

My Life in Widening Circles: Music by R. Murray Schafer. Performers: Land's End Chamber Ensemble; Stacie Dunlop, soprano. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 17712, 2012. 1 compact disc (68:35). Contents: *Trio for violin, viola and cello* (13:29) – *Wild Bird* (8:31) – *Kinderlieder* (13:35) – *Duo for violin and piano* (16:34) – *Six Songs from Rilke's Book of Hours* (16:26). \$24.75

It is hard to believe – at least for those of us not directly concerned with Canadian music on a daily basis – that R. Murray Schafer will reach his eightieth birthday less than a year from now. It is tempting to speculate on how this anniversary will be publicly celebrated in Canada and elsewhere, and we can surely expect further recording projects such as the one under review, plus a new book or two – Stephen Adams' 1983 monograph in the Canadian Composers series from the University of Toronto Press remains the only full-length study. While there is plenty of material to choose from for new recordings, I suspect that authors, having only words at their disposal, will have a harder time summing up Schafer's life and achievements. Indeed, that very problem struck me while researching for this review. Both Alan Gillmor and Kirk MacKenzie (writing in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*), and Stephen Adams, in a *New Grove* article that one hopes will be brought up-to-date in time for the big birthday in July 2013, fall back on Yehudi Menuhin's description of Schafer as "a strong benevolent and highly original imagination and intellect," and as someone in tune with the "needs and dreams of humanity." *EMC* also credits him with creating musical works that are "truly Canadian," and then curses him with the label "Renaissance man," a term bestowed perhaps too often on anyone who knows how to do more than a couple of things well. One almost pities the writer who will somehow have to coherently and convincingly interpret the life and work of such a man, and a *Festschrift* with multiple contributors may turn out to be the best solution.

Listening to this new recording – which, incidentally, I did with great pleasure – recalled to mind some further comments by Stephen Adams, this time directly about Schafer's music, when he points to the composer's "seemingly inexhaustible capacity for surprise," and to his music's "audience appeal." Both characteristics are strongly in evidence on the CD. Two works – the *Six Songs from Rilke's Book of Hours*, and the string *Trio* (both from 2006) – are recorded for the first time. The *Six Songs* are expressionist in style, with the voice sometimes supported, at other times challenged, by the accompanying ensemble. The fourth song, "Was wirst Du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?," uses microtonal intervals in the strings. Stacie Dunlop and the Lands End ensemble perform all the works on the disc; they also gave the first public performance of the *Six Songs*, which Dunlop commissioned.

The other vocal work on the CD, the *Kinderlieder* of 1958, mainly uses texts by Bertolt Brecht. Some are simple and childlike in nature, especially the opening "Mailed" ("May Song"), no. 2 ("The Plum Tree"), and the concluding "Lullaby," while others, including the "Popular Song" and

“Patriotic Song,” are more sinister. Song no. 4 (“Hollywood”) has a fun, *perpetuum mobile* feel, and no. 7 (“The Birds in Winter”) is several times interrupted by a cadential figure that seems to parody Schubert.

Birds appear elsewhere in Schafer’s output too, including in his Tenth String Quartet, subtitled “Winter Birds,” and in *Wild Bird* (composed in 1997), here presented in its violin and piano version. In his liner notes for the recording, Gordon Rumson claims that the piece is in Schafer’s “most extreme chromatic manner,” but there is nothing to really frighten an audience used to more traditional material. The composer himself writes (see www.patria.org/arcana/Programnotes.pdf for notes on this and many other pieces) that *Wild Bird* was inspired by the bright orange hair of Jacques Israelievitch of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, but there are plenty of reminders of birdsong too, such as the falling third intervals, frequent repetition of short phrases, and the way the violin “flies away” at the end. This is a virtuoso piece of some eight minutes’ duration that hardly allows the violinist any respite.

The violinist has an equally gymnastic time in the Duo for violin and piano, also performed on the CD. Here, Schafer acknowledges the opening motive from Brahms’ Fourth Symphony as the building block for the slow middle movement. The Duo’s finale is influenced by “aksak” music, “aksak” being Turkish for “stumbling” or “limping” and characterized by an asymmetrical meter, as for example in a 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 construction. Bartók referred to it in his *Mikrokosmos* as “Bulgarian rhythm.” Schafer’s stylistic plurality and apparent facility in composition makes it tempting to look for other influences on his music too, and the first movement of the Duo occasionally reminded me of Gabriel Fauré, especially of his Second Violin Sonata, even though it does not appear that Schafer has ever acknowledged Fauré as an influence.

The String Trio, by contrast, has – at least in the ear of this reviewer – strong echoes of Leoš Janáček, specifically of his second string quartet “Intimate Letters,” and also, perhaps, of Shostakovich. No criticism of Schafer is intended by these “spot the influence” references, which may or may not resonate with other listeners – the Trio, as with the other works on the CD, constantly stimulates the ear on its own terms, irrespective of the presence or absence of reminiscences of other composers. As with the other works on the disc, the performance and recording quality are superb, and the whole CD is highly enjoyable.

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