

Gilles Tremblay. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCCD 9003. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Tremblay documentary produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield (54:00). Disc 2 (77:52): *Phases* (2:07) (Gilles Tremblay, piano); *Réseau* (5:54) (Gilles Tremblay, piano); *Jeux de solstices* (19:25) (Nouvel Orchestre philharmonique de Radio France, Gilles Tremblay, chef d'orchestre/conductor); *Oralléhuants* (24:25) (Pauline Vaillancourt, soprano; Ensemble de la Société de musique contemporaine du Québec; Serge Garant, chef d'orchestre/conductor); *L'espace du cœur* (8:30) (Pro Coro Canada, Agnès Grossmann, chef d'orchestre/conductor); *Croissant* (17:53) (Penderecki String Quartet).

Among the most recent composers to be featured in the Canadian Music Centre's *Portraits* series is Gilles Tremblay. Tremblay, who maintains an active schedule even in his seventies, has had a profound impact on Canadian music and made valuable contributions to Canadian culture. He served as a member of the board of the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec for twenty years, including six as president and two as artistic director, as a member of the advisory board of the Canada Council, and as a writer of both scripts and music for CBC radio. As a professor of analysis and composition at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal, he contributed to the formation of a whole generation of composers. His compositions, which are rich in their complex mixtures of sound and rhythmic shapes, have played a significant role in the development of music and contemporary art in Québec.

The documentary CD breaks from the format established in previous releases in the series. Instead of interspersing the featured composer's remarks with contributions from acquaintances, fellow composers, and students, Tremblay is the sole speaker. The listener accompanies producer Eitan Cornfield and the composer on a walk

through a garden cemetery on the north slope of Mount Royal. During this promenade, Tremblay reflects on his diverse interests and experiences. Questions, additional remarks, and comments are provided in a voiceover by Cornfield and musical examples added in the editing process. Although the broader scope offered by multiple commentators is obviously lost, the listener is compensated with the intimacy and highly personal nature of this format. Even speaking in English, which is clearly not his first language, Tremblay is an extremely eloquent and engaging speaker displaying an enthusiasm for and curiosity of a wide range of subjects. The natural setting provides an ideal backdrop for his thoughts and one is easily captured by his insightful and often poetic reflections. At one point, while declaring that "running water is the essence of rhythm," Tremblay draws the interviewer's (and thus the listener's) attention to the sound of a bubbling brook. "Streams, rivers, waterfalls...if you slow down these things," he notes "you become conscious of the fantastic rhythms...like many Gamelans, or an orchestra of Indian Tabla making intricate, beautiful rhythms." To reinforce this point, Tremblay's observations fade into a musical

example conveying some of his own intricate and beautiful rhythms. Unfortunately, such illuminating use of musical examples is rare. The relationship between spoken remarks and audio examples is mostly superficial and I felt that, in general, the inherent potential in an audio documentary to support or enhance verbal descriptions with music was largely unrealized.

The second CD contains six works written between 1956 and 2001. With two works for solo piano, a string quartet, a work for soprano and chamber ensemble, an orchestral work, and a choral work, there is a satisfying balance of genres and mediums that provide a broad retrospective of Tremblay's career as a composer. These are definitive performances, including two that are world premiere recordings. All but one are played and conducted by the composer himself, or by the ensembles for which they were written. Although most of the tracks were recorded live and occasional audience noise is perceptible, I did not find this distracting. The ambiance of the halls and the energy of the performances are well captured in these recordings, making for exciting listening. This aspect is particularly apparent in the Penderecki Quartet's performance of *Croissant*. From the opening notes it practically vibrates with dynamic tension.

Tremblay's aesthetic is concerned above all with sonority, and one is struck, both by his comments in the documentary CD and in his compositions, by his fascination with this aspect of music. To cite just one of the works on this recording,

Oralléluants, Tremblay states that "the instrumentation is characterized by the use of three double bassists. Most of the time they use natural open-stringed harmonics, creating an un-tempered universe which tends to colour the rest of the music." At the very opening of the work, the three bass players explore their highest harmonics to create a mysterious, otherworldly sound, seemingly suspended in time until interrupted by the violent crash of a Chinese theatre gong. Later, these same instruments play a fortissimo chord in the low register, thereby causing an "invisible" (according to the score) note to emerge. This note is not sounded directly by any one instrument. Rather, it is produced only through the convergence of the harmonics of all three.

Since the initial releases in the *Portraits* series, there have been some welcome modifications in the organization and layout of the CD package. The audio tracks are now numbered both on the jewel-box cover and in the accompanying booklet, allowing for easier navigation. The cues for the tracks in the documentary have also been numbered and a list of music used in the documentary is provided. Still, although the musical examples, apparently, are listed in order of appearance, I was unable to match the titles in the booklet to the audio clips. Song texts are provided both in the original French and an English translation although, oddly, these are placed, respectively, at the end of the French and English notes. Anyone wishing to follow simultaneously the sung text and the translation is thus forced to flip back and forth over eight

pages of text. The most welcome modification of all, and one that was previously conspicuous in its absence, is the inclusion of dates and venues for the performances and an indication as to whether the performances were recorded live. Given the historical merit and cultural value of these recordings, this is essential information that should have been included from the beginning.

The only real disappointment is the liner notes. Although they are taken from Tremblay's own writings, they appear to be incomplete and often disjunct fragments that have been hastily pieced together. In the note to *L'espace du cœur*, for example, there is a bulleted list of "some prominent features of the material used." Written in point form, they are awkward to read, their relationship to the music unclear, and

their contribution to a better understanding of the piece questionable. Certainly there is much merit in using Tremblay's own descriptions of his music, but these would be much more useful if placed into a coherent and organized text that offers the listener some insight into the piece and provides him or her with the tools with which to approach it. On the whole, however, this is an excellent set. The documentary is informative, engaging, and insightful, Tremblay's music is fascinating in its exploration of unconventional and unusual sonorities, the selections are well chosen to provide a good cross section of his oeuvre, and the performances are of a uniformly high calibre.

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