

**Interdisciplinarity Conference - Munk Centre**

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**“The whole world in a local grain of sand”**

**John Mayo**

A few years ago, Naxos, the company that gave a bit of a shake-up to the classical recording industry, issued a two CD set called *Introduction to Canadian Music*. It is, I suppose, an introduction of sorts, although it doesn't have any music that I can use today since John Beckwith is not represented there. But for the moment I'm not so much interested in the contents of the album as in its packaging. The art work for the set -- and this appears on the slip case and on the cover of the notes -- is a well-known painting by Lauren Harris, his *Lake and Mountains*.<sup>1</sup> It seems an obvious enough picture to accompany some Canadian music, but let's stop and unravel this a bit. What is it trying to tell us?

One thing it could be saying is that Canada is a vast, snowbound, and rather desolate and overwhelming place, and what makes us Canadian is that we're tough enough to live here even if, for many of us, the True North Strong and Free begins at Barrie. But even if we haven't been there, we have come to believe that this Canadian North is part of us. And we believe this to some extent because it is rather nicely captured for us by artists; in this case in a painting we can all immediately identify; a painting by a member of our very own Group of Seven. So far so good. Perhaps. But what happens when you stick this picture on the outside of a collection of Canadian music? Many listeners will assume from this that Canadian music gets its distinct identity by somehow emulating the scale and maybe even the content of works like Harris's landscape. That idea has been around for some time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the one composition actually based on this painting, the first movement of Freedman's *Images* is not included in this CD collection.

In a talk he gave in the 1980s Murray Schafer recounted a story about Istvan Anhalt. There are a number of features about the story and its retelling that make one question its truth, but that doesn't much matter. The very fact that Schafer includes it at all illustrates the point I am making. He is explaining how Anhalt supposedly became aware of the Canadian style in music. I am quoting Schafer now:

When he arrived from Hungary [Anhalt] wanted to see the country, so he took a train from Halifax to Montreal. All day he travelled through the woods of New Brunswick, seeing nothing but trees. Here and there he passed a grubby clearing with perhaps a sawmill or a gas station and a few squat houses, then more trees. When he first heard the music of John Beckwith his mind connected back to that experience. Here were bars of repetitious ostinati followed by sudden wild modulations, then the relentless repetitions again.<sup>2</sup>

Whether this comes from Anhalt or whether it is Schafer putting words in Anhalt's mouth, it is difficult to recognise which music of Beckwith's it is supposed to refer to. But it is an attempt to provide a concrete example of the idea merely implied by the Naxos CD album. Canadian music will be distinctly Canadian if it reflects the immense sweep, perhaps even monotony, of the landscape. Or, since in this case there is no Beckwith work that actually follows the Halifax-Montreal route we must assume that the music will be clearly Canadian if it simply absorbs features of that landscape without the composer having any control over it. Schafer was elaborating on the idea of Canadian style being there but hidden, when in the same talk he took a swing at musicologists — a fairly easy target, incidentally. He argues that, even though we may find similarities between the music of particular Canadian composers and that of contemporary European composers, what we should concentrate on is how they differ. There he says we shall find something quite new. "That newness..." and I am quoting him now, "is Canadian — it can't be anything else; and if we had any musicologists who weren't trained in Princeton or Oxford, they would now be busy pointing this

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<sup>2</sup> Schafer, R. Murray "Canadian culture; colonial culture" in *On Canadian Music*. Bancroft (Ontario): Arcana Editions, 1984. 80

out.”<sup>3</sup>

I think the supposition in this — and it was typical of the 1970s and 80s — is that musicologists are detectives or forensic experts. There must be an audible Canadian identity in our music and it is the musicologists job to find out what it is, and where, and why it is hiding. We were never very successful at coming up with an answer, even those of us who trained in Toronto rather than Oxford or Princeton. And when you can't find a satisfactory answer to a question after repeated attempts you ought to wonder whether you are asking the right question. The problem here, as some of my graduate students were quick to point out to me a few years ago, is a twofold one. First is the assumption that what makes Canadian music Canadian is necessarily a distinct sound. The other is to assume that, since our concept of Canada so often begins with its vast geography, then Canada's musical identity must be on the same scale.

There is a more fundamental problem here as well. That too was shown me by my students. What bothered them was the idea of “looking for” and subsequently “discovering” a Canadian style, or identity. What I was talking about, they told me, was something that was as much constructed as it was discovered. And they meant by that not just constructed by artists, writers, composers etc. but by all of us, in the ways we react to or interact with all aspects of Canadian culture. In other words not just by the composition and performance of new Canadian operas, but by interdisciplinary symposia, and I should add, by the audiences at such events as much as by the speakers. Anhalt's discovery, is not really a discovery at all, but part of the construction of what he was supposedly seeking.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

This morning I am probably going to be engaged in a little of that construction myself, but mostly I will be taking a very straightforward course of action. I will show you how two artists — a writer and a composer — have created their own version of Canada, not by imitating the scale of its landscape, but by concentrating on the small, insignificant, sometimes even trivial artefacts with which we surround ourselves. This is the meaning of my title. I had a lot of trouble with that. It kept getting edited to remove the rogue word “local.” But I wanted it exactly as it now stands, since in this form it is a quotation from James Reaney. Writing to John Beckwith about a work on which they were collaborating he says, “the idea behind the . . . three parts is that you see the whole world in a local grain of sand.”<sup>4</sup> With this small, apparently innocuous, adaptation of something well known, we have in essence the approach of these two artists to the creation of an art both universal and Canadian. In work after work they offer us the local grain of Canadian sand and invite us to construct a whole world. I want to examine a number of their pieces from this point of view. We shall find that there are (to use a term somehow appropriate to our present surroundings) collateral benefits to this exercise, because along the way we shall also pick up some snippets of information about the workings of a literary-musical collaboration that has withstood the inevitable storms of such partnerships for more than half a century.

*The Great Lakes Suite*, a collection of songs written in 1949, based on Reaney’s poems is the first musical work that has both their names on the cover. Their first true collaboration, however, is the opera, *Night Blooming Cereus*, which was completed in 1958. As operas go it is relatively short. Nonetheless it was an ambitious undertaking, especially in the 1950s and it was for both librettist and composer what would now be called “a learning experience.” This might suggest an immature piece, but it is not, although there were plenty of people around to criticize and lecture both collaborators on what they ought to have written. Reaney has been quite open about his own particular problems with this piece, and I quote:

At the beginning I was so incredibly stupid as to write the libretto all in prose with

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from James Reaney to John Beckwith. MS. Coll 10, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto

the lyrics in some rather wobbly versification.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reaney, James "An Evening with Babble and Doodle" *Canadian Literature*,  
12 (Spring 1962) 37-43

Eventually the composer demanded something more rhythmic, and the librettist was forced into taking stock of his own poetic technique, “counting syllables, making parallel lines exactly the same length and finding good clean, clear and sonorous rhymes . . .”<sup>6</sup> There we have a picture of the ideal librettist, altering his text to meet the requirements of the music. I could spend the rest of my allotted time discussing the music of this opera, but I want to draw your attention to one small fragment. The setting of the opera is a small South-Western Ontario community. The story, deceptively simple on the surface, actually unfolds a set of complex rituals — rituals of reconciliation. How do you capture both the geographical setting and the ritualistic nature of the story? Beckwith does it by opening up the hymn book that could be found on every rural parlour piano at one time, and presenting from it a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century tune. The tune is actually the composer’s own, but it is in the style of its models. It is sung by the lonely old woman Mrs. Brown as the culmination of her daily domestic ritual. (\*\*)<sup>7</sup> It would take too long to explain the layers of meaning that this simple piece has within the opera. For my purposes here it is a symbol of place - a small stone cottage in rural Ontario in which a lonely old woman, living all alone, cares for her house plants and occasionally sings hymns to her own accompaniment..

Earlier I quoted Reaney’s thoughts on writing the libretto for *Night Blooming Cereus*. The problems he admitted to were mainly about the rhythmic or formal nature of the text. But there is another element that is frequently a stumbling block for a composer. The librettist furnishes a text that is so resonant, so nuanced -- in a word, so poetic -- that it supplies its own music. Reaney understood this trap. What is needed for an opera is a special kind of text, something he has described as “washed-out” — a text, that is, that requires music for its completion.

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I want to move now to some almost unknown works from this collaborative partnership -- works that belong quite definitely in a different era; the era of serious radio. Although, as far as I know, most of these pieces have never been re-broadcast and probably never will be, given the direction that radio has taken, they have an interest and importance for us today. The pieces are a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> In the original presentation of this paper short recorded examples were played at the points marked (\*\*). In all cases it is obvious which music formed the example.

series of what Reaney and Beckwith called radio collages. These began when CBC radio asked Beckwith to supply incidental music for a reading of some of Reaney's Winnipeg poems. The poet had gathered together some of the work he had written while in exile in Manitoba and the result was a collection broadcast as *A Message to Winnipeg*.

The following year, using this, in a sense accidental, work as a model the two produced a collage that was more of a collaboration -- *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*. This collage is full of attractive moments, but I want to draw your attention to two of them. The first is called "The Music Lesson" a virtuoso poem in true verbal counterpoint that is a picture of the young Reaney's piano lessons with the well-known Canadian teacher Cora B. Ahrens.<sup>8</sup> Beckwith's music supplies the warm-up scales and arpeggios and then the music of the four seasons of Reaney's poems. In time-honoured fashion the pupil plays (and recites) hands separately, and then hands together. A second voice adds the counterpoint text at the same time that Beckwith's piano puts the music together. The success of this piece depends to a great extent on Reaney's invention of word patterns that project typical left hand accompaniment patterns--verbal ostinati, as it were: "Bud bud budling/ Bud bud budling", for example, or "Twig and branch, twig and branch/ Bricks, stones and traffic hum". These contrast with the more melodic "right hand" poetic lines "Crickets cry and the owl flies down/The ferris wheel and the fall rains fall." Beckwith's task here is comparatively easy; the music is an exact mirror image of the poem and must almost have written itself. (\*\*)

I have spoken about Reaney's concept of washed-out text that is sometimes necessary for musical setting. There is a musical equivalent that is frequently found in the collages and sometimes in the operas. Here is John Beckwith's explanation:

Sometimes the music [in the collages] is very foreground and has a very sharp outline - [a] distinct outline which could be conducted let's say; other times it consists of the generation of a very simple pattern that simply goes on while the foreground voice is expressing something.<sup>9</sup>

Beckwith was later to call these abstract background patterns by Eric Satie's term -- "wallpaper" music. It can be heard most appropriately in *A House on King William Street*, the 6<sup>th</sup> poem of 12

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<sup>8</sup> James Reaney in a documentary for CBC radio, Toronto, 1982

<sup>9</sup> John Beckwith in interview with Paul Robinson for CJRT radio, Toronto, Dec.

Letters, where the aimless figures just happen to conjure up the wallpaper of Reaney's poem, which opens:

Like the life here, the wallpaper repeats itself.

The most ambitious of the collages, and the one that is most relevant to our theme today, is the trilogy *Canada Dash - Canada Dot* which was broadcast, one section at a time, during the period 1965-67. Reaney's triptych presents a three dimensional model of Canada--one dimension at a time. In the first part we travel across country just as the pioneers did, from east to west; in the second we travel back into the past, and in the third we open up an old chest in the attic or walk around a flea market picking up those cherished objects that furnish our memory--those personal objects that are for us Canada. In this trilogy Beckwith comes close to creating a musical world that is a direct analogy of Reaney's mythological South Western Ontario. The music of the past, like Reaney's treasure chest of memories, provides Beckwith the means to suggest elaborate webs of allusion and meaning. At the same time it constructs part of that Canadian identity I was speaking of earlier and leads eventually to the work that is the main focus of this symposium.

There is an obvious piece of identity construction in the first collage. Although this piece, called *The Line Across*, presents a here and now journey from Newfoundland to British Columbia and has its moments of Group of Seven landscape painting, it can't help delving back all the time into history -- Indian myths, lists of Kings, Queens and Governors General, voyageur songs; and William Lyon Mackenzie talking to his grandson. In the third section, as we reach Quebec, the piano sets us off in party mood with a Galop. This is actually the "War Fever Galop" by Calixa Lavallee, who is the subject of this section (and for those of you who have forgotten, was the composer of O Canada). The vocalists sing to this accompaniment odd phrases of information, as though making them up on the spot. As the music moves into the contrasted middle section of the dance, the narrator takes us parish by parish up the St. Lawrence to Vercheres, the birthplace of the composer. To snatches of O Canada (sung simply to Lavallee's name!) we hear of its first performance in the Pavilion des Patineurs and then, with the exaggerated closing cadences of the Galop suggesting a certain irony, we learn of Lavallee's death in "Boston, Massachusetts, USA."  
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As far as today's topic is concerned the most significant moment comes I think in the second collage, "The Line Up and Down" After the east-to-west crossing of the country represented in the



first part of the trilogy, we now embark on a journey up Yonge Street. Although this too begins as though it were a geographical trip, it is really a journey back in time, contrasting the chaos of modern urban life with the calm and serenity of the Children of Peace community in 19th century Sharon. The two periods are represented by a bluesey folk singer for the present day and by hymns for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These two are tied together musically. The first of the hymns shares an opening phrase with the Yonge Street song - in effect the song generates the old Sharon hymn, or more realistically, the newer music is seen to have its roots in the older. My next example picks up the music just at the point of transition. The voice of modern Toronto is heard in the jazzy bass line, while over the top floats the first appearance of a disembodied hymn tune. (\*\*)

The subject matter of this second collage in the cycle was important for Beckwith.. The strength of the pioneer community seems to have touched a chord in the composer and suggested where his own spiritual roots might lie -- I use the word spiritual here in its widest sense. The fact that the Children of Peace was also a music-loving community provided the impetus for Beckwith's own scholarly work as well as source material that was to be re-worked in a number of compositions.

The danger with all of this is that one may end up sentimentalising the past. Reaney was certainly aware of this. In a letter to Beckwith he wrote "we don't get the Sharon past by imitating it, we only get it by renewing it in perhaps what looks a different form--new music and poetry".<sup>10</sup> In the collage, the voice of Reaney's narrator expresses the same thought.

"In 1825 the temple was begun. Let's build it again."

"Build Wilson's temple again? but it's still standing."

"The new one will be different from the old, although the pattern will be the same."

Much of Beckwith's subsequent career can be seen as fulfilling this dream.

Apart from the song/hymn pair, the other hymns in the collage are 19th century originals and Beckwith identifies them carefully in the score--"Westminster" for "Now we sing the songs of

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from James Reaney to John Beckwith MS. Coll 10, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto

Sharon", "Armley" for "O hollow, empty, lonesome space", and "Wells" for "I see the sun to set and rise". Beckwith obtained the hymn tunes from some tapes that Keith MacMillan loaned him. MacMillan, who had been interested for some time in the music of the Sharon Temple, had transcribed the tunes from the 19th-century Coates barrel-organ that was used in Temple services and which still exists. The tunes "Armley" and "Wells" were later given much more extended musical treatment in the choral work *Sharon Fragments* that Beckwith completed in June 1966.

The trilogy was completed in 1967 with *Canada Dot* a sort of collage scrapbook; the effect, according to Reaney, was to be like "opening one of those old tin boxes I have and looking at the fragments inside". It was to contain "the very few symbolic things I'd put in a box if Canada was to blow up".<sup>11</sup> It is to be neither here nor now, neither there nor then . . . but timeless and spaceless. The catalogue is pure Reaney in its quirkiness - a can of Bon Ami cleaning powder, an arrow head, the coats of arms of Oshawa, descriptions of weeds and bird songs, ice skating figures and hockey and a faded photograph of an ancestor's wedding. By concentrating on these humble objects in microscopic detail Reaney is able at last to build his own Canada to a scale that he can comprehend. "Humble, simple objects in the kitchen can be deeply loved and remembered" says the poet - we recall Mrs. Brown and the domestic ritual of *Night Blooming Cereus*.

Beckwith creates the equivalent musical worlds. The advertiser's claims for Bon Ami cleaner are matched by fanfare figures from instruments and voices. The measured tones of a government weed book remind Beckwith of some curious liturgical practice and the voices chant the phrases as though singing the Litany. With dot seven, the old sepia coloured photograph of grandfather and grandmother on their wedding day, Beckwith is able to match not only the tone of Reaney's poetry but his technique. Here he resurrects an old Toronto parlour song, "Souvenir of Love" which, with its swooning violin and tremolo piano, matches perfectly the faded picture, and can be used exactly

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from James Reaney to John Beckwith MS. Coll 10, Faculty of Music Library, University of Toronto.

as it stands. Once again we are made aware of the all important thread from here to then; the tone of wonderment in the boy's voice might be that of Beckwith himself discovering his ancestors - "A hundred or more persons are in existence so far because these two came together. . . in love." (\*\*)<sup>12</sup>

I have time for one more illustration. In 1973, while they were still in the middle of their second opera, *The Shivaree*, Beckwith and Reaney collaborated on a musical story for children -- children of all ages I might add -- called "*All the Bees and All the Keys*." A fun piece, it should be part of the musical upbringing of all Canadians. It tells an amusing, but moral tale of the rivalries between a village silver prize band, directed by the rich and autocratic Kenneth, and its underdog rivals--the tin band, led by Benjamin Jr. the bee-keeper's son. The atmosphere of a small-town war with strong class overtones is broadly sketched. The climax comes with the brief visit of the Governor General and his wife to the village. Kenneth and the Silver Band are all set to play but are chased away by Benjamin's musical bees and the tin band takes its place. Eventually the Governor General's wife diplomatically asks to hear both bands play together. (\*\*) In this piece the musical vernacular is not the kind that we have encountered so far, but the music of town bands, music that might be heard at a parade or from a bandstand in the park on a summer afternoon -- another musical strand with historical depth.

We began with a massive landscape -- that is with one version of Canada. We end with a town band, one of those small, relatively insignificant musical moments that can have such resonance for us. There is a direct thread running from these works of the 60s, with their hymns and marches, parlour songs and dances, to the work that is the focus of our attention today -- *Taptoo!* What all these grains of sand have in common is their rootedness. That is another way of constructing Canada. If you want to see John Beckwith boil over, just try putting the words "Canadian Music" and "Canada is a young country" in the same sentence, especially if you are

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<sup>12</sup> In his summing up at the end of the symposium, the composer pointed out that the voice was in fact that of his eldest son Jonathan.

offering the one as a justification for what you perceive as shortcomings in the other. His Canada and that of James Reaney has a rich history, a history constructed from minute, local details. In their collaborative works they have allowed us to become immersed in that same Canada -- "the whole world," indeed. "in a local grain of sand."