

Rubbing Stone Ensemble: *The Lethbridge Sessions*

Notations – issuu.com

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by Cecilia Livingston

This new release from Calgary-based Rubbing Stone Ensemble (founded in 2007) celebrates their commissioning of Canadian composers. The CD gathers seven Canadian works from 2006-2011, showcasing the ensemble's versatility.

The collection is sensitively curated: the pieces flow well, with the longer works for larger ensemble in the middle and more intimate pieces introducing and closing the album. Alain Perron's *Cycle 4* opens the CD. The dialogue of colours and timbres is unusual; a real celebration of the tremendous palette of the contemporary saxophone. Artistic Director Jeremy Brown dazzles with his virtuosic playing. The tight ensemble work is clear from the start and after a jagged, even aggressive opening, the more languid passages draw the percussion and saxophone together in novel duet. Percussionist Graeme Tofflemire deserves a special mention—his playing shines throughout the CD.

Several of the pieces involve electronics: David Eagle's *Resound – Soundplay5*, which captures one performance of this work for saxophone and live electronics (including randomly triggered electronic events which give the work new shape each time). The saxophone writing is spectacular, and Brown plays with flair. In Laurie Radford's *Infolding* the larger ensemble is joined by electronics that are successfully integrated as an equal member of the ensemble; the interplay is completely convincing and tantalize the ear as they fold sound in and out of the acoustic and electronic worlds. *Ikos – kun tu'bar ba* by Arlan N. Schultz is the longest work on the CD, beginning with a striking whispered text. Inspired by the chant of the monks of a monastery in Southwest India, Schultz finds strange and beautiful instrumental evocations of chant in a huge range of textures in which the ensemble seems to revel.

Three shorter pieces follow this longer work. Shelley Marwood's *Merge* is radically different from the rest of the album, rooted in a more traditional tonal and melodic language, with a lyrical, even folk-like opening. The percussion writing is full of personality, the contrapuntal interplay of instrumental voices is engaging, and the clear structure evokes the spacious landscapes she describes in her program note. Anthony Tan's *UnRavel* is a showpiece for violinist Donovan Seidle; after a spectacular "unraveling" of the violin's traditional sound into percussive noise, the interweaving of the violin's singing tone and the ondes Martenot is novel and gripping. The album concludes with Nova Pon's *Wayfaring*, a gentle, glowing work for harp and saxophone. Gianetta Baril's harp playing is exquisite, and the pairing of instruments sounds entirely natural and deserves a wider repertoire.

The Lethbridge Sessions is a highly satisfying CD: beautifully paced, eclectic but coherent, with impeccable playing by these Calgary musicians. This is a fine collection of new Canadian chamber music, and also a great resource for those interested in contemporary music for saxophone. Here's to many more six-year anniversary releases!

The Whole Note – thewholenote.com

Editor's Corner – June 4, 2014

by David Olds

The Canadian Music Centre, established ten years before the NACO, has been producing recordings since 1981 through its **Centrediscs** label. The very first offering was an LP of live electronic music created by the Canadian Electronic Ensemble and over the years electronic and electroacoustic music has had a place in the catalogue in varying degrees. More than three decades since that first offering and having just surpassed the 200-release mark, one of the most recent discs incorporates state-of-the-art computer technology in four of its seven compositions. **The Lethbridge Sessions** [<https://cmccanada.org/shop/cd-cmccd-19213/>] features Calgary's **Rubbing Stone Ensemble** in interactive works by David Eagle, Laurie Radford, Arlan N. Schultz and Anthony Tan as well as acoustic works by Alain Perron, Shelley Marwood and Nova Pon.

The intriguing name of the ensemble was inspired by a landmark of Calgary's geography and history – a “beautiful big rock [...] gracefully presiding over the Calgary region for many centuries and known to native people of the region. It was a place for bison to rub their fur coats, creating smoothed stone surfaces that survive to this day.” The collective of nine musicians dedicated to the creation and performance of new music was founded in 2007 and includes among its instrumentation saxophone, flute, clarinet, piano, harp, percussion, violin, cello and soprano. Jeremy Brown's saxophones (soprano, alto, tenor and baritone) are the most pervasive influence, appearing in all but one of the variously orchestrated compositions on offer. In fact it was Brown and composer David Eagle who brought the initial intention to fruition and their stamp remains strong on the group. Eagle's *Resound – Soundplay 5* for saxophone and electronics is one of a series of works designed as “games” in which sound files, melodic and spoken fragments, solo and ensemble movements, extensive live processing and sound spatialization can be combined in different ways.

Considering astronomer Edwin Hubble's discovery that the universe is constantly expanding, contrary to Newton's law of gravity and Einstein's collapsing universe model, but intrigued by the existence of such phenomena as black holes where gravity is so great that everything collapses inward, Radford's *Infolding* proposes “a concept where sound and energy move inwards, converge [...] where intensity is created as events fold inwards wave upon wave...” The work is scored for soprano saxophone, violin, piano, percussion, live signal processing and eight-channel sound. Another work with elevated inspiration, Schultz's *Ikos – kun tu 'bar ba* uses texts created by the composer, meditations on light based on Orthodox liturgy and Tibetan religious philosophy. The extended composition is scored for soprano (recitation of the texts, often buried in the overall textures), tenor saxophone, percussion, harp, piano and processed audio. Tan's *UnRavel*, like Eagle's *Resound*, uses just one instrument and electronic processing, in this instance a virtuosic violin line performed by David Seidle. As in many of Tan's works the computer is used to extend the range and textures of the instrumental line both micro- and macroscopically.

Even the purely acoustic works on the CD tend to expand the sonic palette through unusual combinations of instruments – Perron’s *Cycle 4* using four saxophones (one player), piano and percussion; Nova Pon’s *Wayfaring* for tenor saxophone and harp; and even Shelley Marwood’s *Merge*, which although ostensibly written for the standard “Pierrot” ensemble includes the addition of soprano saxophone giving some unexpected timbres to the mix. All of the composers represented have strong ties to the Prairie Provinces, although a number of them hail from elsewhere and have made Alberta (Eagle and Radford) or Saskatchewan (Perron) their home. Marwood is a native of Alberta but is currently pursuing postgraduate studies at the University of Toronto and Canadian-born Chinese-Malaysian composer Tan currently resides in Germany.

The Lethbridge Sessions is an eclectic collection of intriguing works by composers ranging from emerging to mid-career, all with strong and unique voices. Congratulations are due to both the Rubbing Stone Ensemble and Centrediscs for bringing them to our attention.