

Malcolm Forsyth. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. CMCCD 8802. \$20.00. Two compact discs. Disc 1: Forsyth documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield (54:10). Disc 2: *Sagittarius* (Concerto Grosso no. 1) (Canadian Brass; National Arts Centre Orchestra, Mario Bernardi, conductor) (17:45); *Atayoskewin*, Suite for Orchestra (Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Uri Mayer, conductor) (20:44); Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra (James Thompson, trumpet; Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony; Raffi Armenian, conductor) (19:54).

The Centrediscs label of the Canadian Music Centre has issued the *Malcolm Forsyth* volume in its *Canadian Composers Portraits* series. Other volumes issued to date include Weinzwieg, Coulthard, Adaskin, Héту, Freedman, Papineau-Couture, Archer, Morawetz, and Schafer; some of them have already been reviewed in this journal. With the exception of Forsyth, each of these composers had a volume devoted to them in Radio Canada International's *Anthology of Canadian Music*. That monumental series produced thirty-two volumes in LP format from 1978 through 1988 followed by seven volumes in CD format, three of which were anthologies of jazz, electroacoustic music and folklore. The *Portrait* series may never attain the breadth or size of the earlier series, but the two share an educational function in addition to presenting a selection of the composers' oeuvres.

Forsyth's profile has risen in recent years, especially since 1989 when he was honoured as Canadian Composer of the Year. Many of his more significant compositions are available on recordings and three have received Juno Awards for Best Classical Composition. The *Portrait* was issued last year, just as Forsyth retired from the University of Alberta as composer-in-residence. Active in Edmonton as a trombonist, conductor and coach, he had taught theory and composition at the University since 1968.

Forsyth is also one of the ten composers so far included in CBC Records' new *Ovation* series of Canadian music. (The other nine appeared in the *Anthology of Canadian Music*, previously mentioned.) The *Ovation* series is more varied in performance medium and covers a wider compositional period than the *Portrait* series. For example, the Forsyth disc includes the *Jubilee Overture* of 1963 and *Three Love Poems of John Donne* for chorus, composed in 1995. By comparison the three works included on the Forsyth *Portrait* are either for orchestra or orchestra with soloists, and were composed in 1975, 1984, and 1987. The growing discography of Forsyth's music does somewhat limit the choices in avoiding repetition of the same works. However, it would have been more representative to include a composition from the last ten years, such as his 1996 orchestral piece, *Siyajabula! We Rejoice!* A bigger contrast in instrumentation could have been provided with his *Serenade* for twelve solo strings. Apparently, a recording of *The Tempest: Duets and Choruses* for oboe and string quartet of 1990 is forthcoming. Can we soon expect a recording of his fifty-minute cantata, *Evangeline*, for soprano, trumpet and orchestra?

Disc one of the *Malcolm Forsyth Portrait*, like the others in the series, is a documentary containing conversation with the composer, clips from different compositions, and commentary by the producer Eitan Cornfield.

Besides remarks by Forsyth himself about his musical world, there are descriptive impressions from an Edmonton music critic, two former students who are now established composers in their own right, a close colleague from the University of Alberta, and cellist Amanda Forsyth, his daughter. They should have been identified in the accompanying booklet to confirm the fleeting reference to them in the course of the documentary. Their comments are made over and around excerpts from several of his compositions also not itemized in the booklet. They included *Electra Rising*, a work for brass quintet (possibly *Aphorisms*), *Music for Mouths*, *Marimba, Mbira and Roto-toms*, *Concerto for Pianoforte and Orchestra*, *Three Métis Songs from Saskatchewan*, and *Tre Vie* (concerto for saxophone and orchestra). I thought the documentary both entertaining and educational when I first heard it broadcast on CBC Radio Two. It works well as a radio broadcast, but I suspect that repeat listeners to the CD set will prefer to proceed directly to the compositions on the second disc.

There is no indication of when the three works included on disc two were recorded; it is probable that they were not re-recorded for the Portrait, but were already waiting in the vault. The recording of *Atayoskewin* is probably the one previously released by CBC Records in 1987. Recording information and brief biographies of the performers should also have been included with the program notes in the booklet. The three very fine orchestras, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, turn in vivid performances. And the soloists, the Canadian Brass in *Sagittarius* and James Thompson in the Trumpet Concerto, truly shine.

The three compositions, though falling into recording companies' current practice of reissuing and repackaging, do very much enhance the portrait. Forsyth's ease in writing for brass is evident in *Sagittarius* (Concerto Grosso no. 1) whose three movements are scored unusually for brass quintet as a concertante group with orchestra. Written in an accessible and accommodating style, this work incorporates allusions to Mexican popular music in the second movement and an easy-going jazz waltz in the third. The Trumpet Concerto's four uninterrupted movements, cast in alternating slow and fast tempos, emanate from the particularly attractive opening section. The solo muted trumpet interacts with the vibraphone *obbligato*. The xylophone is as a secondary solo instrument in the fast movements and the vibraphone returns in the third, combining with the trumpet's distinctive repeated note pitter-patter and flutter-tonguing. Forsyth's virtuosic control of the orchestra is demonstrated in *Atayoskewin*, whose title is the Cree word meaning "sacred legend." The three movements of this suite for orchestra, headed "The Spirits," "The Dream," and "The Dance," are evocative rather than programmatic. The captivating Dance, performed with such sparkle by the Edmonton Symphony, could match the popularity of Canadian classics like Godfrey Ridout's *Fall Fair*.

I am looking forward to the next volumes in the *Canadian Composers Portraits* series due to be launched in May.

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