

This disc, well performed and cleanly recorded, should earn a place in surveys of music literature, particularly of choral music. Kudos to Christopher Bell, the Grant Park Chorus, and to Cedille for making this music available.

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Barbara Pentland, *Toccata: Music by Barbara Pentland*. Barbara Pritchard, piano. Centrediscs CMCCD 18312, 2012.

It is a remarkable fact that three of the major composition professors on Canada's West Coast were women: Jean Coulthard (1908–2000) at Vancouver's University of British Columbia from 1947 to 1973; Violet Archer (1913–2000) at Edmonton's University of Alberta from 1962 to 1976; and Barbara Pentland (1912–2000), also at UBC, from 1949 to 1963. Oddly, all three composers passed away within the same five-week period.<sup>1</sup> Although it would be foolhardy to infer on the basis of the prominent positions attained by Pentland and her two contemporaries that career advancement came more easily to women composers in Canada than elsewhere, their prominence is nevertheless striking. The fact that these three women were supported by universities located on Canada's West Coast may also bespeak greater openness to hierarchy-breaking personnel decisions the farther west one travels from the seats of power (which, in the context of Canada, is usually considered to be Toronto). Regardless, it remains fascinating to observe the ways Pentland, as well as Coulthard and Archer, dealt with the varied legacies of musical modernism. Of course, grappling with this ambiguous and problematic heritage is hardly a preoccupation exclusive to composers who are women, but it could arguably be claimed that women have a privileged vantage point from which to view it, in light of High Modernism's fraught relationship with the qualities it regards as "feminine."<sup>2</sup> To listen to Pentland's music is to listen to a fruitful but not unambiguous engagement with the various consequences of her involvement with some of the major currents of twentieth-century music.

There are many possible ways to measure Pentland's enduring reputation in the small but well-organized Canadian art music community, but the fact that both the library and the network password of the Canadian Music Centre's Vancouver office are derived from her name seems as good a metric as any. Pentland's career is in many ways emblematic of that of numerous Canadian composers of her generation,

<sup>1</sup> Janet Henshaw Danielson, "Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland," *Circuit, musiques contemporaines* 19/1 (2009): 57–70.

<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the modernist legacy was most famously observed by Susan McClary in "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition," *Cultural Critique* 12 (Spring 1989): 57–81.

a generation that arrived at a first maturity before the Second World War and then a second one in a postwar context. Pentland's career took place almost exclusively within Canada: born in Winnipeg, she worked as a freelance composer in Toronto before finally settling in Vancouver. A productive composer, Pentland composed in most genres (with the possible exception of electronic music) including a foray into the operatic genre with the chamber opera *The Lake* (1952).

Canadian pianist Barbara Pritchard's CD devoted to Pentland's piano music is a useful sampler rather than an exhaustive survey: the seven works featured on this CD are among the thirty-seven Pentland piano scores held at the Canadian Music Centre.<sup>3</sup> Its non-chronological presentation features pieces composed over the course of four decades, spanning the years 1946 to 1985. Pritchard's playing is delicate and graceful in the dreamy resonant passages while sharp and incisive in the many accentuated *marcato* jabs. The former category seems most characteristic of (or at least most memorable in) Pentland's pianistic style, in which widely spaced chords are horizontalized, affording what seem like resonant breathing spaces. Still, this recording allows us to enjoy a wide variety of keyboard textures, from the quartal harmonies and ostinati of *Dirge* (1948), to the cloudy atonality of *Toccata* (1958) and the extended techniques (including plucked and strummed strings) in the *Ephemera* series (1974–78).

Like so many of her contemporaries, Pentland's engagement with the music of her time took the form of an encounter with twelve-tone music. Although she had become acquainted with Schoenberg's technique earlier through her friend the composer John Weinzweig in her Toronto years—Weinzweig is credited with having composed the first Canadian twelve-tone piece, in 1939—a decisive moment came in the summer of 1947 at the MacDowell Colony, an artist's retreat in New Hampshire, where she met former Schoenberg pupil Dika Newlin.<sup>4</sup> Never approaching it dogmatically, Pentland used the technique loosely: "I used it as a kind of governing principle, and I have rarely written works that could be called, in any way, in a strict serial technique."<sup>5</sup> Indeed the works featured on this CD represent a variety of styles, of which twelve-tone texture is only one. The early *From Long Ago* (1946)—conceived as "3 Pieces for Young Pianists," with its modal feel, contrasts with a mature work like the eponymous *Toccata* from 1958. This eight-minute piece was written after a European voyage in 1955 that included an inevitable stopover at the Darmstadt courses, where she became acquainted with the music of Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, and Berio. It is the jagged intervals of Webern, however, that can be heard in this work that, we are told in the liner notes, is based on a twelve-tone row. The work contains a beautifully dreamy *Adagio Tranquillo* (marked "pp senza colore") at nearly the exact middle of the piece that

<sup>3</sup> Nor is this the only recording of Pentland's piano music available. Centrediscs released an LP entitled *Pentland Piano Works*, performed by Robert Rogers (Centrediscs CMC-1985/6-ACM 25, 1985); and none other than Glenn Gould can be heard performing the Pentland work *Ombres* on *Glenn Gould Plays Contemporary Music* (Sony WSK 52677, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Eastman and Timothy J. McGee, *Barbara Pentland* (University of Toronto Press, 1983), 56.

<sup>5</sup> In Eitan Cornfield, director, "Barbara Pentland," Canadian Composers Portrait Series, Toronto, Centrediscs, 2003; cited in Danielson, "Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain," 66.

Pritchard's performance captures beautifully. The suitably dark *Tenebrae* (1976) is another eight-minute work that contains some remarkably varied playing—both dynamically and rhythmically. This piece, like others in this recording, exploits various extended techniques including tapped strings and glissandi inside the piano, as well as the use of the resonant possibilities of silently depressed keys à la Schoenberg's op. 11. *Ephemera*, a collection of five character pieces, makes use of ghostly string harmonics to great effect. The longest piece featured on this recording, the late work *Horizons* (1985) begins with a lyrical arpeggio that almost suggests G minor, followed by impressionistic tremolo chords that lead into a simple white-note melody marked "tranquillo." Pritchard carries the long line here with brio. A recurring two-note descending third motive seems to pervade several of the pieces, sometimes in the high register, sometimes low, sometimes played in harmonics or plucked. In a program note to one of the pieces ("Angelus" from *Ephemera*), Pentland quotes John Donne's famous poem that bids us not ask for whom the bell tolls. Could these descending thirds be the haunting sounds of those tolling bells? My hermeneutic side would certainly like to think so.

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Adam Sherkin, *As At First*. Centredisques CMCCD 18212, 2012.

Trained at the Glenn Gould Conservatory in Toronto and the Royal College of Music in London, Adam Sherkin (b. 1982) is a Canadian composer-pianist who brings a deep knowledge of tradition to his compelling, audience-focused music. In a video on his web page, Sherkin expresses concern that the audience for classical music is dwindling, and hopes that his compositions are "relevant to society today."<sup>1</sup> His compositional style attempts to satisfy the tastes of contemporary listeners and acknowledge the rich influence of music history. As his 2012 debut recording, *As At First*, illustrates, he is also a highly proficient pianist who gives his audience emotive, commanding performances.

*As At First* introduces us to Sherkin's multidimensional compositional voice. The opening work, *German Promises* (2011), responds to the rich world of German musical heritage. As he writes in the liner notes, the five movements offer not a musical reflection of older styles, but rather a "subjective perspective" of "promised truths" and "new realities." His own style, which centers on particular pitches but is not tonal, focuses on gestures that generate phrases from their unfolding and expanding. The first movement, "Expectation (*Erwartung*)," for example, begins with a bright, repeated, circular figuration that subsides into an almost random

<sup>1</sup> <http://adamsherkin.com/>