

## The Canadian Electronic Ensemble in the 1970s and 1980s Panel Discussion

Jim Montgomery, David Jaeger, Alexa Woloshyn et Matthew Fava

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### Résumé de l'article

Dans cette table ronde, Alexa Woloshyn et Matthew Fava évoquent la scène de la musique électronique et expérimentale des années 1970 à Toronto, avec Norma Beecroft comme chef de file et mentor. David Jaeger et Jim Montgomery racontent leur histoire, puis évoquent une expérience internationale importante : la tournée hollandaise du CEE en 1985. Cette table ronde a été éditée pour plus de clarté.

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## THE CANADIAN ELECTRONIC ENSEMBLE IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

*Jim Montgomery, David Jaeger, Alexa Woloshyn, and Matthew Fava  
(Panel Discussion)*

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Matthew Fava (MF): I learned about Norma Beecroft's music and listened to samples of her recordings. I was really struck by her own capacity to just kind of seek out through her own curiosity various friends and colleagues who she would learn from and also the fact that that has continued throughout her life. One of the things that I think is really significant is the *New Music Concerts* initiative, which began just over 50 years ago. Just preceding the start of the CEE, it was a training ground for so many of the artists in this city. It was this particular game for the kind of artistic development, the cultivation of numerous performers, the capacities, the competencies, the fluencies of those performers, and, likewise, audiences.

I'm also constantly admiring of the fact that she also had capacity to host people in a more private way. And I think that's one of the interesting things about Toronto—that there is this kind of professional aspect of the art community. There's also this more private, social atmosphere. And she was really cultivating that as well. I don't know that we give folks like Norma credit for that, for hosting parties constantly to accompany concerts. And so, at the same time that *New Music Concerts* was this conduit for countless performers, countless composers visiting the city, there was this atmosphere that was created beyond that that again extended the artistic dialogue in ways that I don't know that we can properly quantify. But then when you speak to people in Toronto about those days, a lot of people remember the parties, the opportunities after the events. I was always impressed by Norma's capacity, on the one hand to be this intensive administrator helping to wield these artistic forces, but then also to just host the community. That's something that, as an administrator, I never had capacity for. If ever I was doing some kind of joint initiative, I was always leaning on people with that more ostentatious, more sociable capacity that usually would diminish very quickly for me. So, I really admire Norma's kind of technical and creative capacities, and then these other nurturing capacities that she drew upon that helped to define the scene in Toronto for a lot of people.

David Jaeger (DJ): I was Norma's producer when she was hosting a CBC Radio series called *The Music of Today*. And so, we got to know one another extremely well. *The Music of Today* was a program that was a one-hour weekly network broadcast that preceded the show that I created in 1978 called *Two New Hours*. *Two New Hours* ran for 30 years. As part of the mix of programming that we included in *Two New Hours* certainly was broadcasts, recordings, and subsequent broadcasts of the *New Music Concerts*, concert productions that Norma was involved in creating. We had a close working relationship on many levels and we shared many, many long hours talking about the relative merits of repertoire and the innovations of various composers that, thanks to *New Music Concerts*, came to Toronto, and it was always a given that they would attend all the rehearsals and those performances with *New Music Concerts*, which we then broadcast on *Two New Hours*. Those could be said to be authentic performances of those composers' works.

And then, Jim, you worked directly with her in the office.

Jim Montgomery (JM): She was my boss for several years, first as tech. I worked for *New Music Concerts* as a techie for a couple of years. And basically, Norma and Bob [Aitken] taught me how to be an administrator. I could talk for hours about Norma. She is an amazing human being. And Matt said, consistently understated her own position and importance. I mean, I have no doubt that she recognizes her place in the world. But her public modesty was always very impressive. And she could be quite stringent, quite a demanding employer. She had a great sense of the importance of detail. And that was reflected not only in the way the concerts were presented, but in the way the parties were presented. One of the things when I was a tech was, we were inspired to break down quickly, because if we didn't get to the party soon enough, the food would be gone.

MF: When I look back at the program notes from that December '72, concert with NMC, there was one piece in particular, *Automatic Duo*. I think it's you, Jim and David, with this iterative piece where each version of the piece you were processing the previous version as part of the performance of the current version. I don't know if a recording of that exists.

DJ: Those early days ... Electronic music had existed for a couple of decades but to do it live was quite a new thing. We wanted to try every way it *might* be done. And so *Automatic Duo* was just one step in that direction.

JM: There is no recording of that particular performance. That performance had three performances occurring simultaneously in the Edward Johnson Building. It was a real statement concert for *New Music Concerts*. And very, very well attended, all three. All three simultaneous concerts had standing room audiences. Rosenblum's Light Ensemble, which was actually a sort of electronic rock band, Nexus, and us. So, you got a really broad spectrum of what was going on. It was great.

AW: Now David and Jim will bring us into the 1980s with a big event for the CEE.

DJ: A watershed moment in the early history of the CEE. In 1985, we were invited to participate in the Holland Festival and Canada External Affairs and its relations in the Netherlands helped to organize a great many Canadian artists' attendance at the 1985 Holland Festival, which is a massive event. And it lasts a month. It was during the month of June 1985. In the case of the CEE, our role was to produce a week of concerts at The Icebreaker.

JM: The Icebreaker is a facility in Amsterdam dedicated to contemporary, mostly musical, art. We presented this week-long series of concerts in June 1985, with considerable support from External Affairs Canada. As part of a massive month-long exposure to Canadian art ... to not just Canadian music but to dance, visual arts, and literature, a broad spectrum of work, also from all across the country. Our involvement came about through the auspices of Jann Wolf, who was the creator—progenitor—of The Icebreaker and had become aware of us through a couple of European tours that we had done in the years previous to 1985. Jann made the initial approach to External, mentioning us. External had set up a method by which arts organizations who received invitations could then apply to the Department of External Affairs for support, for logistics, for travel. And then, in our case, they paid for our tour manager as well. And we got a really good one: Claire Hopkinson.

Jann's vision for a space ... It's sort of generally accepted that this is a good idea now, but in the early '70s, this idea had not actually taken place. The notion was that you produced a location that was a destination, not just for music, but for general community involvement. So, at the base of any good community involvement, there's food and drink, and that was what The Icebreaker provided as an entryway. So, it was a combination of bar, cafe, restaurant, but inside was a concert hall that was completely isolated from the activity around it. And as we discovered when we arrived, incredibly well-equipped, absolutely sound-proof. So, inside this nineteenth-century building—eight story building—was this marvelous little cafe, excellent food and excellent drink, and this, I believe that the number is 144, seat theater on tiered seating. Great sight-lines, very intimate connection to the stage, the artists, the audience. The thing couldn't have been better. And the technical support, from sound reinforcement to lighting, just everything was just top notch. And they gave us a space for a week. So, it was a lot of fun.

DJ: The fact that we were offered the chance to produce a whole series over a course of a week, five concerts in a week, provided us for the first time I think, and in the history of the CEE, a chance to truly express, if I could put it that way, through the concert performances, the spectrum of musical activities that we embrace, and that we're instigating, and that we're all about. Of course, we were going to perform our own works because this was obviously an ongoing

preoccupation, but we also spoke together, the members of the CEE, about those musicians in Canada, who were truly inspiring, with whom we enjoyed performing, and invited a selection of really fabulous performers to come with us. Lawrence Cherney on the oboe, Rivka Golani on the viola, Monica Gaylord, pianist, the Armin Electric Strings (the three Armin siblings). And then some of the repertoire that we wanted to do, actually. We asked Jann Wolf and the administration of The Icebreaker if there were Dutch musicians who would be disposed and available to perform with us. And the answer was an affirmative, a very strong, yes. And we had a number of fantastic Dutch musicians who joined us. We actually did not play any Dutch music, because we didn't see that as part of the mandate of the series. But we played a wide spectrum of Canadian music and individual works by ourselves, and also some of the early collective works. For example, there's a work for accordion and electronic synthesizers that the four of us collectively composed and with a Dutch accordionist we rehearsed and prepared that work. I believe the title was *Davies*.

JM: Named for a street where one manifestation of our studio occurred.

DJ: There were a few acoustic works on the program. For example, Larry Lake's *Trio* for flute, viola, and bassoon was one of the handful of acoustic works. Monica Gaylord learned my composition *Quivi sospiro*, which was an early work for virtuoso piano and synthesizers. That's a work that actually, for me, is particularly important given it's had multiple productions and multiple recordings released. But in that case, Monica was a very strong soloist and provided great support for the other repertoire. I should have mentioned Peter Hannon, who I believe was also along as one of the performing musicians, and a composer whose work he played. So, he played both his own work and some of our works as well.

External Affairs took it upon themselves to meet members of the Dutch musical community in the months before June of 1985 and really prepared the ground. They met with, I think, eight different music critics in Amsterdam and in other Dutch cities and met with publicists and other important fixtures of the musical community, and the result was that this entire month-long event, not only to mention our week at The Icebreaker. Audiences were very, very strong, and in the report from External Affairs, they talk about basically the model that this represented for generating local regional audience support and meanwhile provoking audience interest in an event of massive Canadian content. Basically, the halls were all full—really extremely well-attended. The whole event was proclaimed to be a potentially a huge success. Maybe a qualified success, because there were a couple of areas that didn't attract criticism. It wasn't ours, but in some of the disciplines.

JM: I think for me, what continues to stand out about this event was the enormous allocation of resources, in Holland, particularly. There was a research period of up to six months, involving tours. Curators touring across the

country, from Vancouver to Halifax. Leaving aside the enormous expenditures for travel, for accommodation, it was an enormous undertaking. And the interesting thing is that Holland goes through this exercise once every two years. So, it represented, from a Canadian perspective, a wonderful, aspirational model for future work. This is not at all to denigrate the contribution of External Affairs, which was sizable. In the context of any country's support for its arts, it was commendable. External Affairs, obviously, was interested to see what was happening to its investment. So, they sent a number of people to report on the various successes of the—or lack thereof—of the events over the 12 months, and we wound up with a copy of one of them. The overall impression from this particular reporter was that the average Dutch citizen was somewhat overwhelmed by the presence of all these Canadians, particularly in Amsterdam, although this festival is by no means limited to Amsterdam. Briefly, one of the non-CEE related events was *Ra*, which is a dusk to dawn composition by R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer who often is referred to as “our” Murray Schafer. But this depicts the transit of Ra the Sun God when his chariot goes down at dusk, his traverse through the underworld, and his reemergence at dawn. It involves a cast of dozens, and it's a marvelous work. I actually had the privilege of experiencing this in Toronto. Unfortunately, we were on at the same time in Holland, so I didn't see the Dutch performance, but an incredible piece, all of which was—all of the travel and the transportation—underwritten by External Affairs. All in all, I don't think this kind of commitment to the arts, national commitment, I don't recall it being repeated in any significant way since. So, we were very privileged to be involved in this. And, in fact, this experience had a very positive influence on the future development of the CEE. We had just transitioned from a quartet to a trio. This experience validated that transition and opened the way to several major projects that followed hot on its heels.

DJ: You could use the word, the expression, the week of concerts at the Holland Festival really was a watershed moment, shall we say? And the few years coming after the Holland Festival, for example, we released our first CD recording, *Catbird Seat*. We made our first appearance with the Toronto Symphony in the production of Steven Gellman's *Universe Symphony*, a massive piece, a five-movement piece, Mahlerian in its scale, which we performed. Actually, there were five productions.

With *Catbird Seat*. It was at that time, we were beginning to have a sense of, well, maybe not exactly maturity, but the CEE had become an institution of importance to the development of Canadian music—certainly through the commissioning activities that we undertook. We asked a wide spectrum of Canadian composers to write for us, including Norma Beecroft, who produced a work called *Consequences for Five* and, for the CEE, plus Karen Keizer, pianist, and that work does exist, it was recorded and released on an LP. The Radio Canada International Canadian composers' series, quite a fine recording actually exists

of Norma's. The Holland Festival experience was a touchstone—a watershed and a touchstone to bigger things to come.

AW: I'm wondering if there are any questions. From Colleen Renihan in the chat: For how many years did the Holland Festival run?

JM: I'm not sure, whether the festival is still an ongoing, whether the actual Holland Festival continues now or not. I know that for the next decade at least there were further iterations of the festival. The festival, they sort of "did" Canada, in this year [1985]. And so, the fact that the focus of the festival shifted for each biannual event, there was no official connection to the festival from Canada after this event that I'm aware of.

DJ: I see Robin Elliot has asked: Did we bring our own equipment? Yes, Robin, we did. It's the Carnet, the customs document that shows all the synthesizers there, the microphones, the amplifiers, and the estimated value thereof. So as you can see, this was just before the era of the polyphonic synthesizer. These are, for the most part, either monophonic or duophonic instruments. We acquired our first polyphonic synthesizer just after this, which of course changed the repertoire immensely. But, yeah, it was a lot of stuff we had packing.

JM: That's why God gave us tour managers.

DJ: Claire Hopkinson was absolutely brilliant as a tour manager.

AW: How did you work out the different voltages in Europe?

JM: We got a really hefty transformer and then ran the entire setup through the transformer so we didn't have to change any of the voltages for any of the equipment.

AW: You were still relatively young when you did the Holland Festival. What would you recommend for musicians taking on their first big tour?

JM: I'm old enough now that I've seen several ups and downs in terms of economic situations and how that has impacted public support for the arts—or public *non*-support for the arts. But the creative ferment, the new kids keep coming. An artist will create no matter what the circumstances, and the current crop are no different. They're performing. The TRANZAC Club, they're busy all the time. The current iteration of The Music Gallery has a 50–60 concert season. So, the artists: there's no lack of artists and there's no lack of creativity, both in terms of the creation of work, but in terms of the creation of opportunities to put that work in front of the public. So that's one aspect of the current situation of which I am not pessimistic.

**ABSTRACT**

In this panel discussion, Alexa Woloshyn and Matthew Fava discuss the 1970s electronic and experimental music scene in Toronto, with Norma Beecroft as a leader and mentor. David Jaeger and Jim Montgomery contribute their stories, and then discuss an important international experience: the CEE's 1985 Holland Tour. This panel discussion has been edited for clarity.

*Keywords:* Canada, Toronto, electronic music, Canadian Electronic Ensemble, CEE

**RÉSUMÉ**

Dans cette table ronde, Alexa Woloshyn et Matthew Fava évoquent la scène de la musique électronique et expérimentale des années 1970 à Toronto, avec Norma Beecroft comme chef de file et mentor. David Jaeger et Jim Montgomery racontent leur histoire, puis évoquent une expérience internationale importante : la tournée hollandaise du CEE en 1985. Cette table ronde a été éditée pour plus de clarté.

*Mots-clés :* Canada, Toronto, musique électronique, Canadian Electronic Ensemble, CEE