

Words about music

A series of interviews with Canadian composers:

Stephen Adams talks with Gerhard Wuensch

Gerhard Wuensch is an international composer. Born in Vienna in 1925, he received his first training there, and later studied in the United States with Paul Pisk and Kent Kennan. He has taught in Canada since 1964. Wuensch's Viennese background shows in his liking for traditional forms — sonatas, suites, concertos — and his conservative harmonic idiom. He acknowledges two models especially, Hindemith, and Hindemith's master Max Reger, on whose

about his music; but he boasts an impressively large and varied catalogue of works, each one finely crafted, "well-made". "If I were a critic," he remarks, "I would say that Wuensch uses the leftovers from other composers and combines them into a new menu. Why not? Leftovers can taste very good, if they are served properly."

S.A. Is most of your music written for a



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music Wuensch has recently completed a book. Now Associate Professor of Music at The University of Western Ontario, Wuensch was commissioned last summer to produce a work celebrating the centennial of the university in 1978. *Laus Sapientiae* (In Praise of Wisdom) is a large-scale forty-minute cantata for orchestra, chorus, three soloists, organ, and brass ensemble based on texts from the Old Testament. Wuensch is modest

specific occasion?

G.W. I prefer to write music on commission if somebody says he needs a piece of music because I feel that this is something that contemporary music has gotten away from. It's the old eighteenth-century ideal of the composer being nothing but a craftsman. Like you make tables and chairs, the composer should provide music, whatever is needed. I have no ambitions to be a great prophet. I

prefer to write what Hindemith called *Gebrauchsmusik* — the *Sonata for Soprano Saxophone I* wrote for Paul Brodie, or the *Bassoon Concerto* for Gabor Janota.

S.A. You're concerned, then, to bridge the gap between composer and audience?

G.W. I try to make my music accessible. We have so much esoteric music, very involved, interesting music which is only accessible to another composer; where I think what we need is music that a layman can understand. I like music to be to a certain extent sensuous; I like beautiful sounds. I guess that's part of my Viennese heritage.

S.A. Are you interested in Hindemith's theory of composition, say, his gradation of dissonant chords?

G.W. Oh yes, I use that in my courses. His theories are a continuation of traditional music, basically, but they allow for a considerable breath of expression. You can do any kind of dissonance, and it all has a solid theoretical basis. Of course I studied it when I was a composition student, and it became sort of inbred — you don't think about it any more.

S.A. Are you interested in the recent avant-garde?

G.W. Oh yes, very much so. The only question I have is whether it can reach the audience.

S.A. Do you write in a variety of styles?

G.W. For pedagogical purposes, yes. I published a few little introductory books for pianists (*Twelve Glimpses into 20th Century Idioms*) because I found in my activity as adjudicator at festivals that the kids really liked modern music. It's mainly the teachers and the parents who object. Most of the teachers, unfortunately, don't really understand what goes on in a modern piece. If one could explain to a teacher why the music sounds this way, it may bring audiences closer to modern music. I do occasionally use serial passages in some of my larger works, where it's appropriate.

S.A. How did you become so interested in writing for the free-bass accordion?

G.W. When I was teaching in Toronto, one of my students, Joe Macerollo, got fascinated with the instrument, and I did too. If you dissociate it from the polka sound, the instrument has rather refined registration, particularly 2-foot and very high doublings, which blend well with string harmonics, or as contrast with brass ensemble. After all, the guitar became respectable, so why not the accordion?

Through the button arrangement you can play a twelfth, which on a keyboard you can't do. And there are some nice effects — you can bring the bass register above the right hand; there's a tremolo effect by shaking the bellows, and all sorts of sudden accents, crescendos and so forth. There are about twelve different registers, so it becomes really a portable organ, with the only difference that the dynamics are movable.

S.A. Which one of your pieces would you especially like to see performed more often?

G.W. I think the Piano Concerto. It's in a sort of Stravinskian neo-classical vein, very much modelled on the Symphony in C. Quite Mozartean, with a little bite to it now and then.

S.A. You have been a composer in three different countries. Is it harder, do you think, for a Canadian to become known as a composer?

G.W. Yes. The CBC is really the only outlet for disseminating Canadian music, and sadly lacking is a recording industry in Canada for Canadian music. Through the League of Composers we are trying to set up an organization similar to what they have in Holland, a composer's and publisher's venture that includes recording. I hope that this will come about.

S.A. Can you describe your new work for the centennial of Western, Laus Sapientiae?

G.W. The text was chosen from Old Testament passages which have to do with the value of wisdom. It's partly in Latin and partly in English. The work is continuous. There is an initial motive that recurs in the orchestra at appropriate moments. At certain moments a lyric passage, an *arioso*, will illuminate something which was made before in a very clear statement by the chorus, and the soloist will elaborate on that. The whole thing climaxes in a restatement of the first idea, which will be for everybody involved. There is quite a bit of noise.

S.A. Is it a very serious work?

G.W. Partly. I do use the passage about throwing pearls before swine — but that's in Latin. Actually, Reger's *Hundredth Psalm* had a lot to do with this cantata, because at the end he uses the chorale *Ein feste Burg*: it's a double fugue for chorus and orchestra, and at the very end the brass intones in enormously elongated notes that the chorale, which is combined with both fugue subjects. I try to do something like the same thing in my cantata, in dissonant counterpoint.

EDITORIAL:

A sequel to Canadian music events in Europe

The Festival of Canadian Music in London, Musicanada, and its counterpart, *La présence de la musique canadienne contemporaine* in Paris, have come and gone. Apart from revealing the high level of Canadian composition today, foreign audiences have once again been reminded of the remarkable accomplishments of Canadian performers in the contemporary music field. The cooperation of the Cultural Division of External Affairs, The Canada Council, the Touring Office of the Council, the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, Canada House, London, the CBC, the Canadian Music Centre and various performing groups was a very positive indication of the stature Canadian music is being accorded nowadays.

The Canadian music projects in London and Paris were both complex to arrange and daring in concept. Those responsible for wanting to make our music better known and appreciated in two extremely important international music centres are to be congratulated and deserve our warmest thanks.

However, we must now face the fact that it is only by finding ways and means of having "ongoing" projects which will continually bring Canadian music before foreign audiences that the start made with the London and Paris events can be really capitalized upon. After all

Canadian music is a vast field, and a limited number of concerts in two important cities, though a major step forward, cannot give Europeans — let alone the rest of the world — a totally comprehensive view of the diversity and scope of the music being written in Canada today.

If the London and Paris events could be the beginning of "ongoing" projects between the Cultural Division of the Department of External Affairs, The Canada Council and its Touring Office, the CBC and appropriate foreign government departments, agencies and broadcasting organizations, Canadian music might stand a chance of staying in the international limelight. At any rate, the Canadian agencies and departments concerned could be asked to look into the matter thoroughly and consider a variety of approaches and possibilities in devising a three to five-year plan. Of course, the on-the-spot efforts of the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, and Canada House in London, as well as the imaginative ventures of CAPAC which present Canadian music to overseas audiences — the last one was in Bonn — are all most valuable and could play an important part in developing a larger design for the presentation of Canadian music to overseas audiences in the future.

John P.L. Roberts

New Centre branch opens in Vancouver

November 2 marked the opening of a Canadian Music Centre branch in British Columbia, located at No. 3, 2007 West 4th Avenue in Vancouver, telephone (604) 734-4622. This is the second regional office to be established; the Centre in Montreal was opened in 1973. The Regional Manager of the B.C. Centre will be Mrs. Christine Callon, formerly librarian and music specialist at the King Edward Campus of the Vancouver Community College in Vancouver and she will be assisted by Miss Dessy Wong as secretary.

The initial impetus for an office on the West Coast was provided by an Ad

Hoc Committee of concerned musicians under the chairmanship of Dr. Allen Clingman of the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. The Centre is funded by The Canada Council, the British Columbia Cultural Program, the Thea and Leon Koerner Foundation, the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Foundation.

With the opening of CMC-Vancouver, access to the music of Canadian composers will be available locally providing valuable service to the flourishing musical life of British Columbia.