

Phil Nimmons. *Canadian Composers Portraits*. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2005. CMCCD 11005 / WRC8-7846. \$30.00. Three compact discs. Disc 1: Documentary produced and prepared by Eitan Cornfield (49:58). Disc 2: Dave McMurdo Jazz Orchestra (77:57). Disc 3: Dave McMurdo Jazz Orchestra (77:08).

This is the first in the *Canadian Composers Portraits* series that deals with a jazz musician, albeit one who is best described as a composer, arranger, bandleader, clarinetist, and educator who has worked extensively in several areas, including radio, TV drama, concert music, and big band. Given the fact that the series deals with composers, Phil Nimmons is a good choice because of his stature and the fact that much of his work does fall under the rubric of composition, or at least some kind of combination of composition and arrangement, and that is something that can not be said for the majority of jazz musicians, most of whom make their mark through improvisation. Of course, in the case of Nimmons, or for that matter most jazz composer-performer types, the boundaries between improvisation and composition and arrangement are fluid, a continuum of sorts, where improvised lines are destined to become notated parts. And distinctions between arranging and composing can be further muddled by the fact that a tradition like big-band swing music comes with its own stock phrases and techniques. Having said all of this, it is interesting to note that one of the first segments on the documentary disc is about Nimmons' playing free jazz, accompanied by the claim that out of all the musical activities he has been involved in, he enjoys "making it up as we go along" the most.

As per the usual format in the series, the first disc is a documentary, in this

case with Nimmons talking about his life and work, interspersed with musical excerpts, some of which are meant to illustrate a style of music (e.g., Bach, Gershwin, Ellington), but not played by him, and others of which are meant to give a sense of the piece he is discussing. The other two discs contain live recordings of the Dave McMurdo Jazz Orchestra playing arrangements of Nimmons' music at the Montreal Bistro in Toronto, Oct. 26-30, 2004 (the jewel case slip wrongly lists it as being 2005).

For someone wanting to get a sense of the range of Nimmons' activities as a composer, it really is only the first disc that is representative of Nimmons' compositional output, but the excerpts are few and short. We get to hear very brief excerpts of some of the incidental music composed for the CBC, including *Proud Passage*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Marionette*, but in each instance the purpose of the excerpts seems to be to highlight the introductions by the announcer rather than the music (and an excerpt from one piece, *Skyscape: Sleeping Beauty and the Lion* itself serves as incidental music for some anecdotes from Nimmons' youth). Excerpts from some of his larger works—such as the *Atlantic Suite* and the *Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra*—that accompany comments by Nimmons play a more prominent role in the narrative, but you still do not get a very good sense of the pieces. The McMurdo discs contain arrangements of Nimmons' compositions originally

written for Nimmons 'N' Nine Plus Six, ranging in dates from 1963-88 (with most from the mid-1970s) and admittedly many would see this as Nimmons' most significant contribution to Canadian music. But this is McMurdo's band and the pieces have been arranged for his band, even though Nimmons does take the occasional solo. Nimmons was reportedly pleased with the arrangements and performances, seeing that many of the compositions had previously only been available as broadcast recordings. And he does provide a little bit of insight into his work in the liner notes with "Some Thoughts by Phil on His Compositions and Arrangements."

In what sense is this set of discs a portrait of Nimmons the composer, or even Nimmons the improviser or arranger? The documentary disc hints at what could have been possible, but I suspect that licensing has played a role in determining the content of the discs, especially in cases where the recordings are owned by large record companies like Verve and RCA Victor. You cannot help but wonder, though, why rights for some of the CBC or Sackville recordings could not have been secured for a set that has the potential be an important entry in the documentation of Canadian music.

Rob van der Bliet
York University