

**Talivaldis Kenins.** *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCCD 9403. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Kenins documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (54:49). Disc 2: *Septuor* (16:40) (Toronto Repertory Ensemble, Milton Barnes, conductor) ; Piano Sonata No. 1 (16:35) (Arthur Ozolins, piano) ; Quintet (18:15) (William Aide, piano; Cynthia Steljes, oboe; Gwilym Williams, clarinet; Marcus Henningar, horn; Gerald Robinson, bassoon) ; Symphony No. 4 (23:45) (CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra; John Avison, conductor).

**T**alivaldis Kenins (b. 1919) has many distinctions. One of his most important is bringing to English Canada a central European sensibility rather than an English one. His roots in Latvia and France, which emerge in both his music and his teaching, have been conveyed to listeners and students even if they have little knowledge of those countries.

Kenins wrote almost all his music in Canada, where he arrived with his Latvian wife from France in 1951. The documentary CD implies it was all composed in the Kenins' summer home on Georgian Bay, but that's an exaggeration. Regardless, Kenins has written a wide variety of mostly instrumental music, emphasizing chamber works and concertos, but including solo music and eight symphonies.

His vocal music, almost ignored on the documentary CD and not represented on the performance CD, includes cantatas and songs, both solo and choral. Much of it sets Latvian texts, which may explain its unfortunate omission in most Canadian recordings of his music.

Kenins learned his craft at the Latvian State Conservatory in Riga during the Second World War and at the Paris Conservatory after it. At that time, Latvia lost its independence with the violent invasion and occupation of the

Russians.<sup>1</sup> Kenins left Latvia for Germany. Under great hardship towards the end of the war, he finally made his way to France, where he had spent much of his youth.

In Canada, he taught for thirty-two years at the University of Toronto. His most impressive music comes from the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. But outside those years he also wrote music of high quality, e.g., the Cello Sonata of 1950 and the trio, *Forgotten Pages*, from 1997.

All of his music is impassioned but disciplined. It emphasizes melody, counterpoint, clear forms, and concertante treatment. The fast music, such as the last movement of the Piano Sonata included here, is often witty. The slow movements tend to be more introverted.

*The Septuor* on these CDs, conducted by Hermann Scherchen in Darmstadt in 1950, is a slightly dry but skilful neo-classical work. The much later Quintet reveals major advances in colour and line, and in expressive variety and pacing. Typical of Kenins' chamber music, both compositions include a piano.

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<sup>1</sup>Latvia's independence was lost gradually but most decisively in 1944. There were two Russian invasions; the occupation began at the end of the war and took serious root within a few years.

The First Piano Sonata is one of his early major works, in two energetic outer movements framing a lyrical, more traditional slow movement. Ozolins plays beautifully but also edgily in the fast movements.

The Fourth Symphony is stunning. One of Kenins' radical pieces, it involves elements of indeterminacy and no traditional contrapuntal forms. Years ago, I attributed political significance to this work, but on the documentary CD the composer's son George questions that. The composer himself has often thought the value I have found in his music is too high. To which I say: His legendary self-deprecation is hardly an indication of his creations' worth. I believe his best music is among the finest from twentieth-century Canada.

The full performances are all taken from earlier recordings, although their exact provenance isn't indicated. The sound quality is first-rate. Who would have thought the "tubby" sound of the original LP of the Fourth Symphony could turn into this? The performances themselves are excellent, with a few shaky bits only in the Septuor.

On the documentary CD, Kenins speaks eloquently not so much about his music as his relation to it, and what others have thought of it. Honegger, he reports, thought that Baltic music was serene, nostalgic, and sad. Still, there's a lot more than that even on these CDs.

The most enlightened comments come from Talivaldis Kenins, composers John Beckwith and Peteris Plakidis, pianist Arthur Ozolins, and musicologist Ingrida Zemzare. Full marks to Centrediscs for snagging interviews from the Latvians and for snippets of a few Latvian performances. The booklet notes come mostly

from Kenins, but unfortunately say almost nothing about the Fourth Symphony.

Like the other recordings in the *Portraits* series, the music on the documentary CD is part illustration, part sound track. Choices of repertory are sometimes peculiar but often clever. A few dates and similar data are slightly off. George Kenins' recollection of the nature of the premiere of his father's Eighth Symphony in 1986 is at variance with mine but important to hear, since he played in the orchestra for it.

Producer and presenter Eitan Cornfield wisely doesn't try to impose a tight structure on the commentary but allows character and insight to emerge naturally; and he certainly knows what questions to ask. He needs a lesson in Latvian pronunciation, though. (It's not hard!) Cornfield indicates that Kenins' life has seen tragedy, hard work, and good luck, the last referring to his opportunities in Canada, an opinion echoed by Ingrida Zemzare in Latvia. The luck consists mostly in having had a secure teaching position in Toronto. With a few significant exceptions, Canadians have ignored the music of this splendid composer, who has spent more than fifty years here.

Much of Kenins' music came about because of commissions from Latvians outside of Latvia. Now that the long years of Soviet rule have ended, Latvia itself shows more interest in him than does Canada.

I recommend the *Portraits* series to libraries in Canada and elsewhere. The Kenins CDs are a fine addition to it.

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