

Unheard Of: Memoirs of a Canadian Composer. By John Beckwith. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012. 408 pages, facsimiles. (Life Writing Series). ISBN 978-1-55458-358-4 (print). \$29.95 (paper)

Canadian composer John Beckwith is also well-known in various circles as a teacher, administrator, pianist and writer. Given this multi-faceted life and his many accomplishments in each of those arenas, this monograph provides readers with extensive and interesting insight into the influences and experiences not only of his own career, but also the plethora of Canadian artists and cultural professionals whom he has known and worked with.

This volume is arranged in logical categories similar to those that might be found in a biography written by a second party. Each of the five general headings (“Life, Part 1” – “Studies” – “Career” – “Compositions” – “Life, Part 2”) contains additional subsections that focus the narrative primarily in topical ways, superimposed over a chronological framework that keeps the material tightly organized. Thanks to Beckwith’s remarkable attention to detail, this autobiography proves to be a useful research tool that chronicles much of the burgeoning activity in the Canadian musical scene during Beckwith’s lifetime.

“Life, Part 1” leads us through formative years and early musical training in Victoria, BC. I was struck by the depth of Beckwith’s self-analysis, which is appealing in its objectivity – there is no particular self-aggrandizement or sense of embellishment. Beckwith describes the influences of radio, his early teachers and the omnipresent Royal Conservatory piano exams, a scenario with which other Canadian pianists can identify. He is careful to point out his strong interests and regular participation in theatre, which became important both in his personal relationships and in his compositional output.

In the “Studies” section, Beckwith chronicles his professional training at the University of Toronto and subsequently with Nadia Boulanger in Paris (studies that were subsidized through a *hockey* scholarship, even though he confesses that he “never learned to play the Canadian national game”). Not only does this section trace his early activity as a composer, it also shows his extensive contact with prominent educators, composers and performers, a veritable who’s-who of what was and would become the Canadian musical world of the past century.

It is during the “Career” section that Beckwith describes the three distinct facets of his work – “Writing,” “Academia” and “Politics.” Each is unfolded chronologically, from his earliest freelance work as a concert reviewer, columnist and radio personality, through his initial work as a teacher, to his later time as Dean of the Faculty of Music at the U of T and founding director of the Institute for Canadian Music. In these pages, Beckwith provides background on milestones such as the founding of the Canadian Musical Heritage Society, the Canadian League of Composers, and the Canadian Music Centre, along with detail on the origins of publications such as the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* and the Canadian Musical Heritage series.

Almost a third of the book is devoted to “Compositions.” An immense array of musical styles and movements has been reflected in his own changing idioms, from the earliest French and quartal works to the serial, aleatoric and neo-tonal styles in his later compositions. Beckwith’s extensive description of how each of his own works came into being is illuminating. In describing the circumstances of when and where each composition was born, he also outlines *his* perspectives as to what influences he was experiencing and what goals he sought to achieve. This portrait of his compositional evolution will facilitate analysis by future scholars.

His choice to organize by Grove’s-like categories – “For Instruments,” “Operas,” “Choirs,” “For Voice(s)” – has the further benefit of emphasizing for the reader his own predilections. This segment of the *Memoirs* is somewhat more anecdotal. We learn, for example, about why he did not write a symphony, his lengthy operatic collaboration with James Reaney, and his thoughts about audience response to his compositions. Beckwith closes the memoirs by returning to “Life, Part 2,” wherein he discloses his personal and family life, his broader interests, hobbies and travels.

Among the many things we learn is Beckwith’s reason for becoming a composer. At age forty, he stated that “from about age eight I had the idea I wanted to be a composer – mainly, at that time, in order to become very, very famous.” In the “Composing” chapter, he confirms that longing for fame has been “an often-felt motive in my work life.” Certainly the circumstances that we read about in these pages underscore how his proximity to important people and places helped to fulfill (and perhaps fuel) this ambition, and it is a fair assessment to note that he has achieved significant renown both nationally and abroad. Nevertheless, the title of the book seems to invoke some unfulfilled yearning. In describing the performance of one of his recent (2008) choral works, *Derailed*, he muses that most of his choral works “from being unheard...with only a few exceptions, become soon unheard of, and then unheard. Why are my ideas so often so ‘difficult’?”

These *Memoirs* are well-written in fluid and readable prose. Beckwith’s tone is largely matter-of-fact; he does not employ what he describes as “my habitual critical bitchiness” associated with his earlier concert reviews. It is hard to imagine that a biographer of Beckwith could do better, because there is an authoritativeness that springs from his closeness to the events combined with what is largely a dispassionate telling. A large amount of opinion is offered in the *Memoirs*, but the approach is not governed by being opinionated.

Completing the presentation are illustrations that include samples of Beckwith’s manuscripts and front-page artwork, as well as photographs, extensive footnotes and an index. If this volume is any indication, the publisher’s Life Writing Series is commendable and is an important tool that provides keen insights into Canada’s cultural and intellectual heritage.

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