

István Anhalt. *Canadian Composer Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2004. CMCCD 10204. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Anhalt documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (53:31). Disc 2: *The Tents of Abraham (A Mirage-Midrash)* (Kingston Symphony, Glen Fast, conductor) (36:40); *Foci* (Phyllis Mailing, mezzo-soprano; recorded voices; Ensemble instrumental de Montréal; István Anhalt, conductor) (31:05).

Canada owes István Anhalt an enormous debt. The impact of his contributions as composer, conductor, professor, researcher, writer and, not least, builder of university music departments will be felt for a long time to come. The issuing of a new volume of the CMC's *Canadian Composer Portraits* series devoted to his work is thus to be applauded. When I was asked to write this review, I jumped at the opportunity. As an undergraduate at Queens (1972-76), Anhalt introduced me to the intricacies and rigours of musical analysis as well as the wonders of twentieth-century music.

The choice of compositions is interesting in that it presents two starkly different facets of Anhalt's work. In *Foci* (1969), Anhalt explored the limits of what music could possibly be and did so with his characteristic intensity and resolution. We hear the composer grappling with the problems and issues of the day using the technique and in the style of the international avant-garde. Through this work, Anhalt performs an act of speech, a commentary on his troubled times. To paraphrase G.L. Bruns, *Foci* does not take place in a void of purely formal relations: it is not a hermetic act but an event of the world – an Orphic utterance in which world, word and

music are brought forward as in a single presence.¹ *The Tents of Abraham (A Mirage-Midrash)* (2003) presents a more introverted, personal side of the composer's work, in which he examines his identity and roots. It is unfortunate that the Portrait contains only two works, particularly because *Foci* is a reissue of a recording presented in the *Anthology of Canadian Music* (vol. 22, 1985). I would have preferred a wider selection encompassing the composer's early works. This deficiency is partially compensated by the fact that the Portrait presents the recording of the first performance of *The Tents of Abraham*, a fascinating and no doubt key work in Anhalt's oeuvre. The Kingston Symphony, under the able direction of Glen Fast, has done an admirable job.

¹G.L. Bruns, cited in Istvan Anhalt, *Alternative Voices: Essays on Contemporary Vocal and Choral Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 243.

The weakest aspect of the Portrait is by far the documentary. With regard to the two compositions presented on disc two, the documentary is unbalanced. Only two minutes and ten seconds of this fifty-three-minute piece are devoted to comments on *Foci*. Given the significance of this work for the composer's development, the superficial treatment it receives is as inexplicable as it is unacceptable. Much of the rest of the documentary is taken up with comments on *The Tents of Abraham* and large sections of this are redundant. The author should have provided a more even-handed presentation of Anhalt's work as a whole.

The documentary also distorts, and this begins in the first minute wherein we learn that Anhalt is "Kingston's senior composer." One wonders just how many composers of Western art music currently reside in this pleasant Ontario town and, of those, how many have a stature even remotely comparable to Anhalt's. In my day there were five all told, and I would be surprised if that number has grown much since then. Be that as it may, this theme comes up on numerous occasions in the course of the documentary. Through this emphasis on locale, the author seems intent on situating the composer and his music on the northern shores of Lake Ontario. That Anhalt, like many of his ex-colleagues, chose to retire to the leafy lanes south of Princess Street and that he is happy with his choice is quite understandable. To suggest that Kingston has anything whatsoever to do with the music of *The Tents of Abraham* is a complete distortion.

Canadian musicologist Robin Elliott does note that Anhalt's work is primarily concerned with the "weight of history." But within the context of the documentary, the remark is followed with details of the composer's biography and is left undeveloped with regard to his music. Anhalt is an immigrant composer. Like so many of his generation, he chose to pursue his career far from where he received his training.² In my opinion, *The Tents of Abraham* has much more to do with this point of departure than with the place he now calls home. The shadow of Béla Bartók looms large in this music. For me, the first movement, entitled "The Land," brings to mind the brooding, oppressive atmosphere of the opening of *Bluebeard's Castle*. Indeed, the movement appears to contain, if not a direct quotation, at least a clear reference to Bartók's opera. At approximately three minutes and twenty seconds and again at three minutes and forty-five seconds of the first track, the passage work in the upper winds sounds eerily like the rapid flourishes which punctuate the string trills just after Judith opens the first door and discovers Bluebeard's torture chamber.³

²For more on this topic, see Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially the chapter, "Music and Musicians in Exile," 174-207.

³This observation was made from the recording only. It will have to be checked once the CMC makes the score available.

To link this music with Anhalt's past in no way diminishes its worth. On the contrary, he is part of a remarkable generation of composers born in Hungary or in Hungarian-speaking regions which, during the first decades of the twentieth century, not only met the extraordinary challenge of assimilating Bartók's heritage, but built on it. Some of these composers, despite misgivings and uncertainty, chose remain in Budapest after 1945; others, like Anhalt, decided to leave. Though their work has developed in diverse directions, all were indelibly marked by Bartók's musical persona. It is within this context that *The Tents of Abraham* finds its true resonance and acquires real stature.

In one of the more poignant moments of the documentary, Anhalt says that, however much he admired Zoltán Kodály's mission to establish an indigenous music culture in Hungary, he could not be part of the project because "everyday in the newspapers we heard that Jews are not really Hungarians." Having suffered cruelty and humiliation at the hands of Hungarian fascists and anti-Semites, it

is hardly surprising that he decided to leave. It is one thing, however, to change one's passport, it is quite another to erase the marks of a musical education.

The above is not meant to suggest that there is no relation between Anhalt's oeuvre and the place he chose to take up residence. Indeed, a fascinating perspective on this subject is opened in the documentary when Anhalt comments on his friendship and professional relationship with Glenn Gould (end of track eight and beginning of track nine). Unfortunately this window is soon slammed shut and at the end of the documentary we are inexorably brought back to Kingston's "colonial limestone." Associating a magnificent work like *The Tents of Abraham* with a place, merely because it was composed and first performed there, is trivial. It does a disservice not only to the composer's legacy but also to the promotion of serious music in Canada.

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