canadian Music Newsletter, v. 1 (1, Jan. 2003); <http://www.utoronto.ca/icm/0101a.html>).

Cherney's harmonic language here remains closer to Bloch, or Britten (in the string quartets).

Captured live at Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto in 1994, the recording is rich in detail, with no brittleness in the upper registers of either instrument. The sound stage has the intimacy of the best studio recordings, and none of the "Saturday night at the curling rink" qualities that live recordings of art music still too often have. The performers clearly gave loving and laser-like attention to both their individual and their shared studies of the work—everything is sure-footed and heartfelt.

The String Quartet No. 3 (1985) is in arch form (three movements played *segue* between the parentheses of an introduction and an epilogue), which makes a case for a conservative, classicist bent in Cherney's work. If nothing else, such stable and familiar architecture helps make this work, which is perhaps the most arcane on the disc for the average member of the listening public, accessible after only a couple of hearings. As in *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing*, I hear orientalisms reminiscent of the koto or pi'pa in the introduction's *pizzicati*. The first movement-proper features sudden shifts in the dynamic range, from violent, routing battles among block chords to *pianissimo*, semi-canonic melodies of narrow compass. Intervallic evolution—as opposed to motivic development—is the principal means of advancing the ideas within each discrete section, and it succeeds in this work of modest proportions (about twenty minutes long).

The performance seems at times cautious, if technically solid and accurately rendered, but perhaps the

recording itself contributes to this impression. Made at Salle Pollack at McGill University, it is flatter and less warm than *Like Ghosts*, so benefit of the doubt may be given the performers. One receives a strong impression that it is the hall, the microphone placement, or some other extra-musical factor contributing to the occasional sense that the performers don't place full confidence in the score.

From what I have learned of Cherney at *The Canadian Encyclopedia* web site, the biography available at the Canadian Music Centre's web site, and the Cornfield documentary on Disc 1, it seems he never set about pitching himself to the world as a "Jewish-Canadian composer," something he might legitimately have chosen to do. But he turns his heritage to our advantage in *In the Stillness of September 1942* (1992), an "elegy in memory of the deportation, between July 22 and September 12, 1942, of more than 265,000 Jews from [Warsaw] to the Treblinka death camp" (liner notes, p. [8]), for English horn and string orchestra. At the opening, the English horn evokes a voice-like shofar, as of one *in extremis*. This persona soon disappears, replaced by a solitary bird overflying the Warsaw ghetto. Buzzing chord clusters in mid-register strings suggest the horrors of the survivors around Warsaw's *Umschlagplatz*. The shofar returns at the end, transcending the murky, final chords in the cellos and double-basses.

The recording of *In the Stillness of September 1942*, captured at Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto by CBC Radio, invokes a middle-distance stage in a hall with little reverberation. It is nevertheless arresting, with good perspective maintained throughout

between soloist and accompanying ensemble. I was not pleased by the harshness of the high strings, which suggests that perhaps an inappropriately small number of violinists was multiple-tracked in order to save money. (I do not know that such was in fact the case.)

If the musical evidence in both *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing* and the last work on the disc, *La princesse lointaine* (for harp, English horn, and orchestra, 2001) may be trusted to suggest some aspects of their composer's personality, then Cherney would appear to be a wonderful conversationalist. In the latter work in particular, he displays a gift for letting two voices sound passionately and sometimes simultaneously, sometimes in alternation and often in complete disagreement, but always comprehensibly. As in *In the Stillness of September 1942*, a descending minor third (E-flat to C) establishes and reinforces a tonal centre, though it is not strictly tonal music. Harp and English horn take the interval as subject for discussion and debate and then build their own distinct voices over the course of the introspective, single-movement work. The work is formally less well-delineated than the other pieces on the disc, and seems somewhat the weaker for it. Melodic material and tone colour evolve little over the piece's approximately eighteen minutes, and the orchestral interjections into the soloists' dialogue occasionally seem contrived—almost *Surprise* Symphony conceits in an otherwise *serioso* composition. Stasis and quietude are important themes in Cherney's *œuvre*, but inertia seems to have appointed itself their proxy in this instance. Nevertheless, the many beautiful *parlando* episodes and understated mini-dramas that permeate

the extant tone-poem might support a happier reworking into a film score, despite the composer's assertion that the piece is not meant to be programmatic.

The production values, courtesy of Juno Award winner Neil Crory, are higher than in the preceding work, with nicely equalized voicing that permits the inner parts (second violins, violas, inner horn parts, etc.) to be heard as clearly as the extremes. The sound stage is multi-dimensional, offering the listener a spacious hall with plenty of air, light, and elbow room. Made at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall in November 2002, shortly after the completion of its acoustic renovations, the live recording is a credit to all involved, from acousticians to conductor, musicians, and production staff.

The documentary was written for the CBC Radio Two audience (where it first aired), i.e., people familiar with Western art music. It employs voiceovers of Cherney's works, including *La princesse lointaine*, and music by other composers whose works played a role in Cherney's personal and artistic development. We learn the basics: Cherney was born in 1942 in Peterborough, Ontario. He played Bach and Schubert as a child, both of whom he later quoted in his compositions (as noted above). George Crumb is cited as a major influence on his interest in coaxing unusual colours from traditional Western instruments. He was greatly encouraged by his studies with Samuel Dolin at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto from 1960-63, in part because Dolin took the exceptional step of employing professional musicians to interpret his students' music. Debussy and Messiaen are also cited as influences integral to Cherney's immersion in Francophone

and French-Canadian culture during thirty-four years of life in Montréal as a faculty member at McGill. He loves improvisation, though his scores are usually completely and thoroughly notated.

His children's affectionate remembrances of his cramped, cluttered basement studio are amusing if not very illuminating regarding his approach to composition. McGill colleague Sean Ferguson's enthusiastic comparison of Cherney's works' construction to that of the watches he collects is likewise enjoyable, collegial bonhomie. There are many such vignettes, of varying degrees of intimacy, from people who have been close to him throughout his life. Their uniformly positive, sincere tone leaves us with the impression that Cherney is a well-rounded, hardworking, passionate, and decidedly admirable human being.

In speaking of his Judaism, the Holocaust, and their relationship to his music, Cherney acknowledges a profound influence but eschews overtly programmatic content. He reflects on his exploration of stillness/stasis (static harmony, *sostenuto ma morendo*, dramatic silence, and so on). Messiaen manifested similar interests in his

Roman Catholic cosmology and explorations of spiritual ecstasy. But Cherney's findings are coloured by skepticism and by what conductor Georg Tintner (in referring to Mahler's music) described as "the horrors we live in." Cherney's humour is not dark, though. On the contrary, it is droll and quirky. He also shares Messiaen's fascination with bells and bird calls. Cornfield asserts that Cherney's family life suffered for his art. Perhaps so, but the touching accounts of the music he wrote for family weddings also betray a deep love of family.

The documentary seems somewhat like a hasty tour of a stately home, during which the docent opens doors to the various rooms only to shut them again before one has had sufficient time to peruse the contents. But it hangs together nicely despite its non-linear, hypertext narrative style, and succeeds as an invitation to discover more about Cherney, his music and his place in Canada's cultural life.

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