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My Life on Earth and Elsewhere is R. Murray Schafer’s autobiography. Murray Schafer (b. 1933) is not only a talented composer and music educator, he is also a writer and a painter. He is one of the few Canadian composers of classical music whose reputation has spread beyond the borders of Canada.1 Among his many honours are the Molson Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts (1993), the Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts from the Canada Council for the Arts (2005, for his Oeuvre), the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement (2009), and the title of Companion of the Order of Canada (2013).2 In honour of his significant artistic influence and to celebrate his eightieth birthday, Porcupine’s Quill Publishing Company invited Schafer to write an autobiography. The result, My Life on Earth and Elsewhere, marks this milestone in Schafer’s life and was published in 2012. Like most memoirs, My Life unfolds chronologically, tracing Schafer’s youth and describing his travels through Europe in the 1950s and 1960s before focusing primarily on his career as a freelance composer and educator.

Schafer’s text can be divided into two parts, with each part divided


into six chapters. In the first section, Schafer describes his early life as a student, sailor, and wanderer from the 1940s to 1960s. The chapters in this section are entitled “Beginnings,” “Artist or Musician?” “Europe,” “Behind the Iron Curtain,” “The 1960s,” and “The Soundscape.” In the second part, “The Music of the Environment,” Schafer focuses primarily on music in the natural environment and how it connects to his compositional output. The chapters here include “Monteagle Valley,” “Patria,” “Indian River,” “The 1990s: Canada and the World,” “A New Millennium,” and “Postlude in This part.” Overall, generalist readers will not require a background in music or prior knowledge of Murray Schafer to understand his book, because he is such a good story-teller. Previous efforts at biographical accounts of Schafer’s life include the work of Stephen Adams in 1983 and Jesse G. L. Stewart in 2013. I argue that Schafer’s autobiography complements the two biographical efforts well.

In the first half of the book Schafer talks about his early life and the impact this had on his development as a composer. Among them, Schafer lists his first piano lessons at six years old and his exposure to French music, especially that of Les Six, in his adolescent years (19). He discusses studying at the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto where John Weinzweig, Alberto Guerreroand, and Marshall McLuhan were some of his primary influences. He studied composition with Weinzweig, piano with Guerrero, and English poetry and music history with McLuhan. In his second year he thought the university was a place that cared more about authority than invention. Despite the pleasure he derived from learning with Weinzweig and McLuhan, he still had difficulty in several other courses (23). This section then leads into the far more monothematic, second portion of the book where Schafer focuses his discussion on soundscape composition.

When Schafer was in his second year at the University of Toronto, he grew interested in becoming a music teacher. He thought that music education had never been infused with imagination and that there are limits to how much stupidity a person can handle (24). Later, he taught music at


4 Alberto Guerrero (February 6, 1886 – November 7, 1959) was a Chilean-Canadian composer, pianist, and teacher. He is most famously remembered as the mentor of Glenn Gould. He influenced several generations of musicians through his many years of teaching at the Toronto Conservatory of Music. John Weinzweig (March 11, 1913- August 24, 2006) was a Canadian composer of classical music. In 1952 he became a professor at the University of Toronto. He was nominated for Juno Award for Classical Composition in Canada. Marshall McLuhan (July 21, 1911 – December 31, 1980) was a Canadian philosopher of communication theory and a public intellectual. His work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of the study of media theory, as well as having practical applications in the advertising and television industries.
Simon Fraser University and elsewhere. The memoire provides a great deal of information about this pedagogical portion of his career. One event in particular left a lasting impression on me as a reader. Schafer gave a lecture on creativity in the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon in 1977 (153-55). Of this event, Schafer write, “It is difficult to imagine a scene in which one hundred people, stuffed into plush seats with microphone wires all over the little stage could be creative.” (153). Schafer was overwhelmed by stage fright and said nothing for ten minutes. He then stated, “If anyone wishes to teach, go ahead and teach.” (153). An audience member suggested that they discuss Portuguese folksongs. Communication began and the ice was broken. On the one hand, this incident taught Schafer that direct communication is an important teaching tool. But more than that, he learned that “if you want a creative response from others, learn to keep quiet yourself.” (153).

Schafer’s opinions on education resonate with those of the American educator John Dewey (1859-1952) who wrote “Real education must be based upon the nature of the child. One learns by doing, to swim by swimming, or talk by talking to people, and to think by attempting to solve real problems and not by memorizing mere formal exercises.” Moreover, sometimes teachers are not inclined to admit that their own ignorance. But the moment one says “I don’t know,” one becomes a learner again. Schafer has discussed his innovative and sensitive opinions on music education in several books. His ideas are intended to awaken the genuine creativity that exists in every student. My Life briefly touches upon teaching music in the classroom, but someone looking for a more thorough, systematic summary of Schafer’s thoughts on the subject should seek out his A Sound Education. Furthermore, even though Schafer’s writings on music education have sold thousands of copies in Japan, Brazil, Mexico, Germany and elsewhere, Schafer deeply regretted that his work was not embraced by the Faculty of Education at the University of Simon Fraser. (128). Perhaps, one day, Canada or North America will rediscover Schafer’s important work in music education, and certainly that wish underlies certain portions of his autobiography.

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Schafer’s fans—including Canadian musicians, music students in conservatories or universities, amateurs, and environmentalists—are the target audience of this book. That said, non-professional readers and those from the general public, regardless of age or gender, may also be interested in it. Schafer’s writing style is straightforward, cordial, and creative. Though music plays a central role in the narrative, readers will also encounter a full human being when reading My Life. For musicians, this text contains a first-hand account of Schafer’s career. The curious will find critical observations, barbed comments, and learn about Schafer’s creative process through scattered thoughts on music education and soundscape composition. Schafer’s contribution to music education is undoubtedly one of the most striking aspects of his career, and here he reflects upon that from his own, unique point of view.

Overall, Schafer is certainly known amongst musicians with some training, but whether he’s widely known amongst Canadians at large is another question altogether. In Aimee Jodoin’s review of the autobiography, she notes that Schafer writes with a voice that assumes everyone wishes to listen to him. She acknowledges Schafer’s importance as a composer and educator and his ability to write compelling texts, but she questions whether or to what extent Schafer’s text is reliable. For example, Jodoin observed that “many of Schafer’s encounters—tea with Ezra Pound while the poet was in a psychiatric hospital and a business meeting with Muppets creator Jim Henson seem almost too fantastic to be true. The language he uses to describe his experiences exudes self-absorption.” To some extent, I agree with Jodoin. Schafer’s autobiography brings to mind Hector Berlioz’s memoirs, though in my opinion, Schafer’s work is likely more reliable than Berlioz’s romantic description of life.\(^7\)

Another noteworthy aspect of this autobiography is how it paints Schafer’s relationship with women as muses. Schafer describes three women in his memoir: Phyllis Mailling, Jean Elliot, and Eleanor James, all of whom appear in chronological order. Schafer writes, “I have noticed that whenever I undertook a large project I seemed to need a woman to play up to. These relationships nourished me and gave me the inspiration necessary to push the project to the limit.” (177). Schafer’s description reminds one of Franz Liszt and Marie d’Agoult, Richard Wagner and Cosima Liszt, and other similar relationships found throughout musical history.


Unlike his previous prose endeavours, *My Life* is a record of a life lived in solitude, introspection, and the desire for self-development (241). Indeed, it is worth noting that in addition to being a composer, Schafer dedicated a great deal of time and energy to writing prose. His novel, *Wolf Tracks* can be read in two directions from beginning to end or from end to beginning on opposite pages. *A Sound Education: 100 Exercises in Listening and Sound-Making* and *Hear Sing* describe a whole treasury of listening and sound-making possibilities. Compared to these books, Schafer himself underscores the significance of his autobiography. “There is always an intimacy about a diary that cannot be replaced by any other medium.” (241). Schafer’s *My Life* caused me to consider further how one defines one’s self. Some artists choose to focus on only one thing in their entire life, such as Austrian writer, Stefan Zweig, who identified himself as a writer; whereas others, such as Schafer, regard themselves as proficient in diverse areas such as writing and music. In my opinion, if one wants to achieve expertise in diverse areas, that person must have a clear self-identity, strong abilities to execute, a persevering personality, and good management skills to achieve results. Schafer’s clear awareness of his self-identity is evident in *My Life*. His memoir leads me to ask if he is primarily a music teacher or a composer; a painter or a writer; a wanderer or a practitioner; an artist or an ordinary human being? Who is R. Murray Schafer?

Additional questions provoked by Schafer’s work arise in the chapter “Behind the Iron Curtain,” where Schafer mentions that he was a member of the Canadian Music Council and the International Folk Music Council, while also selling radio programs and commissioned works to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Schafer underscores that most of the conductors of our major Canadian orchestras are not Canadians (206). That said, he acknowledges that as a musician born in Canada, he learned the Classical and Romantic European repertoire and undertook music education in Europe as well. Indeed, it is widely accepted that the tradition of European classical music has a primary position in North America and other areas. And so from this additional perspective, how should we evaluate Schafer? Is he a Canadian musician or an International musician? Is his music uniquely

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Canadian? If his music is regarded as a symbol of Canadian artistry, how do we define Canadian music?

From the title of his autobiography, it is obvious that Murray Schafer hopes his music will achieve international recognition. Has his music been performed all around the world? The answer is yes. Not only in North America, but also in Japan, Germany and other countries. And certainly by the end of twentieth century, the term “soundscape” was widely known throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America, at least in scholarly circles. On the other hand, how widely known are Schafers’s writings, most importantly his educational books? Does he have composition students? If yes, who are they? Though this book raised many questions about one of Canada’s most well-known composers, reading My Life on Earth and Elsewhere appears to be only the first step toward knowing R. Murray Schafer. Listening to the works mentioned in his book would appear to be the next step.

For further reading:


*Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.*


