

The New Music

Alberta's classical composers draw inspiration from varied musical traditions

by Piotr Grella-Mozejko

Being a “classical composer” today means more or less what it meant a hundred years ago; that is, writing symphonies, concertos and sonatas for performance by orchestras, string quartets and solo instruments such as piano or violin. The difference is that nowadays the composer is in big trouble. Nobody wants you. As the distinguished Calgary composer Quenten Doolittle once put it, “A modern composer attends the premiere of his or her work to hear its last performance.”

This is unfortunate. From the baroque compositions of Edmonton's Andrew Creaghan, to the landscape-inspired “aurages” of Calgary's Allan Gordon Bell, to the radical experimentation of Grande Prairie's Rolf Boon, we have, in Alberta, a wealth of excellent composers and a rich body of serious or “New Music” well worth listening to.



The term New Music and its variants such as Neue Musik, Nova Musica or *stile moderno* (versus *stile antico*) has had a long tradition. Mediaeval theorist Philippe de Vitry in *Ars Nova* of 1323 uses the term to denote art music (which we now call classical music) whose innovative qualities set it clearly apart from the previous style(s), and take new directions in technical and expressive approach. In the 20th century, the term was applied at first to anti-Romantic, non-tonal, largely experimental and “dissonant” compositions. In the last 20 years, it has been used to refer to any quasi-Romantic, neo-tonal, minimalistic, “neo-consonant” music written by living composers. Instead of “contemporary classical music,” we have the brief and matter-of-fact New Music. (Unfortunately, the term was later usurped by some pop journalists and musicians.)

Why the resistance to this music? Doolittle, Alberta’s most successful operatic author, whose music has often been performed more than once, knows full well what it takes to have a large scale work staged, and not only staged, but decently rehearsed and faithfully performed. He also knows why his and his colleagues’ music is so often undeservedly rejected by orchestras and other ensembles. As he explains, history is clearly to blame. Music history, that is. Many music lovers haven’t recovered from the sonic assault of such composers as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern, Edgar Varèse and their followers who launched an “offensive of ugliness” from the late 1910s on. The problem is that the vast majority of avant-garde or experimental composers were writing as if they wanted to demonstrate at any cost that they did not have a ghost of talent. As a result, they scared away performers, publishers, orchestra managers—and audiences. Audiences will not willingly suffer through a cacophony of notes that everyone but the composer despises.

Fortunately, today’s classical composers have for the most part returned to accepted notions of beauty. New Music has become aurally attractive and appealing again. It does not mean that artists just imitate the old masters. Yes, there is a tendency to re-create certain aesthetic models, but this re-creation is a development rather than slavish imitation. Although music has evolved in often unpredictable directions in the last 50 years, there is still room for pleasing melody.



THE LATE VIOLET ARCHER, THE MOST FAMOUS FEMALE COMPOSER IN CANADA AND MOST RENOWNED IN ALBERTA, was the driving force in the development of Alberta’s New Music scene. Born in 1913, a student of 20th century giants Paul Hindemith and Béla Bartók, she has become a Canadian legend. Through her perseverance and enthusiasm, Archer, a loner totally devoted to the art of music, laid foundations for what was to mature into a vibrant and healthy New Music community in Alberta, a hard-working, truly pioneering community of composers, performers, music teachers and support organizations.

Arriving in Edmonton in 1962, Archer almost single-handedly established contemporary classical music creation as a legitimate element in Alberta’s cultural landscape. She founded a school of composition, too. Some of our most accomplished composers—Allan Gordon Bell, Ron Hannah, G. Gordon Nicholson, and Robert Rosen—studied with Archer. Says Hannah, “Violet Archer ceaselessly supported and encouraged her students. This is her greatest legacy. Thirty years of pushing have had their effect, and Alberta now has several excellent new music establishments. I believe this is in large part the result of her efforts.”

A park in Edmonton and a large library in Calgary bear her name. In 1985, the Violet Archer Festival became the first event of its kind in North America devoted to a woman composer. In 1998, Violet Archer moved to Ottawa to join her family, but is remembered in Alberta for her powerful music, her deep commitment to the cause of classical composers, and her extraordinary educational endeavours. She died in February.

Archer’s legacy is a musically wide-reaching and geographically wide-ranging community of composers who, in true postmodern fashion, do not hesitate to draw inspiration from a variety of sources, including carefully selected folk and popular genres.



TAKE, FOR INSTANCE, GEORGE ANDRIX. Now in his 60s, Andrix was born in Chicago and settled in Edmonton in 1970. Known

From the late 1910s on, the vast majority of avant-garde or experimental composers were writing as if to demonstrate that they did not have a ghost of talent.

for his elegant modern scores, available from such giants as the leading American publisher Schirmer, he has not shied away from writing witty classical pieces based on blues.

“Participating in disparate musical endeavours has always given me great pleasure,” says Andrix. “I have never been able to bring myself to specialize. I’m sure I would be much better at any one of the things that I do if I gave up the others, but I wouldn’t be having nearly so much fun.”

Fun, play, joy of writing music bring pleasure to him, to his performers and his audiences. Pleasure stems from unifying some seemingly mismatched styles. Andrix’s recent CD release, *The Complete Blues Viola*, is a delightful foray into the world of artistically and technologically advanced blues. Andrix’s music is about building bridges, establishing anew the friendly connections between the classical music composer and listeners.



THIS LOVE OF THE ECLECTIC IS ECHOED IN CANMORE’S ROBERT ROSEN, admired for his ground-breaking theatrical/dance and environmental pieces, the former composed for Vancouver’s famous Kokoro Dance, the latter often performed in outdoor spaces, with active participation of audiences. Rosen has consistently acknowledged

the contribution of such outsiders as experimental rock musician turned classical composer Frank Zappa. What an interesting mix— an ambitious classical composer avoiding the potential sterility of writing only classical scores and an ambitious pop musician who can’t get satisfaction from rock.

Rosen’s Suite fz/Thanks Frank, featured on a compilation CD, *soundland alberta: le pays sonore* (CLEF Records 96001-2), well attests to his inclusive creative philosophy. The work itself is an example of a skillful and unorthodox union of modern recording technology, rock instrumentation and environmental sounds, all placed within a clear, modern classical context.

LETHBRIDGE COMPOSER J-P CHRISTOPHER JACKSON, a self-professed “schizo” personality, throws some light on his similarly varied work: “Well, my style (like my life) is very eclectic, ranging from traditional tonal/modal harmonic principles to more experimental techniques. The pieces I have written have all been for particular performers and organizations and have therefore been tailored to suit particular needs that may be, for instance, instrumentation, but [my music] also takes into consideration potential audiences.”

BUT FOR ROLF BOON OF GRAND PRAIRIE, author of some of the most radical pieces in Canadian New Music (the aggressive and “loud” Black Sunday for organ, for instance), exploring popular genres is a separate activity from “art music” composition. Boon talks of “contrasting crafts” and offers an interesting distinction between his commercial and classical vocabularies: “As a composer, I indulge in both externally censored and uncensored music. By censored, I mean music created using specific sets of parameters, the primary one being accessibility. Film and commercial music fall into this category because of their predetermined psychology, mood and duration. Conversely, the creation of uncensored music is where I experiment, translate, explore, invent and challenge performers and myself. This type of music is less accessible, at least to the lay person, and can be categorized as art, concert or contemporary music.”



EDMONTON’S ANDREW CREAGHAN is, by contrast, deeply immersed in Baroque forms and genres. A virtuoso guitarist, Creaghan has for years drawn influences from the treasury of the 17th and 18th centuries. In many of his pieces, be they orchestral, chamber or solo, he has combined familiar Baroque idioms with purifying influences

of Buddhism and mysticism, which has led to creation of a very personal, emotionally charged yet delicate and sophisticated style.



WALKING OR, PERHAPS, ERASING THE LINE BETWEEN CLASSICAL VOCABULARY AND POPULAR GENRES IS GORDON NICHOLSON OF EDMONTON.

A former student of Archer's, Nicholson has established his reputation as both a classical composer and a musician versatile in other styles. His Alberta sympathies are leg-

endary—upon completion of studies at Berklee College of Music, Boston, he was asked to stay and teach, yet chose to return to Edmonton, where he now lectures at Grant MacEwan Community College. His individual compositional idiom is best expressed in chamber works, often written on commission from some of the most expert New Music performers in Canada and abroad. Allergic to futile experiments, Nicholson represents a style which, while indebted to Bartók and Hindemith, offers a fresh look at relationships between new and old.

One of his music's strengths is his open-mindedness. Says Nicholson: "I draw inspiration from everywhere, but it is in the music I choose to listen to that I can draw my inner inspiration. I seem to listen to, perhaps, less music these days to allow my inner voice to come through. Better, I think, 'to listen to the wind' or my own inner song.

"I have written music in almost all styles, be they classical or popular," says Nicholson. "These days I am attempting to find and use my own composer's 'voice.' This is not verbal, like ordinary language, but includes a unique vocabulary of musical materials. I am trying to make my own voice unique and recognizable." Recognizable it is. With numerous performances in Canada and abroad, Nicholson has brought Canada's music to international attention.



MALCOLM FORSYTH, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS BROUGHT THE WORLD TO CANADA.

Deeply dissatisfied by apartheid in his native South Africa, Forsyth decided in the late 1960s to settle in a country with different values than his tormented homeland. After starting off as a trombone player with the Edmonton Symphony

Orchestra, his compositional talent became obvious and a series of prestigious commissions made him a household name among Canada's classical music lovers. Always sensitive to African native folk music (as manifested in his orchestral *ukuZalwa*, rebirth—an allusion to his hopes for

reconciliation well before the reconciliation took place), Forsyth has not neglected the folklore of his new country. *Atayoskewin*, based on Canada's native legends and beliefs, was his first Juno-winning piece.



FELLOW "DISPLACED" SOUTH AFRICAN COMPOSER JACOBUS KLOPPERS, an international authority on J. S. Bach (to whom he devoted an already classic book), unlike cautiously modern Forsyth, is a firm Romantic. He grew up admiring the best of the Western tradition and set out not only to preserve it but to give it a new meaning and

life. In his pieces, many of them written for church congregations and organists, Kloppers creates a world whose familiar gestures offer an authentic spiritual experience to those who, like the composer himself, seek fulfilment in prayer and humility in music.

JERRY OZIPKO, THE FIRST ADVOCATE OF THE AVANT-GARDE IN OUR PROVINCE, recalls, "In the late 1960s, I was a champion of student composers such as Vernon Murgatroyd, the late John Lewis (an Albertan who helped pioneer computer music in England when he moved there in the late 1960s) and others. I thought it was important to bring what was then the newest trend to my home province. During my grad studies in the U.S. (at what now is Truman State University) I had the opportunity to hear the St. Louis Symphony—works by Xenakis and Penderecki blew me away. When I came back to Edmonton in the summer of 1970, I decided to perform new music on a regular basis."

Along with Jonathan Bailey, Reinhard Berg and Bill Damur, Ozipko gave a series of programs of avant-garde music by such composers as John Cage, Otto Luening, Toshio Mayuzumi and Steve Reich. In 1976, Ozipko and friends formed a new music group, Synapse: New Music Ensemble, and played pieces by George Crumb and others. Another group formed at that time was Ensemble Otherwise, still active today providing audiences with controversial music by Canadian and international composers.

THEN THERE ARE THOSE WHO RISE TO RARE HEIGHTS EVEN AMONG THEIR FELLOWS. "Musicians' musician" Allan Gordon Bell was born in Calgary in 1953, raised in Edmonton, and then invited in 1978 to teach at the University of Calgary. Bell started his career as a self-taught player. His first instrument was electric guitar. His first job—playing in local rock bands. Unlike many of his colleagues who went to other provinces or abroad for musical schooling, Bell is a made-in-Alberta composer. In

Tutti Div a 3

Alberta has provided opportunities—university teaching jobs as well as New Music societies and festivals—for music by our composers to get well-deserved recognition.

the course of time, even as a student of Violet Archer at the University of Alberta, he established himself as one of this country's most revered and successful classical composers, a true master to whom the community looks for guidance and inspiration.

Bell's music is unabashedly Albertan, written in a highly personal, ambitious, progressive yet aurally engaging and stimulating idiom from which emerge Albertan soundscapes and an almost tactile sense of the province's natural qualities. Majestic slow movements evoke endless Alberta skies. Other musical elements suggest explosions of the raw, primordial forces that shaped the Rockies, or brawny rural dance gatherings where folks have too much of a good time sometimes (Old Coyote's Saturday Night, for piano). It is not infrequent in his scores to hear passages written for, yes, rocks (Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra) or oil pipes (An Elemental Lyric, for orchestra). At the same time, Bell's music evokes what the composer refers to as "aurages"—images of aural surroundings, sonic signals that inform us about the beauty of what we so repeatedly neglect.

How did it happen? How did Alberta become home to an exciting and various New Music tradition? John Reid, master jazz saxophonist and president of the Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region, suggests four factors have made for such a rich musical scene. First, our composers have gained international experience from living, working and studying abroad. Second, the electronic age has allowed easy access to happenings and information worldwide. Third, Violet Archer had two great students, Rosen and Bell, who have passed along to their students her rich legacy. Allan Gilliland and Vivian Fung, for instance, have become forces to reckon with. "The level of instruction available here in the province is considerable," Reid asserts. And finally, Alberta has provided opportunities—mainly university teaching

jobs, but also the New Music societies and festivals—for music by our local composers to get well-deserved recognition.

An influential Calgary-based composer, teacher and author of many important orchestral and chamber works, William Jordan, lauds CBC Radio as a significant player in the development of the Canadian New Music scene. "The CBC has been very generous with my music, broadcasting nationally and regionally many challenging new works I've composed. Over the past twenty years, I have heard my Symphonic Fantasy, Second Piano Concerto and Variations for Orchestra all broadcast repeatedly on the national network."

What makes Alberta such a fascinating terrain for New Music is its sponge-like acceptance of a variety of aesthetics. Die-hard avant-garde composers thrive here, too, and their music deserves attention. We

can enjoy traditionally conceived music but what will we hear in a hundred years? The music of Calgary's Hope Lee and David Eagle, and Edmonton's Howard Bashaw opens new horizons—right now. Revered and admired in Europe, these musicians, through their teachings, assure the future of Canada's music.

Inarguably, Alberta New Music has demonstrated a singular quality of continuity and strength from Archer to Bell to... two extraordinary young composers, Calgarians Kelly-Marie Murphy and Heather Schmidt. Former students of Bell, both Murphy and Schmidt have, despite their age, already made an impact on the international scene. Both have won a string of important competitions, both have had a number of orchestral commissions and performances. The future belongs to them. 🏡

Piotr Grella-Mozejko was born in Poland and has lived in Canada since 1989. He is a member of the Canadian League of Composers and president of the Edmonton Composers' Concert Society.

(See page 58 for a selected discography of music by Alberta composers.)



Passages written for rocks and oil pipes are not unheard of in Allan Gordon Bell's scores.

Selected Discography of Music by Alberta Composers

Compiled by Piotr Grella-Mozejko

Almost all of these titles are available from the Canadian Music Centre. Catalogue numbers provided are CMC numbers unless otherwise noted.

Assemblage. Charles Foreman, piano: Four North American Piano Sonatas. A perfect introduction to piano music by two significant Albertan composers: Violet Archer and William Jordan. (UniCal UC CD 9501)

Beauty Enthralled. One Albertan work by Robert Rosen, but what a work it is! (HR 97102)

Brief Confessions Brèves. Arguably the best introduction to music by Albertans, this recording includes over 20 short works by 20 Albertan composers representing every active generation and style. The pieces are short and, for the most part, very accessible. (CLEF Records CR 97002-2. Available from CLEF Records and the CMC)

Canadian Trumpet Concerti/Concertos canadiens pour trompette. A stunning interpretation of Forsyth's Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra. Its second nocturnal movement is unbelievably beautiful. (SMCD 5130)

Jane Coop. Forsyth's monumental Piano Concerto featured along with the works by Bartók and Prokofiev. Jane Coop, Calgary Philharmonic under Mario Bernardi. Need we say more? (SMCD 5124)

E-Motion. Avant-garde at its best (nothing to be afraid of!). Chamber music by Hope Lee and David Eagle. Wonderful. (New Concert Discs NCD 0294-CD)

Electra Rising. Ultimate Forsyth! Fantastic renditions of his orchestral music by the Edmonton Symphony under Grzegorz Nowak. Worth every penny. (CBC Records SMCD 5180)

Forsyth/Freedman. Forsyth's first Juno-winning piece, Atayoskewin, played perfectly by Edmonton Symphony under Uri Mayer. Fun to listen to! (CBC Records SMCD 5059)

Glossa. International broadcasters are raving about it! A perfect combination of accessibility, imagination and craft. A gift for everyone. (CLEF Records CR 9903-2. Available from CLEF Records and the CMC)

Milhaud/Maurice/Forsyth/Sowande. Forsyth's Juno-winning Sketches from Natal played as never before. A classic. (SMCD 5135)

Music Mosaic/Music for Countryside and Wilderness. Ultimate interpretations of Allan Gordon Bell's two significant chamber works. (New Concert Discs NCD 0191-CD)

Northern Arch/Arc du nord. A must! Legendary, very first CD devoted entirely to music by Albertans. Chamber works by Archer, Bell, Grella-Mozejko, Rosen and others. Almost out of print. (Arktos 94001 CD)

Northern Landscapes. A tribute to Dr. Violet Archer. Truly outstanding introduction to Archer's vocal output. (SMCD 1001)

Offering. Includes Quenten Doolittle's already classic Hornby Island Suite for choir. (HFR 9301-CD)

Piano among Friends. Jamie Syer, piano: from Bach to Chopin to Liszt to Doolittle. Doolittle, one of the Albertan (and international) masters, offers Fantasy With Interludes, which one can put on par with many Baroque and Romantic works. Interpretations by Albertan Jamie Syer are extraordinary throughout. (New Concert Discs NCD 010997-CD)

Playing Tribute. Beautiful rendition of Archer's Sonata for Flute, Clarinet and Piano. (CAM 9502)

Polaris. Impressive piano works by Lee, Bell, Eagle and others, breathtakingly interpreted by Alberta's Colleen Athparia. (UC CD 9601)

Soaring with Agamemnon. Like father, like daughter! Amanda Forsyth, one of the world's most accomplished cellists and First Cello of Calgary Philharmonic, gives fantastic performances of her father's music. It is truly a gift for every occasion. (ERAD 231)

Soundland Alberta: Le pays sonore. One of the most informative Albertan discs ever released. Works by Archer, Eagle, Grella-Mozejko, Hannah, Hobden, Rosen and others. (CLEF Records CR 96001-2. Available from CLEF Records and the CMC)

Spirit Trail. Music of Allan Gordon Bell. A must! Orchestral music by one of the world's most visionary composers. (CBC Records SMCD 5183) *This disc is also reviewed by Kenneth DeLong in this issue of AlbertaViews.*

Sundogs. Impressive foray into larger orchestral works by Allan Gordon Bell, David Eagle, William Jordan and others. (UniCal UC CD 9901)

Traffic (The Hammerhead Consort). Made-in-Alberta darlings of Canadian composers and audiences give phenomenal renditions of music by Howard Bashaw, Allan Gilliland and Jeffrey McCune. (Arktos 99032 CD)

SOURCES

Canadian Music Centre Prairie Region

911 Library Tower
2500 University Drive N.W.
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4
Tel: (403) 220-7403
Fax: (403) 289-4877
CMC Distribution Services
E-mail: cmc@ucalgary.ca
www.ffa.ucalgary.ca/cmc/dac_rca/iN.html

CBC Records

PO Box 500, Station A
Toronto, ON M5W 1E6
Tel: (416) 205-3498
Fax: (416) 205-2376
E-mail: cbcrecords@toronto.cbc.ca
<http://cbcrecords.cbc.ca/>

CLEF Records

Concord Tower
#507, 11147 - 82 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T6G 0T5
Tel: (780) 434-3505
E-mail: barbra@connect.ab.ca
www.connect.ab.ca/~piotr/eccs/

The Gramophone

8724 - 109 Street
Edmonton, AB T6G 1E9
Toll Free: 1-800-231-7594
(Canada only)
Tel: (780) 428-2356
Fax: (780) 425-9181
E-mail: gphone@telusplanet.net
www.gramophone.ab.ca/