

Le Souvenir : Canadian Songs for Parlour and Stage/Chansons canadiennes populaires, sentimentales et lyriques. With/avec Russell Braun, baritone/baryton, Sally Dibblee, soprano, Carolyn Maule, piano. Compact disc. (Lavallée Series/Série Lavallée.) CMC-CD 5696 \$19.95

It was with trepidation that I inserted the CD into its player. What was this like? Was it going to be a waste of my time? I am pleased to report that *Le Souvenir* is a delightful revelation. Not only were most of the selections on the CD good music, from the clearly patriotic to the charmingly romantic, but the performances of Russell Braun, baritone, and Sally Dibblee, soprano, both ably accompanied by pianist Carolyn Maule, were treated with individual care and attention, as was the insert in the compact disc.

The encapsulated biographies of the composers were very well done and the comments about the selections, although brief, were exactly what we needed in order to have a better appreciation of these pieces. The organization of the selections into four groups—art songs to French texts, popular songs to English texts, art songs to English texts and theatre music—was well thought out. The more or less chronological presentation of the works in each section allows us to hear the development of the genre, and to follow the social and musical influences that prevailed on the composers over the span of time. The pieces range from 1808-1928.

While Sally Dibblee has a very lovely and versatile voice well-suited in placement to the French repertoire, the very beginning of the recording lacked clarity of the language with the words not quite *au bout des lèvres*, as they say. This was very soon remedied in “Vir’ d’abord mon ami Pierre” by Emmanuel Blain de St. Aubain. The tone of regret she exhibited in her voice in the third verse was

truly lovely. The ease of vocal inflection becomes much more present in the English songs such as, “Oh! What a difference since the Hydro came” by Claud Graves, and “S’Nice” by William Eckstein. “The Fairy Song,” by Stephen Codman, was lovely for both the voice and the piano’s clarity.

We can certainly hear why Russell Braun is one of Canada’s finest baritones. Superb diction and enunciation, colouring of the vocal line, even coloring of the final note of “Le Souvenir” by Guillaume Couture, shows the attention to detail that sets him apart from other singers. With most of the pieces being in strophic form (same music, different words for each verse, which is one of the more difficult forms to interpret well), we are never bored. He has excellent range as is apparent in the duet “Oh, Trust my Love” by Calixa Lavallée. While the piano does not seem to be recorded with the same resonance as the voices, Carolyn Maule always enhances the performances, with her playing for Braun almost symbiotic. I keep returning to Braun’s performance of “Serenade” by Gena Branscombe, with the text based on a stanza from Robert Browning’s “In a Gondola.” Subtle, reflective of Rachmaninoff’s style...captivating!

All in all, a wonderful surprise of music that does let us “glimpse into the life and times of Canadians past.”

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