

Canadian music: A reflection of



Canadian musicians in concert

Musical self-expression generally matures more slowly in any nation than does self-expression in the other arts. Canada has been no exception. But today, Canada has come of age in all professional areas: there are hundreds of choirs, many orchestras, important chamber music groups, a number of opera companies, many expert rock bands and country groups as well as numerous renowned performers in classical music, opera, folk, jazz, country and popular music and children's music. Equally important are the increasing number of Canadian composers contributing not only to the Canadian tradition in music but also to the growth of music worldwide.

The general impression of style in Canadian music has been one of variety. While it has generally reflected contemporary international trends it has also reflected the individualism of the composer. Much of the music has also been enriched by the traditions and cultures of the indigenous peoples, the Indians and Inuit, and the settler cultures, English, French, Scottish, Irish, Ukrainian, Czechoslovak, Polish, German, Jewish, Icelandic, Japanese and others. The social and geographical environment as well as the inspiration from Canadian literary and historical sources are also inherent in some of Canada's music.

Folk songs were one of the earliest forms of music in Canada. The first creators of genuinely Canadian folk songs, the voyageurs, adapted some of the songs of their homeland to their new environment and created many new ones. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, traditions of folk songs developed in all areas of the country and in a number of parts of Canada like Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Quebec, many of these traditions are still very much alive.

Classical music in the country from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century consisted mainly of functional pieces – marches and patriotic songs, quadrilles and waltzes, psalms, hymns and evangelical songs, and parlour songs in the sentimental traditions of the succes-

sive periods. The more ambitious compositions were often cantatas and oratorios or operettas in the European tradition. Cantatas were composed for national events like the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1860 or Confederation in 1867. *Caïn* (1905) by Alexis Contant was the first Canadian oratorio to be given a performance in Canada and Joseph Quesnel's *Colas et Colinette* (1789) was an important operetta. Early Canadian composers whose music extended beyond these forms, like Calixa Lavallée, who not only wrote the national anthem, *O Canada* (1880), but also at least four operas, five choral works with orchestra, and some three dozen other works ranging from symphonies to piano solos were usually forced to establish their careers outside of Canada.

During the late 1920s a number of composers like Ernest MacMillan, Hector Gratton, Claude Champagne and Healey Willan became interested in the corpus of folk music. They were able to draw on thousands of tunes representing the artistic folklore of French Canada, Nova Scotia and the Indian peoples collected earlier by Charles Marius Barbeau and others. Most of their important and large scale works however, were still deeply based in the European traditions.

Composers who matured during the 1930s and 1940s were again strongly influenced by models and trends outside Canada, but often the models were employed in a fresh and original manner. John Weinzweig, for example, was amongst the first in the country to use the 12-tone scale.

By the 1950s a generation of Canadian composers who had received much of their training in Canada included Murray Adaskin, R Murray Schafer, Brian Cherney, Srul Irving Glick, Jacques Hétu, Harry Freedman, André Prévost and Harry Somers. As each of these composers matured he developed his own approach to structure and development, his own 'sound'. R Murray Schafer, one of the most famous internationally, draws on many resources from the sounds of the sea to Persian poetry for a desired effect. Newer generations of composers continue the tradition of individualism, often projecting abstract themes or sounds and employing new techniques in percussion or electronic music.

Initially Canadian orchestras and musical groups performed compositions written mainly in other countries and generally from the classical repertoire. By the mid 1970s Canadian compositions were being performed on a regular basis with an increasing number of new scores being commissioned in the country each year as well.

While Canadian music often embodies the influences of its European background, much of it is also reflects the elements inherent in the country that lend it individuality, and reveals the forces of the environment and some of its historic themes. Certainly there is a sparseness - often a bleakness appearing in the works of a number of Canadian composers which may be related to the Canadian environment. Themes from the country's history like the martyrdom of the Jesuit missionaries or Louis Riel, the visionary hanged as a traitor in the 1880s, have inspired many works. At intervals