

Toccata: Music by Barbara Pentland. Barbara Pritchard, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 18312, 2012. 1 compact disc (56:07). Contents: *Toccata* (7:55) -- *Ephemera* (13:26) -- *Tenebrae* (8:32) -- *Dirge* (2:59) -- *From Long Ago* (3:37) -- *Vita Brevis* (5:27) -- *Horizons* (14:11).

When deciding to record an entire album of piano music written by Barbara Pentland, one is faced with the rather daunting task of choosing which works to record. Pentland, herself a concert pianist of some renown, wrote a substantial amount of piano music, ranging in difficulty from music written for children to music for the virtuoso. This particular CD, featuring pianist Barbara Pritchard, seems to have as its basis the representation of “adult” works from various time periods in Pentland’s career, as well as a predilection for works that focus on piano sonority. Thus the seven works here span a time frame of some forty years, and demonstrate interesting stylistic variety.

The opening *Toccata* (1958) is not written in the style of a tour de force or *perpetuum mobile*. Rather it is conceived more as a “touch piece” in the style of Merulo (the accompanying booklet invokes Frescobaldi as a model), where the segments of the work seem improvisatory in style and thematically unrelated. Written in a quasi-serialist manner, the harmonic fabric is dissonant and there is a sense of linear conception, something for which Pentland is known.

Ephemera (1974-78) follows in a similar vein with respect to its harmonic vocabulary. These five short movements (entitled “Angelus,” “Spectra,” “Whales,” “Coral Reef,” and “Persiflage”) are still serial in their content but are, on the whole, thinner in their textures. Dating some twenty years later than the *Toccata*, there is now some experimentation with “modified” piano sounds. For example, “Angelus” emulates bells tolling, an effect produced by stopping strings with one hand and striking the corresponding keys with the other. “Whales” uses extremes of register and the strumming of strings to characterize the movement and calling of whales; it is one of the more effective evocations created by manipulating the sound.

Two other works from the 1970s, *Tenebrae* (1976) and *Vita Brevis* (1973), are slow moving and decidedly contemplative. Amongst all of the works presented, these are perhaps the most preoccupied with the evanescence of sound rather than the linear development of musical ideas.

Dirge (1948) is similarly slow in its gait but, being over twenty-five years earlier, has a noticeably less serial approach, one which at times suggests a pseudo-Romantic homophonic sound, reminiscent more of Schoenberg than Webern. The booklet, which provides interesting information about each of the pieces and about Pentland herself, aligns Pentland with Webern, but ascribes a more lyrical and less ascetic approach to composition. These three works indeed bring a melodious sense to the foreground.

From Long Ago (1946) is a set of three early vignettes. They are the most tonally based works on the CD, and summon up images of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* with their sparse textures and clearly audible contrapuntal devices. From this set, "Obstinate Tune" is perhaps the most tightly written composition on the album.

The final work on the CD is also the most recent. *Horizons* (1985) returns once more to the pensive and segmented compositional style that typifies most of these compositions. It is an extended and less dissonant work that utilizes once again modified piano sounds created by strumming and harmonics.

As a group, these are not works that project big lines. For those who appreciate sonorous exploration as a basis for composition, this set of compositions provides ample opportunity to do so. While it is interesting to follow Pentland's various ways of approaching how to produce novel (if not original) sound effects from the piano, this collection offers the listener the chance to compare works and to note how the harmonic language, and in particular the intensity of the dissonance, evolves. These works are not presented in chronological order; instead, they appear to be moving from greater dissonance to greater consonance as the CD advances. One can conclude that the date of any single composition therefore is not necessarily indicative of a notable path of development in Pentland's thinking about harmony, since works from a like time period are not necessarily equally dissonant (even with the nearly ubiquitous use of a serialist approach). One *does* conclude, however, that the preoccupation with sound quality and imagery is a mainstay of Pentland's style.

The production values of this recording are first-rate, with fine sound quality throughout—this piano and hall (Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, in Halifax) make for a resonant combination. Barbara Pritchard's pianism is highly suited to this compositional approach, and she is masterful in managing the variety of sound "painting" that the listener encounters. She also brings to these works a lyricism and sparkle that present these compositions in the best possible light; she has chosen wisely in selecting works that take advantage of her ability to build a soundscape. Though not full of compositional variety, this CD contains works judiciously chosen to highlight one of Pentland's preoccupations: that of producing an ongoing series of sound images that are intended to captivate.

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