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Brenda Dalen

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Article abstract

In this interview, conducted on 18 August 1994, Violet Balestreri Archer revisits her past, recreating the experiences of her youth from the earliest days of her childhood in Como and Montreal to her graduation from Yale University in 1949 and sharing highly personal memories of her family, teachers, and friends. She recalls her first visit to Italy, her school years, her piano lessons, her early attempts at composition, her participation in the Montreal Women's Symphony, and her compositional studies with Douglas Clarke at McGill University, Béla Bartók in New York, and Paul Hindemith at Yale University. In listening to her story, we discover "who" she is and "how" she succeeded in establishing her compositional voice and in creating a space or "room" for herself in a profession traditionally dominated by men.

THE COMPOSER'S VOICE: "WHAT WOMEN CAN DO"

Brenda Dalen

During the week-long celebration marking her eightieth birthday (24 April 1993), Violet Archer gave an interview to the CBC radio program "Edmonton AM," which closed with the following anecdote:

> I had a neighbour a long time ago, who lived just diagonally across from me, and from time to time, she would drop in, and one day she said to me, "What do you do?" So I explained to her that I teach at the university. I help students who want to become musicians, and hopefully—there are those who don't want to become musicians—but hopefully I can still help them to like music. And I myself am a composer and I write music, but to earn my living, I am a teacher of music. And you know, at the end of all that, she leaned forward and looked at me like that and said, "But what do you do?"[1]

As she related this incident, Miss Archer chuckled quietly to herself and, upon finishing, let out an irrepressible giggle revealing her good-humored exasperation with her neighbour's utter inability to grasp what could hardly have been a more straightforward account of her professional activities. This was certainly not the first time that she had entertained such a question nor that her response had been found lacking. Society's frequent failure to understand the creative impulse is hardly an uncommon complaint, but the challenges faced by a woman of her generation seeking space for herself in a profession that was entirely male-dominated must at times have seemed formidable, even insurmountable. More than once she must have been called upon to justify her unlikely personal and professional choices. She says very little, however, about any bewilderment, resistance, opposition, or discrimination that she may have encountered, particularly in the early stages of her career, preferring to focus on more positive matters.

Miss Archer's perspective in 1993 is clearly that of a composer who has long since arrived and whose identity is secure. Yet, even when the original conversation took place, she was already well on her way to attaining a degree of financial independence and to creating a space or "room" for herself, conditions deemed by Virginia Woolf as fundamental to women achieving full participation in cultural, political, and economic life. Unfortunately, as Woolf so elo-

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1 Paula Simons, interview with Violet Archer, CBC Radio, Edmonton, April 1993. I am grateful to Jenny Nelson and Eitan Cornfield for making a tape of the interview available and to the CBC for permission to quote excerpts.

quently articulates in her seminal essay *A Room of One's Own,* the prevailing attitude of society towards women who aspired to become writers, artists, scholars, and composers remained as appallingly unenlightened and as devastating in its impact in the 1920s as it had throughout the nineteenth century.

> Let us suppose that a father from the highest motives did not wish his daughter to leave home and become writer, painter or scholar. "See what Mr Oscar Browning says," he would say; and there was not only Mr Oscar Browning; there was the *Saturday Review;* there was Mr Greg—the "essentials of a woman's being," said Mr Greg emphatically, "are that *they are supported by, and they minister to, men*"—there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually. Even if her father did not read out loud these opinions, any girl could read them for herself; and the reading, even in the nineteenth century, must have lowered her vitality, and told profoundly upon her work. There would always have been that assertion—you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that—to protest against, to overcome. Probably for a novelist this germ is no longer of much effect; for there have been women novelists of merit. But for painters it must still have some sting in it; and for musicians, I imagine, is even now active and poisonous in the extreme. The woman composer stands where the actress stood in the time of Shakespeare. Nick Greene, I thought, remembering the story I had made about Shakespeare's sister, said that a woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing. Johnson repeated the phrase two hundred years later of women preaching. And here, I said, opening a book about music, we have the very words used again in this year of grace, 1928, of women who try to write music. "Of M^lle^ Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr Johnson's dictum concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music. 'Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.'"[2]

There is no need to ask "what" Violet Archer has done—indeed, still does. Her accomplishments speak for themselves and are a source of great pride to the Canadian musical establishment. The far more interesting and powerful question is "how?" How did she manage so skillfully and successfully to navigate an unknown course through previously uncharted territory? She embarked upon her remarkable journey, twice marginalized—as a woman and as an Italian immigrant living in Montreal—in a country, which by comparison with the land of her forbears possessed no longstanding written musical tradition, in a time when there was no "room" in Western music for women composers. Violet Archer had no authentic role models. Her passage through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood was marked by two world wars and a global economic depression, each of which affected her profoundly. Moreover, musical language itself seemed constantly to be undergoing radical change; the more acerbic critics of the early twentieth century pronounced it to be "under siege." Yet, in retrospect the very forces that caused so much

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2 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* ed. Morag Schiach (1929; reprint, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69–71. The quotation concerning M^lle^ Germaine is taken from Cecil Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1924), 246.

disruption and discontinuity in her life, particularly in her earliest years, may ultimately have enabled her to reach her destination.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Miss Archer on 18 August 1994 in the house in which she has lived for over thirty years. We sat in the living-room—the physical space in which she composes—a space dominated by her piano and enlivened by the antics of Sonatina and Fughetta, her mischievous feline companions. She told her story, perched on the edge of the sofa, surrounded by the memorabilia of countless professional achievements as well as by numerous photographs and keepsakes from family and friends, in whom she takes great delight. At eighty-two, she is unusually spry, her enormous vitality and unflagging creative energy apparently undiminished by the vicissitudes of advancing age. She maintains a gruelling schedule, composing prolifically, teaching (she accepts five private composition students every year), tending to her voluminous correspondence (a task that occupies her two afternoons per week) attending concerts, giving lectures, and generally promoting the cause of contemporary music to which she remains deeply committed. She is currently working on a composition for strings and three woodwind instruments (flute, oboe, and clarinet), commissioned for performance in South Africa in April, a set of pieces for solo oboe, and a concerto for classical accordion. This autumn she plans to attend the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Faculty of Music at McGill University and to participate in a conference at Yale University commemorating the centenary of the birth of Paul Hindemith.

The words with which Miss Archer revisited her past and recreated the experiences of her youth have been rendered here as faithfully as possible in their original chronology, but no written transcript can ever adequately replace speech.[3] The manner in which something is said often signifies as much as what is being said, and the tone of voice, subtle inflections in pitch and dynamic level, fluctuations in the rate of delivery, idiosyncracies of oral punctuation, changing facial expressions, and accompanying gestures are not easily transferred to the printed page. Nevertheless, "what" she says provides valuable insight into her formative years.

Violet Balestreri Archer was born Violetta Teresa Balestreri on 24 April 1913 in Montreal to Italian immigrants, who had arrived in Canada the previous year. Her parents came from villages within walking distance, in the vicinity of Lake Como. Her mother Beatrice (1882–1963) lived with her parents Ettore and Carolina Azzi, four brothers and two sisters in Romprezzagno; Ettore Azzi was a tailor. The family later moved to Como. Her father Cesare (1878–1958), the son of Giovanni and Teresa Balestreri, grew up with two brothers and one sister in San Giovanni in Croce; Giovanni Balestreri had served as a soldier in the king's army in the newly independent Italy. Miss Archer's parents had rather limited educational opportunities. Her mother attended a convent school. Her father's formal schooling ended abruptly when he was ten years old and in the fifth grade; he and a "school chum" were caught "playing very naughty pranks on the teacher." A strict disciplinarian by virtue of his military training,

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3 In the transcript, ellipses are used to represent verbal pauses rather than textual omissions.

Giovanni Balestreri refused to tolerate his son's unruly behavior and ordered his immediate removal from school, leaving him thereafter to "pick up all his learning almost on his own." Cesare Balestreri was eventually apprenticed to a pastry chef in Como, where presumably he met his future wife. Upon completing the apprenticeship, he worked as a chef in various restaurants as well as on board ships, travelling as far afield as South America.

Considering their conservative upbringing and the times in which they lived, Miss Archer's parents were in some respects remarkably free-thinking. Roman Catholic by birth, they questioned the absolute authority of the church, particularly in matters of censorship, for both were voracious readers.

> They were born Roman Catholics, but they were very ... I don't know how to put it. They were right-living people, but they questioned a lot about their religion, in as much as it controlled so much what they should read and should not read, and they liked to read all the books, and so many books at the time—it's a long time ago—see my father was born four years after Schoenberg, and my mother, four years after him ... after my father. And they both lived to be ... my father lived to be eighty, and my mother lived to be eighty-one. They were avid readers; even as children, they loved to read. And there were books that were forbidden, you know. It's not like now. So many books are not now censored. It's very different from what it was at that time.

Although neither had had any formal musical training, Miss Archer's parents also shared a passion for music and—in the Italian tradition—for opera, in particular. Her mother often hummed operatic tunes as she did her housework.

> It's absolutely true that in Italy, when people go to the opera, then they go home and they know ... they sing all these arias. My mother knew all these too. She would hum them as she was working. I remember hearing her, singing some of the arias out of Verdi and Puccini. Whenever I go to the opera and I hear one of those old operas—by Verdi, for example—I say to myself, "Gosh, my mother used to sing that."

Miss Archer characterizes her father as "crazy about opera. He saw all the operas. He knew the operas as well as Olin Downes, I can say. He could identify the plot of any opera we listened to." Listening to the live broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera on Saturday afternoons became a Balestreri family ritual in Montreal: "As soon as the radio came out, we got a radio, and every Saturday afternoon, at the time when the opera would be on, we listened. That was it. You listened to the opera. That's it." In the CBC interview cited above, Miss Archer shared her father's personal recollections of Giuseppe Verdi.

> My father worked at a restaurant called Ristorante della Scala, which means "Restaurant of La Scala," and after the opera production in the evening, all the artists would go and have their big meal, you know, and so he got to see all these wonderful artists, including people like Caruso, Galli-Curci, Chaliapin, who was a deep basso. He used to see Verdi—you know, the composer—taking an afternoon walk all dressed [up] with a tall hat, a nice warm white scarf around his neck, with his cane and looking, you know, very formal. And then he remembers about Verdi's funeral

> in 1901. It was absolutely packed. The streets were packed with people, who came to pay their respects to him, and it was a rainy day, and there were all these black umbrellas over this tight crowd of people. They were just packed tight.[4]

When I spoke with her last summer, Miss Archer interrupted the retelling of this anecdote to find a print showing Verdi at the height of his powers and in the formal dress, complete with white scarf and top hat, that her father had remembered. This print, together with one of Toscanini, hung on the living-room wall of her childhood home in Montreal. The family print of Toscanini is stored in her basement. The print of Verdi had disappeared, however, and she was extremely pleased to have found in a neighbourhood shop another to replace it. It obviously represents an important link to her childhood, to her family, and to the rich musical tradition that is her heritage.

Violet Archer. This is exactly the same as what we had in our living room on the wall. There was Verdi and Toscanini. And the Toscanini is down in the basement.
Brenda Dalen. You still have it.
V.A. I still have it. *This* I found in that store on [Whyte Avenue]. This is *exactly* the same, and that is how he looked.
B.D. That is how your father remembered him.
V.A. That's how he remembered him, yeah. And, at Verdi's funeral—in 1901, I think it was—there were absolute mobs. He was a national hero. He was very much a supporter of the patriots, the *Risorgimento.* His opera *Nabucco,* which is the shortened version of "Nebuchadnezzar" ... when he wrote that, he was comparing the life of the Israelites to the life of the Italians, who were being ruled by Austria. The pope supported that because, politically, that's the way it was. Italy was all broken up into little communities—provinces. Even now the provinces are so small. I think you could put all of Italy into Alberta.

Cesare Balestreri's decision to emigrate to Canada was inspired by favourable reports from Italian friends in the same line of work, who had recently moved to Montreal. The prospect of establishing a more prosperous life in a new country appealed to his adventurous spirit. In taking this decision, he duly consulted his wife, even though she would never have openly disagreed with the head of the household.

> Well, the way it worked is [that] my father had friends from the town where he was born (San Giovanni in Croce or St. John on the Cross), who were in the same type of work and who decided, as an adventure, to go to Canada. They settled in Montreal and they thought it was a good life, you know—apart from the winters, of course—but they wrote to our father. One of them, whose name I remember—the surname was Zigliani—told him, "Why don't you come on over here and see what it's like. It's good here for our kind of work." So my father, who enjoyed travel so much, having travelled—being on board ship in the kitchen—well, by then he was married, and so he talked it over with my mother. The way it was, of course, it's not like now

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4CBC interview, April 1993.

> that people just ... I don't know. I mean, as I remember my parents, what my father decided—that was it. So my mother said, "Yes, sure ... go."

Mr. and Mrs. Balestreri departed for Montreal in 1912, leaving their two young sons, four-year-old Fernando Giordano (Fernand) and five-year-old Bruno Giovanni (John), in Italy with their maternal grandmother. The intention was that Mrs. Balestreri would return to Italy to fetch the boys as soon as she and her husband were comfortably settled and had determined that Canada was to their liking. Mr. Balestreri obtained steady employment almost immediately, and Mrs. Balestreri was to have returned to Italy at the end of the first year, but Violet's birth in April 1913 necessitated postponing the trip until the following summer. In July 1914, at the age of fourteen months, she accompanied her mother to Italy, where they were forced to remain for the next five years.

V.A. My mother and I [went back] to get the two boys, my two brothers, who, of course, didn't know what I would look like. And, of course, they had been spoiled beyond anything, you know, by my grandparents and their uncles. They had all those uncles there, my mother's brothers. Four of them. And, anyway, we got there in July. We travelled in July. By about mid-August—I don't at this point recall the exact date that World War I started—anyway, the war broke out, and we couldn't get out.
B.D. You were trapped in Italy.
V.A. We were trapped there. So we were there for five years.
B.D. You and your mother and the two boys.
V.A. And the two boys, yeah.

Although she was very young, Miss Archer still vividly recalls many of her experiences in Italy. She became well acquainted with her extended family on her mother's side, but travel restrictions made contact with her father's family near Cremona impossible. She, her mother, and brothers lived with the wife and children of one of her mother's brothers, all of whom were away at war. Life was terribly difficult: economic conditions were desperate, food was scarce, and daily survival was uncertain. Mr. Balestreri sent money regularly from Montreal, but the complete unreliability of the mail left his wife in an almost constant state of anxiety about her financial position and the welfare of her children.

B.D. Do you remember that time?
V.A. I remember something about it. Yes, I do. See the war finished in November 1918, and finally we got our passage in the summer, July 191[9] on a warship.
B.D. So, when the war ended, you were six years old. Just over six.
V.A. I remember something about it.
B.D. What do you remember about living in Italy?
V.A. What I remember about it was that I was often ... my stomach was often upset, because the food was so scarce, and there was so little of everything, like milk and bread, for example. Well, bread ... even bread was scarce. There was meat; well, they ended up by selling horsemeat. Of course, my mother

didn't want to eat that. I wouldn't have wanted to myself. I would say, I wouldn't want to eat horsemeat. And eggs, you know, all the good stuff, that was [scarce]. We ate a lot of rice, boiled rice—what they call *risotto*—but there were no chickens to have chicken broth, so they put in cubes, you know. Maggi, it's called—like Oxo—but that wasn't very nourishing. So that was what rice ... *risotto* was made with. [We had] pasta, of course.

B.D. It must have been a very difficult time for your mother.

V.A. It was very difficult. My father was sending her money regularly for us to live on. But of course, the mail was so upside down, and it took so long all through the war. The mail was in terrible shape, so everything would be late, and I can remember my mother just wringing her hands and saying, "What am I going to do?" I remember that.

B.D. Did you live with grandparents then, you and your mother and your brothers?

V.A. We lived with some cousins of ours. One of my mother's brothers ... they were all at war, of course, my mother's brothers. My father wasn't in the war, because he didn't get the "okay" healthwise, so he was stuck over there.

B.D. Do you remember some of the members of your extended family?

V.A. On my mother's side, I do.

B.D. You do. That's really remarkable.

V.A. Yes, but I remember; yes, I remember them. And of course, we were in Como, and travel to anywhere was just ...

B.D. Impossible.

V.A. Impossible. My father's parents lived near Cremona. You see, this town of my father's is very close to Cremona. And of course, his two brothers were in the army.

Miss Archer's first language was Italian. She was taught to read and write when she was only four and one half years old by a close family friend (the sister of her mother's brother's wife), who was a teacher and whom she addressed as "zia Aurelia."

V.A. Of course she wouldn't let me write with my left hand. See, I was left-handed, and over there you see, I don't know about now, but then you learned to write with a pen right away. You didn't use a pencil, and you had to hold it in a certain way to do copy-book writing. And in the notebooks, the lines were slanted. There were lines like *this* [horizontzal] and then slanted like *this* [to the right], so that you were writing like *this.*

B.D. So that you had to write absolutely to match those lines.

V.A. *Absolutely* like that. But I wanted to write with my left hand, and she wouldn't let me. So to this day, my handwriting is funny, I'd say.

B.D. You did continue to write with your right hand.

V.A. Oh yes. But anyway I could read and write, and by the time I was six, I was reading in the school books of my two brothers.

B.D. Your brothers had started school.

V.A. They went to school, oh yeah, when they were six—each one was six—they went to school.

B.D. But you didn't go to school in Italy.
V.A. No, because I wasn't old enough. And then, of course, when we came back, when I was six ... that's when we came back. If I'd stayed there, I would have gone to school that fall, but I went to school in Montreal right away, that summer after we got here. We came in July, and I went to school in September. I read a lot of books, even when I was that little. I wanted to read the books of my brothers, who were going to school. I remember, there was a geography book. I don't remember if it belonged to the younger of my two brothers or the older one, and I looked at the pictures and read what was underneath them, and I still know by heart what was under some of those pictures. It's silly. Isn't that ridiculous?

One of Miss Archer's most prized possessions is a book about natural history (*Storia Naturale*), still in mint condition, which she received from her uncle Carlo Azzi when she was six years old.

Miss Archer spent much of her childhood alone. She was already nine years old when her younger sister Carolina (Carolyn) was born. Her two older brothers had each other for company and left her to entertain herself. She remembers sitting alone for hours out on the balcony of the apartment in Como, day-dreaming and inventing little stories and tunes.

V.A. What I remember is that the building where we lived ... each apartment had a little balcony. And I would spend hours sitting down on that balcony and I made up my own stories, and you know, my own songs, just sort of rambling on, you know, and that building was like ... this is the building I'm in and on that side, there was the street. Diagonally across from us was the cathedral of Como, and it had statues right along ... all the way up this way on one side of the great big doors and on that side, and I was afraid of those things.
B.D. Well, they're pretty frightening-looking, aren't they? And big, too, when you're little.
V.A. And big. And big. Nevertheless, I seemed to want to sit on that balcony. Of course, my brothers were already ... one was six years older than me and the other one was five, and they were together, you know, they had each other's company, but I was stuck by myself ... and they just chummed together. They went together. Anyway, I would make up ... make up ... like sort of singing ... I don't know what I was singing. I was just making up some kind of a tune about what I *saw* there and I would sit there for a long time on the balcony. My mother would put me there, and I was perfectly happy to be on that balcony. And I would dream up all kinds of little fantasies.
B.D. You had two brothers, and also ... did you have a sister?
V.A. Yes.
B.D. A younger sister.
V.A. A younger sister. She was born when I was nine years old. I had just had my ninth birthday, and she was born in May, at the beginning of May.
B.D. So she too was really almost too young for you to have as a companion.

V.A. Yes. So I was pretty much on my own. Though, when she grew to be about fourteen ... she was so much with adults, you see. By the time she was fourteen, I was twenty-three.

The four Balestreri children later grew very close. Miss Archer is justifiably proud of the accomplishments of her three siblings. Her sister Carolyn (1922–75) earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Sir George Williams University. Fluent in French, Italian, and Spanish, she was a valued employee in the personnel office of the League of Nations in Montreal. After the Second World War she was transferred to Geneva and travelled throughout Europe, working as a simultaneous translator until her marriage to John Osborne. Her brothers Fernand (1908–92) and John (b. 1907) went into banking; both were well placed with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. Fernand managed a branch in Cowansville in the Eastern Townships. John was involved in foreign trade and was even sent overseas to open a branch in Milan, which he ran for one year. The only member of her immediate family still living, he is, at eighty-eight, an avid concert-goer, bridge-player, and volunteer.

Miss Archer cannot remember a time when she did not love music. Her earliest musical memories date from the years spent in Italy. She responded to music and to the timbres of particular instruments as a very young child. Her mother took her to the opera when she was only two years old, and predictably she was "sleepy and fidgety and really, you know, very naughty."

V.A. Well, the war broke out, and for a short time we lived in a hotel not far from where we would have been living later. We had a room in a hotel, so there was a bed for the two boys, and I slept with my mother. At least, I don't remember that, but I was, you know, very small then—about two years old. But there was a piano downstairs in the dining room, and whenever the daughter of the landlady—the lady who ran the hotel had a daughter who played the piano—it was something! It just mesmerized me—the sound of the piano. I considered the sound of the violin ... if I heard a violin, I would burst into tears. It would make me cry.
B.D. So music had an effect on you right from the beginning.
V.A. Yes it did. Then, of course, we moved into this apartment in the same building as these three cousins of mine were living.
B.D. Did you ever go to the opera in Italy?
V.A. Yes, my mother took me to the opera, when I was quite small, and I can remember that I would become very restless and start running down the aisle where we were sitting, and she would come and pick me up and plant me on her lap.
B.D. Did she take you more than once?
V.A. No, I didn't go very often. I was too small.

No one in the family played a musical instrument, with the exception of one uncle (by marriage), who "played the tuba in the band of the Garibaldini, they called it. Garabaldi's band, you know." When Miss Archer was five years old, however, one of her cousins began taking piano lessons, an opportunity that she greatly envied.

> Well, I remember very vividly that when I was ... I think I must have been five years old ... one of the cousins, who lived in the next apartment (we lived in the same building) and who was one year older than me—I say "was," but she's still living, although she's not in good shape at all—started to take piano lessons at her aunt's home, the same aunt that taught me to read and write. They had a piano, so she started to take piano lessons, and I was absolutely mesmerized by the sound of a piano. Even as an infant, you know, if I heard the sound of a piano, it was as though it cast a spell over me. And of course, I was insanely jealous that my cousin was having the piano and taking lessons.

The war ended in November 1918, and Mrs. Balestreri and her children finally obtained passage to Montreal on a warship in July 1919. Miss Archer was uprooted from the only home and family she had ever known to be returned to the country of her birth, which was completely foreign to her, and to be reunited with the father whom she was meeting essentially for the first time. This experience sometimes proved confusing and lonely. Although there was regular correspondence with family members in Italy, she felt herself cut off from them, and especially from the cousin who played the piano.

V.A. I just went along, and ... I couldn't take it all in. I didn't take in everything that was happening, until *finally* we got here—I mean over there, in Montreal. I was so lonely for the cousin who played the piano. In fact, she went to the Milan Conservatory and got her artist's diploma in piano. She wanted to concertize. That's what she wanted to do, and she did do some of it, but unfortunately she had an accident to one hand, to one wrist, and it never was going to get better. Her name was Gisella, and she was gifted as a poet. She wrote the most fantastic poetry even at a very young age. She didn't want to be a teacher, so she trained to be an office girl, you know? Work in an office. And then, on the side, she would write. I have two books of her poems. I've chosen poems out of both books, but the one which I have set to music was sung here. It's called "Caleidoscopio," because the poems are so colorful, you know. And it's very, very beautiful poetry. [The piece] was recorded in Toronto, so I sent a recording to my cousin.
B.D. She must have been very touched.
V.A. Oh yes, she was pleased that I sent it to her.
B.D. When you returned to Montreal, you were meeting your father for the first time.
V.A. Yes, I was, and he seemed like a stranger to me, you know. It took awhile to understand that we weren't going back over there. We were staying right here. That's when I became sort of restless and lonely, etc.

Miss Archer did have an aunt (her mother's sister Adelaide) living in Montreal, who—much to the horror of the Azzi family—had immigrated to Canada shortly after the Balestreris to marry a fellow with whom she had been corresponding: "And, that's all she knew of him. The letters. Can you imagine? Of course, her parents—my grandfather and grandmother—they were horrified. They were all horrified."

Although they became acquainted with other Italian families, the Balestreris never lived in the Italian section of Montreal. Initially they settled near the Grand Trunk railway station, later moving to the center of the city to be closer to the Italian restaurant at which Mr. Balestreri was employed. Miss Archer remembers her father as an excellent chef and regrets not having inherited his culinary talent: "I'm ashamed of myself. I'm just no darn good. My *sister* became a good cook." Her mother generally did the family cooking, but her father always prepared dinner on his day off: "And he would use every pot in the house. I know, because I had to clean them. I complained to my mother, but of course, she never said anything to him." There was a strict code of behavior at the Balestreri table, quietly but powerfully enforced by the father: "There was no fooling [around] at meals at the table. I remember being sent to my room without dessert, because I would giggle and start being silly, you know." Cesare Balestreri had rather conservative notions about what constituted "proper" behaviour for young girls: roller skating and bicycling were strictly forbidden.

Miss Archer started school at the age of six in September 1919, shortly after returning to Montreal. She was soon fluent in both English and French. For the first two years, she attended a neigbourhood school for immigrant children operated by the Presbyterian church to which her family belonged. The language of instruction was English. Since she already knew how to read and write, her principal task was learning to do so in the new language. She enjoyed school and was, in her own modest estimation, a good student: "Yeah, I was alright. I did pretty well." After two years, she was enrolled in a public school, where her knowledge of Italian enabled her to learn French quickly. Her Italian background also made it easy for her to learn Latin, one of her favourite subjects in high school. Miss Archer has fond memories of her teachers. Her tenth-grade classroom teacher, who also taught her European History, made a particularly lasting impression: "I learned how to study from her. She showed us how we could pick out what we needed to remember, underline it, and copy it, so that you would know [what was important]—so I learned from her how to study." Throughout high school Miss Archer remained "a fairly disciplined" student, who "liked to talk a little bit." She thoroughly enjoyed participating in the high-school French club.

> At Montreal High School for Girls, we had a French club. The boys were not with us. They were on the opposite side of the building. It was joined by an overpass: the girls in this one, the boys in that one. They had their French club, and we had our French club, and at the end of the ... I think it was Grade 10, we each put on a play, and it was open to the public. I remember we did Molière plays. I remember I played in one of those things, a screamingly funny thing. It was called *Les deux sourds,* which means "the two deaf people"—"two deaf men"—you know, and of course, they would always understand everything all mixed up, you know, because they couldn't hear properly, and it turned out ... it was so funny!

Miss Archer developed many close friendships in school. She still regularly telephones the sister of a former school friend, who died last year, but with whom she had always remained in touch: "She was my school pal. Her family

and ours were great friends, and we kept it up right up until ... I still call her sister, and we talk."

Naturally, Miss Archer loved her school music classes, in which the students sang part songs and received training in Kodály. In January 1921, three months before her ninth birthday, her long-cherished dream of learning to play the piano became reality. Perhaps the most exciting event of her childhood was the arrival of the piano, which her parents were finally able to afford. Since none of her siblings learned to play, the instrument came to be regarded as her property.

V.A. Every book says I started piano when I was nine. I started in January, and in April I would have been nine years old, so I was not nine yet. Oh, when that piano came, I was absolutely in heaven. I thought it was a most tremendous thing to have happen.
B.D. Your parents bought a piano?
V.A. Finally. Well, they couldn't afford one before. The daughter of the minister—we were great friends, my family and that family—was one year younger than me, and they bought a piano, and I would run over to her house. They didn't live far from me—from us—and after school, I would run over to her house, and I'd say, "C'mon, *play! Play!*" And she played her little pieces. It was heavenly! So I wanted to play the piano very badly, but of course, we didn't have one.
B.D. What kind of a piano did your parents buy?
V.A. I had an upright piano.
B.D. Was it a new one?
V.A. Yes, it was a new one. I don't remember what it cost, because I knew nothing about it, you know. I started to take lessons.

Miss Archer first took lessons with Madame Cadieux-Abran and later, after the Balestreri family moved to a different neighbourhood, with Madame Gagnon, whose enthusiasm for solfège and C clefs was not shared by all of her pupils.

> She was absolutely hep that we had to have solfège. I had to do solfège and I had to learn those clefs, C clefs, and every time I would have homework—for the next lesson I'd be given homework—and I was not enthusiastic about that, so I would end up by taking out my sheet ... I went over by streetcar from where we lived. She lived in Montreal, eastern Montreal, and right after school, I'd get on the streetcar, and it took about an hour to go to her house by streetcar, and so on the streetcar I would take my solfège book out and I would try to figure out what I was going to sing at my lesson. So I wasn't a very good student of solfège. But I learned to be different, let me tell you. It's very important.

Miss Archer never considered herself an exceptionally gifted child. Her desire to study music was simply a matter of fact: "I never even thought about it. I never thought of myself as gifted. It was what I wanted to do. I wanted to play the piano. I had to have music." She practised diligently and mastered advanced repertoire relatively quickly, tackling the Bach inventions at the age of twelve and the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* at fourteen. Madame

Cadieux-Abran and Madame Gagnon also introduced her to the music of several "lesser French composers," including Chaminade and Pierné.

V.A. I don't recall spending a long time on one piece, you know. Easily a Chopin Ballade. Oh, I thought they were just tremendous.
B.D. How old were you when you were playing the ballades?
V.A. Now, I'm trying to think, we lived ... I'm thinking of the houses where we lived. We lived near the Lafontaine Park. Maybe it took three or four lessons to learn a piece, to remember, and learn to play it by memory.
B.D. And how many years had you been studying when you started playing Chopin Ballades?
V.A. Oh, let's see. I was almost nine when I started [playing the piano] so I think that I was maybe thirteen.
B.D. You made very rapid progress.
V.A. I never even thought of it. See, my parents knew nothing about it, so I could have been doing nothing. But I wanted the piano so much. I wanted to be at the piano so much.

It was during her teenage years that Miss Archer made the decision to pursue a career in music. She had played piano solos at concerts throughout high school and was awarded a music prize upon graduating. The music building of McGill University was located directly across from the school, and she was determined to study there. Unfortunately, she graduated in the midst of the Depression, and since her parents did not have the money to send her to university, she was forced to find the means to support herself. With the assistance of her high-school music teacher, Mr. Speers, she obtained work as a vocal accompanist, enrolling at McGill on a part-time basis. The demands of the job left little time for studying, however, and she thought that she might better be able to control her schedule if she were to teach piano. She began advertising for students and by the end of the second year had found enough that she could quit her accompanying job.

V.A. So many people were out of work, including my father. [It was] a very difficult time.
B.D. Was he out of work for a long time?
V.A. Well, yes, for quite a while. It took a long time for things to get back to normal, you know. But anyway, the teacher ... our music teacher at school ... music master, I should say, he was a chap called Jimmy—we called him Jimmy, not to his face, of course—Speers. He was a real Scot, and we would have our music class regularly—this was high school—and when we would come in, he would say [in a heavy Scots brogue], "Good morning girls!" And we used to snicker behind his back. We liked him though. We learned some nice ... very nice songs. School literature, you know. Well, we had pieces by Elgar and ... British composers. We had a songbook.
B.D. Did you enjoy singing?
V.A. Oh yes, I loved the music lessons.
B.D. What part did you sing in the choir?
V.A. I sang alto. My voice is low, you see. My singing voice is low. My speaking voice is not that low, but I can't sing high. Well anyway, I had that

job. I was seventeen. There was this voice teacher, a Welshman, who had been trained at the Royal College in London or in Canada—I'm not sure which—and in England, he'd been known as a Handelian tenor because he specialized in Handel oratorio. From what I can recall, I was very interested in what was happening, you know. I would listen to all the—you know, like the getting warmed up for when they would sing their songs. They had Concone, etc., all these different vocalizes, and then I would go in and accompany. Of course, for the vocalizes that had accompaniment, like Concone, I would go and play the piano. And I was told by the voice teacher that I could not take the music home and that I had to play it right away, right there, so I was a little scared, but I got into it and I enjoyed doing it. I learned a lot and I did it for two years, but he had so many students. I only had Sunday to do all my studying. I would get up at five in the morning to practise my piano. So I could only take a few courses. I took piano, of course. I took harmony and history. I think I had two courses and piano lessons. But that was enough, to be able to keep up with it. Anyway at the end of the first year I went back to this chap. I knew that he was a good teacher. He lived to a real advanced age. He died at the age of ninety-four. I learned that from one of his students who used to teach at Calgary, Alexander Grey, his name was, and he studied with [Mr. Davies]—not when I was there, of course. And he thought ... well, he *was* a good teacher. And I remember, I heard Alexander Grey sing and I thought he was a good singer. Anyway I learned a lot of repertoire: the German *Lieder* and all these English drawing-room songs and oratorio. And believe me, I had to be on my toes. There was no stopping anywhere, you know.

B.D. So when did you learn the music if you couldn't take it home with you?

V.A. Well, I just had to sight read. I had to learn to sight read. And I learned to sight read. There was no other way, you know. And I needed my job. So anyway, I learned to sight read. I worked very hard, but I grew to enjoy it and I loved singing. I still love singing. I don't sing myself, but I used to sing in choirs quite a lot and the church choir of course, until I was about twelve. Then, the second year, I said to myself, "This is just too much." I decided that I would like to try to take on some piano students. So I advertised in the paper and I got a few students and gradually I built up quite a lot of private piano students. So at the end of the second year, I told Mr. Davies that I had to stop. Oh well, you know, he didn't like that, but I said, "I need my time." So, with my students, I could at least arrange for my time, you know. They were mostly kids who would come after school hours, and the way it was at that time, I had quite a number of students in a certain district, and two days a week, I would go from house to house giving them their lessons. That's the way it was.

B.D. This was while you were studying at McGill.

V.A. Oh yes. I was studying. I loved teaching. Right away, I thought it was great. I started from very young kids, you know, and I also had adults who came for lessons, so I ended up having a class of forty students.

Through her work as an accompanist, Miss Archer acquired invaluable knowledge of vocal repertoire; through her studies at McGill, her knowledge of orchestral repertoire also expanded rapidly. Douglas Clarke, dean of music at

McGill and founder and conductor of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, urged his students to attend the orchestra's rehearsals. Miss Archer was only too happy to comply, never missing a single rehearsal or concert. She had the opportunity to hear the music of many contemporary composers including Claude Debussy, Darius Milhaud, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Arnold Bax, and William Walton. Since the repertoire of Canadian orchestras was carefully monitored during the Second World War, the music of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern was seldom, if ever, performed. Nor was that of Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith, with whom Miss Archer would later study. She recalls having encountered the piano music of Bartók, however, while browsing through a local music store.

V.A. Right away after I started going to McGill, I became involved with going to orchestra rehearsals, because the dean of music was the conductor and founder of the Montreal Orchestra.
B.D. Of the symphony.
V.A. Of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, and he wanted us students to go to rehearsals. For me ... he didn't have to ask me. To me, it was an exciting part of my studying to be going to all of the rehearsals for each concert, and there was a concert every Sunday afternoon, you see. Not like here, you know, and besides going to the concert, I would go to the rehearsal and I would have a chance to hear the soloists more than once and became acquainted with the orchestra, so to me, to compose is to compose for orchestra, and that's the first kind of composing I did really. [I] never missed a rehearsal or a concert. No matter if there was a blizzard or what, I *never* missed a concert. Even if I was sick, I would say that I can't miss, I have to go, and I heard a lot of what was then the music, contemporary music at that point, in the forties. Oh, Milhaud, Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Arnold Bax, William Walton.
B.D. Probably Debussy as well.
V.A. And Debussy, of course.
B.D. That was during the war years.
V.A. Oh yes.
B.D. Because Canada was at war, you probably didn't have the opportunity to hear much of Schoenberg and Webern and ...
V.A. No. No.
B.D. That wouldn't have been played. That music just wasn't played.
V.A. No, it wasn't played.
B.D. Did you hear any of the music of Bartók and Hindemith?
V.A. Well, no, we didn't hear any of this. I'm trying to remember if I had heard any Bartók. I knew some music of Bartók, which I had come across in the music store in that district where we lived. It was called Ten Easy Pieces—Ten Light Pieces, *leichte*. And they were like these beautiful harmonizations of Hungarian folk songs, which I liked immensely.

Equally important to Miss Archer's knowledge of the orchestral repertoire was her participation for nearly eight years as percussionist in the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1940. The conductor, Ethel Stark,

Figure 1: The Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra.
Photograph courtesy of Violet Archer.

was a violinist and graduate of the Curtis Institute, where she had studied with Fritz Reiner. Miss Archer gained her introduction to this orchestra through May Fluhmann, a young cellist and classmate at McGill, who had studied at Juilliard until her father suffered a debilitating stroke, which forced her to return to Montreal. Miss Archer became her accompanist, and together they explored the cello literature. Miss Fluhmann played timpani in the Montreal Women's Symphony,[5] and Miss Archer "was drawn into the orchestra to play percussion other than the timps. So I played the drum, the cymbals, and glockenspiel—the whatever. All the extras." The photograph, reproduced in Figure 1, shows Miss Archer standing at the back of the orchestra, poised to execute a cymbal crash. She, in fact, studied percussion at McGill with the timpanist of the Montreal Symphony, who was a Native Indian.

B.D. How did the women's orchestra get started?
V.A. Well, it was started by a group that thought, "Why can't we have a women's orchestra?" So all these ladies ... we rehearsed at night, because many of them ... A group got together, and they got hold of all these people, who could play those instruments, but many of them were ladies who worked in offices; the others were housewives. And we put it together like that. And we

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5 The Canadian Musical Heritage Society is publishing the *Capriccio for Timpani and Orchestra* that Miss Archer wrote in 1939 for May Fluhmann.

became a really good orchestra. In fact, the male orchestra regarded us as a competitor.

B.D. So the Montreal Symphony at that time was all men.

V.A. Yeah.

B.D. No women in it at all.

V.A. Well, I think the harpist was.

B.D. Of course.

V.A. And it started in 1940, and I played in it for almost eight years. So we had to go whenever everybody could come to the rehearsal, so it had to be at night, and I would be so tired after a long day of going from one house to another, teaching my piano students.

B.D. What repertoire did you play?

V.A. Oh, we played Haydn, Mozart, we played some Beethoven—overtures, for example. Actually, by the time we had really gotten hold of the whole thing, we were also playing Brahms. We played Tchaikovsky symphonies and we also gave children's concerts on Saturday mornings, and I used to bring my piano students to those children's concerts. We had quite a good repertoire.

B.D. Did you play some contemporary repertoire as well?

V.A. Yes.

B.D. Do you remember what you played?

V.A. I'm trying to remember. We played some of my music.

B.D. Really!

V.A. I remember that. From a suite called *Leaves of Grass,* of Walt Whitman. When I first discovered that book, I was just crazy about it. I read it from cover to cover. And I wrote a big suite for women's voices and orchestra, and they played two different movements of it at two different concerts during their time. I think we played Delius, and at the children's concerts we did *Peter and the Wolf,* and another one was *Ferdinand the Bull.*

B.D. That one I don't know. I've never heard of that.

V.A. It was by an American called Haufrecht. And in it I played among other things, a cow bell. And also, we borrowed an instrument from the New York Philharmonic, which, when you blew into it, sounded like the "Moo" of a cow. And of course, I had to do that. Oh, I had fun. I enjoyed it.

B.D. How long was the orchestra in existence?

V.A. Well, it lasted until 1965, and then they were just broke and had to give up.

B.D. Why do you think it was started? Was it that there was no opportunity for women to play?

V.A. No, not really at that point. A group got together, and they decided that it would be fun to try and see if they could put together an orchestra of women. And we played even in New York and Toronto and in Sherbrooke, and we had our season in Montreal.

Miss Archer purchased scores for all of the repertoire played by the Montreal Women's Symphony. She used the lengthy intervals between percussion entries to memorize the principal themes of the standard symphonic repertoire

and later, at home, tested her memory by writing them down and checking them against her scores.

V.A. Oh yes, all the stuff that the orchestra played; I got myself a score. I sat—in fact, I would go to those rehearsals and I would memorize the principal themes whenever it was a symphony—because that orchestra did all the standard repertoire—all the Brahms and Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, William Walton, César Franck, Tchaikovsky, of course, and I would listen and try to identify the principal themes and memorize them, and I would go home and write them down. (I still have my notebooks in a box downstairs.) Then I would get the score. I would look at the score and see if I had it right or not.
B.D. So, you had a lot of time as a percussionist to count bars and do all of these things.
V.A. Oh, I did nothing else.
B.D. That's great aural training.
V.A. It's great. This is what I would say to my students who are supposed to write an orchestral piece at the end of the master's program. They don't go to any rehearsals ... they don't go to anything. It's shocking!

Miss Archer made the conscious decision to become a composer around 1935, when she was in her early twenties and studying at McGill, but she had, in fact, already tried her hand at composing as a teenager. She characterizes her earliest compositional efforts as nothing more than "strumming at the piano." Her first composition, which was inspired by a Tennyson poem studied at school, is no longer extant, but she recalls that it was tonal.

V.A. I remember writing down one small piece. I was trying to portray what was in one of the poems we were studying at school. That was when I was about sixteen and I was in high school. It was a Tennyson poem. I don't remember it all just now, but it started like this "The splendor falls on castle walls," etc., etc., you know, a beautiful picturesque, and I thought of trying to put that on the piano and bring out that scenery, the atmosphere, but then I decided ... I played around with it, you know.
B.D. Did you finish that piece?
V.A. I even wrote it down.
B.D. Oh, you did.
V.A. Yeah.
B.D. Was that the first time that you wrote a piece down?
V.A. Yeah.
B.D. Did you improvise a lot at the piano? Was that something that you did normally, just sat down and tried out sounds?
V.A. Oh, not that much. I played on the piano just for my own pleasure and to see what I could find. But I thought that piece was ... I thought it was no good. So I threw it away.
B.D. Ah, so you don't have it anymore.
V.A. No, I don't have it unfortunately.
B.D. Do you remember what it was like? Do you remember whether it was tonal or ...

V.A. It was tonal, yes. Oh, it was tonal, yes.

Miss Archer was granted the Teacher's Licentiate in piano in 1934 and the Bachelor of Music in composition in 1936. While grateful for the training that she received at McGill, she also recognizes that the years spent there were not without their frustration. She was the only woman studying composition in a program that was itself somewhat peculiar. Although McGill granted a Bachelor of Music in composition, it offered no formal courses in that subject; students were simply left to their own devices. Miss Archer worked under the casual supervision of Douglas Clarke, a gifted musician, who unfortunately lacked experience as a teacher and whose approach to teaching composition was somewhat tentative. While her compositional interests were certainly encouraged, she received neither disciplined instruction nor firm guidance, but was left instead to find her own way, pursuing Clarke's occasional suggestions to try a particular genre and bringing in her finished compositions for him to "look over." Although her early works were modelled after familiar, often tonal, repertoire, her compositional voice was, from the beginning, contemporary. She loved dissonance and had already developed very definite ideas regarding how her music should sound.

V.A. The Bachelor of Music degree was just a composition degree, but there were no classes in composition. However, at the end of the third year, we were supposed to turn in one piece for orchestra and one piece for SATB, *a cappella.* And to accompany it with a letter in which one swore that one had had *no* assistance whatsoever in writing these pieces, and *that* was what ... all I'd had, but I was crazy about the orchestra. To me, it was a pleasure to do it, you know, because I went to the closed rehearsals all the time, year after year.
B.D. How old would you have been at that point?
V.A. When I finished ... it took me longer because I was only taking a few subjects at a time, and of course, I did my Teacher's Licentiate at the same time, and anyway, the piece that I wrote was called *Intermezzo.* Also I had arranged from time to time entirely on my own—I never had anybody look at anything ... it never occurred to me ... not because I thought I knew everything. I just ... there was nobody around that I could talk to; I was just all by myself doing this, and I had arranged for orchestra some folk tunes, Russian folk tunes. I found these books of folk songs in the McGill Library; it was quite a good library. I know that I did two sets of things like that; they were arrangements for orchestra, and they were played by the McGill orchestra. Then this piece that I had composed for what was the exam for the Bachelor of Music, that was *Intermezzo,* and I was greatly influenced by Delius at that time, so it's quite "Deliusy," and the McGill orchestra played it. And I wrote a Mass, SATB, which was, I thought, maybe a little bit like Palestrina, you know. Anyway, I was the only one who passed ... got the degree, you see, but we had no tuition whatsoever. If these kids here had to do it, they'd scream. So that's it. ... For about three years, the dean kind of, you know, looked with approval on what I was doing—these arrangements and that piece that I wrote. So then, from time to time—they gave me a scholarship, you see to be able to show him what

I was doing, and he would say, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you want to write an overture?" I would say, "Oh, yes." So he would give me something out of his library scores, such as *Portsmouth Point* of William Walton, that overture which is extremely dissonant, but I loved dissonance anyway, so it didn't bother me. So I used that as a guide all by myself and I never went to him, asking him, "What do I next?" The way he wanted it was that I should have it finished and then bring it to him and he would look it over. That's how I worked with him. But I didn't mind. It didn't bother me at all. I thought this is what I'm supposed to do, you know. I didn't know any different.

B.D. Most of your early compositions—the things that you did as a student—would have been based on models that you knew, that you had studied.

V.A. Yes, well of course I also thought of Beethoven overtures. In the Montreal Women's Orchestra, we played Beethoven overtures. And of course, apart from going to rehearsals, I was playing in that symphony. It's a great experience to be in a symphony.

B.D. Did you experiment with a number of different compositional styles or languages in the early days, or was most of your music in the post-Romantic, tonal ...

V.A. No, no, it was contemporary.

B.D. Right from the beginning.

V.A. Right from the beginning.

B.D. You mentioned that you loved dissonance.

V.A. Yes.

B.D. So, right from the beginning, even if you were writing in a tonal idiom ...

V.A. Yeah, that's right. Yes, I was. I just did what I wanted, you know.

B.D. And how did you do that? It's not necessarily easy. As you mentioned, students like to have direction and to be told, "Try this. This is the way so-and-so did it; now you try something similar," but you seem right from the beginning to have ...

V.A. It's the way I heard music—the impression it made on me in my mind. I would remember what an overture that I looked at [was like]; I would analyze the music.

B.D. But you weren't necessarily analyzing music that was dissonant, or that was ...

V.A. Not necessarily, but I had my own idea about what *my* music should be.

B.D. And how did you acquire that?

V.A. Well, by hearing a lot of contemporary music. I *loved* contemporary music. Oh, I still do, of course. But I do love also the greats of the past. Beethoven, he's a giant as far as I'm concerned. I think Beethoven is a greater giant than Brahms. Absolutely. As far as I'm concerned. I mean, I'm not saying I don't like Brahms—that's not what I'm saying—but Beethoven was an innovator, and Brahms was not.

B.D. Would you say that you were already on the path to establishing what we might call your own compositional voice when you encountered Bartók and Hindemith?

V.A. Yeah, oh yeah.
B.D. Before you studied with them.
V.A. Before I studied with them.
B.D. But you knew that if you wanted to pursue a career as a composer and further develop that compositional voice, you needed help. You needed to find somebody to teach you.
V.A. Yes. Yes, I wanted to find somebody. And I chose Bartók.

Béla Bartók was to have played with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra in 1942, but he was denied entry into Canada because of difficulties with his visa. The cancellation of his concert left Miss Archer extremely disappointed, because she had envisioned finding the opportunity to discuss with him her plans for the future: "I had visions of my going to him after the concert and asking him if I could study with him." The disappointment undoubtedly only strengthened her resolve: "So, he didn't come. And that was when I decided that I would have to write to him and ask him if I could study with him. I had no sense of thinking that I should get advice from anybody or get anybody to write for me or anything. I was entirely on my own. You know, I did these things entirely on my own. I was a very naive person." Acting on the advice of her friend May Fluhmann, she obtained an address from Bartók's publisher and arranged to go to New York that summer. Framed copies of the letters that she received from him hang on her living-room wall. One can easily imagine her reading them for the first time, barely able to contain her excitement in discovering that someone of Bartók's stature had taken seriously her intention to become a composer. The opportunity to study with him represented a dramatic turn of fortune for Miss Archer.

B.D. Can you tell me more about your decision to go and study with Bartók and about your lessons?
V.A. Of course, as I say, I wasn't being impertinent. I just thought, this is the person that I think I could learn from.
B.D. What made you decide that? The music?
V.A. Because I liked the music that I had played—his music, piano music—and there was nobody else. He was in New York, you see, and of course, I couldn't afford to take time off and just go and study, so I had to do it in summer. I saved my money for one summer. But anyway, I wrote him a letter telling him what I was doing and why I had to work for my living and could only study in summer. I spoke to my friend who had been at Juilliard, you know, this lady who was the timpanist. I said, "What do I do? Where do I get an address?" "Oh," she said, "Why don't you write to the *Musical Courier?*"—a journal that she was getting; there was the *Musical America* and the *Musical Courier.* So she got the *Musical Courier.* "Write to them and ask if they can find an address for Bartók." Well I did, and they told me to write to Boosey & Hawkes in New York, and they gave me the address. So I wrote very simply, you know; I just simply stated facts ... that I had been composing, that I needed to study with someone like himself, and that I could only do it in summer, because I had to earn my living, and that's it. I put facts straight on the paper. I didn't indulge

in any kind of formalities such as saying, "Great composer," you know; well, I *knew* he was a great composer. So, nothing happened for three or four months, then it was in April I think—I don't remember the exact date—that I got a letter from him. He said to send him some of my music. So, I did.

B.D. What did you send?

V.A. I picked out what I thought were my best at that time ... some piano preludes, and I sent them to him. So finally he wrote me back—and it's that letter, the middle one—he said he would be in New York and if I could afford ten dollars a lesson, it would be fine ... to let him know. Of course, I was thrilled to pieces, and ten dollars at that time was a lot.

B.D. Yes, it was.

V.A. Ten dollars was a lot of money, but I thought, "Oh, this is incredible!" So, I wrote back and I thanked him and said how happy I was, and so that was it. I went to New York and I telephoned him, and he arranged a time for me to go there at the beginning of July of that year. I was lost in New York, you can imagine—the subways and everything. So, it my first time I got on the wrong subway, it turned out. So I was lost and I ended up at the end of that line, where there was a cemetary called Woodlawn Cemetary, and I was worried, I was sick, I was practically in tears. And I had to get off because it was the end of the line. There was a house by the gates of that cemetary and I said to myself, "Do I have the courage to ring their doorbell and ask if I can use the phone?" So I managed. With great fear and trembling, I did it, and somebody came to the door, and I explained that I had been on the wrong subway and was lost and could I use the phone, and they let me use the phone. So I called Mr. Bartók; he had given me his phone number and he said, "What happened? I told you how to get here. How did you get lost?" I said, "Well, I took the wrong subway." So he gave me an appointment for the next day. So I went back, and that was my first meeting with Bartók.

B.D. And what was it like?

V.A. Well, his, what would be called the living room, was very sparsely furnished. There was a sofa and a couple of chairs and a Steinway grand. Steinway had lent him two pianos, because he was playing with his wife, who was a very good pianist, but now they had taken one away, and so he only had that one piano. Anyway, he asked me a lot of questions, and I always remembered this, because it really put me in my place. He asked me, did I know the Haydn symphonies, and of course, I had heard Haydn symphonies, but not that many, and I said, "Oh yes, I know the Haydn symphonies." So he said, "How lucky you are. All my life I've studied them, and still I do not know them." Of course, he's written 103 symphonies, but I didn't know that. So after that, I was very careful.

B.D. What was his approach to teaching?

V.A. His approach was that he dictated ... the first thing that he did was to dictate a Hungarian folk tune to me, and of course I had never been acquainted with Hungarian folk melodies, excepting those in his piano pieces, but they were already harmonized. So he wanted me to harmonize it, say for violin and piano, and of course I had a hard time, because my harmony was strictly the traditional

harmony of ... what's the name of this text that we used to use? I can't think of it this minute, but you know the one I mean. So to find harmonies, I really had to work very hard. Another time he gave me a German folk tune for clarinet. This was the kind of thing he asked me to do. He was trying to find out how ... what command did I have of *harmony.* I learned a lot from that. They're fantastic things to harmonize. I'm crazy about them. Ever since I worked with him, I learned to harmonize melodies, you know, without spoiling the tune or putting the kind of harmony that doesn't belong to the *scale* of that tune. I didn't know what a Hungarian *scale* was, can you imagine? Because we didn't learn that in harmony class. Anyway, the last thing I did was ... he wanted me to write a tune of my own and to write variations on it and for it to be for string quartet. I still have that.
B.D. Do you?
V.A. Yeah. So that's what I did and I learned a lot from that, and even yet, it's as if I learned it yesterday. I mean, I remember it so vividly.
B.D. How long were your lessons?
V.A. Well, just the one summer.
B.D. And did you go every week?
V.A. Yeah, once a week.
B.D. Did you show him some of your other compositions?
V.A. No, I didn't bring them with me. He told me I should be careful how I spelled my chords, because they were too hard to read the way I spelled them. See, I didn't have any discipline of that kind, but I got it full force with Paul Hindemith. When I was with Paul Hindemith, I learned how to do it the right way for Hungarian or whatever—for any kind of folk melody.

In 1947 Miss Archer entered the Master's program in composition at Yale University, where she studied with Paul Hindemith. On the strength of scores submitted with her application, she was awarded the Bradley Keeler Memorial Scholarship for the first year of her studies and received the Charles Ditson Fellowship the following year. These scholarships, together with two grants from the Province of Québec, enabled her to complete her degree without having to work to support herself. For the first time in her life, she was able to concentrate exclusively on her studies. Hindemith's rigorous approach to teaching composition gave her the technique and discipline that she had long sought. While other students often chafed under his critical eye, Miss Archer thrived. From her instructors and fellow students at Yale, she received intellectual and emotional support, which had not always been forthcoming from her family or from instructors and fellow students at McGill. Mr. Balestreri strongly opposed his daughter's decision to become a composer.

> My father thought it was strange that I wasn't getting married. My mother usually agreed with my father, you know. They were very conservative people. They were wonderful people, but I would say that they were conservative, which was their upbringing, and the European concept of what a girl should do is that she should be prepared for marriage. Well, I was doing everything else but! So, my father was a little ... not too pleased about that, but anyway, I decided that I was doing what I was doing, and that's it.[6]

His objections were rooted in his traditional view of what constituted a suitable occupation for a woman as well as in his fear that his daughter would not be able to earn a decent living. Miss Archer, determined to achieve her goal, had no alternative but to ignore her father, which caused considerable strain in their relationship. At Yale she felt, for the first time, that her aspirations were truly accepted and understood. It is therefore not surprising that she should remember with great fondness the years spent in New Haven.

B.D. The years that you spent in New Haven must have been very different for you, because you were able to focus exclusively on your studies.
V.A. It was the only two years of my life, you know. It was heaven! I've said, two of the happiest years of my life, because they knew what I was, what I could do. They understood me, you know.
B.D. Were there not other people who understood you?
V.A. Oh yes, I'm not saying that ...
B.D. How did your family, for example, react to this ... what must have been at that time and still is, to some extent, an unusual decision?
V.A. Still *is.* Still is.
B.D. For either a man or a woman, but particularly for a woman at that time. What was the reaction?
V.A. My father was absolutely against it. He thought it was just unthinkable. He had no use for it and he would say to me, "What do you think that's ... all that's going to get you?" But I paid no attention whatsoever.
B.D. Did it bother you to have your father say that?
V.A. Well, it meant that we had a very strained kind of relationship, which I *regret,* but I couldn't help it. But at the end of his life, he told my mother that I was right. He *told* her, and so she told me that.
B.D. And how did your mother respond? Did she encourage you, or was that impossible?
V.A. Well, my mother was very gentle and, well, she got along with people, you know. She wasn't a person who shouted at you; she didn't discipline us by screaming at us. She had a lot of patience, you know. And she had a lot of patience with me, because she didn't understand ... not a word of it ... what I was doing, but since she saw that I was having success, she was glad, and she thought that there must be something *good* about it. So, I was quite close to my mother and I understood that she didn't know what I was doing, but she wasn't *contrary* to my doing it. She just felt she didn't understand it. She wasn't considering me disobedient and not caring of discipline or being sensible. For my father the sensible thing would have been if I'd been a schoolteacher or a secretary, you know, what *women* do—can do ... *can do!* Not always. For him, a woman's place was not to be a composer; it was ... it was actually *unheard* of.
B.D. Did you have support either at McGill or at Yale?

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6 CBC interview, April 1993.

V.A. Well the dean of music [at McGill] encouraged me—in his own way, because he was a very gifted man, a very good conductor. He was a good musician. He played the piano and the organ extremely well, but he had no ... had never had any concept of teaching young people, and he was extremely impatient, you know, if we didn't understand his teaching.
B.D. Were there classmates of yours, women who were also interested in composition?
V.A. No, no, not at McGill. At that time, I was the only woman.
B.D. What about at Yale?
V.A. At Yale there was one in my classes. But there were ... I remember there was one in my class and then with another teacher there were ... one, two, three, four ... there were four women taking composition at Yale when I was there.
B.D. And how many men?
V.A. Oh, the others were all ... well, they weren't big classes.
B.D. Was it about half-and-half?
V.A. Well, there were a few more [men], but it didn't seem to matter.
B.D. Do you think that your father would have reacted differently had one of your brothers decided that he was going to be a composer? Would that have been better or worse?
V.A. I don't know. I can hardly say, you know. He didn't see how I could earn my living. He was *worried,* because he didn't see how I could earn ... when he saw me working like a fiend just to be able to go and study.
B.D. So he probably would have reacted the same way had one of your brothers decided to become a composer ...
V.A. He might have.
B.D. ... because it would have been equally difficult ...
V.A. Yeah, that's true.
B.D. ... maybe not quite as difficult because there were more men in the music business.
V.A. Yeah, more men. Definitely more. *Definitely* more men.
B.D. We've talked a little bit about your studies with Bartók and Hindemith and ...
V.A. All I can say is that I have a *vivid* remembrance of *both* of those teachers, as far as the help that I got. They helped me to know how to *find* what to do.
B.D. They both really were very influential in shaping your future as a composer.
V.A. Yes. I think so, yes.
B.D. Both Bartók and Hindemith were very concerned with the musical education of children and wrote music for them ...
V.A. Yes.
B.D. They didn't necessarily teach children, but they certainly were concerned with ...
V.A. Yes, and I'm very interested and dedicated to writing music for children.
B.D. And you also teach children.
V.A. I also teach children. I've taught them from five years ... there's a little boy that I've been teaching since last year. He was five when he came to me

in January 1993. He's a little Polish boy, Marek Krowicki. He's an excellent pianist at six. He's an amazing little boy. *If* you would like, I could lend you a tape of his piano recital. He played his compositions on the first half—some of them written when he was five, from January 1993 to May 1994.
B.D. That's amazing.
V.A. It *is* amazing! He's absolutely exceptional!
B.D. When you work with some of the young people that you work with—and with this little boy—do you ever see yourself in them? Do you see yourself the way you were at their age, or ... it was a very different time and you had different opportunities.
V.A. Well, at six years old, I was very serious ... as a child. Yeah. I was very grown up already ... up *here,* though I was such a silly kid sometimes, just like a six-year-old would be, you know.
B.D. When you look back on your own musical education—from the beginning—what do you think were the really positive things about it?
V.A. Well, the interesting thing for me was that once I had had this tuition with Béla Bartók and then with Paul Hindemith, it all became so clear to me how to know what I'm doing—not just instinctively as I had been doing, but to know *exactly* what I'm doing.
B.D. So it was a matter of acquiring technique and also confidence?
V.A. Yes. It was as if I were a writer and I had not learned how to spell but had these wonderful ideas. It wouldn't be until I could write properly and spell and know my grammar that I could put down my ideas adequately. It's in a similar context, I think. But you see, with Mr. Clarke, he just was interested in leafing through what I had done and he would say, "This is ... "—well, maybe he might like this to be different, you know, and I would try to see what I could do, but I don't think he—see no, I shouldn't criticize ... maybe ... I don't think he had ever taught when he took that job on, and you know, you have to be a *teacher.*
B.D. You have to have the experience.
V.A. He was an excellent musician, but when it came to teaching, it was foreign to him, you know, and he became very impatient, so that we were scared of him. We didn't like him to, you know, lose his composure.
B.D. What would you have changed about your musical beginnings? What would you like to have been different?
V.A. Oh ...
B.D. In terms of your training and of the way in which your career was shaped.
V.A. Well, the only thing ... I really ... the only thing that I begrudge was that, I had to spend so much time earning my living, you know, that I would hardly have time to do my own thing, until I got a job and I was teaching at university. That's what I ...
B.D. That gave you the freedom.
V.A. That gave me the freedom, even though I was bogged down with courses over here, but I like teaching. I love teaching.
B.D. What do you think might have happened had you stayed in Italy ... had your parents never come to Canada?
V.A. It's hard to ...

B.D. Do you think that would have made a difference? Italy has, obviously, such a long tradition—a much longer and richer tradition ...
V.A. Yes, yeah.
B.D. ... of music-making than we do, but do you think you would have become a composer had your parents stayed in Italy?
V.A. Well, I think that music is difficult for women over there, especially for composers. To give an example, there's an Italian woman in Rome who has chosen to write her doctoral thesis about my music. She learned about me through another woman, who is married to an Italian composer—but she's English originally—and whom I met at the International Festival of Women Composers last year. The one whom I met—who gave the [other] the idea of taking me as the subject of her thesis—said that I would be the first woman of Italian ... (she calls me Italian—well, of course both my parents are Italian, but I was born in Canada; anyway, she can call me Italian if she wants to) ... and that I will be the only Italian woman composer who has ever been the subject of a thesis in Italy. So over there, it must be difficult. Of course, I don't know what it's like here. I have no idea what theses have been written on women. I've never heard of any. I'm sure ...
B.D. But there certainly are many women composers ... important women composers in Canada.
V.A. There *are* and in the United States. Yeah.
B.D. But in Canada, you are one of the pioneers.
V.A. Oh, I'm a pioneer ... definitely. My parents were pioneers.

Abstract

In this interview, conducted on 18 August 1994, Violet Balestreri Archer revisits her past, recreating the experiences of her youth from the earliest days of her childhood in Como and Montreal to her graduation from Yale University in 1949 and sharing highly personal memories of her family, teachers, and friends. She recalls her first visit to Italy, her school years, her piano lessons, her early attempts at composition, her participation in the Montreal Women's Symphony, and her compositional studies with Douglas Clarke at McGill University, Béla Bartók in New York, and Paul Hindemith at Yale University. In listening to her story, we discover "who" she is and "how" she succeeded in establishing her compositional voice and in creating a space or "room" for herself in a profession traditionally dominated by men.