

Noël: Early Canadian Christmas Music/ Musique canadienne d'antan pour Noël. The Elmer Iseler Singers; Elmer Iseler, conductor; Norine Burgess, mezzo-soprano; Michael Schade, tenor; Mireille Lagacé, organ; Ruth Watson Henderson, organ, piano, harmonium. Compact disc. Marquis Classics no. 77471-81227-2-8, Lavallée Series/Série Lavallée, 1998.

This recording was one of the last recording projects completed by Elmer Iseler before his death in 1998, and one would have hoped that it would be something to honour his memory. Unfortunately, the project was perhaps too broad in scope to have a good chance of success. The Lavallée Series of recordings is supported by the Canadian Musical Heritage Society (CMHS), and the compositions on this disc do provide a complementary resource for previous CMHS publications that is quite valuable. It is one thing to have the scores of Canadian period pieces, but to be able to hear them actually performed is a great boon to any study of the music.

Having said that, it might have been better to stick to providing a recording that more closely reflects the content of the published scores—for example, to present choral selections from only one of the CMHS editions. Instead, this disc attempts to provide a thematic program of Christmas music that is varied and arranged in a pleasing order to make it commercially viable. It is in this respect that I believe that its success is limited.

There are several reasons for its limited appeal as a Christmas album. The works themselves are of uneven quality. There are a great number of very short works, 27 in all, and there is almost too much contrast in various styles and languages in these small numbers to provide an overall sense of programming. Perhaps it just reminds me too

much of choral programming in years gone by, when an infinite string of short numbers would be reeled off. Iseler was a master at providing continuity to programming, using grouping and thematic connections, but this disc is unable to show any of those skills. The singing of the choir is good but generally unremarkable, considering some of the outstanding recording and live performances presented by this choir in the past.

Clifford Ford's liner notes are done in the thorough historical format of the CMHS publications. However, in making a historical narrative with reference to the pieces, he approaches the selections in a pseudo-chronological order that does not match the order of performance on the recording. This is somewhat awkward and makes the notes relevant only if one is willing to read the entire essay. Details of performers are also rather sketchy. For example, the listing of pieces does not tell us which selections include the two vocal soloists, Norine Burgess and Michael Schade, nor does it inform us exactly which works are played by the two organists, Mireille Lagacé and Ruth Watson Henderson.

Nevertheless, at almost 79 minutes, this is certainly one of the longest CD's in performance time. Despite my caveats, it is a fine supplement to the CMHS series and worth getting for that reason.

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