

Invisible Cities. Music composed and performed by William Beauvais. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2009. CMC CD14809. 1 compact disc (69:09). Contents: *Well tempered choros* (15:13) – *Invisible cities* (10:37) – *Infinity’s window* (9:20) – *Turkish delight* (7:22) – *Juxtapositions* (11:28) – *In Joplin’s pocket* (15:09). \$17.98

Invisible Cities is William Beauvais’ second solo CD recording for the Canadian Music Centre’s Centrediscs label. The first, *A Bridge Beyond*, published in 1998, featured Beauvais, the guitarist, performing six contemporary works by his Canadian composer colleagues. That recording introduced some significant solo guitar works to the concert repertoire. On this new disc Beauvais remains the featured performer, but he is also the composer of all the works presented. In so doing, he follows the tradition of many plucked string instrumentalists (from Luis Milán to Leo Brouwer) who perform their own compositions. *A Bridge Beyond* included one strong work by each composer—a highlight is the striking duo for two guitars, *Teyata*, by Stephen Wingfield. In contrast, *Invisible Cities*, which the CMC web site describes as an “eclectic anthology of [Beauvais’] works for guitar,” includes two pieces for guitar, percussion and bass; two for guitar and percussion; one for guitar quartet; and only one for guitar solo, from which the CD takes its title. Supporting musicians include bassist George Koller, percussionists Alan Hetherington and Barry Prophet, and guitarists Raffi Altounian, Michael Kolk and Rob MacDonald.

Previously I knew only of Beauvais’ effective etudes and pieces, some of which appear in the graded repertoire of the Royal Conservatory of Music, where Beauvais has been an instructor since 1980. He has helped to fill a void for student guitarists, who previously had few contemporary Canadian pieces to play. The six works included on this CD mostly imitate other composers’ styles, and, as a result, I was left without recognizing Beauvais’ own voice.

The program is framed by two sets of three pieces with bass and percussion accompanying the guitar. Beauvais presents three of eight *Well Tempered Choros* (which have been published) as the program opener, and closes the CD with *In Joplin’s Pocket*. The first set pays homage to the traditional Brazilian form; the latter is modeled on three rags of Scott Joplin. One might expect to hear these light pieces in a casual venue rather than in the concert hall. I found the percussion too prominent, ordinary, and even irritating at times. The middle and the more substantial pieces of each set are rendered by solo guitar. I enjoyed the languid quality of the “Verdant Summer” choro, but the “Bouquet at Dusk” rag was too familiar and overdrawn. The guitar tone of the final high pitch of each of the last two pieces of the CD was also distorted.

The evocatively titled *Infinity’s Window* explores the wide range of the guitar’s palette. A tonal canopy is effectively laid down by a bowed cymbal with percussive guitar interjections, which is followed by an extended passage using bottle-neck techniques in a quasi-improvisational manner. A dialogue of seemingly disconnected motives ensues between guitar and the ethereal-sounding glass lithophone which dissolves without fanfare. It contrasts with *Turkish Delight* which calls for steel string guitar with dombek or dumbalak, a goblet-shaped middle-eastern drum. Forward-thrusting rhythms within nine-beat measures are featured in this re-working of an Anatolian song.

The four short pieces for four guitars entitled *Juxtapositions* reference characteristic pieces by other composers. “Alonso’s Serenade” is a pastiche of a well-known (at least to guitarists) fantasia by the sixteenth-century vihuelista, Alonso Mudarra. The attractive instrumentation renders the encounter in a gentle and elegant manner. In the program notes, Beauvais writes that “Eastbound Express” was modelled on a dance by Béla Bartók, and that “Toward the Oasis” took as its departure point the textures of *Kaleidoscope* by the Quebec guitarist and composer, Claude Gagnon. The fourth piece transforms themes from one of John Dowland’s lute fantasias using percussive rhythms and a “bass solo” to create “Dowland’s Calypso!”

Invisible Cities, the substantial single-movement piece for solo guitar, is the most satisfying work on the disc. Dedicated to Canadian guitarist Philip Candelaria, the piece was apparently inspired by imaginary journeys recounted by the Italian writer, Italo Calvino. Rather than imaging Calvino’s literary travels, Beauvais creates his own sound cityscapes. The titles and multi-cultural nature of the four seamless sections perhaps relate to the accompanying booklet’s cover graphic. It displays three versions of an altered image of the building skyline of the multi-ethnic city of Toronto. The work opens most effectively with a Brazilian rhythm imitating the clave by using the technique of slapping strings against the fingerboard, while executing encircling arpeggios. This melds into a lyrical melody supported by rich harmonies, which is followed by a section evoking mysterious bells, while employing an engaging middle-eastern mode. The final section is a *perpetuum mobile* which rises to a climax of powerfully rhythmic chords with a coda of increased and condensed intensity.

I look forward to William Beauvais’ next oeuvre, when I hope to hear perhaps a less eclectic style and a more distinctive compositional voice.

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