

Disasters of the Sun: Music of Barbara Pentland. Various performers. CMC Centrediscs (CMCCD 11806).

Barbara Pentland (1912-2000) is a member of the generation of Canadian composers that came to prominence immediately following World War II. Pentland's long and rich career was associated with three very distinct geographical regions. Her early years until 1942 were spent in Winnipeg. From 1942 to 1949 she lived in Toronto, during a period during which new music organizations and important Canadian compositional institutions were formed. Pentland lived in Vancouver from 1950 until her death in 2000, and she played a significant role in enriching musical activities on the west coast, both as a faculty member at the University of British Columbia and later as a freelance composer active in the Vancouver scene. One of Pentland's trademarks is the wide amalgam of various twentieth-century compositional trends in her music. In lesser artistic hands this kaleidoscope of styles might sound forced and weaken the music to that of mere pastiche. Yet, there is a determined, singular voice that underlies her striking melodic and harmonic gifts, resulting in art of considerable emotional intensity and power.

The latest addition to Pentland's growing discography contains four compositions: three, *Disasters of the Sun* (for voice, flute, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello, piano and two percussionists), *Commentia*, for solo harp and the Quintet for Piano and Strings, date between 1977 and 1983; the fourth composition, the Octet for Winds, dates from 1948. The jewel of this new release is the world premiere recording of the seven-movement song

cycle *Disasters of the Sun*; the piece serves as the basis for the CD's title and its running time is approximately half of the sixty-six minute CD. The text is a series of seven poems by the same title from the Winnipeg-born poet Dorothy Livesay; the two artists also collaborated on an opera from the early 1950s entitled *The Lake*. *Disasters* contains a wealth of imaginative ideas that leave the listener breathless, all expertly executed by the Turning Point Ensemble under Owen Underhill's leadership. However, it is mezzo-soprano Judith Forst who truly shines here: her stunning performance sets a standard that will be difficult to match. Yet for all the composition's strengths (and there are many), I have to acknowledge that this is not desert island music. Put simply, there is an uncomfortable dichotomy between the work's considerable subtlety of power and exquisite orchestration and the moments of rather banal text painting.

The other three works also receive impressive performances. The virtuosic eight-minute *Commentia* requires a performer who can respond to the work's substantial variety of textures and registral changes, as well as the extensive number of extended harp techniques. Harpist Heidi Krutzen tackles these passages with utmost aplomb. Subtle is definitely not the adjective to use with the Quintet—in fact, I can think of no chamber work more worthy of being transcribed for a larger ensemble. To the performers' credit, they do an amazing job of maintaining a restrained interaction with each other, despite the palpable, edge-of-your-seat intensity present throughout

the sixteen-minute piece. Finally, there is a *jeux d'esprit* optimism at the heart of the eight-minute Octet that the musicians expertly convey throughout its three movements. This is joyous music that is a delight to listen to from start to finish.

The performances on the CD are first-rate (once again, Forst's nuanced and expressive performance has to be heard to be believed). The sound quality, clarity and ambience all meet the excellent standard of current CMC Centredisc releases. A small quibble, however, is the rather high sound level. One final point: responding to what I am sure has been a litany of complaints over the years (myself included), this is the first CMC Centredisc release I have encountered that includes the song texts in the CD booklet. May this practice continue for all future releases!

This is an important release that I strongly recommend.

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