

Earth Songs. Music by Stephen Chatman. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2009. CMCCD 14709. 1 compact disc (62:58). Contents: *Earth songs* (University of British Columbia Singers, CBC Radio Orchestra; Alain Trudel, conductor) (22:56) – *From pent-up aching rivers* (Gwen Thompson, violin; Eric Wilson, cello) (10:24) – *To the garden the world* (Julia Nolan, alto saxophone; Sandra Joy Friesen, piano) (10:21) – *Creatures of earth and sky* (Joy Yeh, harp) (10:29) – *Mountain spirit* (Sara Davis Buechner, piano) (4:56) – *Or from that sea of time* (Eric Wilson, cello; Patricia Hoy, piano) (3:53). \$17.98

The music of Canadian composer Stephen Chatman is admired worldwide. He is probably best known for his choral compositions, of which he has written over eighty. But his symphonic works have also entered the repertoire of Canadian orchestras in addition to garnering performances from the symphony orchestras of Berlin, Sydney, Seoul, and San Francisco, to name only a few. This compilation of Chatman's works highlights his talent as a choral composer, but it also features some of his lesser-known chamber works. Four of the items included on the disc are recent compositions (commissioned 2005 or later), while two of the chamber works date from the early 1990s, when Chatman was in residence in Wiltshire, England.

The title, *Earth Songs*, neatly describes the disc's theme: the beauty of our natural world. It binds together all the selections on the recording, including, of course, the title track, which was commissioned for the University of British Columbia's centenary celebrations and performed at a gala concert at the Chan Centre on September 28, 2008. This grand piece for chorus and orchestra is drawn from diverse sources including the Book of Genesis, poets George McWhirter, Robert Stephen Hawker, Walt Whitman, and Zhang Jiuling, as well as the composer himself.

The first movement, "Et in luminent terram," explodes with full fortissimo and *marcato* choral effects, complete with clashing cymbals and strident brass, in a clear nod to Carl Orff. Although conductor Alain Trudel and the CBC Radio Orchestra do a marvelous job, I found the orchestra was occasionally overbalanced against the choir. The second movement, "Earth and Sky," features solos for clarinet and violin in the opening that capture the "audible death of a leaf in autumn," to quote McWhirter's words. Similarly, "pieces of dust and rain" is beautifully illustrated by the scalar patterns of the woodwinds. The University of British Columbia Singers and its director, Bruce Pullan (who is not credited on the back cover), deserve commendation, as does Jane Long for her haunting soprano solo at the end.

The next three movements are evocative of nature. The central image of Hawker's "The Butterfly" is portrayed by overlapping scales in the choir, particularly noticeable in the upper voices. The rendering of "The Waterfall," Zhang's eighth-century poem, takes us into the exotic realm of gongs and other Chinese instruments. Chatman's own poem, "Danse des pluies," is a multilingual extravaganza. The music builds to a frenzy that ends ominously with "the storm!"

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Again, one cannot help thinking of *Carmina Burana* as this movement segues directly to the finale, “Smile O voluptuous cool-breath’d earth!,” with a return of the opening theme and orchestration of the first movement. Like Orff’s “O Fortuna,” the piece ends with a bang, not a whimper.

The second work on the disc, *From Pent-Up Aching Rivers*, is a duet for violin and cello. The piece was commissioned in 2005 by Gwen Thompson, who is the violin soloist on this recording. Extracts from a Whitman poem serve as the titles of the five movements, each of which calls for a vibrant musical depiction. The first movement portrays the title line in an explosive manner that recalls the string writing of Sibelius. Chatman chooses quiet *pizzicato* effects to portray Whitman’s “soft sliding of hands” in the second movement. Chromatic scales in the violin, fighting against an *ostinato* in the cello, sing “the true song of the soul fitful at random,” while long, sustained double stops evoke “the long sustain’d kiss upon the mouth or bosom.” Finally, “the mystic deliria, the madness amorous” is brought to life in a dramatic *moto perpetuo*, which makes the two instruments sound like a full string ensemble. The performances by Thompson and Eric Wilson on cello are outstanding—brilliant, exciting and tightly controlled.

Another Whitman tribute, *To the Garden the World* for alto saxophone and piano, is played seamlessly by Julia Nolan and Sandra Joy Friesen, respectively. The five-movement piece was composed for the 2006 World Saxophone Congress in Slovenia. Among other techniques, it makes use of bird-like effects in both instruments, bringing to life Whitman’s “cradle endlessly rocking” and the notion of “Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul).”

The rhythms of the natural world, however fast or slow, are a common thread throughout the three other chamber works on the disc. *Creatures of Earth and Sky* (1991), featuring harpist Joy Yeh, is a tour de force. Also in five movements, it aptly depicts darting sparrows, jumping spiders and lamenting angels. *Mountain Spirit*, for solo piano, was commissioned by pianist Sara Davis Buechner for a performance on August 6, 2008. The piece was inspired by the landscapes of the Group of Seven artist, Lawren S. Harris, whose oil painting, *Isolation Peak*, also appropriately graces the album’s cover.¹ The music constantly climbs in a style reminiscent of Debussy’s prelude, *La cathédrale engloutie*. The final piece, *Or From That Sea of Time* (1991) for cello and piano, was commissioned by the Canada Council for cellist Eric Wilson, and pays homage again to Whitman (clearly a favourite of Chatman’s). Beginning with ethereal harmonics, the cello pushes through a long, slow crescendo, moving to a clear peak, then dissolving to harmonics again to close.

The liner notes in English and French include an extensive biography of the composer, shorter notes on all the featured performers, and brief but well-written commentaries on the music by the Vancouver writer and musician, Tara Wohlberg. However, the CD track numbers and performers’ credits are provided only on the back cover. This appears to be a house policy with Centrediscs (I have noticed it with other recordings) in order to save space. But I believe that a repetition of this essential information in the accompanying booklet’s list of contents would be helpful to the listener.

¹ Chatman previously wrote a piano quintet entitled *The Lawren S. Harris Suite* (2003). A recording of the quintet is available on the Centrediscs CD, *Vancouver Visions*.

The CD's title track is the last commercial recording made by the CBC Radio Orchestra—North America's last remaining radio orchestra before its lamentable (and publicly protested) demise in November 2008.² For this reason alone, *Earth Songs* is an important recording. But one also cannot overlook the high quality of the music, the top-notch performances of the artists, and the generally polished presentation of the disc, despite the inherent dangers of such a compilation, when recording conditions and venues can often vary. *Earth Songs* achieves this balance remarkably well and, as a representative collection of Chatman's art, it is well worth the price of purchase both for libraries and lovers of Canadian music.

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² The orchestra subsequently rose from the ashes as the National Broadcast Orchestra, debuting at the Chan Centre in January 2010.