

Voces Boreales. Yoko Hirota, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs CD-CMC18713, 2013. Contents: *Sungods* / Brian Current (7:20) – *Hiroshima mon amour* / Robert Lemay (9:22) – *Roiling* / Laurie Radford (12:53) – *Nachtstücke* / Brian Cherney – *Trinômes: 1. Asagao* / François Morel (7:26).

Japanese-Canadian pianist Yoko Hirota has been one of Canada's foremost performers of contemporary art music for the past two decades. Currently a faculty member at Laurentian University, Hirota's extensive repertoire and performance activities, her jury responsibilities at important international music competitions, and her work as co-artistic director of the acclaimed 5-Penny New Music Concert series in Sudbury, Ontario, all attest to her unceasing commitment to Canadian art music.

This is Hirota's third commercial CD release, and it features works by five Canadian composers—Brian Cherney, Brian Current, Robert Lemay, François Morel, and Laurie Radford. In the CD notes, Hirota writes that the title of the recording “signifies two ideas: Northern Ontario, my residence for the last 12 years, and Canada as a whole, which is seen as the Northern country by many Europeans.” The pieces display a variety of the captivating approaches that recent composers have taken when writing for the piano.

That said, Hirota's choice of composers and, specifically, these particular compositions can be associated on three counts. First, despite the age differences of the five composers—nearly fifty years separate Morel (b. 1926) and Current (b. 1972)—there is a remarkable consistency to the compositional heritage they share: specifically, the works by composers such as Messiaen and Dutilleux, and the subsequent generation of French Spectralists. Second, all five compositions place significant virtuosic demands on the performer, features that Hirota handles with aplomb. Third, these pieces are all relatively short. Current's and Morel's single movement works are approximately seven minutes in duration, and both Lemay's ten-minute and Cherney's sixteen-minute pieces are multi-movement works. At nearly thirteen minutes, Radford's one-movement composition could be seen as the longest. Yet the distinct tripartite design allows one to also conceptualize the piece as a multi-movement work.

The recital opens with *Sungods* by Brian Current, a solo piano work written in 2007 for Winston Choi. In his program note, the composer writes that the work had an earlier Latin subtitle, meaning “let the sun shine down upon all of God's creatures.” Current kept this phrase in mind throughout his compositional process, which, as he writes, “took place during what seemed like an endlessly grey springtime in Toronto, when we crave even a glimpse of the sun.” The piece evokes radiant energy, and the dazzling material effectively explores a variety of attractive textures, particularly in the upper portion of the instrument.

The next work is Robert Lemay's *Hiroshima mon amour*. The title is borrowed from Alain Renais' film, although the composer writes that the inspiration for the four-movement piece also comes from Marguerite Duras' book that served as the basis of the film, and his visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the A-Bomb Dome. The opening movement is a series of quasi-improvisatory statements overlaid upon a repetitive, quarter-note ostinato (the pitch changes slightly throughout the piece, but essentially remains focused around the middle range of the piano). Movement two is a tour de force toccata, which receives some rhythmic relief in the slow, plaintive middle section. The third

movement is a slow, meditative essay; one is reminded of similar compositions by Toru Takemitsu, suggesting a form of homage to the Japanese composer. In his program note, Lemay refers to the ringing of the Hiroshima peace bell as another important inspiration. The influence is programmatically represented by the nostalgic plucks of the piano strings.

The third piece on the recording is Laurie Radford's spectacular *Roiling*. The aptly-titled composition served as the required piece for the 1998 Eckhardt-Grammaté National Music Competition. It is an overt tripartite design. Part one is written in aggressive, toccata style, with interplay of virtuosic scalar and arpeggio material in the upper portion of the piano and violent outbursts by the bass. The contemplative, slow middle portion gradually gives way to the work's final portion, a kaleidoscopic series of harmonic and pitch relationships appearing throughout the piano's registers.

Brian Cherney's *Nachstücke* was written for Hirota in the spring of 2011. The piece contains six short movements, each of approximately one-and-a-half minutes in duration, interjected with brief interludes roughly forty-five seconds in length. Like Robert Schumann's piano composition of the same title (his opus 23), each of the movements contains a different mood, ranging from slow and contemplative (for instance, the first and final movements) to lively, playful movements such as the second and fourth. The title is an homage to the late Agnes Logan Green, who taught piano both to the composer and his mother. By Cherney's account, she was a remarkable woman, who instilled in him a life-long passion for the music of Bach and Schumann.

The final piece on the recording is the first movement of François Morel's *Trinômes*, entitled "Asagao." Also written for Hirota, the three-movement composition is an homage to the painter-engraver Yves Gaucher (1934-2000). "Asagao" and the other two movements, "Naka" and "Sgana," get their titles from three of Gaucher's paintings. According to the program note, this piece is Morel's only foray into solo piano composition since his 1954 *Études de sonorités*—a surprising revelation given that these études have become staple repertoire for Canadian pianists. The piece may best be described as a rondo, where the refrains are passages with a vibrant interplay of textures in the piano's various registers; a buoyant, rhythmically active quality to the material, played at a *forte* dynamic level, is prevalent. By contrast, the episodes feature homophonic passages of, at minimum, six-note harmonies played in a legato manner reminiscent of Messiaen (there is a recurring chord progression evocative of one of the cyclical progressions from the composer's celebrated *Vingt regards*).

Voces Boreales is a stunning achievement by one of Canada's leading specialists in contemporary music. Hirota's performances are nothing short of spectacular. I found all five works extremely compelling and believe they will become important contributions to the piano literature. The sonics and balance of the recording are both first rate. Finally, the booklet is excellent, with good biographies of the pianist and composers and program notes for all of the pieces in both English and French.

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