

Sea to Sea: The St. Lawrence String Quartet Celebrates 20 Years. The St. Lawrence String Quartet. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 16310, 2010. 1 compact disc (60:13). Contents: *Sepia fragments* / Derek Charke (13:15) – *Rounds* / Brian Current (11:23) – *À tire-d'aile* / Suzanne Hebert-Tremblay (13:12) – *Allaqi* / Marcus Goddard (12:03) – *A table at the Bushwakker* / Elizabeth Raum (10:20). \$13.98

In celebration of their twentieth-anniversary season in 2008-09, the St. Lawrence String Quartet commissioned a series of new works by Canadian composers to be premiered during an extensive cross-country tour. The call for compositions, made in partnership with the Canadian Music Centre, requested submissions for works of short duration for string quartet alone that would reflect the project's theme of celebrating and recognizing the quartet's Canadian roots. The group also committed to selecting a minimum of five works to represent each of the CMC's five geographic regions. "Through this commissioning," notes violist Lesley Robertson in the CD liner notes, "we hope to honour our roots and express our gratitude to the Canadians who have followed our growth, supported our endeavours, and nurtured our development over the last two decades." This disc presents the five new works that were selected.

In the two decades of its existence, the quartet has established itself as a world-class chamber ensemble with a profile reaching far beyond its Canadian origins. The group has held the position of ensemble in residence at Stanford University in California since 1998, maintains a busy touring schedule in North America and Europe, and works actively with notable international composers including John Adams, Osvaldo Goilijov, Jonathan Berger, Roberto Sierra, and Ezequiel Viñao. The focus of this commemorative recording is thus an admirable gesture. It not only acknowledges the continued importance of a Canadian repertoire for the quartet but also their support of emerging composers. Rather than turning to prominent individuals with whom they have worked in the past—and this is certainly an impressive list that includes Canadians R. Murray Schafer, Christos Hatzis, and Chan Ka Nin—they provided an opportunity for lesser-known composers to be heard. "As I recall," notes Robertson, "there were close to 90 submissions—and most of the names were new to us. This was perhaps the most exciting part of the process."

The inclusion of composers from different regions allows the disc to achieve a truly national feel by drawing together various identities and points of reference. The composers facilitate this through frequent references to regional sounds, places, and traditions. These include the stylized fiddle tunes and reels in Derek Charke's *Sepia Fragments*, the songs of birds found specifically in Québec in Suzanne Hébert-Tremblay's *À tire-d'aile*, imitative textures mimicking Inuit throat singing in Marcus Goddard's *Allaqi*, and the vivid scenes portraying patrons who frequent the Bushwakker Brewpub of Regina in Elizabeth Raum's *Table at the Bushwakker*. By presenting themes that expand upon the traits that have traditionally defined Canadian music, the disc demonstrates the ways in which contemporary Canadian composers express their identities.

Overall this disc represents a wonderful project that suits the quartet's long dedication to new Canadian music as a central part of its repertoire. One nevertheless wishes the commemorative aspect was better reflected in the CD booklet. Apart from a brief introduction by Keith Horner, the booklet contains only program notes from the composers and stock biographies presented as disjointed and piecemeal. The program notes are admittedly helpful, but they could have been integrated into an overarching prose description drawing connections between the individual works and considering them as a collective response to the stated goals of the project.

One wonders, also, about the ensemble's experiences with these pieces. "To hold in our hands such a body of work from Canadians, coast to coast, was tremendously inspiring," notes Robertson, but there is much more that could still be said about how the pieces were selected and how audiences reacted to them. The self-imposed condition of selecting a piece from each region of the country is particularly intriguing and undoubtedly provided the group a rare glimpse into regional differences and compositional practices. An expanded commentary on the commissioning project and the selection process would have provided additional insights into the pieces while both acknowledging and celebrating the significance of the endeavour.

Aside from the shortcomings of the CD booklet, this is an excellent recording both in terms of the quality of the music and the quality of the performances. The music displays wonderful moments covering a full range from the Bartokian rhythms of *Allaqi* through the raucous barroom outbursts in *Table at the Bushwakker* to the delicately swirling textures of Brian Current's *Rounds*. The St. Lawrence String Quartet delivers performances that are nuanced, deeply emotional, and utterly convincing—exactly what listeners have come to expect from the ensemble over the past twenty years. By celebrating a significant anniversary in this way, the quartet members have generously rewarded their listeners by expanding the repertoire with five vibrant new works for string quartet.

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