

From Sea to Sea: Vocal Works Featuring Canadian Poetry. Song cycle by Aaron Jensen. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 20815, 2015. 1 compact disc (56:55). Performers: The SING! Singers (1st, 4th, 11th pieces); Countermeasure (2nd, 8th, 13th pieces); Elmer Iseler Singers (4th-5th, 12th pieces); Cawthra Park Chamber Choir (6th, 9th pieces); KAJAK Collective (7th piece); Canadian Men's Chorus (10th piece). Contents: Sing Me the Songs I Love, Once More / words by John Reade (4:50) – Eunoia / words by Christian Bök (3:46) – Uncle Josh / words by Samuel Cooper (3:08) – UvavnuK Dreams / The Great Sea / words by UvavnuK (7:06) – Spell for Jealousy / words by Jeni Couzyn (3:51) – Remember Thee! / words by George Frederick Cameron (4:23) – Poems in Braille / words by Gwendolyn MacEwen (6:38) – Onions / words by Lorna Crozier (5:34) – Beatitudes / words by Herménégilde Chiasson (4:59) – The Tramps / words by Robert Service (3:31) – Pulse / words by Shane Koyczan (3:56) – Rain in the Country / words by Lucy Maud Montgomery – Opera Somnia / words by Sylvia Legris (4:32).

From Sea to Sea is an exciting new addition to the repertoire of *a cappella* choral works created by Toronto composer Aaron Jensen. This song cycle is a tour de force exploration for choir as well as an homage to Canadian poets. The text for each of the thirteen songs comes from poets from every province and territory in Canada including Gwendolyn MacEwen, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Robert Service, Christian Bök, Lorna Crozier, and Shane Koyczan. *From Sea to Sea* was composed between 2007 and 2013 with its premiere at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto in May 2013 as part of SING! The Toronto Vocal Arts Festival.

Jensen's intelligence and sensitivity as a composer, as well as the impressive range of his compositional style, is revealed in his exploration of the genres of folk, classical, jazz, pop, and minimalism, as well as Inuit throat singing. The end result is a song cycle that contains thirteen perfect musical gems, each of which can also stand alone as a solo performance piece. The vocal ensembles that appear on the recording deliver wonderful, compelling performances. There is no hint of hesitancy in any of the performances; rather the participants engage with wholehearted devotion and enthusiasm, which is what these songs require. Jensen is a composer who understands the human voice and how to write effectively for it. He responds powerfully to these fine Canadian texts. One hears the full spectrum of vocal colours in these creative original songs.

The disc opens with "Sing Me the Songs I Love, Once More," performed by The SING! Singers. Jensen sets John Reade's text with unerring clarity as well as keen responsiveness to its



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emotional complexity. We can hear and feel the poignancy of the text in the lyrical, meditative quality of the music.

Christian Bök's playful text, "Eunoia," is set as a minimalistic, rhythmic romp. Spoken text is declaimed by various voices midst the background of an ever present musical cacophony. It is as if the singers are having a dialogue, sharing and alternating lines of text.

One of liveliest pieces is "Uncle Josh" (for female voices) characterized by the rhythm of the bodhrán drum and the excited screams and whoops of the singers. The Elmer Iseler Singers' performance of this piece is delightful; this song could be sung at any Newfoundland kitchen party!

"Uvavnuk Dreams/The Great Sea" is a highlight with its exploration of the human voice, evocative of vast landscape and the immense sea. Scott Peterson's overtone throat singing is rich and mesmerizing. Dissonant clusters of sound mix with the pulsating rhythm. There is a sense of both the ancient and the very new in this song. The music subtly morphs from one turn of thought to the other. The emotional barometer fluctuates from tense, aggressive, nervous, edgy sections to contemplative, meditative and peaceful resolve. The hand of a choral master is apparent in the palate of sound, what the voices sing at any moment, and how one texture leads to the next.

Jeni Couzyn's text is given a haunting, hypnotic harmonic palette in "Spell for Jealousy." In contrast, sweet, lyrical phrases characterize the poignant text of "Remember Thee!" These songs showcase the understated, captivating qualities of Jensen's compositional style.

Gwendolyn MacEwan's "Poems in Braille" is a hybrid of medieval chant and pop song with its pointillist writing, mirroring the braille alphabet. Andrea Koziol delivers an expressive solo performance.

Layers of onion skin are musically characterized in "Onions," text by Lorna Crozier. Sensual layers of sound build to an exciting operatic climax.

Herménégilde Chiasson's "Beatitudes" (sung in French) is both a cry and a prayer. These are lush texts and Jensen serves up some of his most moving music. The texts begin in mid-sentence and end with a comma, not a period. Tonal montage builds in harmonic fluidity as well as gently sculpted lines that seem to sing themselves.

"The Tramps," text by Robert Service, is a poignant piece for male singers. The verses are sung by the weary soldiers who fought the battles of World War I. A lovely solo voice builds to this full voice, passionate, intense proclamation: "We tramped the road to Anywhere, the magic road to Anywhere, the tragic road to Anywhere."

One of my favourites on the disc, “Pulse,” is an infectious jazz tune, featuring the composer playing the trumpet solo. From start to finish it is dazzling. Denzal Sinclair’s solo singing is beautiful and perfectly suited to this style of singing.

Again the bodhrán drum is featured “Rain in the Country,” text by Lucy Maude Montgomery. This is another piece for female voices. A catchy folk tune segues to a pop song with jazz scat singing.

The final song in the cycle, “Opera Somnia,” pays homage to the Icelandic pop musician, Björk, with its electronic, house, jazz and trip hop influences; great fun!

The album comes with a booklet in English and French that includes liner notes written by Aaron Jensen as well as his biography.

Kudos to Aaron Jensen for producing an eclectic, highly entertaining, and unique contribution to the contemporary choral literature.

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