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First published in 1997, Music Papers: Articles and Talks By a Canadian Composer, 1961 – 1994 is written by John Beckwith, a Canadian composer with a sizeable catalogue of art music to his credit. Beckwith’s 256-page book presents a compilation of articles, discussions, and reviews that primarily pertain to the topic of Canadian music and its composers as aspects of Canadian culture and national identity. Music Papers provides substantial historical information about Canadian music in the twentieth-century, personal insight into Beckwith’s experiences in Canada as an active composer, and many of Beckwith’s own concerns regarding music in general. One of the most important issues the author discusses throughout the book is the struggle to define the culturally exclusive attributes of Canadian music for those in Canada and abroad. While this compilation of written works examines numerous serious topics regarding Canadian music, Beckwith presents a stimulating and effective discussion because of his personable style of writing.

Through the essays presented in Music Papers, one discovers the unfortunate lack of information about Canadian music, the changing musical life in Toronto, the values of a Canadian composer, and more. These essays are not presented in chronological order, and readers should make note of the original date of each text—including at the beginning of every talk—to allow for the proper context. Beckwith’s prefaces for each
essay are helpful for understanding why a given essay was written as well as understanding the author’s role as a composer and music educator. Readers are expected to have a reasonable understanding of musical language and Western music history, however, before approaching the book.

John Beckwith provides a marvellous introduction to his collection of essays with the first section entitled: “A ‘Universal Tongue’?” The essays in this section highlight the stimulating conversational tone presented by Beckwith throughout the book. The discussions here focus on whether music is in fact a “universal” language, with important cases made for each side of the argument. Beckwith concludes that although music can connect people in a global way, the meaning behind music is dependent on the cultural background and heritage of the listener. “Hearing something new is embarrassing and difficult for the ear; foreign music we do not hear well” - a profound statement by Friedrich Nietzsche that supports Beckwith’s argument and emphasizes the cross-cultural understanding behind music to which Beckwith refers. Although the first section of this text does not primarily focus on the issues surrounding the notion of “Canadian music,” Beckwith’s introduction does present a stimulating discussion of the definitions and functions of music in the twentieth century and the underestimated supra-verbal quality provided by music. By the end of this introduction, Beckwith carefully leads the reader to the topic of Canadian music.

Section II, “CanMus,” is the longest portion of the book, with a focus on Canadian Music—not to be confused with the notion of music from Canada. Beckwith gently claims that he may have invented the term “CanMus” as a short term for music with a Canadian identity and not just music from Canada. For the purposes of this review and consistency’s sake, I will use the term “CanMus” when appropriate. One of the unique topics treated by Beckwith in this second section concerns the public relations failure of CanMus abroad. In an effort to assess and critique material written about CanMus in various foreign texts, Beckwith enthusiastically criticizes the lack and quality of information provided by them. Beckwith first addresses this concern in “About Canadian Music: P.R. Failure” and, written more than fifteen years later, in “A Failure Revisited.” These essays allow the reader to gain a better understanding of the how Canadian music is acknowledged abroad. Although Beckwith is diligent to correct the material about CanMus in texts published outside of Canada, Beverley Diamond suggests we should consider re-evaluating whether older texts still “reflect fundamental attitudes” that have meaning to Canadians in recent times. Diamond acknowledges

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Beckwith’s work as significant and certainly does not frame Beckwith’s work as ineffective. However, Diamond does point out that to advance the studies of CanMus, scholars need to consider the changing values in music and culture of Canada today. Overall, this second section of Beckwith’s text is quite interesting, especially its emphasis on Canadian music identity, a topic rarely discussed in today’s Canadian classrooms.

In addition to the “P.R. failure” argument, Section II provides in-depth historical discussions of Canadian music, making note of important figures and repertoire. At times, Beckwith makes this section appear as a kind of history lesson, but this foundation provides essential background information on Canadian music so important to his overall argument. For the reader, the extensive and frequent reference to other musical figures and repertoire may prove overwhelming. In an attempt to provide comparisons with the aforementioned CanMus, Beckwith employs frequent references to Western European composers from prior musical periods without providing further background information. This heavily implies Beckwith’s writing is intended for well-educated scholars of the Western European music tradition, which may unfortunately leave some readers at a disadvantage.

In his discussion of important Canadian figures, Beckwith is careful to mention as many Canadian musicians from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as possible. These range from early figures such as Joseph Quesnel to more recent musicians such as Glenn Gould. Beckwith’s efforts are marked by their comprehensive nature, especially as concerns Canadian music studies. When his essays were written, the definition of Canadian music identity was still being developed and this issue remains relevant today. Beckwith notes that Canadian music has close connections with themes found in Canadian culture as well as art and literature. That said, this may only be true for composers growing up in Canada, as opposed to new immigrant composers. In this second section, Beckwith makes many unavoidable references to Western European music, because of the historical connection many Canadian musicians have with traditional Western music practices. On the other hand, R. Murray Schafer proposes that scholars should focus on the differences, as opposed to the similarities, Canadian music may have with other music traditions. Schafer claims that this difference is in fact exclusively Canadian and worth discussing as it will progress the studies of Canadian musical identity.3

Finally, Beckwith expresses his wish to see more Canadian repertoire used in music education, especially in Canadian schools. To his satisfaction, the Canadian Music Centre (CMC) began its “first systematic efforts to promote Canadian music in education” in 1961, by seeking to make twenty-five per cent of the repertoire studied in

3 R. Murray Schafer, On Canadian Music (Bancroft: Arcana Editions, 1984), 80
music education Canadian. This plan by the CMC was later labelled the John Adaskin Project. Similar advocacy can be found in Mary Kennedy’s 2014 article “50% Canadian Content in our Music Programs?” which, as the title suggests, proposes a much larger integration of Canadian music repertoire into music examples and exercises. More importantly, Kennedy’s proposal raises many of the same concerns that Beckwith did many decades prior. As a music student at a Canadian post-secondary institution, I was pleasantly surprised by the wealth of CanMus repertoire referenced by Beckwith yet disappointed at the lack of CanMus education I have received prior to engaging with this text. I suspect many young Canadian students would feel similarly. Overall, the second section of this book provides extensive discussions of Canadian music identity, repertoire, composers, as well as significant Canadian events that aid the reader in gaining a better understanding of CanMus. On the other hand, it also requires careful reading to follow all information referenced by Beckwith.

In section III, “Some Toronto Musicians,” Beckwith adds to the material of Section II by addressing the activities and influence of specific musicians based in Toronto. Those artists discussed in this third section include Healey Willan, Sir Ernest MacMillan, Glenn Gould, and John Weinzweig. This section provides insight into Beckwith’s opinions and even personal connections with some of these composers, such as Glenn Gould and his family. In addition, the content in this section is easier to follow than the preceding material, as each essay deals primarily with one musician.

It is worth noting Beckwith’s avoidance of the question of musical conservatism in the early twentieth century, a subject that Elaine Keillor addresses in her own work. Keillor mentions that the main contrast found in early twentieth-century Canada existed between French-Canadian composers such as Claude Champagne, who “incorporated newer trends into his works” such as atonality, and English-Canadians, such as Healey Willan, who “continued to enlarge his catalogue with well-crafted works in the British tradition.” This same issue is also addressed by Paul Helmer in “Musical Life in Canada: An Overview of the Interwar Years.” The content of Music Papers,


6 Godfrey Ridout and Talivaldis Kenins, eds., Celebration: Essays on Aspects of Canadian Music Published in Honour of the 25th Anniversary of the Canadian Music Centre (Toronto: Canadian Music Centre, 1984), 50.

7 Paul Helmer, Growing with Canada: The Émigré Tradition in Canadian Music (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 93

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leaves it unclear whether Beckwith found conservatism problematic or not. Instead, he moves on to other relevant topics, such as the apparent “regionalism” of Canada that ultimately affects the understanding of CanMus across the nation. Beckwith himself claims that he experienced this regionalism during his career. He also argues that regionalism will not be rectified anytime soon for a number of reasons, including the cultural and historical background of each province.

An additional issue identified by Beckwith concerns the networking activities mentioned in Section III, which are almost exclusive to the Toronto area. In Section II: “CanMus,” Beckwith writes (in 1979) “[i]f I write a piece… or anyone else in Toronto does, the event will take forever to come to the attention of music-lovers in Brantford, let alone Halifax. How would it be known there?” (75). Improvements in communication and technology, however, would lead one to hope that these kinds of concerns have all but disappeared. And yet, certain concerns still linger.

As a Canadian composer himself, Beckwith does not fail to provide some insight into his experiences, beliefs and concerns as a composer of and educator on the subject of Canadian music living in Toronto. Although this section directly relates to the broader topic of Canadian music, it primarily provides further insight into the musical environment of Canada during the latter half of the twentieth-century. Some of the issues discussed here relate directly to music education, especially teaching composition, as well as the issue of using Canadian repertoire in the classroom. This fourth section contains only four Beckwith essays written about his own experiences and beliefs, providing a more personal aspect to the text. Beckwith’s choice of writings for this section are very effective. They reinforce many of the common themes and issues that his previous sections focus on by providing insight into his life as a Canadian music composer.

As a book-end to the introduction, the final section is again not directly about Canadian music but about the struggles experienced by many composers in the modern world. This section primarily focuses on Beckwith’s personal struggles with loss of hearing—not uncommon among active musicians—and the near-ubiquitous issue of music-pollution, which Beckwith refers to as “acoustic perfume” (231). Although the final pieces of writing in this section do not directly connect with issues regarding Canadian music, it is important to remember the format of the book and to keep in mind that this section allows the author to connect with the reader on a more personal level while discussing general music topics not yet mentioned.

Overall, Music Papers presents twenty-five essays revolving around the musical life of Canadian composer John Beckwith. At first, the book may seem to focus on issues of Canadian music identity, and that is not entirely wrong. Beckwith also includes a series of discussions pertaining to the meaning of music, Canadian music history, his personal experiences, his beliefs, and the struggles he experienced as a composer and
music educator in Toronto. Given the large number of issues raised throughout the book, many with only hypotheses as conclusions, Beckwith explores a wide range of topics from which scholars studying Canadian music and culture can benefit. Because of the somewhat “young” and multicultural nature of Canada’s culture, issues regarding the definition and acknowledgement of Canadian Music are very much present today. These modern issues build on the same concerns Beckwith voiced when he originally wrote the pieces collected here (1961-1994), making the discussions in *Music Papers* immensely relevant today.

**For Further Reading**


