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CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN COMPOSERS, edited by Keith MacMillan and John Beckwith
Oxford University Press (Canadian Branch), 1975 (£11.75)
Obtainable in UK from OUP

HARRY SOMERS, by Brian Cherney
University of Toronto Press, 'Canadian Composers' series No. 1,
1975 (\$15.00)

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Contemporary Canadian Composers is a welcome addition to the rather sparse and fragmentary bibliographical information available on Canadian composers of the twentieth century. The book, edited by two of the senior chroniclers of the Canadian musical scene, replaces several earlier attempts to compile useful information about Canada's composers, such as the *Catalogue of Canadian Composers* (1947 and 1952) and *Thirty-four Biographies of Canadian Composers* (1964), both published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and neither readily available nor widely distributed even during its own lifespan.

MacMillan and Beckwith have included biographical sketches of 144 composers who, in the words of the editors, 'represent... the most active and prominent composers from all parts of the country in the period covered' (p.vi). The chronological organisation admits those composers who have produced all or most of their works since 1920. Until the more comprehensive and ambitious *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* appears (hopefully before the end of the decade) *Contemporary Canadian Composers* will remain an indispensable source of information on the major Canadian composers, most of whom are still living. Unlike the proposed *Encyclopedia*, the MacMillan/Beckwith volume has excluded composers of popular and commercial music, band and church music, and, with a few exceptions, serious jazz figures as well as very young composers who have not yet attracted sufficient public attention. Although these specialist interests are not accommodated, the framework is a reasonable one for a book of modest proportions.

Any reference source, of course, must be judged primarily on the extent and accuracy of its information and the ease with which that information can be extracted. In the latter respect, the book passes with flying colours. Of necessity, a great number of abbreviations are used for bibliographical references, performing and concert groups, publishers and the like, but these are clearly explained at the outset. Each entry consists of a fairly detailed account of a composer's career — more or less depending on the relative importance of each subject — with a brief discussion of his or her music and musical style, followed by a comprehensive list of musical works and primary and secondary literary sources. Included in the list of works, which is further broken down by instrumental category in the manner of *Grove's Dictionary*, is a discography and information about first performances.

The editors have eschewed lexicographical 'objectivity' in favour of providing a brief aesthetic evaluation of each composer's work, with occasional discomfiting results. A case in point is William Aude's article on the Saskatchewan composer Murray Adaskin in which we are informed that his chamber opera, *Grant, Warden of the Plains* (1967), although containing 'many fine passages' (p.1), nevertheless is marred by 'a sentimental chorus culminating in the tonic chord with the third on top' (p.2).

In a work of this scope, it is inevitable that errors of fact and omission will occur, and although the evidence points to a generally sound editorial exercise, there are indications that some of the contributors failed to handle data with sufficient care. A brief examination of the entry for R. Murray Schafer (pp.199-205) will demonstrate the point. The long article on Schafer, by fellow composer Udo Kasemets, is nicely proportioned and most informative. However, the bibliographical appendices contain a sufficient number of minor errors to be the cause of some concern. Schafer's works *East* (1973) and *Four Songs on Texts of Tagore* (1958) are incorrectly dated 1972 and 1962 respectively, and Kasemets fails to mention that *Divan I Shams I Tabriz* (1970) and *Music for Morning of the World* (1970) are part of a triptych called *Lustro*, the third part of which, *Beyond the Great Gate of Light* (1972), is omitted for the list of works altogether. Also missing from the otherwise complete (to mid-1973) list of works — barring seven pieces that Schafer withdrew in August 1968 — is the early piano solo *Polytonality* (1952), the composer's earliest extant work.

In the list of literary works which follows, the page numbers of the articles are not consistently present, several dates and volume numbers are misquoted, and at least one non-existent article by Schafer is listed: 'Money and Music', printed in the bibliography without page numbers, is merely part of the front-cover by-line for 'What is this Article About?' which appears in *The Canadian Forum* for December 1964 and which is given its own separate listing.

Although these are admittedly minor errors, in themselves of small significance, they are sufficient in quantity to lead future researchers temporarily astray, and if other entries contain a similar percentage of factual error (which has not been established) the value of the biographical dictionary is accordingly diminished.

Dr. Cherney's monograph on Harry Somers, one of Canada's most distinguished composers, provides clear evidence that scholarly musical criticism in Canada has arrived at a new level of maturity and professionalism. The Somers book, the first of a projected series of critical studies of major Canadian composers, is

the first truly important document of its kind to have emerged from the morass of journalistic prattle which has passed for critical musical commentary in Canada, and as such it augurs well for the future.

If Cherney's book succeeds as a welcome analytical study of a significant body of music which is still too little known, even in Canada, it fails signally to treat its subject in the round and we are frustrated in our desire to discover the man behind the music. Very near the end of his study Cherney writes, almost apologetically: 'to establish a relationship between the personality of a composer and the qualities of his music is troublesome in some cases, and probably futile in most' (p.151). But surely one of the biographer's fundamental tasks is to illuminate this very relationship. The reader seeks to know more about the influences on Somers and the links between his music and that of his contemporaries. In a technological age it is, perhaps, not surprising that a humanistic approach is overshadowed by a classical passion for underlying form, and in musical biography particularly it is difficult to fuse the analytical with the humanistic in a way that satisfies the demands both of Apollo and Dionysius. Cherney gives us what might be called 'the composer's view', and perhaps it is the composer in the author² which restrains him from any significant attempt to penetrate the mask and introduce us to the man. Either that or we must conclude that Canadian composers live inordinately dull and prosaic lives. Moreover, a first biography carries with it certain responsibilities. We value Schindler not for his analytical insights — such as they are — but for the revelation, compounded of innumerable details, of the character and spirituality of a great composer. Later generations will have the scores; Cherney has had access to the man, and it is a source of some disappointment that he has failed to capitalise on this privilege.

The bulk of Cherney's book consists of fairly intensive analyses of Somers' major works, with little to relieve the sombre procession of charts, diagrams, and music examples. The many musical illustrations are welcome, indeed indispensable, considering that Somers' works are still not generally known. Nevertheless, one would have to have access to the full scores to quibble with Cherney's analytical observations in any meaningful way. In keeping with the general tenor of the book, the writing style is correct, if perhaps a bit stiff and perfunctory, even occasionally cryptic. For example, when the author announces that 'the song ["Stillness" (1942)] demonstrates an ability to create and sustain contrasting moods through harmonic and pianistic resources' (p.8) one wonders what kind of atmosphere might have been created through contrapuntal and non-pianistic resources. Or this curiously flat statement: 'The opening of the first movement of [of the Piano Sonata No. 2 (1946)] is the most highly organized two-part writing one encounters until *North Country*' (p.25; italics mine). Here the adjectives convey little information and leave the reader pondering the organisational hierarchy of two-part counterpoint. It is surprising, too, given the author's objective approach to his subject and what might be diagnosed as an anti-romantic bias, that he should allow such a statement as: '... a Kafka-like atmosphere... achieved by limiting material [in the opera *Louis Riel* (1967), Act II, Scene 2] to low harp, tam-tam, and tom-tom sounds...' (p.138).

For the most part Cherney has observed the niceties of scholarly writing: his documentation is thorough and his analyses perceptive and meaningful. The music examples are not always conveniently placed, and occasionally the author quotes a source without revealing its origin. Most disappointing in this respect is the decision to print only a selected bibliography, sure to be a source of some concern and annoyance to future Somers scholars who will be eager for every scrap of evidence, however insignificant it may appear to be during the composer's lifetime.

I have, of course, been picking nits. Cherney's book will stand as the first serious attempt to deal with a significant Canadian composer in depth. In its thoroughness, its analytical detail, and its perceptiveness, it sets a high standard for its projected companion volumes. In referring to one of his helpful analytical charts (*Passacaglia and Fugue* for orchestra (1954), pp.66-67) Cherney recognises that 'such a scheme cannot, of course, convey the sense of sheer physical excitement generated by the fugue' (p.65). It is this very sense of exhilaration one feels in the presence of great art which, in the last analysis, the author has failed to communicate to the reader. To be sure, he has made us more aware of Somers' music, but he has not made us more curious about it to any appreciable extent. Nevertheless, we must conclude that with Cherney's study of Somers, the critical literature on Canadian music has acquired a new dimension.

NOTES:

¹But see Alan Gillmor's 'Contemporary Music in Canada', *Contact* 11 (Summer 1975), pp.3-13; 12 (Autumn 1975), pp.15-24 (Ed.)

²Brian Cherney (b.1942) teaches theory and analysis, composition, and twentieth-century music history at McGill University and can be considered one of the outstanding Canadian composers of the younger generation. His String Quartet No. 2 was awarded the McMaster University Prize for Chamber Music in 1970.