

Chura-Churum / The Merman of Orford. By Harry Somers. Toronto, Ont.: Centrediscs, 2009. CMCCD 15309. 1 compact disc (70:28). Contents: *Chura-Churum* (Teri Dunn, Michele DeBoer, sopranos; Vicki St. Pierre, Laura Pudwell, mezzo-sopranos; Mark Houtman, Stephen Erickson, tenors; Doug McNaughton, Alain Coulombe, bass-baritones; Robert Cram, flute; Sanya Eng, harp; Greg Oh, piano; Bob Becker, Russell Hartenberger, Bev Johnston, Ryan Scott, percussion; Les Dala, conductor) (30:06) – *The Merman of Orford* (Robert Cram, flute; Bardyhl Gievori, French horn; Tom Wiebe, violoncello; Russell Hartenberger, percussion; Les Dala, conductor) (40:22). \$17.98.

Harry Stewart Somers (1925–1999) was the foremost English-Canadian composer of his time. After his death, friends and colleagues of the composer initiated the Somers Recording Project under the artistic and administrative leadership of Robert Cram and Barbara Chilcott. While many of Somers' compositions have been performed in public, few were recorded for commercial distribution. *A Window on Somers*, the series of CDs on the Centrediscs label, commemorates the lifework of this seminal Canadian composer with the aim of preserving and bringing his music to a larger public.

Somers composed in a wide variety of genres ranging from the concert hall to the television studio. His eclectic, personal approach to twentieth-century styles is reflected in this set, with the music walking a fine line between elite modernity and popular appeal. The selections on the CD provide a good cross-section of his oeuvre.

Two contrasting works are presented: *Chura-Churum* (1985) and *The Merman of Orford* (1978). *Chura-Churum* was an "obsession" with Somers for almost thirteen years, the final version making its appearance in 1985. The inspiration for the piece began in 1972 when the Montreal Symphony Orchestra commissioned Somers to write a piece for the Swingle Singers, a contemporary ensemble of eight singers that specialized in microphone technique using simple phonetics to articulate the music of Bach. Canadian actress Barbara Chilcott provided Somers with the text in translation from original Sanskrit with phonetics in the form of a *puja*. A *puja* is a ceremony invoking the blessing of the deity and spirits and also functions as an expression of thanks for the imparted wisdom. *Chura-Churum* means "all manifest-unmanifest creation." Scored for eight amplified solo voices, flute, piano, harp and percussion, the work is complex, dense, and virtuosic. Crotales announce the opening, which reveals that sound and silence are two essential components of this contemplative, sonorous composition. The vocal demands are like a cadenza in their intensity and are commensurate with the mystery and spiritual elevation of the work. It is reminiscent of songs from the Somers' canon such as *Evocations*, *Kuyas*, and *Shaman's Song*.

Chura-Churum may seem difficult with the first listening, and stylistically even a bit out-of-date. However, there is an astonishing sensitivity and intensity in the emotionally-charged

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delivery of the text, all of which is a testament to Somers' skills in extended vocal techniques. One hears echoes of Ligeti's *Aventures*: vowels and consonants, spoken and chanted sounds tapering off, and rhythmic shouting and clapping. A linguistic logic is transformed into a purely musical one: the need to exploit all the possibilities of the voice. The fragments of sounds chanted, cried, whispered and sung here produce a real "Klangfarbenmelodie" of their own. ("Klangfarbenmelodie" is a German term, meaning "sound-colour-melody.") The evocation of Indian music, from the splendor and the contemplations of the resonances to the basic sounds of inhalations/exhalations, manipulates the listener's emotions. The accumulation and release of tension over an extended arc achieves a high dramatic impact.

The Merman of Orford is a more accessible work. Its inspiration is drawn from the medieval tale of the Orford Merman, a wild man caught in fishing nets by local fishermen in the time of King Henry II. In 1978, the Canadian Mime Theatre chose to mount an "integral mime play combining the arts of mime, music and drama." The Theatre was celebrating its tenth anniversary, but was also having difficulties surviving. The company sought to mount a new production to renew public interest. This was the first time that live music would be presented onstage and Somers was asked to compose the score. Each of the fourteen movements or playing sessions is a short vignette lasting anywhere from forty-six seconds to five minutes and twenty seconds. The atmosphere is bucolic and pastoral, with each movement having its own rhythm and character. This quasi-symphonic work, which is forty minutes in length, was created for just four instruments. The musicians, who are again under the direction of Les Dala, are superb with their clear, rhythmically crisp articulation, meticulous shading and exquisite phrasing.

The influences of baroque counterpoint, twelve-tone techniques, and Gregorian chant are all part of the compositional framework. Tension is produced by sharp fluctuations in volume (Somers calls them "dynamic unrest") which may be applied to single notes or to segments of a melodic line. The growth pattern of the phrases is an extension of a crescendo/decrescendo dynamic shape, working around the build-up, achievement, and release of tension. Of particular mention, Robert Cram on flute delivers crystalline clarity of articulation with a lovely singing quality that permeates the elegiac quality of *The Merman of Orford*.

All of the performances on the CD are polished and compelling, reaching the same exalted artistic level of the other recordings in this series. From the minimalist Gregorian melodies to the more complex, dense and demanding tonalities, the phrases and enigmatic harmonies are conveyed with a solid artistic intensity. The abundant energy is matched by an equal sensitivity in the gentle passages. The ensemble singing and playing has a remarkable clarity as well as a wealth of rich tonal shading. The album comes with an eight-page booklet in both English and French, with liner notes by Somers himself discussing his inspiration and creative process.

Highly recommended.

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