

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

John Beckwith. *Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961–1994*. Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1997. xiii, 256 pp. ISBN 0-919614-72-8 (paperback)

Glenn Colton

Volume 19, Number 1, 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014609ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014609ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Colton, G. (1998). Review of [John Beckwith. *Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961–1994*. Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1997. xiii, 256 pp. ISBN 0-919614-72-8 (paperback)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 19(1), 86–91.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1014609ar>

John Beckwith. *Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961–1994*. Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1997. xiii, 256 pp. ISBN 0-919614-72-8 (paperback).

Few individuals have influenced the musical affairs of Canada during the past fifty years as profoundly as John Beckwith. As one of Canada's leading composers and a prominent member of the oft-mentioned "first generation" of modern, self-consciously Canadian composers, Beckwith's compositional achievements are well known. Yet not to be overlooked are his remarkable contributions as a pianist, teacher, university administrator, critic, writer, and broadcaster at various times during his illustrious career. From his days as a founding member of the Canadian League of Composers in the early 1950s to his role as founding director of the Institute for Canadian Music at the University of Toronto in the 1980s and beyond, Beckwith remains a central force in Canadian music.

1997 marked the completion of two important recording and publishing projects. The first is a new compact disc of four Beckwith works: *Keyboard Practice*, *Upper Canadian Hymn Preludes*, *Etudes*, and *Quartet* (CMC Centrediscs WRC8-7070). The second is the publication of *Music Papers*, a compilation of articles and talks by Beckwith from the past thirty years (many of them previously unpublished). Since some of the chapters were written for a professional audience and others for a more general readership, the book has something to offer for both music specialists and those with a general interest in Canadian music. The subject matter ranges widely, with chapters grouped into five broad categories: "A 'Universal Tongue?"; "CanMus"; "Some Toronto Musicians"; "Composing"; and "Sounds Like..."

A "UNIVERSAL TONGUE"?

The first two chapters, "Trying to Define Music" (1970) and "Music, the Elusive Art" (1967), outline the author's thoughts on the nature and origins of music. The latter chapter, the more detailed of the two, examines musical gestures which have acquired special meaning within a culture and the concept of referential meaning in modern music (i.e., music which refers to earlier compositions or musical traditions). It is interesting that Beckwith's previously unpublished 1967 article essentially proposes an intertextual theory of music which pre-dates the recent explorations of musical intertextuality by a number of scholars in the 1980s and 1990s.¹

In "Music, The Search for Universals" (1978), the author attempts to tackle a longstanding question: What universals, if any, are shared by the various musical cultures of the world? While Beckwith makes some interesting observations on the topic initially, the central thesis soon becomes obscured by a lengthy digression which, at times, reads more like a critique of pop music than a "search for universals." The author, in retrospect, acknowledges that the

¹ Among the more recent studies devoted to intertextuality in music are Kevin Korsyn's "Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence," *Music Analysis* 10 (1991): 3–72; and Joseph Straus's *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

attempt to “fit the ‘classical’ composer into the world music setting” (p. 18) was not entirely successful. (Each article in the book is contextualised by a newly written prefatory note.)

Despite being written in mid-1970s, “A Big Song and Dance” addresses an issue of particular relevance for universities of the 1990s: the place of music in the curriculum. In the process, Beckwith touches on some recurring themes developed elsewhere in the book, such as the distinctiveness of Canadian culture (music, in particular), and the modern composer’s constant struggle to assert his/her own creative voice amidst the looming shadows of great musical figures from the past. On this topic, Beckwith concludes with the following colourful observation: “One facet of being a musician is this sense of making comparisons (however absurd) every time you write a new piece, or perform or analyse or study an old one—comparisons with the top achievements of Bach and Mozart and Chopin and Debussy and Mahler, those bastards who are so good they keep you humble” (p. 31).²

CANMUS

A series of eight articles on aspects of Canadian music follows. “About Canadian Music: The P.R. Failure” (1969–70) documents the appalling state of international reference sources on Canadian music up to that time. Beckwith offers a critique of sources on Canadian music published since 1944 and, as his detailed commentary illustrates, the few entries on Canadian music which do exist from this period are most often misleading, superficial, and riddled with errors. These themes recur in the sequel article, “A Failure Revisited” (1986), and the related essay which follows, “CanMus and World Music” (1994).

Toward the end of the latter article, Beckwith concludes a brief overview of historical periods in Canadian music with some perceptive observations on the important topic of national and regional associations in music (both explicit and internalized). Most interesting perhaps is his suggestion that traces of regional or national identity may be detected even in abstract works with no overtly nationalistic intentions: “Is the Quintet of Serge Garant *just* a replica of the austere post-Weberian lingua franca of the 70s? Personally, I think not. I find it a quite elegant and distinctive expression that bespeaks the composer and his locale” (p. 127).

“A Festival of Canadian Music” (1977) offers a personal account of trends in Canadian music history, with a selective sampling of composers. A more in-depth discussion in a similar vein is presented in the recent article “The Canadian Musical Repertoire,” based on a lecture given at Mount Allison University in 1992. One of the highlights of the book, this informative essay discusses, among other things, the roots of patriotism in Canadian music, the origins of Beckwith’s interest in “Canadiana” and, perhaps most interestingly, the influence of Canadian culture on his own music.

² Beckwith’s remarks were made in reference to Picasso’s commentary on the art of Delacroix: “That bastard, he’s really good!” Francoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 203.

Rounding out Beckwith's discussion of Canadian music are three articles dealing with specialized aspects of the Canadian musical repertoire. In "Notes on CanChorRep" (1985), Beckwith argues for a reconsideration of the scope of the Canadian choral music tradition. While the choral works of Healey Willan are relatively well known, as are (to a certain extent) those of R. Murray Schafer, Harry Somers, Jean Papineau-Couture, Jean Coulthard, and other twentieth-century composers, how many are familiar with the expressive harmonies and intricate melodies of nineteenth-century composer Antoine Dessane? The answer, according to Beckwith, is that we all *should* be. The achievements of Dessane, and those of his contemporaries James P. Clarke, Ernest Gagnon, and others, provide ample musical evidence to support the author's view that "not all Canadian choral music *is* new, and ... older items have been unjustly neglected" (p. 61).

"Canadian Music in the 1950s: Summary of a Symposium," is precisely what the name implies. Originating as a summarizing talk at the conclusion of a 1983 symposium at the University of Western Ontario on Canadian music of the 1950s, Beckwith's commentary touches on highlights of the symposium, interspersed with personal recollections and observations. "Canadian Music of the 1960s and 70s" (1979) offers an assessment of developments in Canadian music between the years 1959 and 1979, followed by an examination of works by five composers active during this period: John Weinzweig, István Anhalt, Harry Somers, Gilles Tremblay, and R. Murray Schafer. The strength of this previously unpublished article lies in its concise summary of important period trends, including increased compositional activity, the development of new-music societies and increased information on Canadian music (due largely to the Canadian Music Centre). The one drawback is the limited scope of the composers selected for discussion. While each of the composers mentioned merits close examination, there are many more names which could be added to this list; for example: Adaskin, Coulthard, Archer, Pentland, and Papineau-Couture—not to mention Beckwith himself. Within its selective focus, however, the article provides an interesting snapshot of an important era in Canadian music.

SOME TORONTO MUSICIANS

The next section, "Some Toronto Musicians," includes detailed accounts of four prominent figures: Healey Willan, Ernest MacMillan, Glenn Gould, and John Weinzweig. This series of articles is appropriately prefaced by the previously unpublished and provocatively titled "Musical Toronto: A Contradiction in Terms?" (1984). The article on Willan, originating as a 1972 review of an exhibit and catalogue (by Giles Bryant) from the National Library of Canada's Willan Collection, offers a concise summary of Willan's life and music. Most interesting perhaps are the personal recollections of Willan's teaching and some colourful anecdotes revealing the humorous side of his personality. A similar biographical sketch, interspersed with detailed commentary and personal recollections, is provided of the remarkably active life of Sir Ernest MacMillan. This recent article (previously unpublished) explores the multi-faceted nature of MacMillan's musical career, including his prominent roles as cultural nationalist, composer, conductor, and educator. One of the

highlights of the book, this article paints a vivid picture of MacMillan's immutable creative energy, productivity, and indelible impact on the Canadian music scene.

Next we have a trilogy of articles devoted to the life and musical career of Glenn Gould. Most interesting of these are the first two, "Notes on a Recording Career" (1961), and "Shattering a Few Myths" (1983). The first, a critical summary of Gould's early recordings, is a perceptive and refreshingly candid assessment: "His late-Beethoven sonata disc contained some misconceptions of tempo or structure (later pages of the Opus 110 finale); some outright insensitivities (first movement of Opus 111); and some mugging (variation-theme of Opus 109)" (p. 162). One of the more interesting aspects of the article is Beckwith's assessment of how Gould's interpretive vision of a piece tends to evolve in successive recordings, "generally in the direction of intensification" (p. 162). The second article, a memorial tribute written months after Gould's sudden death in 1982, attempts to shatter three myths: that Gould was unknown and unappreciated prior to his 1955 successes in the United States; did not enjoy success; and, most significantly, that his early development as a pianist was influenced mainly by listening to recordings of Schnabel, Tureck, and others. In addressing the third myth in considerable detail, Beckwith unlocks the complex relationship between Gould and his teacher, Alberto Guerrero (with whom Beckwith also studied), revealing in the process Guerrero's powerful influence on Gould's musical development. The third article on Gould, "Daredevil Kid," is a book review of Otto Friedrich's *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989).

The final "Toronto musician," John Weinzweig, is given a detailed biographical sketch comparable to that afforded MacMillan. Written in 1983, the article obviously excludes Weinzweig's most recent activities, a void now filled by Elaine Keillor's *John Weinzweig and His Music: The Radical Romantic of Canada* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995). Yet considered in perspective, the article offers a fascinating account of aspects of Weinzweig's life, musical development, and compositional output as viewed through the eyes of a contemporary and colleague. As Beckwith acknowledges in the prefatory notes to the article, Weinzweig is the one musician of the four that he has had the longest and closest association with, and this is reflected in the in-depth treatment of his subject. Widely acknowledged as the first Canadian composer to use serial technique, Weinzweig exerted an enormous influence over the direction of composition in Canada as a teacher at the University of Toronto and the first president of the Canadian League of Composers. Beckwith addresses these and other aspects of Weinzweig's career in a decade-by-decade account of his life and music, followed by a concise summary of the composer's musical output to 1983.

COMPOSING

The next section features a series of four articles on aspects of composition. The first, "Memories, and a Few Red-Neck Opinions" (1991), offers some personal recollections of the author's association with the Canadian League of

Composers and a brief, yet fascinating discussion of how his own music relates closely to Canadian culture and history. As Beckwith notes, “a large part of my compositional work—at least half—reflects my Canadianism” (p. 202). The “Red-Neck” opinions include an assertion of the author’s belief in “the richness of the Western classical tradition, and in the twentieth-century modernist projections of that tradition” (p. 200), and a brief critique of “neo-accessibility” in modern music (returning to a theme raised earlier in the book).

“Composing in the Eighties,” reprinted from a 1981 article the author contributed to the *Australian Journal of Music Education*, contains a concise summary of eleven criteria which Beckwith recommends for teaching student composers. This composition class “sampler” is preceded by an insightful and, at times, witty consideration of the varied terminology often used to describe what the author unapologetically refers to as “our kind of music” (modern “art” or “classical” music):

Why not call it “music,” *tout court*? The word itself has changed significantly in its meaning, and the change may perhaps be in our favour. Up to the 1930s it had a soothing connotation. When a balladeer crooned “I hear music when I look at you,” one doubts the music he heard was Varèse’s *Ionisation* (p. 206).

“From Composer to Audience” (1985) offers some miscellaneous thoughts on varied aspects of composition in the twentieth century.

The following chapter documents Beckwith’s extensive collaboration with James Reaney, an association which produced the operas “Night Blooming Cereus,” “The Shivaree,” and “Crazy to Kill,” among other works. Written in 1989, the article pre-dates the composition of another Beckwith/Reaney opera, “Taptoo!” (1993–95). It would therefore be interesting to read an updated version of the paper which delves into the most recent collaborations between the two, comparing and contrasting these to the earlier works. Placed in perspective, however, the chapter does offer a fascinating account of the origins, inspiration, and musical/dramatic characteristics of each of the first three operas and, as such, provides a useful overview of Beckwith’s operatic output to 1989.

SOUNDS LIKE...

In the first of two closing articles on aspects of hearing, “Hearing and Listening,” Beckwith returns to a topic raised elsewhere in the book, his crusade against Muzak. As the author argues, “the inescapability of music—or of what I call quasi-music—reduces the musical experience to a merely casual one, where the sense of hearing is involved, albeit involuntarily, but the ability to *listen*, attentively and consciously, is in danger of being badly eroded” (p. 230). The paper, intended for a general audience, includes some colourful anecdotes along the way, such as the Toronto Transit Commission’s 1959 decision to play Muzak for its subway passengers.³ The final chapter, “Hearing and Context,”

³As a sign of just how much times have changed since 1959, I was interested to read that the TTC has recently turned to programming classical repertoire at its subway stations—not to entertain passengers, but to keep rowdy groups of teenagers away!

begins with a highly personal account of the author's own hearing loss, followed by a discussion of contextualizing sounds and yet another plea to stamp out Muzak. Beckwith concludes by underscoring the need for stronger emphasis on acoustics courses in the university music curriculum.

Music Papers is an important addition to the field of Canadian music and a rare opportunity to read a wide-ranging set of articles by Beckwith within a single volume. The fact that some of the articles are more than thirty years old need not be viewed as a detriment, although it would be interesting to read updated versions of several of the papers in a future volume. "Composing in the Eighties" and "Notes on My Collaborations with James Reaney," for example, are two articles which demand 1990s sequels. The decades spanned by the articles, on the other hand, presents readers with an opportunity to witness period commentary on aspects of music in Canada from one of its most distinguished commentators. The author's modernist, nationalist, and distinctly Canadian perspective underscores what is perhaps the book's most valuable attribute: its insightful glimpse into one of Canada's foremost musical minds.

Glenn D. Colton

James B. Hartman. *The Organ in Manitoba: A History of the Instruments, the Builders, and the Players*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997. xii, 292 pp. ISBN 0-88755-644-2 (paperback).

Unlike the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other countries,¹ Canada has seen only sporadic attempts to trace the history of its church, concert, and theatre organs. The literature in both official languages is sparse, and becomes even more limited if one seeks a scholarly account.² Precisely why this should be the case is unclear, especially when one considers national contributions to organ building and playing. For more than a century Canada has been home to a thriving community of organ builders with a reputation for quality and innovation that extends well beyond the country's borders. Though their principal markets remain North American, Canadian firms export organs as far afield as Asia and Australia in the face of strong international competition. Canadian organists, too, have enjoyed recognition at home and abroad: one need only cite the names of Healey Willan, Lynnwood Farnam, Bernard

¹ See, for example, Orpha Ochse's *The History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), Stephen Bicknell's *The History of the English Organ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Norbert Dufourcq's *Livre de l'orgue français* (Paris: Picard, 1969).

² One might cite Stephen C. Willis's brief overview, *Pipes and Pedals: Chronicles of Canadian Organs and Organists* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1983), Karl J. Raudsepp's *Organs of Montréal* (Pointe Claire, Québec: Orel, 1993), and Élisabeth Gallat-Morin's *Jean Girard: musicien en Nouvelle-France* (Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 1993) as being among the few relevant works. The venerable age of Canada's largest organ building firm, Casavant Frères Ltée of Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec, has stimulated several historical accounts including Laurent Lapointe, *Casavant Frères, 1879-1979* (Saint-Hyacinthe: Société d'Histoire régionale, 1979) and, fascinatingly, Mathieu-Robert Sauvé, *Joseph Casavant, le facteur d'orgues romantique* (Montréal: XYZ, 1995), a historical fiction for young readers.