

**Sonic Mosaics: Conversations with Composers.** By Paul Steenhuisen. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2009. xxviii, 314 pp. ISBN 978-0-88864-474-9 \$34.95\*

Most texts dealing with Canadian music are organized as surveys – Elaine Keillor’s *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* of 2006 provides a recent example – that address significant trends in musical composition and place them into larger historical and cultural contexts. The survey format generally provides a clear overview of compositional developments, yet often prioritizes works and composers representing a modernist mainstream while seldom broaching in any detail the thoughts or personalities of individual composers. An alternate approach – and one that has, in the last forty years, become more common generally in contemporary music texts – is to present in a single volume a collection of interviews or conversations with selected composers. Although this approach is less inclusive and does not address explicitly any larger trends or developments, it often provides better insight into the musical activities of each composer, conveys a stronger sense of his or her individual personality, and explores the musical works on their own terms rather than in the way they fit into a larger picture. Paul Steenhuisen has chosen the latter path and the result, *Sonic Mosaics: Conversations with Composers*, is an excellent – and welcome – view of contemporary music activity in Canada.

The thirty-one interviews included in the book were conducted by Steenhuisen between July 2001 and November 2004. Almost all were undertaken initially for publication in the Toronto-based classical music magazine, *The Wholenote*. The choice of interviewees was linked to current events – either a live performance in the Toronto area or a major CD release during the month of publication – that would be of interest to the magazine’s readership. While this was undoubtedly a practical solution for a regular feature in a monthly publication specializing in concert listings, it makes for an oddly diverse collection when the interviews are taken out of their original context and presented together in one volume. It also leads to glaring omissions. One can easily come up with a list of major composers (Anhalt, Hatzis, Hétu, Tremblay, Forsyth...) who were not interviewed and thus not included in the book. On the other hand, lesser-known composers (some in their early thirties) who certainly would have been otherwise overlooked are presented alongside established figures to present a wide range of compositional styles and techniques. The format also accommodates six composers outside of Canada, including such notable figures as Pierre Boulez and George Crumb. Their examples place the Canadians interviewed in an international context and greatly enhance the scope of the book. *Sonic Mosaics* makes no attempt to be inclusive or comprehensive. It provides instead a glimpse of the new music scene in Toronto during the early years of the twenty-first century.

Steenhuisen is excellent in his role as interviewer. He is an accomplished composer with strong new music affiliations and a history of service with the Canadian League of Composers, the Canadian Music Centre, and the International Society for Contemporary Music. As a result he knows the topic thoroughly and approaches the composers as an insider who is familiar with their work and sympathetic to their situations. “I soon realized,” writes Steenhuisen, “that composers were speaking candidly and openly to me about their work for two main reasons: first I’m a composer, I know their work, and while being critical, I asked questions as an ‘insider’; second, I happened to be talking to them about two of their favourite subjects – themselves and their work!” (xiii). Since most of the interviews were linked to a performance, the discussions often focus on a single work. It is here that Steenhuisen’s insider status is most apparent and appreciated. His knowledge of contemporary music and familiarity with the interviewees’

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musical styles and oeuvres allows for intricate and detailed discussions. He engages the composers in a thoughtful and meaningful way to provide the reader with insight into the philosophical issues related to new music and the challenges and joys of composing. Steenhuisen approaches each composer on his or her own terms, asking questions that are unique and appropriate to each rather than following a set formula. He is also adept at asking good opening questions and then stepping aside to let the composers speak for themselves. In most cases a strong sense of each composer's personality is apparent.

Beyond the interviews, Steenhuisen provides additional information in an eighteen-page foreword and a nine-page afterword. He uses the afterword to describe his own work as a composer, "so the reader can examine how my creative inclinations influenced the questions" (xiv). In the foreword, he outlines his methodology for conducting the interviews and discloses his relationship with the contributing composers (he had met, known, worked, studied or had been close friends with all but two of them before commencing the interview project). He also addresses issues of contemporary music making and provides insight into "the practicalities of life as a composer" (xvi). The passages outlining the working methods of professional composers and the challenges they face to gain their musical incomes are especially enlightening. Many readers will be surprised (and dismayed) at the amount of work required to produce a composition, the shortage of funding sources, and the meagre sums to be earned through commissions and royalties. Steenhuisen also provides a discography that lists a maximum of five recordings per composer, so that listeners can be introduced to or explore further the music of the composers interviewed. His familiarity with the repertoire makes him an excellent guide and one hopes many readers will pursue his suggestions. Since the book's publication, numerous recordings of the works of most of the composers interviewed have become available online thanks to the Canadian Music Centre's CentreStreams initiative.

Overall, *Sonic Mosaics* is an enjoyable book that provides pertinent insights into the new music scene in Toronto at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The fact that the interviews are short (most are around seven pages) makes the book easy to read and accessible. The focus on single works adds depth to the interviews, although in some cases the works discussed are not typical or representative of the composer's output. Since the book's format facilitates browsing rather than reading from cover to cover, the chronological presentation of the interviews is unwieldy and it is often necessary to consult the contents page. An alphabetical organization would have enhanced the ease of use. Despite this, the book provides a valuable and revealing overview of current trends in music. Whereas most books on music have difficulties addressing the twenty years prior to publication, Steenhuisen focuses almost exclusively on the current decade to reveal the thoughts, challenges, and artistic endeavors of contemporary Canadian composers.

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