

Barbara Pentland. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCD 9203. \$30.00. Three compact discs. Disc 1: Pentland documentary / produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: *Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra* (Mario Bernardi, piano ; CBC Symphony Orchestra; Victor Feldbrill, conductor) (15:05); *Symphony for Ten Parts* (Chamber Ensemble of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Victor Feldbrill, conductor) (10:35); *Shadows – Ombres* (Barbara Pentland, piano) (4:15); *String Quartet No. 3* (Purcell String Quartet) (22:55); *Two Sung Songs* (Phyllis Mailing, mezzo-soprano; William Aide, piano) (7:20). Disc 3: *Interplay* (Joseph Macerello, accordion; Purcell String Quartet) (14:10); *Eventa* (Vancouver New Music Ensemble, Owen Underhill, conductor) (13:28); *Vincula* (Andrea Stoneman, piano) (11:05); *Tides* (Victor Constanzi, violin; Erica Goodman, harp; Salvador Ferreras, marimba) (13:42); *Horizons* (Robert Rogers, piano) (12:35).

Barbara Pentland (1912-2000) is widely acknowledged as a leading figure in Canadian music. She is remembered for her strong advocacy of modernism, her highly individual style, and her pioneering achievements in gaining national and international recognition both for Canadian and women artists. This three-disc set on the *Canadian Composers Portraits* series presents a full-length documentary on her life and career as well as ten of her works written between 1955 and 1985.

The documentary CD, prepared and produced by Eitan Cornfield, draws together commentary from a wide variety of sources. Interspersed with archival comments from Pentland herself are remarks and observations from friends and colleagues (John and Helen Weinzweig, Harry Adaskin, Harry Somers, and Phyllis Mailing), scholars (David Duke, who is preparing a biography on Pentland), and performers (Ian Hampton of the Purcell String Quartet, Owen Underhill who conducts the Vancouver New Music Ensemble, and pianist Robert Rogers). What emerges is a fascinating glimpse into Pentland's long and remarkable career: her difficulties in overcoming societal and parental opposition to

her chosen vocation; her studies in Paris, at Julliard, and at Tanglewood; her brief years in Toronto where she, along with Weinzweig and Somers, formed the "young radicals;" her appointment to the faculty of the University of British Columbia and later resignation when the administration undermined her high academic standards; and her marriage at the age of forty-two to John Huberman.

The characteristically stark and open texture of Pentland's music is remarked upon numerous times during the documentary. The adjectives used to describe it include "cool," "clear," "austere," "rigid," and "glacial;" at one point, "uncompromising severity" is applied both to Pentland's music and to her visual appearance. Surprisingly, these traits are not apparent in her personality. She is revealed as an articulate, eloquent, thoughtful, and warm individual. Clearly Pentland possessed a strong sense of determination, but it was balanced by an equally strong sense of humour. Since the range of commentators includes people who knew Pentland both personally and professionally, the overall picture is satisfyingly comprehensive. Performers and scholars such as Duke and Hampton provide insight into her music, while

friends such as the Weinzweigs and Mailing describe a more personal and intimate side of the composer. Common to both is the acknowledgement of Pentland's position as a role model, especially for other female artists. As Helen Weinzweig remarks, noting the influence Pentland had on her own development as a writer, "she was a person who went against family, against tradition, against society: [was] pro-woman and pro-work. [She] had a tremendous influence."

A major complaint with the documentary, and perhaps the only significant one, is the use of Pentland's music. Instead of supporting and clarifying the many verbal descriptions of Pentland's style, her music remains in the background with little or no apparent connection to the comments in the foreground. Pentland's music is highly unsuitable for this type of treatment and the effect, at times, is jarring and disorienting. There are also missed opportunities. When Duke describes the development of Pentland's style and the various composers who influenced that development or when Pentland herself, in an interview with broadcaster Augusta LaPaix, describes the greater use of warmth and colour in her late works, an aural reference would have been helpful.

The audio CDs present a rich selection of music covering a variety of genres including chamber music, symphonic works, and a concerto. Although very early works are absent, the listener is rewarded with representative compositions from the fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties. Several of the ten works are available on previous releases (albeit many of them only on LP), but three are world premiere recordings. Listening to the music, one is struck immediately by the range of sounds and colours. This is especially

apparent in the writing for odd combinations: the low rumblings of the accordion at the beginning of *Interplay*; the brittle yet oddly voluptuous textures from the violin, harp, and marimba in *Tides*. The re-issue of the *Symphony for Ten Parts*, a landmark both in Canadian orchestral composition and in the development of Pentland's style, is extremely welcome on CD. With the recording dates ranging from 1962 to 1995, there is an understandable discrepancy in the sound quality, but even in the earlier recordings the quality is not distracting.

The performances are of a uniformly high quality. Several feature celebrated Canadian artists who were closely associated with Pentland, including the Purcell String Quartet and Phyllis Mailing. They give definitive performances that are also of historical and archival interest. Pentland herself is even featured on one of the tracks. A particularly nice touch is the inclusion of three works from a commemorative concert given in Vancouver on September 27, 1987. This date was proclaimed "Barbara Pentland Day" by the mayor of Vancouver and the CD now provides a further tribute to that event. Oddly, although the liner notes confirm that the recordings were made on that date and indicate that the performances are live, there is a complete absence of any audience noise, including applause. One is left wondering, are these really concert recordings or were the performances pre-recorded earlier in the day?

The *Barbara Pentland* portrait is only the second in the series thus far to include two audio CDs instead of one (the other is the *John Weinzweig* portrait). While there are undoubtedly other composers who deserve similar treatment, it is highly appropriate that this consideration be bestowed on Pentland.

Despite her undeniable importance to Canadian music history, too many of her works are underappreciated and underperformed. Nevertheless, her music offers a rich and rewarding experience to the interested listener willing to explore the many complexities and paradoxes of her style. One

hopes that this release of the *Canadian Composers Portraits* will facilitate a better understanding of her music and a fuller appreciation of her significance.

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