

OUR MURRAY

Three Contemporaries

I first met Murray Schafer in the early 1950s. I was a junior academic in the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. He was a student in a new program called the Artist Diploma Program—not my student, therefore, since I was working with degree candidates. Several years later, in May of 1958, I was assigned to review a chamber music concert in Toronto by three young composers, one of Murray’s contributions to the program being a set of songs for mezzo-soprano and piano entitled *Three Contemporaries*.¹ The “three contemporaries” referred to in the title were an English composer, Benjamin Britten, a German painter, Paul Klee, and an American poet, Ezra Pound. The texts, by Murray himself, were amusing straight-faced biography:

Benjamin Britten is a most distinguished composer. Born in 1913 in Lowestoft, he received a scholarship in composition at the Royal College of Music....

Do you know the painter Paul Klee? He was a painter of unusual force and clearness, as much in words as in painting...

Ezra Pound, at the age of sixty-one, returned to America to receive a generous scholarship from the United States Government...

The music is in the style of “diatonic dissonance” after the French group called *Les Six*, then very fashionable among young composers. At the end of the third song, the singer glissandos to a high G on the name “Pound,” and is instructed to repeat the note, “disintegrating into high lunatic laughter.”

In the fall of 1949, when he was sixteen years old, Murray had the opportunity to be among the choristers in a performance of Britten’s cantata *Saint Nicolas* at Grace Church on-the-Hill, with Britten himself conducting.² Seven years later Murray sent the composer his score to the “Britten” movement of what would later become *Three Contemporaries* and received a thank-you letter: Britten said he was “very pleased” with the work.³ In fact it was this personal encouragement by Britten that inspired Murray to continue with his musical portrait of twentieth-century artists by then adding the Klee and Pound movements to complete the work in its final three-movement form.⁴ Murray would later interview Britten for his first book-length publication, *British Composers in Interview*,⁵ and around the

same time, he interviewed Pound at his home in Rapallo, Italy. Murray compiled and later published Pound's extensive musical writings,⁶ and helped to prepare Pound's little-known opera, *Le Testament*, for production by the BBC. Although Murray never met Klee, who died in 1940, he became well acquainted with Klee's paintings and critical writings.

I found *Three Contemporaries* to be the stand-out of the young composers' program. The performance, by the mezzo-soprano Phyllis Mailing (later Murray's first wife) and the pianist Weldon Kilburn, was excellent.

Teachers

Murray never pretended he was self-taught, but in some areas he mostly was—history, philosophy, languages for example. As to music, the record of influences which helped him build his spectacular career is not extensive, although we do have a number of the important details. As a youngster, he sang alto in the church choir in which his younger brother, Paul, sang treble under the choirmaster John Hodgins at Grace Church on-the-Hill, the historic Anglican church in mid-town Toronto, as we learn from all the biographies including his own.⁷ Hodgins had a prominent reputation as a choral director and organist and also taught piano and organ at the Royal Conservatory of Music. Both biographers acknowledge the strong influence on Murray's musical training of singing under Hodgins' direction.⁸ It appears that Hodgins also gave Murray some introductory organ lessons, as did Murray's piano teacher, Douglas Bodle, who was well-known for both organ and piano performance. These few lessons on organ had a limited effect, it seems, as Murray showed no evidence of an interest in the organ in his compositions.⁹

During Murray's brief enrolment in the Artist Diploma course at the University of Toronto, he was fortunate to work with two outstanding keyboardists, Greta Kraus and Alberto Guerrero. Kraus was a specialist of the harpsichord, an instrument Murray got to appreciate and used in two successful early works, the *Concerto for Harpsichord and Eight Wind Instruments* and the *Sonatina for Flute and Harpsichord*. She also helped him with contacts for his later stay in Vienna, having been born there. He was one of the last students of Guerrero, for many years an exceptional pianist who had by this time in his career given up public performance. Since Murray devoted little time to practice, his lessons became discussions on other subjects, which both teacher and student appeared to enjoy.¹⁰ When Guerrero died in 1959, Murray composed *In Memoriam Alberto Guerrero* for string orchestra.

For composition Murray had already been a student of John Weinzweig, and their association continued at the Faculty of Music where Weinzweig was a professor. Murray had high regard for Weinzweig, referring to him as “a Parnassus of one” among Canadian composition teachers. In London, Murray had the ambition to study with Mátyás Seiber but Seiber died in an auto accident in 1960, so Murray enrolled with Seiber’s student Peter Racine Fricker, then director of London’s Morley College and a notable figure in the younger generation of English composers. To this more-or-less “formal” group of influences may be added the sixteen composers Murray interviewed for the above-mentioned book, *British Composers in Interview*.¹¹ For his chosen profession he had not only teachers but models.

The Piano

Murray said he disliked the piano, and consequently he wrote comparatively little solo piano music and included the instrument in only a few of his ensemble works. The piano is however an important part of his life story. He owned a good upright, improvised on it often, and used it in his compositional tryouts. When his teacher, Douglas Bodle, entered him for a piano examination to earn a licentiate from the Royal Schools of Music in London, England, he impressed the examiner, Sir William McKay, who after the exam asked if he could come to the Schafer home and hear Murray play some more.¹²

Arnold Walter

For insubordination, and for refusing to apologize, Murray was expelled from the Faculty of Music on the decision of its director, Dr. Arnold Walter. The professors whose teaching he rejected and in fact ridiculed were Richard Johnston (music theory, choral conductor) and Robert Rosevear (music education), and he finds it necessary in his autobiography to make a bad joke out of Rosevear’s name. In later years he and Johnston came to be good friends.¹³ His descriptions of his encounters with Walter are also flavored with sarcasm (and especially with a tasteless imitation of Walter’s Germanic accent), but he had a genuine appreciation of Walter’s scholarship and enjoyed his lectures. Walter in turn recognized Murray’s intelligence and talent. At some point in conversation with Walter I remember him characterizing Murray as an “outsider,” and referencing the concept as specifically explored by the English writer Colin Wilson’s influential 1956 book, *The Outsider*. It is interesting—and somewhat prophetic—to note regarding Walter’s referencing of the Colin Wilson book with respect to Schafer, that a number of years after

Walter's death in 1973 Wilson would specifically explore the *outsider* concept with respect to classical composers in *The Musician as Outsider* (1987).¹⁴

On Walter's retirement, Murray sent him a serious letter, regretting his inability to attend the retirement presentation, reviewing their relationship, and asking "let us be friends."¹⁵

Ten Centuries Concerts

From his experience in an Anglican church choir, lessons with a professional harpsichordist, and other aspects of his development, Murray acquired an appreciation of early music before the "early music movement" came into being. He became an active member (the first president in fact) of the notable series called Ten Centuries Concerts. The group of Toronto composers who imagined and created the series project were Harry Freedman, Harry Somers, Gordon Delamont, Norman Symonds, Murray, and myself, although in the early years I recall Murray Schafer as its principal driving force. Others who played significant roles in the series' five-year existence (1962–67), such as serving on the board of directors, were the Toronto Symphony members Ruth Budd and Eugene Rittich, and the CBC staffers Diana and Tom Brown: Diana was a radio producer and Tom was a singer and journalist (he edited the CBC newsletter). Later board members included the composers Robert Aitken, Norma Beecroft, Bruce Mather, Howard Cable, and Keith Bissell. The music historian Helmut Kallmann contributed many program ideas, wrote some of the program notes, and was responsible for most of the *historical* Canadian music the series offered. An example was *The Siege of Quebec*, by the eighteenth-century England-based, Czech composer Frantisek Kotzwara, a composition in the then-popular piano program music idiom, of which he, Murray, and I collaborated in making an instrumental chamber music arrangement.

The series wasn't devoted exclusively to early music, but, as its title "Ten Centuries" implied, argued for programming drawn from the entire repertoire as known since roughly 1000 A.D., with whatever groupings seemed appropriate. The juxtaposition of medieval liturgical works with modern Canadian compositions (e.g., our own) was precisely what we wanted to offer, and the success of the first season suggested there was an eager audience. The concerts in the Faculty of Music concert hall (later named Walter Hall) drew full houses. We had little money, charged little of our audiences, and operated the series by undertaking tasks such as lighting, stage management, and ticket selling ourselves. We paid the performers the standard minimum, which they accepted (some even refunding their pay cheques). We prepared essay-like program notes which Diana Brown

reproduced and circulated to our subscribers by mail before each concert. A reflective essay by Murray on the history and legacy of this important and innovative concert series, “Ten Centuries Concerts: A Recollection,” can be found in his collection of essays entitled *On Canadian Music*.¹⁶

First Orchestra Commissions

Supporting himself and his wife Phyllis first as clerk-librarian at the Canadian Music Centre and later in his first teaching position at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Murray continued to compose. His first orchestral commission from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, *No Longer than Ten (10) Minutes* (1970), took its unusual title from the commission contract; i.e., the work was to last “no longer than ten (10) minutes.” The premiere cannot be called a success.¹⁷ The conductor, Victor Feldbrill, did not respond to the work’s humor and was unable to enact the conducting role as the composer imagined. The score ends with a section of the orchestra quietly sustaining the dominant-seventh chord of the next work programmed—presumably a standard classic composition in a tonal idiom. Somehow Murray didn’t figure this device fully: not all orchestral classics are suitably prepared by a tonal dominant-seventh, as the next work performed on the program, Kodály’s *Peacock Variations*, opens very quietly with a subdued timpani roll.¹⁸ Murray’s *Son of Heldenleben*, written two years previously on a commission from the Montreal Symphony, was a more successful and enduring spoof, this time of Richard Strauss.

Patria 3: The Greatest Show

Though endowed with a strong dramatic sense, Murray was not attracted by the traditional forms of opera. For example, *Patria 3*, an early work in his powerful cycle *Patria*, contains a number of short chamber works with dramatic as well as musical scenarios presented as separate acts in the context of a county fair originally titled *The Greatest Show on Earth* (until Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus refused permission to use its famous trademarked tagline, so Murray reduced it to *The Greatest Show*). My partner Kathleen and I went to Peterborough for the second of three performances of the first running of *The Greatest Show* in early August of 1987, but when we arrived at the announced park location we learned it had been cancelled due to heavy rains—this unfortunate news from the composer himself, dressed in full make-up for the show and unable to stop his tears.¹⁹ Somewhere in his writings Murray admits to his occasional crying habit. The Canadian composer Alexina Louie tells of a performance of Murray’s *Adieu, Robert Schumann* which brought Murray to tears when he suddenly compared

Schumann's mental stress (depicted in the libretto) to his own suffering under Alzheimer's.

Classical Forms

In his early compositions Murray wasn't attracted to the classical formats of sonata or symphony, other than the *Sonatina for Flute and Harpsichord* (or Piano) from 1958; however, in 1970 he accepted a commission for the Purcell Quartet, and, enlivened by the experience, went on to write a second string quartet, and when that proved successful, went on to a third and more. There are now thirteen quartets in the series, the thirteenth carrying the title *Alzheimer's Masterpiece*, a designation perhaps both poignant and amusing, since the composer knew by that time of his diagnosis with the disease. The quartets sometimes have themes in common. I can't claim to know the first quartet or all of the later ones, but both the second and third I have recalled many times. The second, subtitled *Waves*, is related to Murray's *soundscape* studies, with its references to the rhythms of recurrent sea tides. The third quartet I admired greatly, especially when I looked at the score and discovered how difficult it is for the players—for example in a passage near the end for *unison micro-tones!*

His harpsichord concerto, a student work from 1954, did not at the time ignite a series in the classical concerto form, but exactly three decades later he embarked on the first of several commissions for solo concerti starting with the brilliant *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra* (1984) for his friend the flutist-composer Robert Aitken; this work has been much performed and appreciated. The concerto series grew to include works for solo guitar, accordion, violin, viola, harp; plus two group concertos, one for string quartet and one for percussion ensemble. Four of the concerti have titles descriptive of programmatic or theatrical elements in the pieces: *The Darkly-Splendid Earth: The Lonely Traveller* (violin), *The Falcon's Trumpet* (trumpet), *Four-Forty* (string quartet), and *Shadowman* (percussion ensemble; discussed at length below). Murray's considerable output of orchestral works did not include a numbered series of classical-form symphonies; however, when the Toronto Symphony Orchestra commissioned a work and their publicity department called him to find out the title for its 2010 premiere, it was a great surprise when he said off-handedly "Oh, it's called *Symphony No. 1 in C Minor*." The piece indeed employs a three-movement structure (fast-slow-fast), and there are moments suggesting a C tonal coloration; however no further symphonies emerged.

Shadowman

One of the finest, perhaps *the* finest, among Murray Schafer's works employing the full resources of an orchestra in my view is *Shadowman*, commissioned by the percussion ensemble Nexus and the University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and premiered by them in February 2001, conducted by Raffi Armenian. This concerto combines Murray's command of the orchestra with brilliant writing for the percussion soloists employing a vividly dramatic anti-war theme. Of the five Nexus players (Bob Becker, Bill Cahn, Robin Engelman, Russell Hartenberger, and John Wyre), two impersonate "Dark Messengers" and two "Messengers of Light," while one (Hartenberger) acts the title role of the "Shadowman," a solo drummer in a tattered military uniform, positioned centrally near the conductor. The various sounds of war are effectively pictured by about forty different percussion instruments, among them familiar standards such as bongos, maracas, crotales, and field drums, as well as lesser-known devices (brekate, anglelung, steel pans, Brazilian bird whistles, among others). In the manner of Charles Ives, the concerto employs melodies associated with various wars such as the US Civil War and World War II with the famous Haydn melody used for the German national anthem, *Deutschlandlied* (or *Lied der Deutschen*). (Although it is Germany's current national anthem and was first adopted as such in 1922 during the Weimar Republic, in the context of *Shadowman*, the melody would be most associated for the listener with Nazi Germany and the employment of the anthem for the party's ideological and militaristic purposes.) The main character's journey through various wartime emotions is accomplished through a series of percussion devices, such as using toy instruments to depict his eventual succumbing to the effects of Alzheimer's disease. Russell Hartenberger's rendition of the title role of *Shadowman* at the premiere was sensational. The work has not received further performances, as far as I know.²⁰

Recollections

In 1974, the Montreal composer John Rea, friend and contemporary of Murray's, published a parody of Murray entitled "Richard Wagner and R. Murray Schafer: Two Revolutionary Religious Poets" (*Canada Music Book*, no. 8, Spring/Summer 1974). Curiously, when Murray produced his autobiography in 2012 he used the same title as used Wagner for his autobiography, *My Life*, but also adding a characteristically comical phrase, "*on Earth and Elsewhere.*"

On some occasion at Banff in the 1960s, Murray received an award and the chairperson, Keith MacMillan, introduced him as "*Our Murray Schafer.*" I'm told MacMillan isn't the first or only person to use this pun.

In 2003 I wrote an article entitled “Open Letter to R. Murray Schafer,” a review of the various essays that comprise his book, *Patria: The Complete Cycle*. In the review I took Murray to task for what I felt to be a number of excesses in his writing, such as the usefulness of its sometimes overly angry tone; the times when certain criticisms cross unnecessarily over to deliberate insult; and for his unrealistic expectations of what the writers for the “Arts and Entertainment” section of the *Globe and Mail* can reasonably cover when writing for a varied audience of over half a million. Regarding these numerous admonishments, I never heard a word from Murray. It seems to have had no effect on our friendship.²¹

January 2022, John Beckwith,
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¹ John Beckwith, “Young Composers’ Performances in Toronto,” *Canadian Music Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Summer, 1958), 54–55.

Editor’s note: This article by Beckwith includes reviews of a number of young composers’ concerts, discussing a total of eight composers in all. The concert that featured Schafer’s *Three Contemporaries* was held on 10 May 1958; the other two composers on the program were Milton Barnes and Morris Eisenstadt.

² *Editor’s note.* This performance of *St. Nicolas* at Grace Church-on-the-Hill occurred on 2 November 1949 and was broadcast by CBC Radio. See “Britten in Canada: A Continuing Connection” by Stephen Ralls and Bruce Ubukata in program notes to *The Aldeburgh Connection: A Britten Festival of Song*: http://aldeburghconnection.org/archives/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Aldeburgh_Gala_2013_web.pdf (KLM)

³ L. Brett Scott, *R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), p. 23.

⁴ *Editor’s note:* Britten’s encouragement of the young Schafer recalls Schafer’s later encouragement of younger composers and scholars (myself included); and similarly, I recall with much gratitude John Beckwith’s support of my first research project on Schafer. As a young scholar in 1985 just beginning my master’s thesis—which examined the relationship between Schafer’s soundscape research work and his own compositions—I was very appreciative for the encouragement I received when I reached out to Beckwith in his post as the first director of the University of Toronto’s Institute for Music in Canada (at that time known as the Institute for Canadian Music). (KLM)

⁵ *Editor’s note:* Indicative of the young Schafer’s initiative and fearlessness, Brett Scott recounts the following regarding Britten’s participation in *British Composers in Interview*: “One of his [Schafer’s] subjects, the famed composer Benjamin Britten, had not responded to the young interviewer’s written request to meet. After Schafer had the temerity to take the train to Aldeburgh and knock on Britten’s door, the esteemed composer agreed to an interview, but only through written correspondence.” Scott, *A Creative Life*, p. 32. (KLM)

⁶ *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*; edited with commentary by R. Murray Schafer (New York: New Directions, 1977; London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 430 pages.

⁷ These biographies are Chapter 1 in Stephen Adams, *R. Murray Schafer* (U. of Toronto Press, 1983); and Chapters 1–7 in L. Brett Scott, *R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life*; the autobiography is R. Murray Schafer, *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere* (Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine’s Quill, 2012).

⁸ The influence of John Hodgins on Schafer is discussed in Adams, p. 5, and in Scott, p. 10; Scott also references Hodgins on two other occasions in his study.

⁹ *Editor’s note*: The careers in music of both John Hodgins and Douglas Bodle merited entries in *The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 1st and 2nd editions, now online as part of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. See <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-hodgins-emc> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/douglas-bodle-emc>. (KLM)

¹⁰ Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, 20.

¹¹ *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 186 pages.

¹² Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, 19.

Editor’s note: Instructive of Schafer’s early years with the piano is the account by his brother, fellow author Paul Schafer, in the colourful tale of “Boogie Bass on the Chimes,” the second of his five Schafer youth and family stories, which are available on this website and can be accessed here: <http://uoftmusicicm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Five-Schafer-Youth-and-Family-Stories.pdf>. (KLM)

¹³ Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, 24.

¹⁴ *Editor’s note*: In the 1956 book Colin Wilson investigates his concept of the *outsider* by examining the work and lives of artists and thinkers such as Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, T.S. Eliot, William Blake, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others. In *The Musician as Outsider* (1987) Wilson takes for his subjects Beethoven, Liszt, Berlioz, Schumann, and Brahms, among others. Over the years Wilson would explore the *outsider* theme in a number of other books, both with and without the word “outsider” in the title.

It is interesting to note the timing of Wilson’s original *outsider* book with respect to Schafer’s own biography. *The Outsider* was released by the London publisher Victor Gollancz in May of 1956, about two months after Schafer’s arrival in England to begin a number of years of travelling and living in Europe, at a time when the young composer was feeling quite alienated from his country of origin. As related in Scott, *A Creative Life*, Schafer “set sail from Halifax on March 3, 1956, aboard the SS *Ascania*, which would dock in Portsmouth, England. The young, restless man was more than eager to leave his native country. Looking back, he recalls having headaches every day toward the end of his time in Canada, headaches that disappeared the day he left the country” (pp. 21–22). (KLM)

¹⁵ This thoughtful letter by Schafer to Walter is presented in its entirety in Adams *R. Murray Schafer*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁶ R. Murray Schafer, *On Canadian Music* (Bancroft, ON: Arcana Editions, 1984). <https://www.patria.org/arcana/>

Editor’s note: John Beckwith’s own essay on the Ten Centuries Concerts series appeared in the *Women’s Musical Club of Toronto News & Notes* 33 (2006): [3–5] and is republished as Chapter 11 in Beckwith’s *Music Annals* (Toronto: Institute for Music in Canada, 2022): 140–47. (RE)

¹⁷ *Editor’s note*: Stephen Adams has a different take on the merits of the premiere of this purposely provocative work for orchestra, stating “Schafer achieved his closest approximation to the avant-gardists dream: a *succès de scandale* (albeit on a Toronto scale) in the tradition of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre*. In the *Globe and Mail*, John Kraglund grumbled that the piece was longer than ten minutes; William Littler in the *Toronto Daily Star*, however, grasped the composer’s purpose.” Adams’s discussion of *No Longer than Ten (10) Minutes* is worth reading in its entirety, in particular for his

insightful analysis of the various concert conventions that Schafer sought to turn on their head, and the manner in which he chose to do so; see Adams, *R. Murray Schafer*, pp. 117-119. (KLM)

- ¹⁸ *Editor's note*: See Schafer, *My Life on Earth*, pp. 102–04, for his own experience and thoughts on the premiere. According to the composer, the work originally scheduled to follow *No Longer than Ten (10 Minutes)* was actually the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 (in B-flat Major which Schafer incorrectly states as being in B-flat Minor) with Claudio Arrau as the soloist; i.e., a classic orchestra standard with a clear tonality. However, as Schafer relates, “Smelling trouble the management [of the Toronto Symphony] altered the program, saving the Brahms until after the intermission and substituting Kodály’s *Peacock Variations*” p. 103. (KLM)
- ¹⁹ *Editor's note*: Schafer, dressed as a caricature of Wagner, plays himself in *Patria 3* as the creator of *The Greatest Show*, giving a lecture in a tiny venue called the “University Theatre.” (See photo in Schafer, *My Life*, p. 194.) The three-day first run of *The Greatest Show* in Peterborough occurred August 6th–8th with, as noted above by Beckwith, the second night being rained out. This first running in 1987, sometimes billed as a “workshop performance” of *The Greatest Show*, featured about 45 of the scripts’ approximately 100 acts. The full realization of the show in 1988, August 25th to September 3rd, also at Peterborough’s Del Crary Park, was also hampered at times by rain; see Ronald Hambleton, “Days of Rain Take Toll on Schafer Show,” *Toronto Star*, 28 August 1988. (KLM)
- ²⁰ *Editor's note*: In “Program Notes,” Schafer’s brief but valuable commentaries for most of the works in his vast library of compositions, Schafer states the following regarding *Shadowman*, “To my regret, the work has not achieved the popularity I had hoped for. We need more anti-war demonstrations in music”. (The 109-page “Program Notes,” is online at: <https://www.patria.org/arcana/Programnotes.pdf>.) (KLM)
- ²¹ “An Open Letter to R. Murray Schafer,” *Literary Review of Canada*, vol. 11, n. 8, 2003.
- Editor's note*: Beckwith’s “Open Letter,” a valuable and thoughtful piece of music criticism, can be read here: <http://uoftmusicicm.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/John-Beckwith-Open-Letter-to-R-Murray-Schafer.pdf>. At a time when civility in public discourse has seemingly almost completely disappeared, it is refreshing to read Beckwith playing devil’s advocate with a number of Schafer’s assertions and tendencies in an uncompromising way, yet at the same time doing so with an overall tone and approach that is comradely, respectful, and even affectionate. Particularly instructive in the review is Beckwith’s focus on a number of Schafer’s “vivid concert pieces,” addressing his younger colleague (and fellow senior citizen) as follows, “Your productivity, inventiveness and high standards are remarkable. You may dismiss the works I recall as potboilers—fuel for the on-going *Patria* flame—but they have an important place in the Canadian new-music repertoire.” (KLM)