

# Preserving Gems Of Canadian Music

By PAUL TUROK

For 25 years, the Canadian Music Centre, with main offices in Toronto and regional headquarters in Montreal, Alberta and Vancouver, has devoted itself to the nurturing, care and preservation of Canadian composers and their work. For the past five years, its quasi-independent, Toronto-based subsidiary, Centrediscs, has been releasing recordings of contemporary Canadian music. Unlike its parent organization, Centrediscs receives no direct financial support from the Canadian government, relying instead on funds raised through corporate sponsorship as well as contributions from other nonprofit cultural institutions to finance its productions. Significant support is also given by some of Canada's most famous performers.

The activities of the contralto Maureen Forrester on behalf of contemporary Canadian music are less familiar to most listeners than her splendid international career; she nonetheless appears on a disk devoted to excerpts from R. Murray Schafer's "RA," (Centrediscs CMC 1283). Schafer, one of Canada's best-known and more controversial composers, created a combination of opera and participatory theater that may or may not be as viable in real life as the liner description suggests. However, he writes beautifully for voices, has other excellent performers on this disk in addition to Miss Forrester, and composes music that gives a ritualistic impression without being inanely repetitious.

The great Canadian tenor Jon Vickers (splendidly accompanied by the redoubtable Richard Weitach of the Metropolitan Opera) sings songs by seven Canadian composers, with exquisite musicianship (Centrediscs CMC 2185). All are conservative stylistically, to the point that one work melds perhaps too easily into the next, but all are pleasantly lyrical.

Henry James's "Washington Square" became the subject of a highly successful 1979 production by the Canadian National Ballet. Michael Conway Baker's well-crafted, theatrical and melodious score, which sounds much like what Menotti might have written for the same scenario, is splendidly played by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by George Crum (Centrediscs WRCL-2069). Although it is an analog recording (the other two Centrediscs discussed are digital), the sound is superb. The Centrediscs are currently only available as LP's.

CBC Enterprises, the entrepreneurial arm of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, also showcases Canadian performing talent. In a sense, it has a more difficult task than Centrediscs, for its products seek to compete with those of the world's major record companies. Thus, the commitment to the highest standards of sound reproduction and quality control evident in its SM5000 series of releases is as much a sound business decision as an artistic one. Few will quibble with splendid discs of Verdi arias, sung by baritone Louis Quilico (SM5043) and arias from French and Italian operas by tenor Ermanno Mauro (SM5046).

Both artists, familiar to American audiences from their Met appearances, are in rare form, and Uri Mayer's accompaniments with the Edmonton Symphony are appropriately involved. (Both productions are also available on cassette.) Given the

popularity of Richard Strauss's tone poems, it is good to report that "Till Eulenspiegel," "Death and Transfiguration" and "Salome's Dance" (CBC SMCD5015, also available on LP and cassette) are gracefully played by the Vancouver Symphony under Kazuyoshi Akiyama (formerly of the American Symphony Orchestra). And they are so clearly recorded one can admire the proficiency of Vancouver's players without suggesting that more exciting versions of these pieces are not available.

Two CBC productions can be unhesitatingly recommended. Vivid performances of overtures and intermezzi from Italian operas by Franco Mannino and his excellent National Arts Centre Orchestra have been superbly recorded (CBC SMCD5021, also available on LP and cassette). In addition to popular works by Rossini (including "William Tell"), Verdi, Bellini and Donizetti, there is a particularly beguiling reading of the intermezzo from Wolf-Ferrari's "I Quattro Rustico."

Perhaps of even greater impor-



John Mahler/Camera Press

Maureen Forrester—a supporter of contemporary Canadian composers

tance is the impressive collaboration of violinist Steven Staryk and pianist John Perry in the complete sonatas for violin and piano by Beethoven (CBC SM5023-5, five LP's, also available on cassette). Canadian-born Staryk's credentials include stints as concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony and of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. He has been performing sonatas with the American pianist John Perry since 1969, during which time these two artists have developed a sensitivity to each other's playing which particularly manifests itself in the rhythmic acuity and restraint with which they approach Beethoven's music. Their clean-lined, crystalline-textured playing is seconded by an equally clear-sounding recording, and their set is highly competitive with the others currently available. It is especially recommended to the many listeners who prefer a lean, somewhat intellectual approach to this familiar music.

Finally, in a lighter vein, Boris Brott leads the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in superbly recorded potpourris from "The Sound of Music," "My Fair Lady," "Fiddler on the Roof," "Funny Girl" and "Annie" (CDC SM5022, also available on cassette and CD). One wishes that all five shows had the benefit of the late Robert Russell Bennett's stylish arrangements, rather than only the first two.

Paul Turok is a critic with a special interest in recorded music.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST!