

O Music: The Music of Allan Gilliland. Performers: New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia, Raymond Baril, conductor. With: James Campbell, clarinet; Dean McNeill, trumpet. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 17111, 2011. 1 compact disc (59:50). Contents: *O Music* (9:14) – *Kalla* (8:43) – *Love's red rose* (5:27) – *Fantasia on themes from West Side Story* (13:03) – *Loch na beiste* (9:09) – *Dreaming of the masters I* (14:14). \$13.98

The New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia has devoted its latest CD, *O Music*, to works by the Scottish-born, Edmonton-based composer, Allan Gilliland. The ensemble, led by Raymond Baril for the past thirteen years, concertizes in Alberta and has toured in Europe.

Gilliland has composed for choir, orchestra, and wind, jazz, and chamber ensembles. He has also written film, television, and theatre music. His works have been performed by the Canadian Brass, the St. Lawrence String Quartet, the Boston Pops, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, among other ensembles. He was the composer-in-residence with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra (ESO) for five years, during which the orchestra premiered eleven of his compositions.

The title work, *O Music*, juxtaposes two radically different sections. After a march-like opening tune whose contours and treatment, with prominent percussion, derive from the world of Bill Conti film soundtracks (e.g., *Rocky*), there follows a transition involving crystal glasses and humming instrumentalists before the Edmonton Youth Choir sings a fine *a cappella* setting of the Khalil Gibran poem that gives this work its title. Though the playing and singing are well executed, one wonders why the composer did not create a more cohesive choral-instrumental setting of the Gibran text, saving the “film music” for another work.

Two other compositions use folk or folk-like materials: “My Love is Like a Red Red Rose” and *Loch Na Beiste*, which was inspired by a children’s book about the Loch Ness monster. The former is an expansive setting of the Robbie Burns song, with harmonic and orchestrational touches worthy of Percy Grainger or Howard Cable. The oboe and saxophone solos sound rather tentative, but the English horn and euphonium make tasteful contributions. The B section of *Loch* features a strong bassoon solo and a hornpipe melody given a pop-sounding twist similar to that of the A section of *O Music*. While the woodwinds handle the technical demands of *Loch* cleanly, and the interchanges between brass and woodwind choirs are effectively managed, a recurring problem here and throughout the disc is woodwind intonation on *forte* unisons.

The *Fantasia on Themes from West Side Story* gives the Sinfonia a technical workout, and, though unison intonation in the high woodwinds suffers occasionally during “Tonight” and “Somewhere,” generally such elements as balance, blend, and precision are nicely controlled, and there are strong individual contributions from the solo flute and English horn. The oboe, however, sounds off-microphone, and this is an issue in other parts of the recording, with certain instruments or groupings (e.g., 1st clarinets) dominating the foreground repeatedly, while others are not present enough in the mix.

Two jazz-oriented compositions for solo instrument and wind ensemble are included: *Kalla* for trumpet and band, featuring Dean McNeill (Director, University of Saskatchewan Jazz Ensemble); and *Dreaming of the Masters I*, for clarinet and band, with James Campbell as soloist. The former is the more substantial work: *Kalla*, the Norwegian word for “call,” harkens to what the composer refers to as “the trumpet culture in New Orleans” at the turn of the twentieth century. (What connection there might be between Norway and New Orleans is never explained.) Call and response patterns are fundamental to the work, which has a “Blues in the Night” quality and makes use of plunger mute, growl tones, blue notes, and other jazz elements. It is convincingly played by McNeill, who delivers the solo part with panache, though he, too, sounds rather off-mic.

Dreaming of the Masters I, originally written for an ESO pops concert, pays tribute to jazz clarinetists of yore, including Benny Goodman and Buddy DeFranco. The ensemble essentially becomes a swing-era dance band, and the clarinet part incorporates opportunities for the soloist to improvise. While the Sinfonia acquits itself well, particularly the percussion early in movements 1 and 3, this work ultimately lacks the conceptual originality of *Kalla*. On this recording, it also lacks a convincing soloist. Campbell’s concept of jazz style and technique is derivative and dated, and he comes across as a dabbler rather than someone who has internalized jazz techniques and made them his own – the way Tom Martin, principal clarinet of the Boston Pops, or Richard Stoltzman, a touring solo clarinetist (to name but two) have done. Campbell’s playing consistently lacks the rich nuance of expression, and the many gradations of accent and emphasis in the melodic lines that were common currency for Goodman, Artie Shaw, and others.

Ultimately Campbell’s performance lacks personality, and there is little feeling of abandon or fun. Though the notes are mostly in the right places, the performance includes flat *altissimo* pitches, scrambling passagework, and, at times, imperfect tongue-finger co-ordination. While “living on the edge” and taking chances that might not always pan out can be exhilarating for soloists and audiences alike in concerts, recording standards are pretty fussy these days, something Campbell surely knows. The CD-buying public expects clean, engaging, in-tune playing, and digital editing is quite capable of assisting musicians in avoiding the kinds of imperfections noted above.

Adding a mix-up in the order of titles between the disc and the booklet to the audio pick-up problems mentioned above, plus what sounds like an acoustically very dry recording space and one less-than-stellar solo performance, this disc ultimately doesn’t meet the high production standards traditionally associated with Centrediscs recordings. Still, the Sinfonia acquits itself well and it will be interesting to watch its progress in the future.

Timothy Maloney
University of Minnesota