



Tim Brady: Music for Large Ensemble.

Boulder, CO: Starkland ST-230, 2018. 1 compact disc (63:59). Contents: *Désir: Concerto for Electric Guitar and Large Chamber Ensemble* / Tim Brady, electric guitar, Bradyworks Large Ensemble, Cristian Gort, conductor (26:07) — *Eight Songs About: Symphony #7* / text: Douglas Smith; Sarah Albu, soprano, Vincent Ranallo, baritone, Bradyworks Large Ensemble, Tim Brady, conductor (37:44).

<https://starkland.bandcamp.com/album/tim-brady-music-for-large-ensemble>

Reviewed by: Alastair Boyd, University of Toronto

One sunny day last June in a lofty arcade near Toronto's business district, passersby may have been surprised to encounter a slim, silver-haired figure thrashing away on an electric guitar, with a back-up band of four dozen more guitars making the rafters ring. Quite a few of the spectators had certainly made a special effort to be in the neighbourhood, because they knew that Canadian composer and guitarist Tim Brady had been commissioned by Toronto's Luminato Festival for a work celebrating what would have been George Harrison's seventy-fifth birthday. The result was the piece they were hearing: *While 100 Guitars Gently Weep - Concerto for George*. However, for many in the crowd this event was probably their first exposure to Brady's music. Those who went on their way resolving to become better acquainted with his compositions will find no shortage of recordings to choose from: the discography on his website (timbrady.ca) lists more than twenty, from his earliest, jazz-based CDs to this latest disc on the Starkland label.

The stylistic span of these recordings illustrates the disparate roots of Brady's musical personality as both composer and performer. He initially studied the guitar and composition at Concordia University in Montreal (where he was born in 1956) after which he obtained a Master's degree in jazz performance and composition at the New England Conservatory. Settling in Toronto in 1980 he quickly achieved success as a composer, winning several CAPAC



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composition awards, and getting commissions from Arraymusic and New Music Concerts. These “Toronto period” works display the modernist style characteristic of that era. During these years it was as if he maintained separate musical identities and pursued parallel careers as jazz guitarist and composer. But gradually the electric guitarist and the composer came together. By the time he returned to Montreal in 1987 and founded “Bradyworks,” his own instrumental ensemble and production company, his new course was clearly set.

In their contrasts, the two works on this new CD showcase the eclectic nature of Brady’s style, aptly described in the booklet as “a highly personal synthesis of contemporary classical, jazz, rock, and electronics.” *Désir: Concerto for Electric Guitar and Large Chamber Ensemble* (2016-2017) is Brady’s third concerto for his instrument, and demonstrates his continuing preoccupation with the challenges of combining amplified and acoustic music, and bridging what in the liner notes he calls the “cultural gap between electric guitar and orchestra.” Formally the work follows the traditional three-movement “fast-slow-fast” concerto structure. The first movement, entitled “Ecstasy,” has a vigorous rhythmic character based on the constant repetition of rapid 16th-note descending scale figures of varying lengths, for both soloist and ensemble. There are some abrupt shifts to contrasting slower sections, but the relentless hard-driving pulse always quickly reasserts itself. Throughout, the texture is motivic and linear with much rhythmic unanimity between instruments, so that very little in the way of harmonic motion is created.

The slow second movement—“Beauty”—offers an opening cloud of electronically tinged instrumental colours, followed by the first emergence of melodic solo guitar lines over a chordal instrumental accompaniment. It leads straight into “Wisdom,” the third movement, which in effect reconciles the two stylistic poles presented in the previous movements. Although there is a return to rapid guitar figurations alternating with patterns from the ensemble, the texture is considerably more diatonic and chordal than was the case with the first movement. The feel is thus closer to experimental rock than New Music minimalism: think Frank Zappa channelling *The Rite of Spring*.

For the second work on the disc, *Eight Songs About: Symphony #7*, Brady exchanges his guitar for the conductor’s baton. The title has a double meaning, as Brady not only calls the work his Seventh Symphony, but in it pays homage to Dmitriï Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony and the circumstances of its premiere in Leningrad in August 1942 during the 900-day siege. The original text for this cycle of songs for soprano and baritone is by Brady’s frequent collaborator Douglas Smith. In each song the voice represents a different person associated with the Shostakovich premiere. For example, baritone Vincent Ranallo opens and closes the cycle with the songs “Bells” and “August 9th,” which are similar in their New Music vocal style—recitative-

like vocal lines over outbursts of instrumental commentary that seem disconnected from the voice—although the first represents Stalin and the last, conductor Karl Eliasberg.

In her three solos (songs #2, 5, and 6) soprano Sarah Albu assumes first the voice of Shostakovich's wife Nina Varzar, then the voice of a prostitute, and finally that of the Leningrad Radio Orchestra's second bassoonist. This sixth song, "Aria," is the most straightforward, with a chordal accompaniment and even some voice-instrument doublings, reflecting the text in which the bassoonist proclaims "I prefer simple music." Further exceptions to the predominant New Music style are song #4 ("Distance"), the other solo for baritone, which features a jazz-like accompaniment as a German soldier speaks wonderingly of hearing distant music from the besieged city; and the second of the two duets, "Performance," where the Leningrad orchestra's two oboists sing in lyrical unison of their struggles with Shostakovich.

The work certainly bears out Brady's admission in the notes that he has been "at times, a bit obsessed with the life and music" of Shostakovich; but unlike the disc's preceding concerto, there is nothing overtly symphonic about the form of these songs, the title notwithstanding. As for the *Concerto for George* I mentioned at the outset: it is well worth checking out the video from last June on YouTube. There is a link to this on Brady's website, where you can also learn about his other recent recordings, and discover more about this distinctive figure in Canadian music.