



The Cremation of Sam McGee

Christine Hanson

reviewed by Ron Chalmers

Robert Service's melodramatic work, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, must be one of Canada's best-known poems, especially in the West where its gold-rush setting and frozen imagery ring almost true. We learned its internal rhymes in school, and loved the heroic absurdity of its logically entailed train of events.

It's quite a treat to hear this epic again, not in the plodding singsong of our childhood recitation but as a deadly serious narrative that Michael Marra speaks in an earthy Scots brogue.

And that's not even the best part.

Edmonton-born cellist Christine Hanson has composed a *Cremation of Sam McGee* suite, with six movements interspersed among the spoken words. Hanson's cello evokes the beautifully bleak setting of Service's poem, and the effect is

enriched by the ornamentation and accompaniment of a diverse ensemble including trombone, guitar, mandolin, violins, bass, piano, accordion, and percussion. The subtle accents of trombone and percussion are especially effective.

The imagery of snow and ice, hope and struggle is unmistakable, especially as simultaneous backdrop to the voice. But Hanson has composed much more than just a soundtrack to accompany a short poem. As the suite progresses, the score is liberated from the original inspiration and finds its own way—reflective, meandering, playful, and satisfying. Hanson studied jazz performance at Grant MacEwan College, classical music at the University of Alberta, and has worked with folk musicians in Scotland, where she now lives. All those influences are apparent.

The poem is delightful to hear once or twice. But the music has more enduring appeal. Happily, after 39 minutes of words and music, the CD then repeats 31 minutes of just the instrumentation. Sam McGee was an effective inspiration to this album, and an amusing introduction, but the tonally adventurous, totally listenable music alone is a splendid achievement by this young composer/musician.

Christine Hanson will perform *The Cremation of Sam McGee* with her original cast, on a western Canadian tour in 2007. The CD is available through www.christinehanson.com. ✨

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