In search of our own music

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Teachers should certainly not throw out all but Canadian music from their school libraries. But a balanced performance program should include music of a variety of styles, periods, and countries, and good Canadian repertoire has a place in such a program.

John Beckwith received a questionnaire from a high school student doing a survey of Canadian composers. Question One asked: "As a Canadian composer do you feel your work is sufficiently well known?" While considering whether to answer "Yes" or "No," Beckwith glanced at Question Two: "What do you propose to do about it?"

The questionnaire's rather too obvious assumption was probably justified — the music of Canadian composers is generally not well enough known. But what to do about it? An obvious answer would be "Introduce and develop the study of Canadian music in the schools. Show children that they have a national cultural heritage of which they can be proud. Stimulate their interest today, challenge their minds and ears with the best of our music, and you will be developing a knowledgeable, interested audience for the future."

But it is a far cry from proposing this to actually implementing it. Teachers who out of personal interest or a sense of patriotic commitment set out to select Canadian music for their students to perform are immediately faced with a number of problems.

What Canadian music is available? How technically difficult is it for young performers? How musically interesting is it? How effective is it as teaching and performance material? It is not enough for the teacher to pick up a publisher’s catalogue and select a piece just because it is Canadian. The decision should be made on aesthetic and educational grounds, not on purely nationalistic grounds. Inferior music cannot be justified just because it is Canadian. And so teachers need guidance.

In response to the need for reference material to assist teachers, CMEA and the Canadian Music Centre have undertaken to produce a Guidelist of Canadian music suitable for performance by student ensembles (bands, choirs, orchestras, string orchestras, and chamber ensembles). Each piece listed will be described in terms of its musical worth, stylistic features, technical problems, degree of difficulty, pedagogical value, effectiveness in performance, and appeal for students. Only the best music, based on the recommendations of experienced educators who have actually used the repertoire with students, will be listed.

The preparation of the Guidelist is the first phase of a joint CMEA – Canadian Music Centre project on Canadian music for schools. This is in fact a reactivation of the John Adaskin Project, begun by CMC in 1963 to develop a body of Canadian teaching material and to encourage creativity in music education. In 1963 fifteen Canadian composers were chosen to observe and work in classrooms. They were then commissioned to write music for student performers. In 1965 a follow-up seminar was held where many of the pieces written were demonstrated. Some of the music was subsequently published, but further development of the project was curtailed because of CMC’s heavy commitments to preparations for Canada’s Centennial. In November 1967 a policy conference on the John Adaskin Project was organized in Toronto by CMC. Educators from many parts of Canada gathered with Canadian composers and with special guests Peter Maxwell Davies, who had done outstanding creative work with children in England, and John Davies, who was then Assistant Director of the MENC-Ford Foundation Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education. Although enthusiasm at the policy conference ran high, CMC itself could no longer maintain the Adaskin Project. CMC felt that further initiative should come from educators, but the project was a major undertaking and for some time no initiative was actually taken. It was not till 1973 that the CMEA decided to join with CMC in undertaking a reactivation of the Adaskin Project. It was felt that the first step should be to survey what is currently available by Canadian composers for student performers, and then acquaint music educators with Canadian repertoire chosen and described for its suitability for school...
What do we in fact want to do in our teaching piece. It is, I think, important to assume some responsibility here. What do we in fact want to do in our music programs? What sorts of teaching materials would help us better achieve our aims? The possibility for intelligent, creative interaction between educators and composers holds real hope for the future of music education in our country. If we can share our ideas with sympathetic, interested composers, and if those composers can react to our insights into the educational process and can use their imaginations to create exciting sound materials for the classroom, there are possibilities for development and musical growth for everyone — students, teachers, and composers.

Implicit in what I am saying is this — composers writing for schools need to be in contact with teachers and students. This was the assumption behind the first John Adaskin Project Seminar in 1963, and behind the Contemporary Music Project in the United States. Commission money is not enough. Composers need opportunities to work with students and to discuss with teachers the problems and objectives of school music. A number of Canadian composers know this at first hand.

Harry Freedman underlines the importance of actual experience with students. Some years ago he received a Canada Council grant to compose music for school band. After a summer in his studio he produced music which was unuseable. It was too difficult, primarily because the young players had not been prepared for the sounds and techniques of the contemporary idiom in which Freedman was working. At that point Freedman recognized the importance of consultation with teachers and classroom trial with students, and also the need for sequential preparatory studies introducing young performers to contemporary techniques. Out of that experience grew Freedman’s ongoing project — the preparation of a series of musical studies for junior band, each piece classroom-tested and revised in the light of student and teacher reaction. Dissonant harmonies, tone clusters, interesting rhythms, mixed metres, tone production exploration and aleatoric elements are introduced, but only the easiest notes for each instrument are used in the beginning stages, and textures are transparent so the players can hear themselves and can concentrate on developing embouchure and tone. From his contact with schools, Freedman has learned to think educationally as well as musically. When his band series is completed and published it will provide valuable musical learning opportunities.

In the choral field, Freedman’s Keewaydin for SSA and optional tape (G.V. Thompson) and Three Vocalises for Sibers (Leeds) are useful in familiarizing students with contemporary sounds and devices. Keewaydin employs tone clusters, a combination of singing and speaking styles, graphic notation, and exploration of the sounds of Ojibwa place names. Chorale, the first of the Three Vocalises, explores dissonances. The second, Soliloquy exploits chromaticism, while the third, Chant, introduces irregular meter and jazz-influenced style. Keewaydin and Three Vocalises require careful listening and are in fact ear training exercises as well as performance pieces. Like Freedman, Murray Schafer is introducing students to contemporary compositional techniques. And both composers stress the importance of “ear cleaning” and thoughtful, focussed listening. But in his educational music Schafer does not have Freedman’s interest in developing instrumental performing technique per se. Schafer’s concern is more with encouraging and developing students’ creativity. For example, Minimusic (Universal, available in Canada from Berandol) is not so much a musical composition as a collection of sound exploration ensemble activities for classroom use ideas and stimuli to encourage students to work with, listen to, make decisions about and express themselves through sound. All Schafer’s music for
schools utilizes graphic notation, not only because this is a contemporary technique with which students should be familiar, but also and more importantly because it is the sort of notation which students themselves will probably use in classroom composition work and because such notation provides young performers with interesting opportunities for creativity in interpreting and realizing symbols. *Statement in Blue* for youth orchestra (Berandol) also includes opportunities for improvisation within an established framework. *Miniwanka* (Universal, available from Berandol) and *Epitaph for Moonlight* (Berandol) encourage vocal sound exploration, as *Statement in Blue* encourages instrumental sound experimentation. All three of these pieces require sensitive listening. *Threnody* (Berandol) is the most complex of Schafer's music for young people. It includes electronic tape and a collage of spoken descriptions of the horrors of war in addition to the choral and orchestral parts. It is a concert piece of emotional power rare in music for young performers. Its social message challenges the minds of performers and audience.

Since the first John Adaskin Project seminar in 1963, Schafer and Freedman have worked from time to time in schools, trying out their music and their ideas about music education. Harry Somers also participated in the 1963 seminar, observing and working with students and writing for them. He followed this brief experience with a year in schools throughout North York as a Special Consultant. He has a real concern for the development of music education, and he has contributed some valuable additions to the school repertoire. *The Wonder Song* for SATB (Berandol), commissioned in 1963 for the Adaskin Project, cleverly explores rhythmic complexities. *Theme for Variations* (Berandol) provides opportunities for improvisation and exploration of contemporary sounds. It can be played by any combination of instruments and is thus particularly useful in school ensemble programs where finding repertoire for odd assortments of instruments is often a major problem. *Little Suite for String Orchestra* (Berandol) is an attractive setting of three Canadian folk songs, idiomatically scored for strings, well contrasted from movement to movement, technically challenging but not too demanding for intermediate level players, and with leadership responsibilities for all instruments in the ensemble. *Two Songs for the Coming of Spring* for SATB (Berandol) contain effective stylistic and dynamic contrasts, varieties of note values, meter, and choral textures which provide excellent teaching and performance opportunities. *Five Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* for SATB and piano (G.V. Thompson) present exciting challenges to a well-trained high school choir.3

While Somers, Schafer, and Freedman have spent some time in schools, Keith Bissell has spent a lifetime in education. He has contributed a large body of fine music, including repertoire for the important but generally neglected elementary level where few composers of stature have deigned to venture. His music for young children is technically simple but musically tasteful and interesting. The influence of Orff is often evident. As an educator, Bissell believes in a strong and varied music program with exposure to good singing materials from the very beginning and with instrumental experiences developing out of the basic choral foundation. He feels the logical place for children to begin instrumentally is with simple percussion, since ensemble playing can thus be introduced without all the technical problems of traditional orchestral instruments. When students have acquired basic music literacy and experience, and are physically ready, they can move on to string or wind instruments. Bissell has in fact written for all these stages of the process—a large quantity of choral music ranging from unison to SATB; collections for percussion instruments and voice; and instrumental works for small and large ensembles. In his instrumental as well as choral music, he often utilizes Canadian folk material. The following are some of Bissell's most useful and interesting pieces and collections: *Andante and Scherzo* (E.C. Kerby) for full orchestra; *Folk Song Suite for Woodwinds* (Boosey and Hawkes) for 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, and bass clarinet or bassoon; *Go and Leave Me If You Wish, Love* (G.V. Thompson), a Newfoundland folk song arranged for SATB and soprano solo: *His Majesty's Pie* (Waterloo), an operetta for upper elementary and junior high level students; *Let's Sing and Play* (Waterloo), folksongs in French and English with Orff instrument accompaniments for the elementary school level; *Sayings* (Variations on sundry maxims) (E.C. Kerby) for unison voices and percussion, suitable for upper elementary and junior high; *Singing and Playing* (Waterloo), for unison voices and percussion at the primary level; *Three Pieces* (E.C. Kerby) for senior string orchestra; *Two Songs from Shakespeare* (Berandol) for SATB.

Bissell's output has been large. Other composers have concentrated less on music for schools. Some have written a few pieces specifically for students, or have produced music which, although not originally intended as educational material, can be performed by good high school ensembles. John Weinzieg, for example, wrote a *Clarinet Quartet* (Leeds) for the original Adaskin Project. His *Round Dance* (Leeds), arranged by Howard Cable, is a difficult work, presenting real musical and technical challenges to a good
senior band. Robert Fleming’s You Name It’ Suite (G.V. Thompson) for strings and A Two-Piece Suite (Leeds) for clarinet trio are useful for young instrumentalists. His Madrigal (Waterloo) for SA or unison with piano, with words by Shakespeare, and folk song arrangements like A Kangaroo Sat On An Oak (Leslie) for SATB with tenor solo, Old Man (Leslie) for SATB with soprano solo, and Three Nova Scotia Folk Songs (Waterloo) for SSA are worthwhile additions to the school choral repertoire. Intermediate strings are challenged by Talivaldis Kenin’ Nocturne and Dance (Boosey and Hawkes). Louis Applebaum’s Suite of Miniature Dances (E.C. Kerby) for band is of high quality musically and is technically demanding. His Three Stratford Fanfares (Leeds) for brass ensemble with optional percussion are very effective. Such Howard Cable compositions as Newfoundland Rhapsody (Chappell), Quebec Folk Fantasy (Chappell), Scottish Rhapsody (Leeds), and Stratford Suite (Chappell) are difficult but can provide an excellent senior band with challenging, effective repertoire. Choral music such as Violet Archer’s Landscapes (Waterloo) for SATB divisi and her arrangements of Three French Canadian Folk Songs (Berandol) for SATB divisi, John Beckwith’s Ten English Rhymes (Berandol) for unison voices, Derek Holman’s Weatherscapes (G.V. Thompson) for SATB and optional brass quintet, Godfrey Ridout’s Ave Maria (G.V. Thompson) for SSA and his arrangement of Sainte Marguerite (Waterloo) for SATB, and Healey Willan’s Rise Up My Love, My Fair One (Oxford U.S.A.) for SATB divisi are all pedagogically useful. Contributions to student repertoire have come not only from career composers but also from practising educators with extensive school experience. Among others, Donald Coakley has produced Cantos (E.C. Kerby) for band, Morley Calvert Suite from the Montrenerian Hills (Berandol) for brass quintet, and W.H. Belyea Slumber Song (Frederick Harris) for SA or contralto solo with optional descant.

This list of people writing for schools is by no means complete. It could also include Richard Johnston, Udo Kasemets, Derek Healey, Alfred Kunz, James Gayfer, Kenneth Campbell, Quentin Doolittle and others, to say nothing of the people whose suitable compositions remain unpublished. And almost all the composers listed have music which could be performed in schools if it were published.

John Beckwith, for example, wrote a clever and interesting choral piece called GAS! The required precision in choral speech, the independence of parts, the necessity for careful listening and the graphic notation would challenge high school performers, and the spatial effects, the variety of textures and dynamics and the production of sound effects would be intriguing. And how refreshing to have a piece with some humour in the classroom or on the school concert program! It was recently performed by the University of Toronto Concert Choir, and was well received by audiences in Toronto, Ottawa, Quebec City and Montreal. But to date three Canadian publishers have turned down the manuscript as being too avant-garde and therefore too risky. And an English publisher specializing in contemporary music for student performers, rejected GAS! because its text contained too many Canadian local phrases! And so GAS! remains unpublished. It can be rented or purchased at cost from the Canadian Music Centre.

Rental rather than purchase of music is particularly common with orchestral repertoire. Most of the Canadian orchestral music which teachers might like to consider using is available only on rental from the publishers. And in any case most of the repertoire, if playable at all by student performers, can only be attempted by top calibre senior level groups.

To summarize the overall repertoire situation then, there is a real need for more published music for full orchestra, especially at the junior and intermediate levels. A handful of effective pieces are available for school string orchestra but more repertoire is needed. There is a lack of good chamber ensemble music, particularly for strings and for mixed or variable instrumentation ensembles. Much choral music is available, but there is not enough simple but musically interesting repertoire for the elementary school level. The Canadian band repertoire, although fairly extensive, leans heavily towards street marches. Historically these have been the mainstays of town bands, but they are generally clichéd, of limited musical and formal interest, and of little intellectual challenge in the teaching situation. Very few serious Canadian composers have written for band. There is a particular lack of interesting music for junior and intermediate level bands. In other words, then, work needs to be done in all area. Because of time limitations and because the focus of the present Adaskin Project is on music for school use, solo repertoire is not being included in the Guidelist. But that is another area of real need, particularly at the junior and intermediate levels.

Gathering repertoire suggestions and evaluations from educators all across Canada is a huge job, but it is important that recommendations come from experienced teachers, and from as wide a range of levels and teaching situations as possible. People approached have included elementary, secondary, and university music educators, administrators, people involved in amateur community
musical activities, private teachers, students, and composers. University music education classes and school classes have co-operated in reading through less familiar repertoire. Reading sessions at regional music educators' workshops have also been held. (For example, Nancy Vogan of the Mount Allison University Music Department held a choral reading session for the New Brunswick M.E.A. in October, 1975.)

Anyone undertaking a national project in Canada has communication problems, and certainly it has not been easy to make contact with teachers in all parts of the country. And yet the co-operation received has been very encouraging, not only in terms of the evaluations and suggestions from those who know and use Canadian repertoire and are willing to share their experience and opinions, but also in terms of the response from teachers who are not familiar with Canadian repertoire but have expressed a desire for the sorts of information which the Guidelist will provide. In a country where education is a provincial matter and where we are so widely separated geographically, it is heartening that teachers from all regions are willing to co-operate on a project like this.

Teachers should certainly not throw out all but Canadian music from their school libraries. But a balanced performance program should include music of a variety of styles, periods, and countries, and good Canadian repertoire has a place in such a program. Kodaly and Orff, for example, developed musical materials and approaches particularly suited to the educational needs of their countries. We can rightly use their music and adapt it to Canadian needs. But we should also be working with our own composers to foster a varied repertoire particularly suited to Canadian music education. Students, teachers, and composers, working together, can help create the future.

Endnotes

1. In defining "Canadian" for purposes of the Guidelist, the CMC rule-of-thumb is being used. If a composer is not a Canadian citizen, he should have lived in Canada for at least five years.
3. For discussions of Somers' work in North York, see Somers' article Composer in the School: A Composer's View (Musicanada No. 19-May 1969, p. 7 ff.) and (C. Laughton Bird's "Composer in the School: The Role of the Music Supervisor" (Musicanada No. 19-May 1969, p. 5 ff.).