

RECORDINGS:

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Other Minds Ensemble, et al.

"EGO SCRIPTOR CANTILENAE: THE MUSIC OF EZRA POUND," *Rubin, violin; The Other Minds Ensemble, The Arch Ensemble, Western Opera Theater, ASKO-ensemble, Villon Music Theatre, Conductus Ensemble, Hughes. Other Minds OM 1005-2 CD*

Composer/conductor/bassoonist Robert Hughes has made the music of poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) his personal crusade, and the present compilation disc is the culmination of his 30-year fascination. Pound, who, by his own description, could not carry a tune, was so obsessed by the relationship between words and music that he seems to have started composing out of literary necessity. He believed that the essence of a poem in a foreign language could be captured better by setting it to music than by translating it. This notion is the impetus that guided the composition of his two operas, *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*, based on French medieval poetry by François Villon and Guido Cavalcanti, respectively, and written specifically for radio broadcast.

Pound's music for the operas (selections from both are presented here) is spare, raw, chant-inspired, and often rhythmically complex. Striving to be as true to the speech rhythms of the poems as possible, Pound enlisted the aid of enfant terrible composer George Antheil to help him devise the metrics, which resulted in successive time signatures of, for example, 1/4, 13/32, 7/16, 3/8, etc. Impenetrable notation like that is probably the worst way to get the declamations to sound natural, but the performers--culled from scattered Pound performances and recordings between 1972 and 2001--all do a very impressive job of communicating Pound's musical speech, equal parts medieval and modernist. Particularly hard to forget is "Héaulmiere's Aria" from *Le Testament*, in which an aging whore laments the loss of her beauty. The wailing and growling of contralto Anna Myatt is not terribly pretty, but the emotional authenticity of the woman's timeless agony resounds unmistakably through the centuries.

The disc also contains several tracks of music for solo violin, industriously rendered by Nathan Rubin, whose slightly rough-hewn tone would probably have pleased the poet-composer trying to re-define music in his own image. The violin pieces actually stand on their own quite well, and *Al poco giorno* could conceivably enter the repertoire.

Although Pound's music cannot entirely support the polemical weight which comes attached to it, it is fresh and fascinating. This release is courtesy of the San Francisco-based Other Minds, whose mission is to champion the new and unusual, and whose record label has also produced intriguing discs of music by Nancarrow, Antheil and Stravinsky. No one, probably not even Hughes, is claiming that Pound belongs in the pantheon of great composers, but this idiosyncratic body of work proves to be full of rare pleasures and well worth hearing.

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