

CD Review:
Zuzana Šimurdová, piano
VERTICAL LANDSCAPES

by Jerry Ozipko

Subtitled *Piano Music by Canadian Women Composers*, this recording is a revelation to this reviewer. When I was working on my first music degree, there were only four Canadian women composers of note: Violet Archer (1918-2000), Jean Coulthard (1908-2000), Barbara Pentland (1906-1995) and Ann Southam (1937-2010). Here we have a musical landscape of piano works from eleven representatives of the next generation of Canadian composers – all of these being women!

A graduate of both the University of Alberta and the Juilliard School of Music, Jamaican-born **Maria Thompson Corley** opens the programme with *Wilful Ignorance*, which she composed in 2020 during the American civil unrest in the wake of the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain killings. With a broad, uplifting musical and emotional panorama, the work, which is quite percussive and rhythmic in its impetus, has a most interesting genesis and structure. In Corley's own words: "I took a portion of *The Star-Spangled Banner* (US national anthem) and made it upside-down and backwards, just as I feel that a not insignificant part of the US populace has wilfully decided to embrace 'alternative facts.'" Within its unique emotional atmospheric texture, Corley has also interjected fragments of the black African hymn *Go Down Moses*.

Pamet' stromů which translates to mean 'Memories of Trees' (2023) gently intrudes into the musical environment extremely quietly, almost inaudibly. This is the musical offering from **Teri Hron**, the University of Alberta alumna, as well as a graduate of Conservatorium van Amsterdam and the Université de Montréal. As with Corley, the inspiration and formulation of the composition have an interesting origin. "I initially set the melody based on a poem by my grandfather," writes Hron. "The changes of character and tempo relate to different aspects of

what might be carried by a tree during its lifetime, from its deep roots to its smallest twigs." Listening to the work provides a pointillistic picture of just such a tree from seedling to sapling, to full-grown evergreen or deciduous oak or maple. Like trees, parts of the piece take time to grow while others speed on through.

Next on the roster is **Christine Donkin's** delicate *Snowstorm* from 2021. Another former student of the University of Alberta as well as the University of British Columbia, Donkin has composed a wide variety of music for performers of all musical genres, ages and expertise. This piece was composed during "a snowstorm which I experienced while living in northern Alberta." What followed is quite reminiscent of inspirational scribbles on restaurant napkins! "After creating the first few phrases, I had to catch a taxi to attend a rehearsal; so, I recall jotting the first six notes of the melody on a scrap of paper and hoping this would be enough to remind myself of how the rest of the piece sounded (fortunately, it was)." The flakes fall in a delightful and gradual accumulation into drifts of snow notes.

Serbian born and JUNO Award recipient, **Ana Sokolović**, composed *Prelude and Fugue for GG* in 2007. As the composer declares about the work, it is "my personal tribute to the musical genius Glenn Gould. The prelude is a free comment where I try to create a reflection, a kind of echo on GEGD notes. The fugue consists only of sixteenth notes. The repetition is the main feature, and the dynamics has an important role for bringing out some important elements of the texture." Upon listening to the free-flowing prelude, it seems to transcend metre and duration. The rhythm and texture of the fugue has an almost ultra-musical sensation when compared to the fugues of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. It is both stylistically different and alluring.

Melissa Hui's *When Soft Voices Die* (2007) is one more stylistic and textural journey into the unexpected. Born in Hong Kong, Hui was raised in North Vancouver and earned her first degree at the University of British

Columbia, from which she progressed to California Institute of the Arts and then Yale University. Her musical inspirations come from a variety of ethnic-folk cultures – namely Central African Mbuti, Indonesian gamelan orchestra and Japanese gagaku court music. I discerned some of the gamelan style in this piece, especially in the chordal sections. Portions of it appear to be meditative. According to Hui, "the work is dedicated to three mentors – Jacob Druckman, Mel Powell and Earl Kim – to whom I owe my deepest gratitude for their inspiration, encouragement and support. These three extraordinary composers died within a few years of each other between 1996 to 1998. I miss them dearly." Hui's commentary along with the musical textures of the work clearly provide an evocative sonic picture of the title.

The late **Joan Hansen** from Victoria is clearly the senior Grande Dame of this collective. Her musical studies were conducted at the University of British Columbia (where she studied with and was mentored by Jean Coulthard) and then the University of Victoria. In 2002 she composed *Vertical Landscapes*, which gives the album its evocative title. This dramatic work is comprised of two short but very different expressive movements which clearly provide wondrous musical descriptions of vertical landscapes – the breathtaking view down upon the Canadian Rockies from atop the summit of one of those gloriously majestic peaks, contrasted with its opposing glimpses upward of rock faces, cascades and waterfalls from the depths of Capilano Canyon.

Kristin Flores is also the University of Alberta graduate. Unlike the other women on this recording, her instrumental forte was NOT the piano, but rather, the violin. Further studies were taken at the University of Calgary. *Remembrance* was composed there in 2006 as a partial completion of her Ph.D. candidacy exams under the supervision of Dr Allan Gordon Bell. According to Flores, the work was composed close to Remembrance Day of that year and pays special homage to her close childhood friend's mother,

Audrey Salveit, as well as to the memory of all those noble brave souls who lost their lives fighting to preserve our nation from enemy forces. The work carries a rather noble sounding demeanour.

The next work on the docket is **...our inner lives were entwined... embroidered with the same pattern**, composed in 2021 by **Karen Sunabacka** of the Red River Settlement in Manitoba. She is a music graduate of the University of Windsor. Her musical influences are varied – in addition to the western classical traditions – there are her Métis roots along with her parents' European connections to Scotland, Sweden and Finland. The composer writes of the title of this work as "a quote from my mother Joyce Clouston's writing about her oldest sister, Beverley, who was medically fragile and physically disabled after complications at birth." Following a very quietly articulated beginning, Sunabacka plumbs the depths of her soul to express all of the anxieties and feelings written by her mother in words – expressed here in sound.

Music for Piano by **Alexina Louie** expresses its own unique sound palette of chords and rippling waves within its four brief movements. Louie completed her musical studies at the University of British Columbia and then at the University of California, San Diego. Since then, she has become a staple of the rich musical heritage that has emerged in our country since the 1970s. Her compositional oeuvre is vast, including vocal and choral music, opera and ballet, orchestral and concerted works as well as chamber music and music for solo piano. As an Officer of the prestigious Order of Canada, Louie, herself describes this work, which was composed in 1982, as "four movements which explore a variety of tonal and stylistic idioms." She equates the expressive characteristics of the music as looking into a mirror and conveying her own coming of age through sound.

Linda Catlin Smith began her musical studies in her home city of New York, then at the State University of New York in Stony Brook and went on

to continue at the University of Victoria, after which she moved to Toronto. She soon became involved with Arraymusic ensemble. **Bloom**, composed in 1996, is the product of a request from Piotr Grella-Możejko and was dedicated to Udo Kasemets in honour of his major set of piano pieces entitled *80 Flowers*. The work is a gentle, sedate composition centred around a number of similar dissonant chords from which individual notes emerge and reach outwards. Catlin Smith describes the meaning of the title as "the way I hear the resonance of the piano chords."

Garage by **Alice Ping Yee Ho** concludes this unique musical offering. Born in Hong Kong, she studied music at Indiana University and the University of Toronto, where she studied with John Eaton, Brian Fernyhough and John Beckwith. She has released ten recordings of a wide array of her compositions reflecting her artistic range. **Garage** was composed in 2005 as the theme for an independent film of the same name. Directed by Canadian film maker Edmond Chan, the film is a psychological thriller depicting the nightmare of events experienced by two individuals who become trapped in an underground garage. As outlined by the composer, "the sense of hopelessness and despair in this drama is portrayed by the bleakness of the music, often a long pause after an intense passage or gesture to create an empty space filled with rich ringing overtones." Understanding the theme of the drama, I listened to this music in a darkened room, and it actually raised the hairs on the back of my neck. SO dramatic!

The pianist, **Zuzana Šimurdová**, is a former Czech Republic concert artist who has relocated to Edmonton, which has become her home base for performance tours and where she and her husband have established a teaching studio. On this recording her performances and interpretations of these works demonstrate the vastness of her emotional expression as well as her penchant for detail in expressing the melodies, the harmonic intentions, the specific articulations and dynamics of each composition as notated by the

respective composers. There is so much depth to her playing that it is at times difficult to find the appropriate vocabulary expression to describe it. Depending upon the work, she can display delicacy so softly as to render it almost inaudible. At other times, the bombast is almost overpowering! In her personal notes she explained her intention of "exploring the tropes, trying to find pieces whose emotional impact" would make her and the listener respond deeply, seriously and positively. She has definitely succeeded in accomplishing that goal, and she has dedicated this recording to Canadian women in music.

This disc is yet another stellar example of the judicious and tasteful planning, organization, and musical selection, recording, editing and production by Edmonton's iconic composer and producer Dr Piotr Grella-Możejko, who has issued this wonderfully performed music on his own PGMaudio record label. Bravo again!



VERTICAL LANDSCAPES
ZUZANA ŠIMURDOVÁ
plays Canadian women composers
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Z. Šimurdová and P. Grella-Możejko

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