

## Review

### Compte rendu

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Sean Ferguson

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Le quatuor à cordes selon Schafer

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## Review of

**R. Murray Schafer: String Quartets Nos. 1-7 (No. 5, *Rosalind*; No. 6, *Parting Wild Horse's Mane*; No. 7, with soprano obbligato), Quatuor Molinari (Olga Ranzenhofer and Johannes Janssonius, violins; David Quinn, viola; Sylvie Lambert, cello). ATMA Classique, ACD22188/89, p2000, 2 compact discs. (R. Murray Schafer *String Quartets 1-7. Quatuor Molinari*)**

and

**André Prévost: String Quartets Nos. 2-4 (No. 2 *Ad Pacem*), Quatuor Alcan (Brett Molzan and Nathalie Camus, violins; Luc Beauchemin, viola; David Ellis, cello). Chaîne culturelle de Radio-Canada (SRC), RIC 2 9984, p1999, 1 compact disc (*Quatuor Alcan: André Prévost*).**

The string quartet is often considered by composers and music lovers alike to be a kind of musical Mount Olympus where only the gods may dwell. Composers are expected to reserve their most profound thoughts for this genre, and the recording of a complete quartet cycle is seen as an important event. Two Canadian artists with appropriately Olympian statures have recently reached this milestone. Montréal's Molinari Quartet performs R. Murray Schafer's complete quartets on the ATMA Classique label, while the Alcan Quartet performs the string quartets of André Prévost on a disc produced by the Chaîne culturelle de Radio-Canada. Strictly speaking, this latter disc is not actually a complete cycle, since it contains only Prévost's *Second*, *Third*, and *Fourth Quartets*. The notes to the disc make no mention of a *First Quartet*, and neither does Prévost's works list on the web site of the Canadian Music Centre. Even the Schafer disc — which, with its premiere recordings of the *Sixth* and *Seventh Quartets* has surpassed by two the previous winner in the category of "most quartets by Murray Schafer recorded at one time" — threatens to be a complete recording for only a short time. In the liner notes Schafer already refers to a commission for an *Eighth Quartet*, and claims that he would love to write even a "*Ninth*, a *Tenth* or a *Hundredth*."

Although these two composers were born within a year of each other, it is hard to imagine a less similar pair of artists. Schafer grew up in Toronto and later established himself in rural Ontario while Prévost grew up in small-town Québec only to settle later in Montréal. As a young man Schafer spent time in Vienna, while Prévost studied in Paris. Schafer has been openly scornful of the academic environment while Prévost is a professor emeritus at the University of Montréal. Prévost says he is influenced by Beethoven while Schafer says Beethoven's music reminds him of a "Vienna sausage" (Schafer, 1984, p. 83). In listening to these two discs, therefore, it is interesting to see how these differences manifest themselves in the music of each composer.

The mere act of composing for string quartet inevitably links one to the great European tradition. Highly sensitive to this fact, Schafer tries hard to find his own path. This is not done musically so much as it is through the incorporation of theatrical elements and a non-standard exploitation of the concert environment. In the *Second*, *Third* and *Seventh Quartets*, for example, the players variously leave the stage and return, while an offstage soprano and violin bring the *Fourth Quartet* to a close. In the *Sixth Quartet* the music may be accompanied by a Tai Chi master and in the *Seventh* Schafer adds a soprano in the role of a schizophrenic woman. Schafer's quartets are also more unified than we normally expect in a cycle, even in comparison with the late Beethoven quartets. At the end of the *Second Quartet* all the players leave the stage except for the cello, while the *Third Quartet* begins with solo cello and reverses the process. The character of the soprano in the *Fourth Quartet* comes back in the *Seventh*. And most strikingly, the *Sixth Quartet* is made up almost entirely of material from the first five. As well, in a very "Stockhausian" turn, Schafer incorporates elements from his mammoth *Patria* opera cycle into several of the quartets. Of course, the theatrical aspects of these quartets can only be suggested by a sound recording. The *Seventh Quartet* in particular suffers from being heard and not seen. This work is less a string quartet than a mini opera — Schafer's *Erwartung* in the small — and should be heard live to be fully appreciated.

Musically, Schafer's quartets are distinguished less by the revolutionary nature of their ideas than by the quality of their realization. The incorporation of previously composed material in the *Sixth Quartet*, for instance, results in an extremely well composed but somewhat standard working out of the implications of a number of contrasting motivic ideas. The most conventional approach to the genre occurs in the *Fourth Quartet*, with its traditional arch form, galloping repeated rhythms, and its classical approach to thematic development. At approximately eight and a half minutes into the piece we are even treated to a lovely set of ascending and descending sequences. Perhaps the quartet that is most original in its musical conception is the *Second*, which is the only one to be explicitly based on Schafer's work in sonic ecology. The starting point of this piece is the ocean soundscape, especially the recurring pattern of ebb and flow of the waves.

The work can be seen as a utopian soundscape, with the composer playing the role of “acoustic designer.” A great composer can be most reliably identified, however, by his ability to make lesser composers want to stop composing. I must admit that this possibility crossed my mind as I listened to the Molinari Quartet’s performance of Schafer’s *Fifth Quartet*, with its magical, almost perfect equilibrium between kinetic and potential energy. It is a work of beautiful delicacy and lyricism and I wish that I had written it.

If Schafer seems uncomfortable bearing the yoke of tradition, Prévost accepts it with relish. In the liner notes to the CD, he provides the listener with a long list of influences, from Beethoven to Bartók, Prokofiev to Shostakovich and even to Schafer himself. These quartets contain everything they should: a serious mood, the careful working out of motivic ideas, a heightened dramatic sense, and the exploitation of classic string techniques. Prévost’s goal appears to be an expression that is at once profoundly personal and universally relevant — “to write the music that I am, to be true to myself.” He displays complete mastery of the genre and goes to considerable lengths to make his music sound sophisticated and international. Indeed, on listening to this disc blindly one would be hard-pressed to correctly identify the nationality of the composer.

Prévost’s quartets are generally lyrical and somber, with a symphonic breadth. The musical texture is harmonically rather than contrapuntally conceived. An emphasis is never placed on virtuosity for its own sake, although there are occasional flashes of brilliance. An exception is the final movement of the *Fourth Quartet*, which is a scurrying “perpetual motion” piece that recalls the third and fifth movements of Berg’s *Lyric Suite*. Interestingly, in the final chords of the *Fourth Quartet* Prévost is able to create a sense of harmonic resolution — despite the non-tonal harmonic context — by using expanding contrary motion in the outer voices. This technique is similar to that used by Bartók at the end of his *Fifth Quartet*. Prévost’s *Third Quartet* is dedicated to the victims of the massacre at the École polytechnique in 1989. Although this event occurred after the piece was already composed, the dedication is appropriate due to the solemn spirit of the music. The drama in this work is not theatrical, but is poignant, restrained and dignified.

Turning from the works to the recordings, it should first of all be mentioned that the performances on these discs are evidence of the current vitality of the string quartet milieu in Quebec, which includes established performers such as these two ensembles as well as younger groups such as the Bozzini Quartet. The Alcan Quartet has a full, rich sound and excellent blend which is well suited to the sophisticated harmonies of Prévost’s music. In the *Third Quartet* in particular, the performers create an appropriately dark and tragic atmosphere. The Alcan Quartet does not specialize in contemporary music exclusively. In fact, at the time of writing they are in the middle of a series of concerts of the complete cycle of Beethoven quartets. Their background in this earlier repertoire helps them find the link that exists between Prévost’s music and its precedents. On the Schafer disc,

the performances of the Molinari Quartet are absolutely superb and compare favorably with the well-known recordings by the Orford Quartet. I especially appreciate the energy and spontaneity of the performances. There is none of the too-perfect artificiality that can occur in this age of the digital recording studio. Witness for example their unrestrained interpretation of the second movement of the *Third Quartet*, as well as the fragile transparent texture they achieve in their performance of the *Fifth Quartet*. The sound of the Molinari recordings is also outstanding; producer Johanne Goyette should be particularly commended for her efforts in simulating the displacement of the performers in Schafer's *Seventh Quartet*. With his highly attuned awareness of the sonic environment, the presence of the composer at the recording sessions can only have helped. Finally, the work of soprano Marie-Danielle Parent should also be noted. Her pure voice is especially well suited to the ethereal off-stage singing of the *Fourth Quartet*.

I have two small criticisms of the Schafer recording, however. The first is that in fitting all seven quartets onto two discs, the order of the quartets is not maintained. This means that, for instance, if one wishes to hear the connection between the cello solos at the end of the *Second Quartet* and the beginning of the *Third*, one must change discs. Considering the careful links between the works, this is a disappointment. The other criticism has to do with the production values. I was surprised to hear a great deal of digital noise in the recording, especially starting approximately 10 minutes into the *Second Quartet*. The pops and clicks at this point continue for over a minute and are particularly annoying when listening on headphones. This distortion occurs on both a pre-release copy of the discs I had and on the final released version. It is impossible to know at what point in the production process these errors were introduced, but needless to say they are unacceptable and are an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise exemplary recording.

Let there be no mistake about it, however. Both of these discs are significant achievements and they should be included in any serious collection of recordings of contemporary music. They are the result of particularly fruitful collaborations between two of Canada's finest ensembles and two of her most accomplished master composers. Both ATMA Classique and the Chaîne culturelle de Radio-Canada are to be highly commended for their efforts in bringing these important projects to realization.

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## References

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**Sean Ferguson**