

Myth, Legend, Romance: Concertos of Elizabeth Raum. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 20615, 2015. 1 compact disc (73:56). Contents: *Persephone and Demeter* (Erika Raum, violin; Rivka Golani, viola; Regina Symphony Orchestra; Victor Sawa, conductor) (17:36) — *Sherwood Legend* (Kurt Kellan, horn; Calgary Philharmonic; Victor Sawa, conductor) (24:03) — *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* (Erika Raum, violin; Sneak Peek Orchestra; Victor Cheng, conductor) (32:17).

Concertos have always been popular with audiences. Quite apart from the pleasure we take in feats of virtuosity, there is also the fact that the presence of a soloist in front of the orchestra provides a focus for our attention—a musical protagonist whose journey we can follow as the concerto unfolds. However, concertos pose some constructional challenges. Composers since Mozart have grappled with the fundamental question of how to distribute the musical substance successfully between the soloist and orchestra, so as to achieve a coherent musical fabric where the orchestra does not degenerate into a bland background for the spot-lit soloist. And at our current point in musical history composers have to compete with a large repertoire of existing Romantic virtuoso concertos, particularly for piano. To put it bluntly, is there much point these days in trying to outdo Rachmaninov or Prokofiev in the provision of yet another virtuoso vehicle? As for the notion of soloist as the protagonist of a musical story: the concept is inapplicable to a lot of late twentieth-century music where the focus is on purely textural and sonic elements rather than a traditional thematic-harmonic narrative. Once a composer regards the orchestra itself as a giant aggregation of soloists there is little opportunity for a featured soloist to stand out from the crowd, so to speak.

And yet ... Like bumblebees who fly in defiance of aerodynamic science, or writers who ignore the death sentence long since pronounced on the novel, some composers happily manage to respond to commissions for new concertos. *Myth, Legend, Romance* is a new Centredisc of three concertos by Saskatchewan-based composer Elizabeth Raum, which provides appealing evidence why this is so. It brings together recordings made in 1997, 2007 and 2014, two of them featuring her daughter, violinist Erika Raum. The first two concertos are program music, with an extra-musical story to tell or picture to paint, while the third is very much in the virtuoso tradition of a century ago. Within this narrative and pictorial framework, the soloists do indeed fulfil the role of musical protagonist whose adventures we follow over the course of the concerto.

The first work, *Persephone and Demeter*, is a double concerto for violin and viola. The detailed booklet program notes—anonymous, but perhaps supplied by Raum—invite us to identify the solo violin and viola with the mythological daughter and mother, while the orchestral tuba has a walk-on part as Hades, the god of the underworld who abducts Persephone in the middle of the first movement. Her life in Hades' kingdom, Demeter's search for her, and the bargain Demeter strikes for her daughter's rescue play out in the remaining three movements, which consist respectively of a waltz, a dirge, and, after a preamble, a recapitulation of the basic elements of the first movement. Violist Rivka Golani joins Erika



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Raum in bringing this musical story deftly to life, aided by some fine playing from the Regina Symphony conducted by Victor Sawa.

Sherwood Legend was written for hornist Kurt Kellan, who performs the concerto here with the Calgary Philharmonic, again with Victor Sawa as conductor. Kellan was still serving as the orchestra's principal horn at the time this recording was made in 1997, and the work has clearly been tailored to his talents. His fondness for the film scores of Erich Korngold, so the booklet program notes tell us, has determined the basic style and shape of the work as "movie music without the movie." One of Korngold's best-known Warner Brothers scores was for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, so it seems natural enough that the solo horn should become an Errol Flynn-like character, rampaging through three vividly pictorial movements. The late Romantic movie score idiom inevitably invites comparisons to the second of Richard Strauss's horn concertos; like that earlier work, this is an exhilarating virtuoso joyride.

The final work is the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*. It is the most ambitious, not only in being the longest of the three concertos, but also in being written for an instrument for which there is no shortage of existing masterpieces. It is also the least programmatic of the three works on the disc; although the booklet notes give it the subtitle "Faces of Woman," this does not appear anywhere on the Canadian Music Centre score that I consulted. (Presumably it has the composer's blessing, and the CD artwork has been inspired by this title.) It is something of a family affair, written especially for violinist Erika Raum, and indeed the composer goes so far as to incorporate music by Erika, written for her sister Jessica's wedding, into the second and fourth movements.

The sombre first movement is in slow waltz time and oscillates between B minor and F minor; its only unconventional feature is the accompanied cadenza, which unfolds over a long pedal note on timpani and double basses. The second movement is an actual waltz which evokes almost too vividly the ghost of Prokofiev with an occasional touch of Mahler. The third and fourth movements are less conventional and correspondingly more interesting, both in their improvisatory structures, and their less conservative rhythmic and melodic vocabulary (a recurring theme in the last movement is almost a twelve-tone row). Erika Raum sounds understandably at home in this music, returning to make this recording last year in Toronto after having given the premiere performance twenty years earlier. She is ably accompanied by the Sneak Peek Orchestra under its founding conductor Victor Cheng.

These three concertos are very "audience-friendly" music. Elizabeth Raum has a fine ear for orchestral colour, something one is tempted to attribute to her long career as principal oboist with the Regina Symphony Orchestra. She deploys a traditional harmonic and melodic vocabulary that will hold no terrors for any listener who is comfortable with, say, Prokofiev and Poulenc. It often seems to be the case that composers such as Raum who also work in film and television are not self-conscious about writing music that is mainstream and conservative in style. By concentrating on simply giving pleasure to audiences and performers, Raum demonstrates that opportunities can still be found to say fresh things within a framework as traditional as the virtuoso concerto.

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