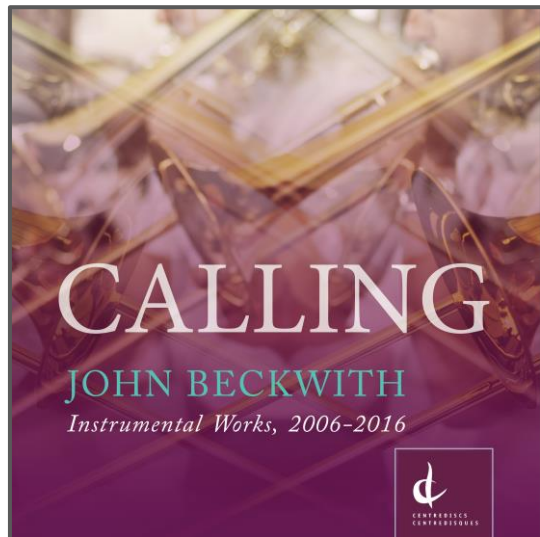




**La Patrie / Our Canada: Canadian Orchestral Music 1874-1943.** Symphonova Orchestra, Shelley Katz, Symphonist. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCD 25618, 2018. 1 compact disc (76:05). *La Patrie* / Calixa Lavallée (12:54) – *Overture Macbeth* / Clarence Lucas (14:14) – *Trois Préludes* / Rodolphe Mathieu (6:21) – *Overture* / Ernest MacMillan (11:59) – *Pavane* / Georges-Émile Tanguay (3:34) – *Serenade for Strings* / Murray Adaskin (9:09) – *Capriccio for Hand Timpani* / Violet Archer (4:40) – *Our Canada (Music for Radio No. 1)* / John Weinzweig (12:41).

<https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/152550>



**Calling: John Beckwith Instrumental Works / Oeuvres instrumentales, 2006-2016.** Various Performers. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 24917, 2018. 1 compact disc. *Calling* (8:26) – *Fractions* (12:25) – *Follow Me* (11:06) – *Pages* (5:12) – *Sonatina on "Mari's Wedding"* (6:06) – *Ut re mi fa sol la: Six Fantasies for Guitar* (15:38) – *Quintet* (10:23).

<http://www.musiccentre.ca/node/150918>

**Reviewed by: J. Drew Stephen, University of Texas at San Antonio**

The conditions under which contemporary classical music is currently produced present many challenges for composers and performing arts ensembles. The ease of access to existing music through streaming platforms creates massive competition for any new composition or recording while production costs make it prohibitive to use the large orchestral forces that were once summoned by Mahler and Bruckner as a matter of course. As I previously observed in a 2014 review of four contemporary Canadian music recordings,<sup>1</sup> to succeed in this environment, it is necessary to find innovative ways to present music so that it has a sense of purpose, a sense of legitimacy, and a sense of relevancy grounded in time and place. Colin Eatock, who has also addressed this issue in an article

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1. J. Drew Stephen, "Canadian Contemporary Music in the Twenty-First Century: A Review of Four Recordings," *CAML Review* 42, no. 2 (2014): 36-40, <https://caml.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/caml/article/view/39544/35853>.



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assessing the state of classical music, argues that the goal for “musicians, educators, concert presenters, and all others involved in the promotion of classical music” should be “to bring classical music back into the everyday lives of everyday people.”<sup>2</sup> The two recordings under consideration here provide excellent examples of this approach.

The Symphonova Orchestra’s release of eight Canadian symphonic works written between 1874 and 1943 on *La Patrie / Our Canada* corresponds with Canada’s Sesquicentennial year and is a fitting contribution to these celebrations. Since these works, according to the Canadian Music Centre’s press release, “have not been previously recorded on CD and [are] rarely performed,”<sup>3</sup> they fill an important gap in our recorded heritage of symphonic music. With selections by some of Canada’s most significant composers of the past 150 years, the repertoire has clear purpose and relevance. These are works that define the country and should have been available long before now.

While the recording of this repertoire is clearly welcome, it is the ensemble itself that is most remarkable. From what I can tell—the exact details are not clear in the liner notes or on the ensemble’s website—the group consists of twelve solo musicians augmented by orchestral samples from the Vienna Symphonic Library. The dynamics and tempo of the sampled material are coordinated with live musicians through gestures from the conductor. This unusual setup, according to Symphonova Orchestra’s website, allows the group to specialize “in repertoire that would normally require large forces playing in large spaces” and to reach “where no normal symphonic complement can usually go.” In other words, the group addresses head-on the challenge of bringing a symphonic repertoire to venues and communities that could not normally afford or accommodate a full symphony orchestra. I found it frustrating that descriptions of how this is accomplished rely heavily on jargon. In rendering these performances, the “acoustics of the venue itself is transformed by the Symphonova Virtual Acoustic System™ (SVAS™)” which somehow creates “the best concert hall acoustics even in the least likely venues.” The music played by individual musicians is augmented by “specialist unique Instrumental Loudspeakers made out of the instruments themselves, whose speed, dynamics and playing style is seamlessly controlled by Symphonova’s newly developed conducting wand.” Even the ensemble director, in his role of coordinating sampled material and live musicians, is re-designated as a “symphonist” rather than a conductor. Given the innovative nature of these performances, I would have preferred a clearer explanation of how they were achieved.

While Symphonova’s aim “to promote high quality but forgotten repertoire, perhaps ignored for practical, financial or political reasons” is certainly laudable, the recorded product is not entirely convincing. Listening to the recordings, even with quality headphones, I found the overall sound lacking in depth, with some of the instruments—notably the percussion—displaced spatially in the mix. While most of the full orchestra passages are realistic, I found that some orchestral effects sounded fabricated. An example is the stopped horns and pizzicato strings passage starting at 2’10” in the *Overture Macbeth*

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2. Colin Eatock, “What’s Wrong with Classical Music?” *3 Quarks Daily* (Monday, October 4, 2010), <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/10/whats-wrong-with-classical-music.html>.

3. Canadian Music Centre, “La Patrie - Our Canada,” accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/152550>.

by Clarence Lucas. The Symphonova technology is clearly impressive, but commercial recording may not be its best application. It seems to me that a recording could be more easily and more effectively produced using multi-tracking and mixing technology. Even in a concert setting—and this is my impression from watching the videos on the Symphonova website—I suspect that the effect of hearing a full symphonic work performed by a small group of musicians would be uncanny and disappointing. One loses the visually impressive spectacle of a large group of coordinated individuals working together to produce a coherent symphonic product.

Despite the claim in the press release that these works have not been previously recorded, there is in fact a commercial release of Ernest MacMillan's *Overture on Symphonic Spectaculars* performed by the Toronto Symphony under the direction of Andrew Davis.<sup>4</sup> A comparison of the two recordings reveals the shortcomings of the Symphonova performances. Whereas the Symphonova recording sounds flat and lacking in nuance, the full orchestral recording by the Toronto Symphony is rich, dynamic and much more vibrant. It is clear that modern technology makes it possible for Symphonova to perform large orchestral works in small spaces, but it does not replace the grandeur of a full symphony orchestra.

A different response to the economic challenges of presenting contemporary music in the twenty-first century can be seen in John Beckwith's *Calling*. This release consists of seven instrumental chamber works written between 2006 and 2016 and serves as a companion to *Avowals* (Centrediscs, CMCCD 12907) released in 2007 and featuring works for solo voice written between 1980 and 2000. Together the two releases demonstrate a trend towards chamber compositions that can be economically produced in small venues.

Even without the sonic resources of a large ensemble, Beckwith achieves brilliant and imaginative explorations of timbre and texture in these short instrumental pieces. They also demonstrate Beckwith's keen interest in a wide range of musical styles and compositional approaches. *Fractions*, which is scored for a Carrillo piano—a keyboard instrument consisting of ninety-seven pitches covering a single octave rising from middle-C—and a string quartet with two of the instruments tuned a quarter-tone higher than the others, allows for wonderful explorations of micro tuning to produce effects that shimmer with colour. *Calling*, written for an ensemble of flugelhorn, trombones, euphonium, and double bass recalls the historical associations of the trombone as a signal instrument while the Quintet is written for a mixed instrumentation in the tradition of *Pierrot Lunaire* and *L'Histoire du soldat*. The other pieces are responses to various models that demonstrate Beckwith's curiosity and broad musical interests: *Follow Me* for clarinet and piano consists of canonic formulations inspired by Bach's Goldberg Variations, *Pages* is a suite of condensed piano miniatures, *Ut re mi fa sol la* for guitar is a set of six fantasies on different hexachord patterns in the spirit of the late Renaissance instrumental pieces, and the Sonatina on "Mairi's Wedding" is built on fragments of the popular Scottish tune. Beckwith notes that, having heard "Mairi's Wedding" at the annual Tartan Ball hosted by the Toronto branch of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, it "proved so catchy I couldn't get it out of my head."

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4. Ernest Macmillan, conductor, *Symphonic Spectaculars - Grands Moments Symphoniques*, recorded 1988, CBC SM-5068. This recording was later released in digital format as CBC SMCD-5068.

What makes this recording particularly compelling is the quality of the performances. The performers on these recordings are seasoned and respected musicians who, in most cases, have a direct personal connection to Beckwith. In his liner notes, Beckwith specifically recognizes Robert Aitken and William Aide—who were both students in his University of Toronto music classes fifty years ago—as “valued friends whose performances and promotion of my music I have greatly appreciated.” This familiarity extends to the other performers as well: pianist Barbara Pritchard is a devotee of Canadian keyboard music and a regular performer of Beckwith’s compositions; the guitar fantasies were commissioned for Peter Higham who also commissioned, premiered, and recorded Beckwith’s *After-images After Webern* for guitar and violoncello; *Follow Me* was composed at the request of clarinetist Peter Stoll who has collaborated with Beckwith on several previous compositions; and composer Bruce Mather, who performs the Carrillo piano on *Fractions*, was the person who introduced Beckwith to this unusual instrument. As a result, the performers are personally invested in the music and it shows in the sincerity of their interpretations. In fact, these are definitive recordings by the performers for whom the pieces were written and performances from events that are significant in Beckwith’s career: *Pages* and *Fractions* are live recordings of the premiere performances, *Calling* and the Quintet are premier performances from a live concert organized by New Music Concerts in honor of Beckwith’s 90th birthday, and *Follow Me* is a live performance from the 90th Celebration of John Beckwith concert at the University of Toronto. Even with the ambient noise that is occasionally audible, these are vibrant recordings that capture the excitement of the live concerts.

Although the approaches demonstrated on these two recordings are very different, both realize the goal of bringing classical music back into the everyday lives of everyday people. In *La Patria / Our Canada*, the Symphonova Orchestra makes innovative use of digital technology to perform overlooked symphonic works that are relevant to Canada’s Sesquicentennial celebrations. Due to the nature of the ensemble, it should be possible to bring these and other similar pieces to remote communities that would not normally have access to symphony concerts. The superb liner notes by Elaine Keillor demonstrate the importance of these works and provide details that help the listener understand the music and appreciate its significance. In *Calling*, John Beckwith offers vibrant explorations of sound and colour in works for instrumental chamber ensembles. More important, the recordings demonstrate the human relationships among the composer, the performers, and the audiences. These are compositions that emerged from Beckwith’s personal connections to performers and performances that preserve a distinct sense of time and place. With these recordings that celebrate the past—150 years of Canadian symphonic music and John Beckwith’s remarkable career as a composer spanning 60 years—we are also given models for the future production of Canadian classical music.