

Foliage. Richmond Hill, Ont.: Riverdale Ensemble, 2000. Furiant: FMDC 4619-2. One compact disc (54:54). The Riverdale Ensemble: Stephen Fox, clarinet/bass clarinet; Daniel Kushner, violin, Ellen Meyer, piano. Contents: Trio, op. 97 / Hals Gál (21:48); *Hommage à Henri Rousseau* / Daniel Foley (17:21); Trio / Aram Khachaturian (15:45). E-mail: info@riverdaleensemble.com. Web site: www.riverdaleensemble.com.

Although the Toronto-based Riverdale Ensemble has only been in existence since 1996, it has already developed a strong reputation for its polished performances, unusual and neglected (but not second-rate!) repertoire and historically informed performance style. As the members of the Ensemble note on their Web site, a significant portion of their repertoire is music “in the Romantic idiom - from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries—that speaks both to the heart and to the head...Support of current Canadian composers through commissioned works is one of our goals.” At the core of the group is a trio—clarinet, violin and piano—although the ensemble is frequently supplemented with guest artists and even choral groups.

Foliage represents the Riverdale Ensemble’s premiere recording and it is a winner. The CD contains three works for clarinet, violin and piano—one which is relatively unknown (Hans Gál), a world premiere (the Canadian composer Daniel Foley), and a standard (Aram Khachaturian). The Gál is a three-movement work that displays his firm grounding in the classical Germanic tradition of Bach, Mozart and Brahms. (Gál also wrote the first significant biography of Brahms.) Although it is not inappropriate to comment on the influence of Brahms upon Gál’s trio, it

would be unfair to extend the comparison too far, as Gál’s composition displays a strong sense of its own symphonic argument and formal structure.

The Khachaturian trio is, of course, a staple chamber work from the first half of the twentieth century. The Riverdale Ensemble’s interpretation of the three-movement work is nothing less than astonishing, a simply stunning performance that is worth the cost of the CD alone. (Any apprehension one may have about purchasing this disc will be immediately dispelled by listening to the superb balance and pacing between the instruments during the initial moments of the work.)

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about Foley’s *Hommage à Henri Rousseau*. However, simply put, the composition does not work. Clearly the music is engaging for the musicians to perform. Further, the piece is well crafted and displays Foley’s superb handling of a number of musical styles, ranging from the baroque to early, Massenet-influenced Debussy to boogie-woogie. Unfortunately, however, this kaleidoscope of styles represents one of the composition’s glaring weaknesses—namely, there are only fleeting moments when Daniel Foley, composer from 2003, is present. To be kind, *Hommage* desperately begs for

musical substance instead of its continuous pastiche of styles.

The performances are all top-notch and the recording is, well, simply amazing both in terms of balance and sonic quality (the beautiful dialogue between the bass clarinet and violin near the opening of the second movement of Foley's *Hommage* will alone make your jaw drop). The program notes by Stephen Fox (Foley supplies his own notes for *Hommage*) are informative and useful.

As I alluded to earlier, this CD has something to appeal to everyone: something old and relatively unknown, something new that was commissioned by the Riverdale Ensemble, and a twentieth-century classic. I eagerly look forward to the Riverdale Ensemble's next release. My criticism of Foley's *Hommage à Henri Rousseau* notwithstanding, I would strongly recommend this disc.

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