

Norma Beecroft. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCCD 9303. \$20.00. Two compact discs Disc 1: Beecroft documentary / produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (54:43). Disc 2: *Improvvisazioni Concertanti No.1* (Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Victor Feldbrill, conductor) (7:40); *From Dreams of Brass* (Barry Morse, narrator; Mary Morrison, soprano; CBC Toronto Chorus and Symphony Orchestra; John Avison, conductor) (16:00); *Collage '76* (New Music Concerts Ensemble, Robert Aitken, flute and conductor) (8:54); *Accordion Play* (Joseph Petric, accordion; Bill Brennan and George Morgan, percussion) (13:00); *Amplified String Quartet with Tape* (Accordes String Quartet) (12:44).

To recount the musical and professional life of Norma Beecroft (b.1934-) is to provide a fascinating perspective on new music in the latter half of the twentieth century in Canada and abroad. Beecroft studied composition with John Weinzweig in Toronto, Aaron Copland and Lukas Foss at Tanglewood, Bruno Maderna at Darmstadt and Goffredo Petrassi in Rome (the latter on the advice of Claudio Abbado, a fellow student at Tanglewood). While at Darmstadt she heard a live performance (that was possibly the premiere) of Stockhausen's *Kontakte* and was introduced to the ideas of John Cage when she fell upon a class being led by David Tudor on the "various sounds made by a chair being scraped across the floor."¹ She knew Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio. She worked at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht and at the Columbia-Princeton Studio in New York with Mario Davidovsky.

Beecroft's impact on the development and promotion of contemporary music in Canada was

¹Peter Such, *Soundprints: Contemporary Composers* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972), p. 92.

enormous. She was a pioneer of electro-acoustic music in Canada, she worked as a television broadcaster in the nineteen fifties when the medium was just developing (and aired live), and as a radio broadcaster and producer in the nineteen sixties and seventies creating documentaries on John Weinzweig, Barbara Pentland, Harry Somers, Jean Coulthard, Bruce Mather, Harry Freedman, Gilles Tremblay, Murray Adaskin and Violet Archer. She was president of the Canadian Music Associates and Ten Centuries Concerts, and later was co-founder (with Robert Aitken), president and manager of New Music Concerts in Toronto.

Eitan Cornfield tells this story well in his documentary by including interviews with some of the best-known figures in new music in Canada: composers Harry Somers, John Weinzweig and Harry Freedman; composer and CBC's *Two New Hours* producer David Jaeger; composer, flutist, and New Music Concerts director Robert Aitken; and soprano Mary Morrison. I am puzzled, however, by Cornfield's emphasis on Beecroft's "silence" for the last ten to twelve years, an emphasis created through the framing of the documentary. The first three minutes and fifteen seconds feature

Beecroft talking about her garden; Cornfield interjects, "It's a perfect early spring day and Norma Beecroft, pioneer of electro-acoustic music in Canada, is showing me what she's been up to for the last dozen or so years." Five minutes before the end of the documentary Cornfield muses, "But for the last ten years Norma has fallen silent. Are her composing days over?" He concludes with a discussion about the brevity of Beecroft's catalogue. Although it is curious that no works have been forthcoming recently, its emphasis in the documentary somehow diminishes the remarkable contributions and breadth of Beecroft's productivity throughout her lifetime—in broadcasting and arts administration as well as composition.

Although the recording quality on the second CD is mixed (tracks one and two sound somewhat muddy), all of the performances on the CD are exceptional, with performers ranging from Joseph Petric to the Toronto Symphony to the Accordes String Quartet. The selection of works is also excellent, including two works not previously available on commercial recordings: *Accordion Play* and *Amplified String Quartet with Tape*. (Both were presumably recorded for broadcast on CBC's *Two New Hours*; David Jaeger is listed as producer and David "Stretch" Quinney as engineer.) Written in 1991 and recorded live in 1994, this CMC release of *Amplified String Quartet with Tape* was honoured with a 2004 Juno nomination for Classical Composition of the Year, up against works by Christos Hatzis, Jacques Hétu, and R. Murray Schafer. One set of pieces not on the recording that really ought to be is *Tre Pezzi Brevi*, premiered at Darmstadt and the only

work of Beecroft's published by a major music publisher. As Robert Aitken indicates in the preface to the Universal Edition, "With their compactness of form and flexibility of combination (flute with harp, piano or guitar), these pieces have already become an important part of the repertoire and are established as 'contemporary flute classics.'"²

Improvvisazioni Concertanti No. 1 (1961) was composed by Beecroft in her final year in Rome. Performed by TSO principal flutist Nicholas Fiore,³ the difficult solo flute part is replete with extended techniques bearing the influence of Severino Gazzelloni, Beecroft's flute teacher in Rome, who is described by Aitken as "the foremost performer of contemporary music at the time."⁴ Beecroft's trademark attention to timbre is apparent in the orchestration. The solo flute is the only woodwind in the work, and it is set against separate blocks of brass, percussion and strings.

² Robert Aitken, Preface to *Tre Pezzi Brevi* by Norma Beecroft (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1962). The preface is also reprinted in the booklet for the CD collection, *Ovation, Volume 3*, reviewed on p. 39 of this issue of *CAML Review*.

³ Fiore's performance is not listed in the accompanying booklet. See David Olds' review in *Whole Note Magazine* (Dec. 1, 2003-Feb. 7, 2004). Available online at: http://www.thewholenote.com/wholenote/back_issue_main.html.

⁴ Aitken, Preface to *Tre Pezzi Brevi*.

Beecroft's other early work on the CD, *From Dreams of Brass* (1963-64), similarly uses family groups of instruments as different timbral blocks or voices: strings, brass, and percussion again, as well as a chorus, solo soprano, narrator and a three-track, stereo half-inch magnetic tape projected from three speakers, one on either end of the stage and the third behind the audience. (These timbral groups are depicted visually as blocks in the stage diagram that Beecroft provides with the score.) The recording is excellent—the performers include Mary Morrison, Barry Morse, and the CBC Toronto Chorus and Symphony Orchestra—and we are fortunate to have it since the work has never received a public performance. This year will witness the work's fortieth anniversary as well as Beecroft's seventieth birthday: Would not a public performance be a fitting tribute?⁵

Conceptually, *Collage '76* is the least compelling work on the disc. As a musical technique, collage is really only successful if the quotations are known and take on new meaning through their layering or juxtaposition. Since all of the referenced works are by Beecroft herself, only a select few would be able to navigate the confusing layers of sound. But *Jeu II* (1985), for flute, viola, live electronics and tape, also uses a collage technique and is perhaps Beecroft's most beautiful work. Written

⁵Concert programmers and others will be interested to know that Beecroft has transferred all of her tapes to CD and that they are available from either the CMC or the composer.

in 1985, it is dedicated to Goffredo Petrassi on his eightieth birthday. Through extensive quotation, it also pays tribute to the three hundredth birthday of Bach and the one hundredth birthday of Berg. It begins with reverberated Bach quotations on flute and viola (Robert Aitken and Rivka Golani) against the opening stacked-fifths of Berg's Violin Concerto as a multi-layered electronic drone. Beecroft's choice of the Violin Concerto is brilliant for when the Bach quotations suddenly give way to Berg, we hear first on the viola the concerto's opening alternation of the violin and harp, and then Berg's celebrated quotation of Bach's chorale, "Es ist Genug," from the concerto's fourth movement.

Accordion Play (1989), devoted to acoustic instruments alone, is for accordion and two percussion. Unlike the much earlier, acoustic-only *Improvvisazioni Concertanti No. 1*, this piece reflects Beecroft's extensive experience with electronic music by exploiting the potential of the instruments to produce electronic-like timbres and gestures, convincingly evoked by Joseph Petric, Bill Brennan and George Morgan. In contrast, *Amplified String Quartet with Tape* (1991-92), performed by the Accordes String Quartet, not only begins with a sweeping, lyrical cello line, a sound produced unmistakably by an acoustic instrument, but it also avoids techniques that might be confused with electronic sounds. Although other works by Beecroft that involve tape and acoustic instruments seem to blur the boundaries between the electronic and the acoustic elements, this work almost exaggerates their differences.

I was delighted to find that, in its second batch of *Portraits* releases, the CMC greatly improved the level of detail in the accompanying CD booklet, perhaps in response to reviewers' frustrations (including my own) with the first ten. The booklet now includes, among the usual items, track numbers for the documentary, lists of the music used and the people who appear in the

documentary in order of appearance, and much more detailed information about the recordings (dates and places, producers and engineers). Maybe track numbers for the music will appear in the booklets of the next round.

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