



[\*R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life\*](#) by L. Brett Scott.

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L. Brett Scott's *R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life* constitutes an important and salutary contribution to the ever-expanding literature on one of the most iconic and influential Canadian composers of the twentieth century. Merely contemplating the pace and content of Schafer's life is enough to exhaust the faint of heart. It may not have been an especially happy life, but the sheer scope and impact of Schafer's artistic output, intellectual activity, activism, visionary teaching, and fertility of his creative imagination have been truly staggering. Working closely with the composer, his family, and his colleagues, Scott has

beautifully and eloquently created the most up-to-date exploration of Schafer's work to date. The author's goals are ambitious, and the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of Schafer's place in the sweep of twentieth-century Canadian art music.

Indeed Scott's *R. Murray Schafer: A Creative Life* is in a category of its own. Although the composer is now eighty-seven years of age, no previous monograph on Schafer has had this scope and range. Apart from self-described energy alchemist Jesse G. L. Stewart's idiosyncratic exploration of Schafer's "plot to save the planet" (published by a Florida press specializing in religious books) and Schafer's autobiography, Stephen Adams's 1983 monograph in the Canadian Composers series from the University of Toronto Press remains the only prior full-length examination of Schafer's contribution.<sup>1</sup> That Scott's book is beautifully presented by Rowman and Littlefield, and features striking use of photos, score excerpts, valuable appendices (list of compositions, discography), and other supporting materials, is an added bonus.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse G. L. Stewart, *R. Murray Schafer and the Plot to Save the Planet: A Biographical Quest* (Jacksonville, Florida: Sunesis, 2013). (Jesse G. L. Stewart is not to be confused with professor, musician, and sound artist Jesse Stewart, of Carleton University.) R. Murray Schafer, *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere* (Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2012). Stephen Adams, *R. Murray Schafer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).



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In addition to discussing the entirety of Schafer's compositional output (in sections examining early and transitional works, theater works, choral compositions, compositions for voice, orchestral works, chamber, solo, and electronic compositions), Scott engages extensively with Schafer's fascinating journal writings and correspondence, much of which have been previously unavailable to researchers. And he provides an illuminating discussion of Schafer's singular essays and other writings, including his monographs on Ezra Pound and E. T. A. Hoffmann, and his too little-known works of fiction. Also covered in-depth is Schafer's field-defining work on acoustic ecology and creative music education. On each of these aspects of Schafer's journey, Scott engages with newly available archival materials to provide us with fresh insights into the composer's innermost thoughts and reflections. Scott's discussions of the various stages in the forty-year-long evolution of the theatrical *Patria* cycle are particularly valuable and illuminating.

"Life and works" authors should always be wary of the potential pitfall of drifting into hagiography, perhaps especially when they have had a close personal association with their subject. Unfortunately, Scott does not always avoid this hazard. He frequently presents Schafer's works and ideas as though they arose in an intellectual and artistic vacuum, with the result that his subject's visionary originality and intellect tend to be decontextualized in many respects. For example, Scott makes no mention of Schafer's friend and colleague Pauline Oliveros (to whom Schafer owes acknowledgment for the evolution of the concept of "Deep Listening"), or Max Neuhaus (the musician, artist, activist, and educator who explored and established his influential conception of acoustic ecology alongside Schafer), or Pierre Schaeffer (whose introduction in 1966 of the notion of the "acousmatique" is in essence identical to Schafer's "schizophonia"), or Schafer's friend and patron Peter Schleifenbaum, the German-born forester-ecologist whom Schafer described as "my patron-king, my Ludwig of Bavaria," for the overwhelming backing he provided in support of annual performances of *The Enchanted Forest* (Part 9 of Schafer's mammoth 12-part *Patria* cycle), by loaning his 60,000 acre property – the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve near Algonquin Park – to the cause.<sup>2</sup>

Scott also uncritically repeats Schafer's specious claim to have been a founding member of Amnesty International (39), an assertion that is entirely unsubstantiated (or even mentioned) in any of the numerous histories of the organization. And he sidesteps some of the more problematic aspects of Schafer's outlook on Canadian music, indigeneity, and Canadian national identity. The following assertion by Schafer in 1960, for example, is jaw-dropping, even for its time:

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<sup>2</sup> Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Iuniverse, 2005); Megan Murph, "Max Neuhaus, R. Murray Schafer, and the Challenges of Noise," (PhD dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2019); Megan Murph, "Max Neuhaus's Sound Works and the Politics of Noise," *Ecomusicology Review* 5 (2017), <https://ecomusicology.info/max-neuhauss-sound-works-and-the-politics-of-noise/>; Ariel Bustamante, "Sound Art and Public Auditory Awareness," *Hz* 12 (July 2008), <https://www.hz-journal.org/n12/bustamante.html>; Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966); Ken Winters, "Grab your boots, baton," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 August 2005.

*“The Eskimos are such an astonishingly unmusical race that the composer really has to wring his material to make it musically presentable. There is a marked similarity between an Eskimo singing and Sir Winston Churchill clearing his throat.”<sup>3</sup>*

And nearly twenty-five years later, Schafer makes the following arguably well-intended but equally problematic statement about an imagined merging of settler and indigenous identity:

*Task number one, forget where you came from; only then will you find out where you are ... When you finally realize you come from Canada (with no strings attached) you find yourself brother and sister of the Indians and the Inuit. All your life you had denied this possibility based on ethnic grounds ... now you discover that it is right and inevitable.<sup>4</sup>*

Scott does not cite these comments, but rather avoids these issues entirely in the book. As Dylan Robinson has pointed out with reference to Darryl Leroux’s recent study of settler claims to indigenous identity, this kind of

*identification of settler artists as the artistic heirs to Indigenous people is a historical precursor to more well-known and continuing instances of ‘going native’ that have been a staple of Canadian and American culture from Grey Owl to more current false claims to Indigenous identity.<sup>5</sup>*

Published as it is in the twenty-first century, Scott’s book might have attempted to help us grapple with some of these thorny issues surrounding Schafer’s conceptions of Canadian identity, indigenous musics, and cultural appropriation more generally. Earnest conversations about these issues continue apace in musicology at the present moment, and valuable contributions such as Lee Veeraraghavan’s 2017 dissertation, “Dirty Ears: Hearing and Hearings in the Canadian Liberal Settler Colony,” and Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (which takes Schafer to task directly) begin to address them more satisfactorily.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the volume the reader is nonetheless always aware of being engaged in the unfolding of “the most comprehensive study of Schafer and his enduring legacy,” as the book’s back cover promises. Scott’s contribution is admirable and significant, and this is a must-read for anyone interested in Canadian music.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Murray Schafer, “The Limits of Nationalism in Canadian Music” (1960), in *On Canadian Music* (Bancroft, Ontario: Arcana Editions, 1984), 10.

<sup>4</sup> R. Murray Schafer, “Canadian Culture, Colonial Culture” (1983), in *On Canadian Music* (Bancroft, Ont.: Arcana Editions, 1984), 89. Reprint of a presentation given as the Stauffer Lecture at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, ON, 4 November 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis and Saint Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 155; Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Lee Veeraraghavan, “Dirty Ears: Hearing and Hearings in the Canadian Liberal Settler Colony” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2017).