

Canadian Organ Music Showcase. David Palmer, organ. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2006. CMCCD 12106 WRC8-7964. 1 compact disc. Contents: *Shadow Variations* / Brent Lee – *Sarum: Variations on an Advent chant* / Deirdre Piper – *Benedictus (Hommage à Monteverdi)* / Peter Paul Koprowski – *Reflection and promenade* / Chan Ka Nin – *Émergences* / Alain Gagnon – *Fantasy variations on a Newfoundland folk song* / Robert Evans. \$17.98¹

This album is a commendable seventy-three minutes of fine playing, intriguing compositions and enticing registrations. David Palmer, playing the Carthy Organ at the Jack Singer Concert Hall of Calgary's Epcor Performing Arts Centre, offers strong performances that ably capture the sonorities of the four-manual instrument by Casavant Frères (Opus 3623, 75 stops, 111 ranks). Palmer, the long-time organist at All Saints' Anglican Church in Windsor, is Professor of Music at the University of Windsor. In addition to concertizing and teaching, he also has acted as a clinician in the Royal Canadian College of Organists' Travelling Musicians Program. He is respected for his dedication to twentieth-century music (Olivier Messiaen, in particular), and his interpretations on this disc are clear, articulate and admirably played. He traverses the breadth of this instrument in terms of registration, displaying the instrument's colorful capabilities well and fully. The choice of repertoire is drawn from six associate composers of the Canadian Music Centre, which makes the disc that much more appealing as a documentation of the state of contemporary organ composition in Canada.

The disc's first track is *Shadow Variations* by Brent Lee (b. 1964). Composed in 2005, the piece has a minimalist aura about it, using similarly constructed registrations in each manual division that, when played simultaneously, provide a gentle and yet persistent pulsating presence causing interesting aural and textural effects – essentially, “shadows.” Born in Saskatchewan, Lee is currently on the faculty of the University of Windsor.

Perhaps the most accessible material is Deirdre Piper's *Sarum: Variations on an Advent Chant* (tracks 2-5). The piece is based on *Conditur Alme Siderum*, often sung to the hymn text, *Creator of the Starry Height*. Piper, who is British by birth and now resides in Ottawa, treats the four-phrase *cantus firmus* to a gentle *ostinato* accompaniment before launching a tonal exploration of the opening triad of the first phrase (tracks 2-3) Through this material Palmer gives a sense of the range of registration capabilities of the instrument, particularly the mutation stops, strings, and principals. The fourth variation (track 5) elaborates the *cantus firmus* with rhythmic variation punctuated by interruptions reminiscent of bell changes, and using plenum registrations on various divisions of the instrument. Active as a pianist, organist and choral conductor, Piper teaches at Carleton University and holds the position of Organist and Choir Director of St. Matthias Anglican Church in Ottawa.

Polish-born Peter Paul Koprowski (b. 1947) arrived in Canada via England in 1971 and now teaches at the University of Western Ontario. His numerous awards include the Jules

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Léger Prize for New Chamber Music and his many commissions have established him as a distinguished composer and conductor. His *Benedictus (Hommage á Monteverdi)* (track 6) was composed for Claudio Monteverdi's four hundred and twenty-fifth centenary year and is interesting for its turbulence in the outer sections of the piece, contrasted by a gentle lullaby in the middle.

Juno Award winner Chan Ka Nin teaches theory and composition at the University of Toronto. Born in Hong Kong, Chan moved to Canada in 1965, and has become a versatile composer in genres of orchestral music, chamber music, opera, as well as vocal and choral music. *Reflection and Promenade* (tracks 7-8) was commissioned by the Toronto Centre of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, and received its premier in 1993. *Reflection* expresses a brooding, introspective wistfulness, whereas *Promenade* is sparkingly expectant, exploring the world-view of a young person who is delighted by all that is encountered.

Quebec composer Alain Gagnon holds a faculty position at L'École de musique at Université Laval. His compelling *Émergences* (tracks 9-11) is the longest piece on the disc and has the strongest hint of Messiaen. The piece is intriguing for its contrasting colorations, and shows well the grandeur of the Casavant sound. *Émergences* takes the form of a sonata, and Palmer's fluid playing is fully in evidence in this work.

Robert Evans' (1933-2005) *Fantasy Variations for Organ on a Newfoundland Folk Song* (tracks 12-19) presents the lilting modal melody of *The Blooming Bright Star of Belle-Isle* in eight short variations, each with progressively expanded accompaniments, following a *partita* format. My favourite is the fifth, but other listeners may be compelled by the seventh, which has a jazz feel. Each variation is dexterously and artfully performed.

It is refreshing to have a disc of challenging and relatively new works that explore themes outside the realm of sacred music. Throughout, the recording engineers have done a fine job of capturing the grandeurs and subtleties of the well-respected Casavant Frères' instrument. Acoustically, I would like to have heard more ambient reverberation in some of these works, but perhaps the performance space did not allow for that. The CD booklet provides helpful background information about the composers and their compositions. Print-space limitations may have prevented the producers from including the stop-list of the instrument – something that I as an organ enthusiast would have appreciated. Nevertheless, *Canadian Organ Showcase* continues the CMC's tradition of excellence in producing discs of the works of its associate composers.

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