

Chamber Music. By Colin Eatock. Various performers. Toronto: CMC Centrediscs, CMCCD 17812, 2012. 1 compact disc (56:00). Contents: *Ashes of Soldiers* (Melanie Conly, soprano; Peter Stoll, clarinet; Peter Longworth, piano) (9:45) -- Suite for Piano (Timothy Minthorn, piano) (12:11) -- *Tears of Gold* (Anita Krause, mezzo soprano; Thomas Wiebe, cello; Ian Robertson, harpsichord) (10:31) -- *Three Songs from Blake's "America"* (Andrew Tees, bass baritone; Kate Carver, piano) (10:42) -- *Three Canzonas for Brass Quartet* (Niagara Brass Ensemble) (6:03) -- Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano, "The Lotos-Eaters" (Laurel Mascarenhas, violin; Karl Konrad Toews, cello; Timothy Minthorn, piano) (9:08).

Colin Eatock is a Toronto-based composer with a modest but interesting oeuvre. Despite his success as a composer, though, composition is only one aspect of this multifaceted individual: he is a frequent contributor to the *Globe and Mail* as a music critic, an editor, university instructor, and scholar (his book *Mendelssohn and Victorian England* was published in 2009; a collection of interviews about the pianist Glenn Gould appeared in 2012).

This new recording of Eatock's chamber music is the first devoted entirely to his compositions and highlights an important aspect of Eatock's art. For instance, of the twenty-three compositions listed on the composer's website, fifteen are chamber works or vocal music with piano or chamber ensemble. The present release contains six compositions—five chamber, three of which are written for voice, and one for solo piano. However, of the six works, three are from previous recordings which Centrediscs licensed for this release: a 2001 release on Echiquier Records by the Niagara Brass Ensemble of various brass works contains Eaton's *Three Canzonas for Brass Quartet*; a 2000 release of various piano works performed by Timothy Minthorn contains the 1995 Suite for Piano; and a 2003 recording by the Timothy Minthorn Trio on the Toreador label contains the Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano, subtitled "The Lotos-Eaters." (Although the latter work dates from 2000, it is mistakenly listed as 2010 on the back cover of the CD booklet.)

The first work on the recording is also Eatock's most recent composition, the 2010 *Ashes of Soldiers*; the title is derived from a similarly titled poem by Walt Whitman. The piece is in two parts, played without pause. The first is a slow, plaintive instrumental duo between the clarinet and piano. One prominent four-note chromatic motive serves as a link with the second, slightly more animated part with voice. Peter Stoll's consummate breath control and stunning intonation and Peter Longworth's intelligent keyboard support provide a rich instrumental combination. However, it is soprano Melanie Conly's absolutely precise diction and beautiful timbre that engenders a superlative quality to the ensemble's performance.

Pianist Timothy Minthorn performs the disc's second composition, the 1995 three-movement Suite for Piano. The opening Fantasy is a virtuosic display of trills and arpeggios; the second movement, a Toccata, is a brilliant study in staccato writing; while the third movement is a hauntingly plaintive elegy. Despite my enthusiasm for Minthorn's stunning control of the instrument, I find this one of the weaker pieces on the disc. Put simply, the Fantasy is stylistically just too close for comfort to Debussy (for instance, try listening to his *L'Isle joyeuse* or *Les collines d'Anacapri* next to it) or early Messiaen, with respect to the latter two movements.

Tears of Gold is a cycle of five songs, based on poems from William Blake's 1789 *Songs of Innocence*. Thomas Wiebe's cello performance on these songs is gorgeous—the tone is full when required, yet remarkably intimate and sensitive when needed. Wiebe's instrumental partner is the harpsichordist Ian Robertson. Their playing provides the secure support needed for Anita Krause's breathtaking performance of these songs: her intonation and clarity of diction are combined with an intelligence and beauty of tone that is hard to surpass.

The song cycle, *Three Songs from Blake's America*, dates from 1987. The performers on the recording are the celebrated baritone Andrew Tees and pianist Kate Carver. Tees is in great form here: his thoughtful performance captures every nuance of Eatock's interesting setting of Blake's poems; and Carver is rock solid as collaborator. Despite my admiration of Eatock's setting, I was a little too uncomfortable with the overall musical language: once again (like my comments above with respect to the Suite for Piano), Debussy's ghost (and Shostakovich's in the second movement) is pervasive. I will address this concern again below.

The *Three Canzonas for Brass Quartet* from 1991 is an interesting piece. Scored for two trumpets, French horn and trombone, the piece is a conscious attempt to incorporate the composer's harmonic language with the form and textures of pieces by Giovanni Gabrieli and Samuel Scheidt. This is noble and powerful music, which receives an assured performance by the Niagara Brass Ensemble.

The final piece on the disc is the 2000 Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano. The subtitle, "The Lotos-Eaters," comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1842 poem of the same title; the piece is a programmatic image of the poem. The calm and tranquil opening gradually gives way to a more intense middle section, with respect to dynamics and textural complexity, only to end with a calm repose. The ensemble's musicians Laurel Mascarenhas (violin), Karl Konrad Toews (cello), and Timothy Minthorn (piano) are perfectly in sync with each other; this is a lovely performance in every sense of the word.

In sum, I find this recording a mixed achievement. On the one hand, the performances are all first rate—in particular, the three song cycles and the striking performances by Conly, Krause, and Tees. At the same time, interesting passages are all-too-often situated with music that, for my taste, is uncomfortably derivative of Debussy, Messiaen and, at times, Shostakovich (and one can continue further: the Piano Trio is an uneasy mélange of Debussy and the English pastoralists from the early half of the twentieth century). This is unfortunate, as Eatock clearly understands how to write well. When one filters through these influences, there is an exciting voice to be heard. I hope that, in time, we will hear more of it. Finally, the recordings are first rate—although I found Tees' voice to be a little too forward in balance in his performance. The program notes and biographies are in both English and French; unfortunately, there is no French translation of the texts.

Edward Jurkowski
University of Lethbridge