

John Beckwith. *Canadian Composer Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCCD 9103. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Beckwith documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (54:37). Disc 2: *The Trumpets of Summer* (speaker; soloists; instrumental ensemble; Festival Singers of Canada; Elmer Iseler, conductor) (33:45); *Taking a Stand* (Canadian Brass) (12:13); *Synthetic Trios* (Therese Costes, soprano; Connie Gitlin, clarinet; Delores Kay-Hee, piano) (18:12); *Stacey* (Monica Whicher, soprano; Stephen Ralls, piano) (13:42).

John Beckwith has been one of the most important musical figures in Canada for the last fifty years, contributing so much to the Canadian musical makeup. Most who are involved in music in Canada today have been influenced by his impact as performer, teacher, critic, writer, administrator, or composer.¹ This new volume of the *Canadian Composer Portraits* series of recordings brings together a documentary and four compositions from his substantial and eclectic oeuvre.

Does this two-CD set on the Canadian Music Centre's Centrediscs label provide a good portrait of Beckwith the composer? The documentary that comprises the first CD is an improvement over the 1986 Beckwith LP album in the *Anthology of Canadian Music* series. In the latter, the generous selection of works was accompanied by a personal but rather one-dimensional interview with the composer. A better composite emerges in the new documentary by not only incorporating the words of Beckwith himself, but others close to him, including his spouse, Kathleen McMorrow, and son, Larry. McMorrow describes Beckwith as being a compact person with large hands and feet and a flamboyantly expressive face. His music too demonstrates

an economy of means while expressing a wide range of emotions. Further insightful comments are contributed by John Weinzweig, Helmut Kallmann, Beverley Diamond, and Kenneth Winters. Eitan Cornfield's documentary also does a nice job of linking the conversation to relevant clips of recordings of Beckwith's works. Happily, the pieces are listed in the accompanying booklet, an improvement over earlier volumes in the series, which were criticised for omitting this information.

Does the choice of pieces included on the second CD enhance the portrait? As with the other volumes in the *Canadian Composer Portraits* series, no new recordings were made specifically for the *John Beckwith* volume; instead, they were selected from pre-existing releases. The *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* lists eighty-three compositions by Beckwith for the stage, orchestra and band, chamber ensembles, piano, choir, voice, and collage or incidental settings. It is apparent that he has been very productive since 1990 (the year of the latest composition listed there), because his compositions now number more than 130. A database search in August 2003 of the Canadian Music Centre's new Web site returned over 107 Beckwith scores as well as 15 commercial recordings which include compositions by him. It would have been appropriate to include in this new portrait deserving works that have not enjoyed commercial recordings. One might choose the

¹Timothy J. McGee, "John Beckwith and Canadian Music," in *Taking a Stand: Essays in Honour of John Beckwith*, ed. Timothy J. McGee (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 5-8.

documentary cantata, *The Hector* (1990), *Peregrine* (1989) for viola, percussion and small orchestra, or *beep* (1990) for soprano, baritone, chorus and percussion. Nevertheless, the four works included on the second CD are at least representative of each of the last four decades of the twentieth century. A magnified portrait, illustrating a variety of styles and instrumentation, is available if one considers the works included on another CD recording, also entitled *John Beckwith*.² Besides the *Quartet* (1977) for strings, this recording features keyboard music, an important genre in Beckwith's oeuvre. Considered jointly, these two recordings are of comparable breadth to the body of works presented in the earlier *Anthology of Canadian music* volume. In fact, of the eleven works included there, five have been repackaged for the two Centrediscs productions. The picture becomes even more complete by adding the four orchestral works (recorded from 1992 to 1996) included in CBC Records' new release, *Ovation 3*.³)

The 1969 recording of *The Trumpets of Summer* with prominent soloists and the Festival Singers of Canada conducted by Elmer Iseler conveys not only the freshness, sense of occasion and theatricality of the work itself, but also the vibrancy of the theatre scene in Stratford at that time. From a compositional standpoint, *The Trumpets of Summer* employs two twelve-note series, a technique that perhaps reflects Beckwith's abiding interest in the music of Anton Webern.

²*John Beckwith*, Centrediscs CMC-CD 5897, 1997.

³*Ovation 3, musique Canada music: Norma Beecroft, Barbara Pentland, Talevaldis Kenins, John Beckwith, Gilles Tremblay*, CBC Records PSCD 2028-5, 2003.

The Shakespearean allusion is evoked by the accompanying band, a new version of an Elizabethan broken consort. Beckwith modestly refers to the work as a choral suite, but the multi-faceted treatment of Margaret Atwood's text reaches beyond that of conventional incidental music, and by analogy captures a sense of "the play apart from the play." Hamlet discovers the "conscience of the king" through the play within; Beckwith expresses the ambience and mood of the theatre-goers as if by looking down from above and dropping into "the scene."

The recordings of the other three works are all from live concert presentations that help to capture the immediacy of the music. While the indicated choreography of *Taking a Stand* is lost, one can still hear the mobile nature of the Canadian Brass' performance and the audience's response to the whimsical, witty aspect, a characteristic of several of Beckwith's pieces.

Synthetic Trios has had several performances; this recording is taken from a concert celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Canadian League of Composers. The title refers to the unusual process in which the work was composed as is indicated both by the invented syllables of the soprano and the percussive sounds introduced by the clarinetist and the pianist.

I particularly enjoyed Monica Whicher's and Stephen Ralls' performance of *Stacey*. The six songs in this cycle constitute a vivid portrayal of the main character in Margaret Laurence's novel, *The Fire-Dwellers*. Judging by the telling and sensitive setting, Stacey MacAindra's ruminations with God obviously struck a chord with Beckwith.

This, then, is a significant recording in the *Canadian Composers Portraits* series. I have enjoyed discovering more of John Beckwith's music while writing this review, and I hope that this CD set receives wide distribution, allowing many listeners to become more

intimately acquainted with the art of one of Canada's most distinguished composers.

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