

Editor's Corner

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You may have read Max Christie's article "John Beckwith Musician" two issues ago (*The WholeNote Volume 28/1*) about the launch of Beckwith's latest book *Music Annals: Research and Critical Writings by a Canada Composer 1973-2014*, and Christie's sequel "Meanwhile back at Chalmers House" in the following issue. The evening of the launch at the Canadian Music Centre

included a live performance by SHHH!! Ensemble and provided my first exposure to this duo from Ottawa: Zac Pulak (percussion) and Edana Higham (piano). Dedicated to performing and commissioning new works, their debut CD *Meanwhile* has recently been released by Analekta (AN 2 9139 analekta.com/en). Comprising works by five mid-career Canadian composers including Monica Pearce (whose *leather* was also included on that composer's portrait disc *Textile Fantasies* reviewed in this column last month), Jocelyn Morlock, Kelly-Marie Murphy, Micheline Roi and John Gordon Armstrong, plus one relative newcomer on the scene, Iranian-Canadian Noora Nakhaie, and the current grand old man of Canadian music, Beckwith himself. All of the works were written for the pair, with the exception of Murphy's *Dr. Blue's Incredible Bone-Shaking Drill Engine* which was Pulak's first commission back in 2016 "fresh out of school and out of my depth." Murphy, who had never written for solo percussion, eagerly took on the project and created a dynamic and almost relentless work for unpitched drums with only a brief respite in metal and bell sounds. This is followed by Roi's *Grieving the Doubts of Angels*, a motoric, minimal and mostly melodic work which ends dramatically with a pounding pulse.

A highlight for me is Nakhaie's *Echoes of the Past*, inspired by *Sister Language*, a moving book by Martha and Christina Baillie. This testament to the triumphs and struggles experienced by a family dealing with profound mental illness and to the bond between siblings is sensitively interpreted by the composer. *Meanwhile* concludes with the title piece, the duo's first commission, a 2018 work for marimba and piano (both inside and out) by Beckwith in which the then 91-year-old shows no signs of compromise in his approach. There are echoes of earlier works – *Keyboard Practice* comes to mind – yet we are left with the impression that the composer is looking forward as much as back. Forward is definitely the direction of SHHH!! Ensemble and we're glad to be along for the ride.



Kelly-Marie Murphy reappears on the next disc, *de mille feux* (a million lights) featuring the Andara Quartet ([leaf music LM262 leaf-music.ca](http://leaf-music.ca)). Murphy's *Dark Energy* was commissioned by the Banff Centre and the CBC as the required work in the 2007 Banff International String Quartet Competition, won that year by Australia's Tinalley String Quartet although the prize for best performance of the Canadian

commission was awarded to the Koryo String Quartet (USA). The Andara Quartet would not be formed until seven years later when the members met at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal. They have subsequently gone on to residencies at the Banff Centre, the Ottawa

Chamberfest and the University of Montreal. The quartet's debut disc opens with Benjamin Britten's all too rarely heard *String Quartet No.1* with its angelic opening high-string chorale over pizzicato cello before transitioning into a caccia-like *Allegro vivo*. The extended *Andante calmo* third movement eventually leads to a playful finale in which the strings seem to be playing tag. This is contrasted with Samuel Barber's gorgeous *Molto Adagio* extracted from his *String Quartet in B Minor Op.11*. Of course we are familiar with this "Adagio for Strings" in its standalone string orchestra and a cappella choral versions, but I must admit to have mixed feelings about having it cherry-picked in the context of a string quartet recording. Generous as the disc's 65-minute duration is, there was ample space available to have included the quartet's outer movements as well (less than ten minutes between them), but that is a minor quibble. Murphy's single-movement work is next up, opening forebodingly, as many of her works do, before changing mood abruptly to a rhythmic and roiling second half featuring abrasive chordal passages and Doppler-like effects. The final work, producer James K. Wright's *String Quartet No.1 "Ellen at Scattergood"* is in four somewhat anachronistic movements. It could have been written a century ago, but is none the worse for that. A pastoral depiction of life at the cottage of a couple of friends, it was commissioned by the husband as a gift for wife Ellen.

This maiden voyage for the Andara Quartet with its warm and convincing performances bodes well for their future, and for chamber music in this country. I also note that the triennial Banff Competition is still going strong 30 years after its inauguration – the first prize winner in 2022 was the Isidore Quartet (USA) and the Canadian Commission Prize went to Quatuor Agate (France). This year's required work was by Dinuk Wijeratne and it's great to realize that all nine of the competing quartets from around the world have taken that new Canadian work into their repertoires. Even more exciting is when a young quartet like the Andara takes on an earlier competition's work and gives it new life as they have done with *Dark Energy*.



Blue and Green Music features two string quartets by American composer **Victoria Bond** performed by the **Cassatt String Quartet** along with the song cycle *From an Antique Land* and the standalone song *Art and Science*, both featuring baritone Michael Kelly with Bradley Moore, piano (**Albany Music TROY1905 albanyrecords.com**). The title work takes its inspiration from a painting of the same name by

Georgia O'Keeffe, in the words of the composer an "abstract study in motion, color and form, with the interplay of those two colors that dance with each other in graceful, sensuous patterns." The four movements endeavour to represent that interplay, and to these ears succeed gracefully and gleefully in the final movement *Dancing Colors*. *Art and Science* takes its text from a letter which Albert Einstein wrote to the editor of a German magazine that the composer says "even though it was written as a letter, the organization of thoughts was startling. There was such logic [...] and such a sense of form that it was as though Einstein had composed a poem..." More traditionally, *From an Antique Land* does use poetry, with *Recuerdo* and *On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven* by Edna St. Vincent Millay bookending