

Poetic Sketches. Performer: Elaine Keillor, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 21615, 2015. 1 compact disc (65:52). Contents: *Five Poetic Sketches* / Oskar Morawetz (15:15) – *Netscapes* / John Weinzwieg (8:54) – *In a Flash* / Alexina Louie (5:18) – *Through a Narrow Window* / Elma Miller (13:00) – *Quips and Cranks: Five Bagatelles* / Patrick Cardy (14:10) – *Let Hands Speak* / Kelly-Marie Murphy (9:15).

With this new CD the Canadian Music Centre presents an entertaining and stylistically well-balanced set of previously unrecorded piano works, all composed during the past thirty years (the earliest is Elma Miller's *Through a Narrow Window* from 1985, followed by Morawetz's imaginative *Five Poetic Sketches* of 1991; the others were written between 2000 and 2006). In the majority of cases the composers themselves have provided program notes about their piece, reproduced in the booklet accompanying the CD, and these are consistently useful and informative. Perhaps the most down-to-earth comment comes from Patrick Cardy, who writes that the first and last of his five *Quips and Cranks* are named "after two toy dogs that my sons play with," one a Labrador with a fondness for Beethoven (allegedly), the other a Saint Bernard. Beethoven is also invoked in these pieces through Cardy's choice of subtitle, "Bagatelle," which, like Beethoven's, are short (between two and four minutes) and of varied character, accessible and contrasting. The third, subtitled "Lullaby for Kevin," has the feeling of a slightly languid waltz, while the fourth, "A Lazy Afternoon," includes a central section of a somewhat Spanish character. It is always dangerous to overindulge in "spot the stylistic similarity" games, of course, since different people hear things differently; but for what it's worth, this reviewer noticed the influence of French impressionist composers on several works on the CD, including the second of Cardy's pieces, which is somewhat reminiscent of Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque*, although Grieg is also not stylistically far away either. To continue with this line of thought, although Alexina Louie claims an "avant-garde version of boogie-woogie" and Ligeti's studies for piano as the direct inspiration for her *In a Flash* from 2006, the opening measures may recall in the ears of some listeners the movement, "The Snow is Dancing," from Debussy's *Children's Corner* suite; and, in another place, there is a chord sequence that sounds just like something out of the same composer's "Minstrels" piano prelude. The final piece of Morawetz's *Poetic Sketches* uses repeated notes in the manner of Ravel, and is very virtuosic. Pointing out such influences—real or imagined—is in no way meant to belittle the inspiration behind any of these pieces, which are clearly not intended to be derivative.

The longest single-movement piece on the CD is Miller's *Through a Narrow Window*, which takes the listener deep into a complex, intense, and varied sound-world. It is the only work on



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the disc that uses extended piano technique, requiring the player to brush the strings inside the piano at various points while also depressing keys in more conventional fashion. Like several of the other pieces presented here, it uses the full range of the piano keyboard (similarly, Louie's *In a Flash* ends tempestuously in the piano's lowest register, and Murphy's technically demanding *Let Hands Speak* begins with a dramatic upward glissando). John Weinzweig's *Netscapes* is perhaps the most imaginative in terms of its external inspiration. Weinzweig writes that "I imagined browsing on the internet and discovering a wide variety of music fragments, each with its own sonic profile of sufficient thematic interest requiring no further elaboration," and the title of his piece is surely a reference to the Netscape Navigator web browser, which at the time he wrote it (2000) was still a dominant force in the browser market. The work is composed exactly as Weinzweig tells it, using sound fragments of which some are primarily rhythmic in quality, and others more melodic/harmonic. Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* may come to mind, and indeed *Netscapes* is a sort of minimalist "micro-cosmos" of fragments that somehow manages to keep the ear engaged for almost nine minutes without growing repetitive or tiresome.

Pianist Elaine Keillor needs no introduction as a champion of Canadian music. She previously premiered the pieces by Miller and Weinzweig on this disc (and, incidentally, published a book-length study of Weinzweig back in the mid-1990s); and she was also a co-performer, twenty-five years ago, in the premiere of another piece by Patrick Cardy, *Quant je suis mis*, a short work for voice and piano. It is clear from her performances on the CD that she still enjoys coaxing sounds out of a piano—there is a wonderful spectrum of nuance, and a sense of discovery and adventure here, born out of a lifetime of experience as a pianist and musical thinker. Those composers who are still living will surely be thrilled with this album.

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