

Murray Adaskin. *Canadian Composers Portraits.* Toronto: Centrediscs, 2002. \$20.00 2 compact discs. Disc 1: Adaskin documentary produced and presented by Eitan Cornfield. Disc 2: Diversion for orchestra (National Arts Centre Orchestra, Mario Bernardi, conductor) – Concerto for bassoon and orchestra (George Zukerman, bassoon; CBC Vancouver Orchestra; John Avison, conductor) – Suite for orchestra (CBC Vancouver Orchestra, Mario Bernardi, conductor) – In praise of “Canadian painting in the Thirties” (CBC Vancouver Orchestra, Mario Bernardi, conductor) – Divertimento no. 6 for solo percussion and orchestra (John Rudolph, percussion; CBC Vancouver Orchestra; Mario Bernardi, conductor).

With the recent death of Murray Adaskin, the Canadian music community has lost one of its pioneers, a composer who helped define Canada’s musical identity in the years following World War II, and one of the first Canadian composers to move beyond the Toronto and Montreal cultural scenes. This two-disc set presents a full-length (53:30) documentary on the life and career of Adaskin, as well as a collection of five of his works for orchestra written over the time period 1948-94.

The documentary, produced and narrated by Eitan Cornfield, is built around a relatively recent interview with Adaskin at his home in Victoria, in which the composer surveys his musical career paths and relates numerous anecdotes which span a ninety-five-year lifetime. We hear the interviewer only in introduction and intermission passages, leaving the bulk of the verbal description in the composer’s own voice, an entirely appropriate focus. Adaskin’s stories, which unfold slowly but which reveal much about the philosophy and influences of the man, take us from his early days in Toronto as an amanuensis of his older violinist brother Harry, through his years as a member of the trio that played at the Royal York Hotel. He then reminisces about his experiences as a composition student in California with Darius Milhaud, his tenure as head of the music school at the University of Saskatchewan, where he was appointed composer-in-residence in 1952, his trips to the Canadian Arctic, and his eventual retirement from teaching in 1971. Most of the commentary about the works

Adaskin composed after his retirement is delivered by the narrator in short interjections and a postlude. With regard to his later years, Adaskin himself focuses on non-musical matters, including his vast collection of Canadian art and his methods for staying healthy at ninety-five.

As a prelude to Adaskin’s words, the documentary begins with several sound clips of interviews with others, presumably colleagues, students, and composers who have worked with Adaskin or who know his work well. Unfortunately, these individuals are not named by the interviewer, nor are they credited in the accompanying liner notes. I believe I picked out the voices of violinist Andrew Dawes (formerly of the Orford String Quartet) and possibly composer John Weinzweig (with whom Adaskin studied in the 1940s), but I cannot be sure of the others, nor do I have a clear idea as to when the interviews were conducted. The logical assumption would be that these are new interviews compiled for this recording, but since this information was not explicit, the listener is left to guess who the interviewees might be, with what authority they describe the composer, and at what stage of his career their comments were made. This sort of context, even if only placed in the notes, would lend more weight to such an aural documentary since, unlike television, we do not have the benefit of subtitles. Wafting over the voice tracks of the interviews are musical excerpts from various Adaskin compositions. These are tastefully incorporated into the structure of the documentary and do not overshadow the

commentary; however, they too are uncredited, although we can occasionally infer their titles and significance from the dialogue. As with the interviewees, a list of the compositions used for this background music would have been appropriate in the liner notes, and would have provided the listener with an even greater feel for the scope of Adaskin's work.

The second disc, containing the five orchestral works, demonstrates highly professional production values and top quality performances by major Canadian orchestras. (The National Arts Centre Orchestra plays *Diversion for Orchestra* on the first track, while the remaining pieces are performed by the CBC Vancouver Orchestra.) The recording quality is consistently good with no discernible differences between the tracks; however, it is not clear whether these works have been specially recorded for this production or whether they form a compendium of pre-recorded excerpts. The absence of dates for the recordings leads the listener to assume the former. I was struck, however, by a comment in the liner notes about the first piece, which was commissioned for the NAC orchestra's inaugural concert on Oct. 7, 1969, directed by Mario Bernardi. The recording on this CD is also credited to the NAC Orchestra under Bernardi. Is this, then, a digitally remastered recording of the premiere performance, or a recording from the same time period, or did Bernardi record it again much later? This sort of question could be easily avoided with a complete credit, with date, for each performance on the disc.

While I was impressed with the vibrancy of the recordings, and the diversity of style they demonstrated within the scope of Adaskin's orchestral oeuvre, I could not help but be slightly puzzled by the choice of pieces for this collection, which seems, at least on the surface, to belie the mandate of

the *Canadian Composers Portraits* series to present an anthology of the composer's most important works. A collection consisting only of orchestral music does not, in my view, show a complete picture of Murray Adaskin, who was prolific in many genres. As we learn from the documentary, for example, Adaskin's formative years were spent as a violinist. His father, we're told, advised him that the violin was the key to the gate of heaven. His brother Harry, whom he idolized, was a violinist. Adaskin wrote at least twenty works featuring the violin as a solo instrument, clearly indicating its importance in his output. Why, then, does the violin not feature at all in this anthology? Rather, we are presented with recordings of the rather neoclassical *Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra* (1960), and the highly syncopated, clearly structured *Divertimento No. 6 for Solo Percussion and Orchestra* (1984), both substantial pieces requiring virtuosic playing, and performed remarkably well, but not really a representative sampling of Adaskin's creative work. As an anthology of his purely orchestral music, however, this CD is admirable; perhaps a re-titling would be in order.

The legacy of Murray Adaskin is very large, spanning over five decades and myriad genres, including orchestral music, chamber music, choral music, and opera. This *Canadian Composers Portraits* CD provides a fascinating glimpse into his life through his own words, and several convincing performances of some of his works. For the documentary alone, the recording is worth owning. The flaws in this production, albeit small ones, are really limited to some missing detail in the liner notes, and a lack of true diversity in the choice of works for the anthology.

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