

Piano Atlantica. Barbara Pritchard, piano. Halifax: Centrediscs CMCCD 15210, 2010. 1 compact disc (72:19). Contents: *Con Stella* / Jérôme Blais (7:53) – *Variations* / Ian Crutchley (22:56) – *Four quiet preludes* / Anthony Genge (8:12) – *[Selections]: from 25 Preludes* / Richard Gibson (19:36) – *Variation* / Richard Gibson (1:50) – *Last dance* / Clark Ross (11:52). \$17.98

When first presented with Barbara Pritchard's *Piano Atlantica*, I interpreted the title as an indication that the disc would contain piano compositions presenting colourful portrayals of the geography and the musical traditions of Canada's East Coast. Thinking along the lines of Sibelius's *Finlandia*, I anticipated vibrant renderings of maritime landscapes and folk music in the tradition of the *Atlantic Suite* of Phil Nimmons, *Petite Suite Maritime* by Maurice Dela, and *Newfoundland Sketches* of Howard Cable. Even the CD booklet, with its insistence that "whether native to the region or 'from away,' artists living on the East Coast are inspired by their coastal existence," appeared to confirm my initial assumption. Turning to the music, however, I was confronted with something entirely different: six compositions, mostly with generic titles (variations, preludes, and a dance), and no verbal references to anything coastal, regional, or Canadian in either the titles or the program notes. Clearly this was a disc seeking to assert its Atlantic approach through more than surface references.

The program assembled by pianist Barbara Pritchard consists of works written in the last fifteen years by a diverse group of Canadian composers working in a wide range of musical styles. What they share in common is their current residency in Atlantic Canada. All of the composers, along with Pritchard, now live and work in the Maritime provinces although only one, Richard Gibson, is native to the region. Jérôme Blais was born in Montreal where he also studied and then taught until moving to Halifax in 2004. Ian Crutchley grew up in British Columbia and studied both there and in Great Britain before moving to Sackville. Anthony Genge was born in Vancouver and worked as a jazz performer before pursuing formal composition studies in Buffalo and Tokyo and ultimately moving to Antigonish. The most circuitous route to the East Coast was taken by Clark Ross. Born in Venezuela to Canadian parents, he made his way to St. John's via Peru, Quebec, New York City, and Belgium.

The repertoire on the disc presents a satisfying mixture between pieces that are methodical and contemplative in their compositional approaches (Blais, Crutchley, Gibson) and pieces that are introspective and atmospheric (Genge, Ross). Blais' *Con Stella* (2001) is a powerful demonstration of the piano's tremendous resonance. From the stark opening chords played at the extreme ranges of the instrument to the closing passages executed directly on the strings, this is a thoughtful exploration of the sonic potential of the instrument. Crutchley, in his *Variations* (2001-04), uses an eleven-note pitch series as a source of both melodic and harmonic ideas. The variation approach allows for multiple and often radically different views of the material without losing a sense of unity. "Although each variation is a discrete entity," writes Crutchley, "the set has its own overall shape, and at the end one feels as though a journey has been undertaken, from

© 2010 The author and the Canadian Association of Music Libraries, Archives, and Documentation Centres / L'auteur et l'Association canadienne des bibliothèques, archives et centres de documentation musicaux.

a sparse and uncertain starting point to a conclusion that seems inevitable in its confident, yet basic articulation of the source melody.” Gibson’s *Preludes* (1995-97) and the short *Variation* (1995) allow for a similar focus on concise musical ideas in concentrated form. Although only eleven of the twenty-five preludes are included on the disc, one sees the ways in which Gibson uses specific aspects of pianism to demonstrate the expressive possibilities of the piano. In *Four Quiet Preludes* (1995), Genge draws on his jazz background to create a quietly contemplative set of pieces rich in subtle colours. As with the Crutchley and Gibson works, there is a tendency to explore minimal materials in full detail. “The compositional idea,” notes Genge, “evolved, in part, from an interest in exploring the way a single musical idea could suggest a larger idea or form, similar to the manner in which a *Haiku* can express a much larger idea with a few carefully chosen words.” The only work on the disc that might be considered programmatic is Ross’s *Last Dance* (1999). A haunting slow tango with a fiery middle section, Ross suggests that it evokes “a nostalgic, bittersweet feeling, as if in remembrance of something (or someone) beautiful that has been lost.”

For the most part, the pieces on this disc are complex and challenging. The musical language is sophisticated, there is a wide range of musical styles, and the pieces display a variety of pianistic techniques. The music is nevertheless highly rewarding for the listener. The contrasts from piece to piece are striking and the use of bold colours and gestures make for compelling listening. This is due to the high quality of the music and to the excellence of the performances. Pritchard is clearly committed to this repertoire and demonstrates a strong affinity for the music. Her playing is finely nuanced to maintain interest throughout. The loud passages are executed with a sense of power that is warm and rich while the quiet passages achieve a delicate intimacy. I was impressed by her consistent ability to draw me into the music through her interpretations.

Given that none of the compositions on the disc refer explicitly to Atlantic Canada, I initially wondered about the validity of the title. Is the residency of the artists enough to merit the disc’s “Atlantica” claim? However, upon further reflection, I found the title provided a useful interpretive framework that placed the music into a richer context. I began to seek in the music evidence that the artists, as the CD booklet claimed, had “responded to their maritime life with an intense dedication and creativity that reflect the diversity of culture, geography and lifestyle at the heart of an area where the four provinces touch the sea.” Whether intended by the composers or not, I became aware of parallels between the music and the landscape. I perceived in the music a rugged beauty, a profound sense of solitude, and respect for a natural unfolding of time that is entirely appropriate to the geography and lifestyle of Canada’s East Coast. But even without this admittedly subjective reading, the disc celebrates undeniably the vibrancy of a region that can nurture and attract composers and performers of such a high calibre.

J. Drew Stephen
University of Texas at San Antonio