

**Launch Pad.** Penderecki String Quartet. Toronto: Centrediscs , 2008. 1 sound disc + 1 booklet in English & French. CMCCD 13308 WRC8-8043. \$17.98. Contents: *Everything We See in the Sky* / Laurie Radford (17:17) – String Quartet No. 2 / Alice Ping-Yee Ho (17:32) – String Quartet No. 2: *The Secret Garden (Music for Agnieszka Holland)* / Piotr Grella-Mozejko (15:01) – String Quartet No. 1 / Daniel Janke 1 (9:41) – String Quartet No. 3: “sonata distorta” / Jeffrey Ryan (12:18).<sup>1</sup>

A superb release, *Launch Pad* contains works that the Penderecki String Quartet commissioned and premiered between 2003 and 2006. The five composers featured are established figures on the Canadian new music scene and are in what is often called “mid-career” (all born between 1957 and 1962), but they have diverse backgrounds and hail from different parts of Canada.

For me, the highlights of the disc are the first and last works. The opening number, Laurie Radford’s *Everything We See in the Sky* for string quartet and digital signal processing (2005), was inspired by the year 1905, which the composer posits as a historical moment when numerous old and new ideas collided to spark new ways of seeing “everything in the sky.”

The central collision in Radford’s work is between acoustic string instruments and digital processes that give the wooden instruments new timbral and rhythmic possibilities. The result is a fascinating seventeen-minute fantasy that is alternately dominated by acoustic and electronic-generated sounds. This work succeeds not only because of the wide variety of timbres and registers explored, but also because the rhythmic vitality keeps the work buoyant and the listener engaged.

The final work on the CD is Jeffrey Ryan’s String Quartet No. 3, subtitled “sonata distorta” (2006). It is inspired by Tolstoy’s novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which examines the protagonist Pozdnyshev’s feelings as he watched his wife and a male violinist play Beethoven’s Sonata. Sensing the musical bond between his wife and the violinist, he became so jealous that it eventually led him to murder his wife. Ryan’s twelve-minute quartet is a psychological portrait of Tolstoy’s protagonist in the moments before the murder. By combining distorted fragments of Beethoven’s work with passages that sound alternately oppressive, loving and empty, this intense work perfectly captures Pozdnyshev’s frenzied and hysterical emotional state.

Also excellent is Alice Ho’s String Quartet No. 2 (2003). She tells us that the work is based on the opposing ideas of “dream” and “reality.” At first hearing, it is tempting to interpret the slow haunting first movement—I find the moment when members of the quartet start “chanting” near the end of the movement to be particularly powerful—as dream and the more energetic second movement as reality. Repeated listening have, however, made me think that, for this composer, the dividing line between dream and reality is not so clearly marked.

The remaining two works—Piotr Grella-Mozejko’s String Quartet No.2 (1999-2002, premiered 2003) and Daniel Janke’s String Quartet No. 1 (2005)—are definitely worth a listen, but I do not find them to be as compelling as the other three. Subtitled “The Secret Garden,” Grella-Mozejko’s quartet is an attempt to “encode in sound” the composer’s emotional response to Agnieszka Holland’s movie. Parts of this mostly introverted work are extraordinarily beautiful,

with exquisite use of harmonics and glissandos. At fifteen minutes, however, I find it to be a bit overextended. Janke's relatively short quartet also explores the timbral possibilities of the string quartet. It is full of yearning, and employs appealing and vaguely Middle Eastern melodies. Overall, however, the piece seemed a little too static harmonically and rhythmically.

Throughout the CD, the playing of the Penderecki String Quartet is committed, full of variety and technically impeccable. Canadian composers are fortunate to have an ensemble that is so actively commissioning, touring with and recording new works. I look forward to hearing more Canadian music from these four players in the future.

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