



[*Between Composers: The Letters of Norma Beecroft and Harry Somers*](#). Brian Cherney, ed. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024. 279 pp. ISBN 978-0-2280-2274-9.

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In October 2024, the Canadian contemporary music community lost one of its most unique and pioneering members, Norma Beecroft, who passed away in her 91st year. Events and tributes that followed celebrated Beecroft's contributions to Canadian music, as composer, educator, broadcaster, and arts administrator. In her early years, Beecroft sought instruction from composers such as John Weinzweig, Aaron Copland, Goffredo Petrassi, and Bruno Maderna. Emerging with a solid foundation in the explorative principles of modern composition in the mid-1960s, she established herself as an innovative and

energetic force in Canadian contemporary music. Her work embraced experimental methods of composition and emerging technologies like magnetic tape, synthesizers, and computers. Her work and dedication to concert and radio programming, which included New Music Concerts (co-founded with Robert Aitken) and weekly radio show *Music of Today* (co-hosted with Harry Somers), promoted innovative and experimental music and its history in Canada. *Between Composers: The Letters of Norma Beecroft and Harry Somers*, edited by Brian Cherney, therefore arrives at a time of increased interest in the composer's life and work.

In this new book, composer Brian Cherney takes us back to the beginnings of Beecroft's career by way of a series of love letters exchanged with composer Harry Somers. Along with an introduction and epilogue, the book comprises a selection of the over two hundred letters written between the two, edited and annotated by Cherney. The letters reveal a compelling narrative, and readers interested in the life of either composer, or in the milieu of post-war Canadian cultural history, will find the book enjoyable and fascinating. The correspondence, previously kept private, reveals new dimensions in the significance of this short but intense relationship between the two composers.

It is 1959 and Beecroft is a young, twenty-five-year-old student of composition. She has set sail from Toronto for Rome hoping to study under Goffredo Petrassi at the illustrious Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. However, Beecroft has been seeing Somers, an older and more established composer, for the last five years, and the relationship is at a critical juncture. Despite



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her departing the continent, the two continue the affair by airmail. Still deeply attached to each other, they must contend with the Atlantic Ocean—and increasingly more—standing between them. Written between September 1959 and February 1960, the conversation covers but six months. But the lovers write frequently and passionately; on some days multiple letters are mailed. The effect of this, or more specifically of mail delay, is that the narrative is sometimes offset. This is a problem the lovers have too, which they overcome by naming important letters, for example what Somers calls Beecroft’s “angry young woman letter” (p. 72). This helps the reader, as one cannot help but flick back and forth comparing dates with declarations. There is some pleasure to be had in reconstructing the timeline of events surrounding the two as they contend with their ongoing romance, and close reading may be required. This is something the lovers admit to doing too, as they endeavour to interpret the nuances of the heart in each other’s words.

It is clear from the correspondence that Somers and Beecroft have discussed her trip to Rome and Somers has played the role as mentor, offering support and guidance as Beecroft decides what she wants to do with her life. It is too late, she believes, to entertain dreams of becoming a concert pianist, but her love for music is strong, and she has set her sights on composition. Beecroft expects Somers to join her in Rome, where they can continue their relationship as she takes the next steps in her career. There is the potential for marriage and children, but also doubt, as the two contemplate whether spouses can both pursue composition. Somers’ career is on the rise, and he is furiously busy with commissions—especially his soundtrack for the film *Saguénay*—and copying, which he does to pay the bills. However, his efforts are rewarded with little in terms of remuneration, and despite the desperate yearning between the lovers, he struggles to find the resources to join her. He also remains married to his first wife, Cathy, although he has promised a divorce. Throughout their correspondence, there are hints of past conflict and infidelities. Beecroft, increasingly aware of the pressures faced by a woman in her mid-twenties in the 1950s, needs answers and commitment from her lover. Ultimately, of course, she finds her path independent of Somers.

The original letters (some of which still have sticky notes presumably left by Cherney) now reside in the Norma Beecroft fonds at the University of Calgary Archives and Special Collections.¹ They were written on thin blue onionskin airmail paper, in the handsome hands of both composers, who both had their own unique flourishes. (Beecroft, impressed by Somers’ handwriting, emulated his style for both correspondence and score writing.) Roman postmarks from the 1950s also add a little glamour to the artifacts. Somers, perhaps influenced by several glasses of wine, as Cherney suggests, sometimes adds little illustrations and, more often, big, bold declarations of love and affection. Some of this character is lost in the printed format, although Cherney provides select images in the introduction and, for example, retains Beecroft’s idiosyncratic use of the tilde in place of the period at the ends of her sentences.

¹ Finding aids and descriptions of the Norma Beecroft’s fonds held at the University of Calgary Archives and Special Collections can be found online at <https://searcharchives.ucalgary.ca/norma-beecroft-fonds>.

The letters were some of the few archival items restricted by Beecroft until after her passing. But Cherney relates in the introduction how Beecroft willingly gave them to him. During a visit to Beecroft's home while he was researching for a new book on Somers, Cherney spotted them sitting in a large stack in front of her. Beecroft offered him the letters as she felt they would be useful to anyone writing on Somers. In them, he found a compelling story between two composers, told from a rare and intimate viewpoint, that also reflected much about the creative communities in Toronto and Rome at the time. Dropping, for the time being, his original research plans, Cherney began work on what would become *Between Composers*. While Beecroft was not alive to see the publication of the book, she attended Cherney's staged dramatic reading of a selection of letters at McGill University in 2024, an event that also featured performances of works by Beecroft and Somers.²

Cherney's instinct about publishing the letters is accurate. We witness the dramatic final moments of a passionate romance, filmic in its narrative and scope, set against the backdrop of post-war Rome and Toronto. Opening with Beecroft writing wistfully from the deck of the SS *Liberté* on its way to Plymouth, one's imagination can be forgiven for conjuring black-and-white film grain and mid-Atlantic dialects. The pair are also undoubtedly glamorous. Tall and handsome with his pipe in hand, Somers has made a name for himself as a young and exciting composer, passionate and obsessive over his work. The beautiful Beecroft, a former model and daughter of actress Eleanor Beecroft, is a striking, self-possessed woman with talent and ambition.

Cherney's introduction provides excellent background to the characters, the nature of their relationship, and the development of their work. The letters are judiciously annotated, and the editor was fortunate to have Beecroft at hand via email to advise or give insight at the more obscure points. This is most apparent in the epilogue, where Cherney outlines the climactic events leading to the end of the affair through letters Beecroft had written to her mother and from Beecroft's own memories discussed via email. Cherney shows the depth of his research by providing biographical notes for the many names referenced in the letters. Somers and Beecroft ran in creative circles on both sides of the ocean, and we are introduced to many movers and shakers of the era as they pop in and out of the lives of our protagonists. As a biographer of Harry Somers,³ Cherney is familiar with this milieu; still, a handful of people cannot be traced. Both lovers are keen to discuss music, theatre, film, and art of the day, and Cherney helps us with insight into the various conversational references to people, places, or plays.

Readers of Somers may want to take a moment to place his letters published here alongside those found in *Secret Agent: The Selected Journals and Letters of Harry Somers*⁴ as he navigates his

² A description of the event can be found online at <https://www.mcgill.ca/music/article/brian-cherneys-between-composers>.

³ Brian Cherney, *Harry Somers* (University of Toronto Press, 1975).

⁴ William Scoular, ed., *Secret Agent: The Selected Journals and Letters of Harry Somers* (Canadian Music Centre, 2009).

various love affairs and the tragic suicide of his first wife, Cathy. Analysts of his work will enjoy reading about his thoughts on the prevailing methods of composition of the time, including serialism and electronic music, and his own approaches to work from the era. Early on, we find Somers groaning at the challenges he faces in scoring *Saguenay*. Later, he declares himself a genius for accomplishing it (p. 244). We gain insight into the composition methods of scoring a film, temporally constricted by celluloid frames, and how this challenge presents an opportunity for Somers to develop his craft. We also find him initially vexed by a commissioned piece for guitar, an instrument he'd only recently learned, that evolves successfully into his four-movement Sonata (1959) (p. 46, n26). Somers is also arriving at a deeper interest in colour and texture, something he would explore more in the decade following the affair.⁵

For the younger Beecroft, the period covered by the letters is of more pivotal import, as she is finding her voice and confidence in her chosen vocation. Cherney describes, in the introduction, how her work is moving out of Somers' shadow. Absorbing as much as she can amid the avant-garde scene in Rome, she reports back to Somers her activities, feelings, and thoughts, intimately. She discusses her lessons with Petrassi and Gazzelloni, as the stage is set for what will be, in Cherney's words, a "compositional breakthrough" only months after the end of the affair (p. 13). We are witness to some of Beecroft's early thoughts on electronic music and experimental techniques that she would embrace later in her career. After attending a piano recital by David Tudor, she expresses to Somers her distrust in the primacy of technique over substance.

"~ Really darling, I can't help wondering why these people who are so interested in bloody sonority cannot see further than they do and use their bloody sonorities to create music and something that communicates something important ~" (p. 97).

This stance remains consistent throughout her musical career and is echoed in numerous statements found in Calgary's Beecroft archives. In an August 1990 letter to an aspiring composer, for example, she advises, "I often begin a piece after I have drawn many charts and graphs, and organized my material, and shortly after I get into the work, the graphs slide away."⁶

We learn how important Somers was to Beecroft and the role he played as lover and mentor. However, his unwillingness to commit to Beecroft in those shaky first weeks abroad undoubtedly helped steer her to her chosen path. By the turn of the decade, through her dedication and perseverance, Beecroft had developed the self-confidence she needed to forge her way forward. Much is already known of the lives of both composers, but these letters crescendo to reveal an explosive finale, a little tragic, but satisfyingly resolute.

⁵ Scoular, 85.

⁶ Norma Beecroft, *Correspondence, August 1990*. University of Calgary Archives and Special Collections, Norma Beecroft fonds: acc. 2019.91 box/file 08.09.