

Rodolphe Mathieu: Musique de chambre. Toronto, Ont.: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCD 9803. \$19.98. One compact disc. Performers: Réjean Collier, piano; Quatuor Claudel. Contents: Quintette pour piano et quatuor à cordes (9:50); Trio pour piano, violon et violoncelle (32:40); Trois préludes (5:40); Sonate pour piano (11:56).

Rodolphe Mathieu was born in Grondines, near Quebec City, in 1890 and died in Montreal in 1962. In that relatively long life he produced only a couple of dozen works, mostly for small forces, the majority of them remaining unpublished, unperformed and often incomplete. Ample justification, it would seem at first glance, for the obscurity in which he lived and into which his work has fallen since his death.

And yet...the Canadian Music Centre has come to the rescue and shed at least a little light on the life and work of this strange, unfulfilled genius of Canadian music. Some of the chamber music of Rodolphe Mathieu lives again on this new CD issued by the CMC.

One's first reaction to the CD is curiosity. How is it that this man and his music have been so ignored? Part of the answer becomes clear on first hearing. This is music that demands your attention, but giving that attention isn't always easy. At its most accessible it is reminiscent of Debussy and Fauré. At the other extreme it is no more approachable than Schoenberg. Sometimes a score is almost necessary for something to hang on to, and the listening is more a discipline than a pleasure.

The CD contains performances of four of Mathieu's major chamber works written over three decades between 1912 and 1942. During five of these years (1920-25), Mathieu was in

Paris where he studied composition with Vincent d'Indy, orchestration with Louis Aubert and conducting with Vladimir Golschmann. Most of his major works date from this period, among them the Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello.

The Trio received its first performance in 1926. It seems not to have been performed again until 1975 in Montreal. The liner notes describe it as Mathieu's masterpiece. It is certainly solidly built. Tonality is stretched to its limits and beyond in the first movement, which is developed from a short row laid out in the opening bars. While I recognized and appreciated the skill of the work, I have to say I rarely enjoyed listening to it. It sounded to me like music written to challenge and satisfy the composer and the performers rather than the listener.

The Sonata for Piano, written a few years later, is a fascinating work, full of power and urgency. It is in one movement and often sounds like an advanced study or an improvisation on the semitone and ascending and descending minor thirds of the opening four notes. It is full of good, demanding, piano technicality, with a lot of octaves in both hands and rippling arpeggios. It is a busy, restless work, always moving except for the silences and points of rest after moments of climax. It shows touches of the influence of Scriabin and Debussy. Unfortunately, my copy of the CD had a flaw in it around five minutes into the sonata. I hope it was only my copy!

The influence of Debussy and Scriabin is also evident in the much earlier Three Preludes for Piano, written between 1912 and 1915 before the composer left for Paris. Each prelude is based on a short motif, sometimes just four notes, that is expanded and developed over the space of one or two minutes, again in the form of a fleeting improvisation.

And that leaves the first item on the CD (and last chronologically), the Quintet for Piano and String Quartet; it dates from much later, after Mathieu had given up composition for about ten years. The notes describe the work as the only instance in which Mathieu made a concession to public taste. And it shows! One immediately thinks of Fauré, Franck and Debussy with the smooth chromatic lines and lush harmonies of the opening larghetto. There are still the by-now-recognizable trademarks: the overdeveloped fragments and the sudden silences after lush climaxes. This is obviously the same composer having come through his atonal period and now communicating with his audience.

Now I see why the producers put the Quintet first on the CD rather than presenting the works in chronological order. Despite the small confusion this causes it does increase the odds that people will listen to more than the first piece!

The playing on the CD is excellent throughout. Pianist Réjean Coallier is obviously devoted to keeping this music alive and recognizes its value, especially to pianists. He is also responsible for the excellent liner notes.

The Claudel String Quartet also plays with conviction and precision. I'm not sure why, but it seems worthy of mention that they are all women and have been playing together since they were young. The latter fact, though not the former, is clearly evident. They play this sometimes difficult music extremely well.

The notes are useful. Perhaps later research will provide more information on the life and work of this strange man they refer to as the first modern Quebec composer.

Mathieu is by no means easy listening, nor is his music the most polished sounding, but there is much in this CD to recommend perseverance. The piano writing is particularly idiomatic and worth investigation. One gets the feeling that Mathieu could certainly have become a major composer had things worked out. For now, he remains an almost-great. This well-performed, well-recorded and well-researched CD will certainly help his cause.

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