

ARTICLE

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A Canadian Cultural Question: Can Meaning in Music Extend Beyond Emotions?

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Abstract

This article argues that music can reflect and express the ideas that define particular cultures by considering the presence of concepts from Canadian philosophy in the nation's music. It begins by examining how musical compositions can incorporate philosophical notions before surveying some themes in Canadian philosophy. The article then identifies these concepts from Canadian philosophy in the musical compositions of artists such as Léo Pol Morin, R. Murray Schafer, Udo Kasemets, Michael Snow, Glenn Gould, R. Bruce Elder (this article's author), and David Jaeger.

Résumé

Cet article soutient que la musique peut refléter et exprimer les idées qui définissent des cultures particulières en considérant la présence de concepts de la philosophie canadienne dans la musique du pays. Il commence par examiner comment les compositions musicales peuvent intégrer des notions philosophiques avant d'examiner certains thèmes de la philosophie canadienne. L'article identifie ensuite ces concepts de la philosophie canadienne dans les compositions musicales d'artistes tels que Léo Pol Morin, R. Murray Schafer, Udo Kasemets, Michael Snow, Glenn Gould, R. Bruce Elder (l'auteur de cet article) et David Jaeger.

Keywords: music; emotions; culture; meaning; composition

1. Introduction

What meanings can be associated with the word “music”? Different cultures have created very different rhythms and melodies sending messages about power, territory, supreme beings, and beliefs. This article will argue that music can also reflect and express ideas that define cultures, by considering the philosophical roots of Canada.

The exploration will be of compositions of sound and timing, and mainly those that do not deviate towards obvious rhythms.¹

Let's begin with Aristotle.

2. Aristotle: Meanings in Music Extend Beyond Emotional Response

Aristotle noted the capacity of music to stimulate emotional responses, and that music contained emotional moods and thus could be written to convey moods oriented towards good behaviours (Aristotle, 1987, p. 1448a).

Our tendency continues to be the association of learning about moral decisions with learning rules of behaviour and following the instructions of others. In many cultures, an appeal to a supreme being of a religion is often accompanied by musical rhythms, and melodies. Music accompanying early training in good behaviour can hold the attention of children: "Music has the power of forming the character, and should be introduced into the education of the young" (Aristotle, 2017, p. 1340b). Aristotle's explanation was that music engages the mind. He suggested that when we can engage with syntactical sound forms requiring recognition, anticipation, and conjecture, and follow their patterns and pattern changes, we become more sensitive to possible endings and outcomes. These outcomes offer a sense of good, a way that things ought to be, and what it is to seek agendas that resolve with good being experienced by others.

Aristotle advocated for the recognition of pleasant outcomes, for example, when music has a cheerful ending or a powerful harmonious sound and can evoke positive attitudes to patterns and conclusions. That, he said, is the first step in recognizing the benefits of doing good and will influence characters who seek fulfillment in following such paths. Children can listen long before they can read, and Aristotle said they can recognize good in music as a guide and a goal for decision making. His theory of happiness extended these observations, in that happiness is not personal pleasure, but the pleasure we experience in knowing we are doing good for others (Aristotle, 2024, pp. 1099b–1100b).² Already we are beyond emotional stimulations.

3. What We Can Bring to Musical Meanings

John Cage, an American composer, proposed a radical critique of meaning in music. In his book *Silence*, Cage urged the composer to "give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music [in the ordinary sense], and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments" (Cage, 1961, p. 10). Cage rejected the idea of art as self-expression. Chance operations were for him fundamentally tactics to eliminate the ego from art-making:

¹ The difference between music and noise has been extensively explored. In the early 20th century, composers began to challenge tradition — an integral component of art — and push the boundaries of musical sound by incorporating what was thought to be noise into their compositions.

² See also Egerton Ryerson (2002). Ryerson, the first superintendent of public schools in Ontario, strongly supported music as a component of early childhood education.

Art may be practiced in one way or another, so that it reinforces the ego in its likes and dislikes, or so that it opens that mind to the world outside, and outside inside. Since the forties and through the study with D. T. Suzuki of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, I've thought of music as a means of changing the mind. I saw art not as something that consisted of a communication from the artist to an audience but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves. And, in being themselves, to open the minds of people who made them or listened to them to other possibilities than they had previously considered. (Kostelanetz, 2000, p. 211)

Leonard Meyer argued that the more different kinds of music we listen to, the greater the range of musical possibilities we can imagine, and the less determined the information we may be expecting to contemplate (Meyer, 1967, pp. 12–17). Meyer offered the idea of meaning and music as a journey of mental stimulations where we are drawn into the adventure by uncertainty because we can conceive of multiple possibilities of the next musical passage. Meyer's book established that there are few guaranteed statements that can be made about meaning in music, but his effort did show that our encounters with music involve much more than judgements of personal taste and emotional responses.

Knowledge of patterns and forms in a musical arrangement, not to mention theories about its history and composer, will also affect what meanings we bring to musical experience, but so too will what others have said about a composition, who they are, and what civilization they represent. The world of art, including music, is one where we can choose the knowledge we see as relevant to its production as well as relevant to its encounter.³

4. Music and Literature: Meanings

Let us compare hearing musical sounds to literature. Reading takes us away from our present setting, and:

finds homes for us everywhere [. . .] Writers of literature strive to introduce us to situations we have probably never before encountered; at the same time [. . .] they also want to make us identify with and understand that unfamiliar situation. Combining the unfamiliar with the familiar is a hallmark of literary writing. (Pike & Acosta, 2011, p. 5)

This mental activity can be the same source of meaning in music.

We recognize some music from an early age and then are led to new combinations of notes and sounds quite unfamiliar to us, but memory and cognition stimulated by new patterns of sound engage the mind. What is making the sound? Where is it going? Why did it stop there? The first encounter of the shift from one form of music to another can be fraught with interruptions and questions. Just as following a

³ In a sense, the more we know about the craft of making music and the freer we are to exercise that knowledge, the greater the possible differences in response to a musical event.

Shakespearian play or the poetry of Robert Service can move us miles in our minds, so too can music shift us into a headspace full of uncertainties and yet draw us further towards the unknown. How can this happen with notes? At least words have some roots in the world. But such roots are dialectical, requiring an awareness of negations and affirmations, of limits and uncertainties: “We understand what words mean only in comparison with what they do not mean and what they do not say” (Pike & Acosta, 2011, p. 5).

Combining the certain with the uncertain can also be the composer’s intention. When we hear a noise or sound, the origin of which we cannot identify, we are curious.⁴ Recognizing sound patterns is shared by many in the mammalian kingdom. Creating sound patterns for survival purposes has been documented with birds, whales, and other species, but creating sound patterns to reflect ideas issuing in a new kind of reality, that, to date, is still the unique capacity of human beings.⁵

Francis Sparshott explored the idea of creativity: a person “is called creative because of a tendency to produce things of a novel sort [. . .] in a variety of contexts” but he added that being creative “is not a special sort of activity, but any sort of activity that issues in new being” (Sparshott, 1977, p. 163). When do you have new music as creative, a new being? Perhaps when it is inspired by another new being. This possibility opens the door for a new country, a developing new being, to be an inspiration and source of new meanings in music.

5. Canada: As a New Being

Are there ideas about Canada that can be captured in music, as meaningful sound patterns? Such a question can raise issues about culture, as distinct from philosophy, and some clarification is needed.

The 2002 collection, *Philosophy, Culture, and Pluralism*, explores the relationship between culture and philosophy. In the “Introduction,” William Sweet, urges the reader to “investigate how certain philosophical questions have been pursued in different cultures” (Sweet, 2002, p. xx). While philosophical systems are often presented as having universal accessibility because of shared foundations of concepts (truth, the infinite, beings), methods of problem solving (logical reasoning, deductions from culturally recognized laws to particulars), and universal questions (Is there a god? Are humans free?), the theories developed, and answers provided range considerably. There are philosophical systems seeking the clarity of sciences (which themselves are constantly being revised) while other responses to common questions and methodologies produce culturally identified philosophies, such as Chinese, African, and Indigenous philosophies, which differ considerably around the world.

⁴ Aristotle (1981) also identified that aspect of our being that differentiates us from the world with which we engage. We share the world with other nutritive plants and animals, but we differ from the world of living things in that we have a rational faculty, and reasoning enables us to carry out carefully formulated projects.

⁵ A former student of mine recorded his washing machine as a musical composition to accompany his unpublished essay, “From Noise to Sound to Music.” He had found a job, purchased his own washing machine, and returned to school part time. Soft sounds producing musical rhythms, the quiet before the spin cycle, the silence before the applause when the machine stopped, all was “music to his ears.”

Leslie Armour, in his article “Culture and Philosophy,” argues that culture is not just about descriptions of behaviours and values; culture identifies the different meanings people attribute to behaviours and events: “When the same behaviour is habitually given more than one meaning” and the meanings “form a whole way of life, there are two or more basic cultures involved” (Armour, 2002, p. 179). Armour establishes that unity is a foundation to establishing order, that is, unity grounds the patterns of behaviours that we rely on to know what is going on and to determine our decision making. Armour includes in the adherence to unified orders and patterns — albeit different ones define different cultures — the “activities of painters, poets and musicians” (Armour, 2002, p. 179). Though such activities are subject to endless debate as to their meanings, different cultures are the source of those different meanings. Persons experiencing the artwork seek to recognize a unity therein, a meaningful ordering to the creative expression; “the unity which emerges in paintings and symphonies is one source of the clues to the idea of meaning itself” (Armour, 2002, p. 179). Our behaviours as both meaningful to ourselves and to others will result from a mixture of social orders and individual choices, “but the cultural structure which puts one or the other in the foreground or balances them off against one another will make a difference to nearly all outcomes” (Armour, 2002, p. 190).

The observation that culture can determine choices and our perceptions of unity applies to music — our present focus in the arts. Were we solely driven by logic or analytic reasoning, all sound patterns recognized as music would have similar ordering patterns, such as an initial melody, variations on that melody, and definitive endings. But we know that is not the case. Some music has served as role models for developing composers (George Frideric Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach) in the way that some philosophical theories have been strong roots for future contributions (Plato, René Descartes, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx). Yet, the more we learn about cultural meanings in the world, the more we realize that philosophy generates patterns that can be arranged into multiple different unities.

If we consider early philosophical developments as Canada was becoming a new being, new patterns were being formed to address and reflect the increasing complexities of multiple cultures. In spite of multiple cultures, principles of unity began to emerge. *The Faces of Reason* (Armour & Trott, 1981) tracks many of these early efforts to adapt universal answers to universal questions while recognizing cultural differences.⁶ The inspiration for new pattern developments was the freedom to rethink old theory in a new setting.

The documentation of creative efforts of philosophy which address, reflect, and further expand the concept of Canada has been underway since the early 1950s, but largely ignored in university philosophy departments. Several shared principles have emerged in the research undertaken with the goal of identifying those patterns of problem solving that sustain and unite the complex country:

⁶ The French-Canadian inquiry was already under way with Roland Houde’s *Histoire et philosophie au Québec* (Houde, 1972) and Yvan La Monde’s *Historiographie de la philosophie au Québec 1853–1971* (La Monde, 2011).

- 1) Dialectical oppositions are seldom treated as warring opposites from which a winner must emerge. In Hegelian traditions, oppositions are collated with the goal of fostering a synthesis that generates new ideas to address old problems. In Canadian philosophy, reason is used as a way of exploring apparently “contradictory ideas [. . .]. Only rarely is it used as an intellectual substitute for force” (Armour & Trott, 1981, p. 4).
- 2) Cultural distinctions can often be identified with the acknowledgement of different meanings associated with the same event (Armour & Trott, 1981, pp. xxii–xxiv).
- 3) God is an idea that, though shared in name by multiple religions, must be understood as a source of moral inspiration. God, for early Canadian philosophers, is not the author of a set of rules that must be followed.
- 4) There is, in multiple writings, a recognition that selves are not free-wheeling powerful individuals, but are embedded in dialectical relations with other selves. We cannot reject who we are not, because we need others to confirm our identity and to survive. The constant tensions of needing who we are not foster a multicultural diverse collective of unique communities.⁷ Those tensions underlie the unity of being a Canadian: the ongoing recognition of differences united in our freedom, while being challenged to survive.

Such tensions also infiltrate many free creations in the artistic world. Some are tied to past cultural expressions. In a new developing being (the emergence of Canada), all artists — be they literary, musical, and visual including dance — are free to break loose and experiment. While there have been past masters setting standards accompanied by critical expectations for achieving greatness in many cultures, a new country without a specific artistic legacy is free to initiate its own determinations of experiences and measures of excellence. Not surprisingly, tensions, overwhelming scale (in geographic size, cultural complexity, and historical roots), and uncertainties emerge. The search to create a pattern of engagement, a unity, has produced some artistic outcomes that would not have been imagined anywhere else.

6. Tensions in Artistic Expressions

Dialectical debate and ongoing tensions have been recognized in much Canadian literature. Richard Plant, editor of the collection of plays, *Modern Canadian Drama*, writes:

Modern Canadian Drama, particularly that with a documentary force behind it, often offers a different dramatic tension from that created by the traditional protagonist/antagonist opposition. [. . . The audience can become] caught up in tensions engendered by the reality of characters being revealed on stage bouncing off the reality of the audience’s preconceptions of them. The result is our involvement in a third reality, the “real” identities of the characters and their implications. This too seems a sophisticated dramatic tension. (Plant, 1984, p. 26)

⁷ See Trott (2019) for an argument for the existence of Canadian philosophy.

While there have been different modes of visual expressions created in Canada (e.g., paintings, sculpture, photography), there is considerable evidence of one's attention being held by the whole visual image or sculptured object, not a specific feature of it with subtle background to give a focus. The "other" in front of the viewer often startles the viewer with its holistic opposition, and yet holds the attention while the viewer is drawn to sort out meaningful patterns. Certainly, much work of the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson reflect experience of the powerful otherness of nature that, while often beautiful, also demands that one have knowledge, courage, strength, and fellow humans in order to survive. The viewer is drawn into the image, asking, "Could I survive there?" The huge expansion of visual productions (including dance) continues to sustain this holistic challenge for the viewing participant. Can such tensions and syntheses that foster new tensions, but evade antagonistic conflict, be captured in music?

I do not consider folk music or their wonderful melodies with repetitive harmonies and rhyming lyrics. Nor am I reviewing Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, or The Tragically Hip (and many others), all of whom through syncopated rhythms and lyrics connect to key Canadian concerns.

7. Modernism and Music in Canada

Near the turn of the 19th century, paintings were breaking new ground with abstract experiments and artistic responses to new powers such as electricity.⁸ There were huge shifts and changes in concert music. Much that originated with European composers — such as Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, and others — involved in modernist breaks from traditional concert phrases, harmonies, repetitions, and grand endings. Stravinsky's 1913 *The Rites of Spring* opened the door to creative experiment.

Canada had its own response to modernist movements, inspired by them, but not in imitation of them. Responding to life-changing forces referred initially more to wilderness, the north, wildlife, and the unpredictability of natural forces. These forces were challenges for all Canadians regardless of their cultures, and created tensions out of which a synthesis of new music began to emerge. Electricity eventually impacted the artistic mind as well.

8. Seven Canadian Composers Expressing Philosophical Roots

Léo Pol Morin, R. Murray Schafer, Udo Kasemets, Michael Snow, Glenn Gould, R. Bruce Elder (this article's author), and David Jaeger are all examples of music composers who reflect Canadian philosophical roots, not through knowing Canadian philosophical theory and applying it, but through living and writing music in a developing culture, a new being. In effect, they serve as examples in music of an emerging philosophical identity. In the following sections of this article, I will examine these musicians and their works.

These Canadians composed music that reflects the developing culture of dialectical synthesis, tensions, and accommodations through change. Musical composition

⁸ See Elder (2018). The section focused on pure abstract art appears on pages 552–568. The entire book deals with electrolgy and electromorphic art.

became more abstract, expressing not simply emotions such as sadness or joy, but expressing changes in interpretive reactions, more exact expressions of living experience, through incomplete phrases, unexpected endings to patterns and sets of orchestrations, dramatic rises and silences that spoke more to the mind than the ear, yet to the mind as it comprehends change and uncertainty.

Léo Pol Morin (1892–1941), a French-Canadian composer from Quebec, excelled in skill through his European education and returned home frequently to recognize the enormous potential for musical innovations in Canada.

How the academy has recognized Morin shows divergent responses between Québécois and English-Canadian analyses. Quebec author Paul Bazin situates him in imitation of European composers, as if he was trying to bring their styles and artistry to Canada (Bazin, 2012). Kristina Beth Anderson offers a quite different perspective (Anderson, 1994). Her sources of interpretation are the articles and analyses of music that Morin published in newspapers and eventually collated in his *Papiers de Music*. Anderson (1994) includes a translation of Morin's *Papiers de Music*.

What we find is a recognition that composers can capture ideas and cultural characteristics in their works. The thesis cites Ravel, who defended a shared musical vocabulary in the world (notes, chords, etc.) but claimed that it was infused with the character and spirit of its nation and its people.

Anderson describes Morin as seeking to find national meaning (Anderson, 1994, p. 12) in his desire for a distinctive Canadian music (Anderson, 1994, p. 20), and he writes repeatedly about the need to teach more about music and promote it in educational curriculum in schools (Anderson, 1994, p. 38). Morin desired a musical vocabulary, one shared by the world, yet “infused with the character and spirit of its nation and people” (Anderson, 1994, p. 30). Even incorporating jazz rhythms and patterns into art music seemed a move in keeping with courage and the need to accommodate and adapt. Morin wanted to create new ways of expressing the artistic responses to a new land, a musical synthesis of oppositional modes of expression (Anderson, 1994, p. 70).⁹

New music being written recognized multiple cultural possibilities, the difference in cultural traditions, and the possibility of synthesis in multiple ways. Morin wanted both to promote recognition of, and to synthesize, Indigenous music that he had learned — though recordings were pretty sparse — to create a broader spectrum in Canadian music (Anderson, 1994, p. 36). Morin incorporated Inuit folk patterns and rhythms into his composition, such as *Three Eskimos*, and adapted European sound patterns to the shifts and changes found in a world dominated by natural wilderness. In 1945, several compositions first performed at a 1929 festival of Canadian music in Montreal, such as *Weather Incantation* and *Aquarium*, were published as *Suite canadienne* after his death. There was a recognition that art is not universal in expression of topics. Legends, traditions, and meanings associated with nature can all infuse the creative mind with ways to express national identity.¹⁰

⁹ While Morin acknowledged there were differences between music from Quebec and Ontario, he also recognized Sir Ernest MacMillan and Healey Willan as participants in Canadian music.

¹⁰ See Caron (2015). Morin frequently published under the name James Callihou.

9. Encounters with Nature in Canada

R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021), born in Sarnia, Ontario, was determined to capture Canadian characteristics in music. Both Morin and Schafer recognized the different encounters with nature that cultures experience.

Schafer was drawn to the natural world, as were so many painting artists before him, and he was writing music inspired by not just natural sounds but by the struggle to survive and then be inspired and transformed by nature — ideas he expressed in his music.¹¹ He recorded some compositions on the shores of northern lakes in Ontario, such as *Music for Wilderness Lake*. Schafer sensed there was a new world being discovered in his habitat, a sense of needing to live in harmony with “the climate and the land” (Schafer 1984, p. 89).

Schafer bemoaned the neglect of attention paid to Canadian musical creativity while also promoting the Indigenous musical roots of the country:

When you finally realize you come from Canada (with no strings attached) you find yourself brother and sister of the Indians and Inuit [...] you realize that Canadian history books will soon have to be rewritten [...] that the “two founding nations” were marauders who destroyed a culture from which we may still learn valuable lessons: for instance, ecological stability, a respect for nature, and a no growth economy. (Schafer, 1984, p. 80)

In 1984, Schafer presented the natural wilderness as the other which created the dialectic of self and not self, whereas music could be the synthesis for new understanding: “The music and the forest were companions: they intensified one another” (Schafer, 1984, p. 80).

Schafer was writing about the kind of changes in attitude and circumstance that we are just beginning to see now. His first mode of communication was his music. Natural sounds have a dominant role in some compositions and recorded orchestral compositions, including vocals. As such, his compositions were a first in accommodating contrapuntal sound formations.

Udo Kasemets’s compositions convey a very different sense of environment, yet the idea of the environment — and alerting listeners to the dangers that arise from allowing technological will to impose itself on the environment — is at the heart of his mission. Kasemets was born in Estonia, studied composition, conducting, and piano at the State Conservatory in Tallinn. He then attended the Staatliche Hochschule in Stuttgart and, in 1950, the Kranichstein Institut in Darmstadt, where he became familiar with the music and philosophies of Ernst Krenek, Hermann Scherchen, and Edgard Varèse. In 1951, he emigrated to Canada, working in both Hamilton and

¹¹ The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson had already been breaking tradition with their paintings conveying the overwhelming emotional and humbling impacts of the wilderness experience. A viewer of their multiple works is immersed in power and colour and beauty. One is not simply observing these “others,” these oppositional scenarios of skies, fierce waters, and impenetrable forests. One is caught in the dialectics of encountering what is part of Canada while being totally humbled by its “otherness.” The viewer is caught in tensions of artists capturing wilderness scenarios and surviving the efforts to do so.

Toronto.¹² In 1958, he was the founder-director of *Musica Viva*, an organization devoted to the performance of new compositions and seldom-heard early music. Kasemets's compositions developed through a number of stages — each marked by a breakthrough insight: “When studying Palestrina I sensed that musical order was larger than the sum of its components, however cleverly, imaginatively, and systematically they were put together” (Timar, 2019, p. 14).

Kasemets's musical concepts transfigured from interests in local melodies to universal conjectures about “the music of the spheres” rooted in early Greek philosophical theory which opened the door for divine speculations and expressions of such ongoing longings in musical compositions. A shift to universal explorations of ideas — that is, not being confined by cultural or religious meanings — meant that mathematics, a universal order, could be also be a factor for the development of new musical patterns. Dialectical relations, such as musical expressions that can synthesize both the mystical and the mathematical, were emerging within the culture he had adopted by living in Canada. A synthesis of oppositions was emerging in political evolution, in religious theory, with the emergence of the United Church, whose roots had considerable development through the writings of Queen's University philosopher, John Watson, and the search for a Canadian national construct resulted in a declaration of a multicultural identity. Kasemets's music can be heard as in keeping with such cultural evolution. His later acknowledgement of the impact of the writings of John Cage, is neither an acceptance to follow Cage, nor a decision of a future plan, but a guide that opens creative doors even further.

“With Cage I was born again,” said Kasemets:

Cage was the person who showed that music is not a fixed discipline, but one that relates to life in many ways, as one system related to all systems. It was Cage who showed that music belongs in the universe at large. (Poole, 2000)

In 1972, Kasemets wrote, “to compose isn't any longer to solve musical acrostics,” but rather is a process of “learning to know what life and nature, indeed the whole universe, are about, and to present a report on these studies by using all means available, including sounds” (Kasemets, 1972, as cited in Ware & Gillmor, 2013).

A 1968 work of Kasemets that reflects the collaboration of multiple ideas combined with mathematical choices is *T*¹. Kasemets describes it as “a cybernetic audience-controlled, audio-visual performance piece,” composed in tribute to Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, and John Cage (Strachan, 2015, pp. 304–305). Kasemets's notes for the creation of the piece stipulate “aural and visual presentations and illuminations (by means of speech, recordings, slide projections, films, sculptural constructions, etc.) of words ideas and images of B. Fuller, M. McLuhan and J. Cage,” will be manipulated according to a live audience poll regarding pitch (frequency), volume (amplitude), and tonal colour (timbre), which is then processed by a computer — so this is a real-time composition — and displayed for graphs, for the

¹² Kasemets taught piano, theory, composition, and conducting at the Hamilton Conservatory of Music as conductor of the Hamilton Conservatory Chorus and the Collegium Musicum of Hamilton until 1957. He was the founder-director of the Toronto Bach Society from 1958–1959.

performers and audience (Windeyer, 2015).¹³ Kasemets's entry in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* notes:

It is clear that Udo Kasemets expected his audiences to participate creatively, to respond imaginatively to the infinite variety of sounds in the environment, and thus to achieve a more intense awareness of the contemporary soundscape. A number of classroom works, created in the early 1970s during his short tenure with the North York school board, were conceived as ingenious perception exercises. *Musicgames* (1971) is conceived as a series of seven sound-perception and sound-conception group exercises; *Songbirdsong* (1971) is a tape-recorded birdsong cognition exercise; *Colourwalk* (1971) involves colour perception; and *Senslalom* (1972) is intended to instruct all five senses. (Ware & Gillmor, 2013)

The overlap between R. Murray Shafer and Udo Kasemets should be clear. Interestingly, this grand effort — relating ecological, environmental, and spiritual concerns — has been pursued by composers who worked as outsider artists. Perhaps this is because the altered modes of consciousness these works reflect are generally unwelcome within the rubric of the empirical-factual paradigm of cognition.

Between 1965 and 1967, Kasemets directed the Isaacs Gallery Mixed Media Ensemble, an informal collective that drew on the diverse skills of local musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, poets, and technicians and attempted through their real-time exchanges to bring difference, dissensus, and difference into an organic harmony characterized by tension and reconciliation. The Isaacs Gallery Mixed Ensemble performed on nine evenings featuring works by American and Canadian composers dedicated to producing music in new forms. The roster of performers that Kasemets enlisted for his evenings at the Isaacs Gallery is striking. Among those who presented was the American trombonist Stuart Dempster, who performed works by Luciano Berio, Pauline Oliveros, John Cage, and others. One local group that presented in Kasemets's evenings at the Isaacs Gallery was Stu Broomer's Kinetic Improvisation Ensemble: that collective also presented high-energy (and high-volume) compositions at the two 1967 performances in Toronto of Joyce Wieland's *Bill's Hat*, a live cinema event mounted in August at Cinethon (a massive experimental film event held at Cinecity film theatre that introduced a generation of Ontarians to avant-garde cinema) and in November at an "Expanded Cinema Night" at the Art Gallery of Ontario — Wieland, along with her then-husband Michael Snow was a member of the group of artists that Av Isaacs represented. (Stu Broomer also worked with Michael Snow on *Sound and Darkness* for the Youth Pavilion at Expo 67.) Another local group that performed was the Artists' Jazz Band, made up of visual artists who gathered periodically in private (often in Gordon Rayner's loft) and occasionally in public to create collective, spontaneous compositions: the group included (among others)

¹³ Windeyer notes that:

The first and only performances of *T'* occurred at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute on the weekend of March 9 and 10 in 1968 — part of a weekend extravaganza of "environmental compositions" entitled *SightSoundSystem* that capped off the Kasemets-curated "Festival of Art and Technology." (Windeyer, 2015).

Windeyer is attempting to recreate the piece using contemporary computer technology.

Graham Coughtry, who produced quasi-figurative, semi-abstract paintings inflected by a strong colour sense (on trombone), Nobuo Kubota, an architect, painter, sculptor, and student of Zen Buddhism (on alto saxophone), Robert Markle, who created assertively masculinist figurative works, mostly of female nudes, in many media (on tenor saxophone and piano), and Gordon Rayner, at the time, an abstract expressionist painter (on drums) — all these players were members of the Isaacs Group of Painters and most of whom had become acquainted with one another in days when Toronto's so-called Gerrard St. Village was a bohemian enclave. Another Canadian group hailed from London Ontario — the Nihilist Spasm Band, a noise ensemble that included artists John Boyle, Bill Exley, Murray Favro, and Greg Curnoe (the last another artist Isaacs represented).¹⁴

In 1968, Kasemets planned and directed *Sightsoundsystems Festival*, a weeklong event that marked the inception of the Toronto branch of the New York-based Experiments in Art and Technology. The inaugural event, *Reunion*, sponsored partly by Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, brought John Cage and the artist Marcel Duchamp to Toronto's Ryerson Theatre for the four and a half-hour premiere, in which games of chess between the two visitors determined the performance.

Michael Snow's work, as much as R. Murray Shafer's and Udo Kasemets's, evinces a concern with environments and what McLuhan called "counter-environments." This is true of his sound/music works. In 1976, Snow created an installation piece, *Hearing Aid*:

The work consists of a metronome placed in an empty space. The sound of the metronome (and of the space where we hear it) is recorded and played back on a cassette placed in an adjoining space. The sound emitted by the cassette player is re-recorded and played back in turn on a second cassette placed in a different space. The whole process is repeated a third time.

The sound of the metronome, altered by the effects of the space and played back over and over, reveals that all representation is distortion. Is it possible to capture sound in itself? How can we describe what we hear? What does it mean to listen and understand? Is there a possible representation that does not alter the individuality of the facts? A minimalist installation that invites us to think about the nature of sound, but also about memory, space and representation (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2011).

¹⁴ I can vouch for the success of the effort: as a young music reviewer for the student newspaper, I attended a performance, and I can recall the challenge the group presented to conventional ideas on music, and the demands that ideas on spatialization as a legitimate musical parameter that foregrounded music's "environmental" character made on perception, requiring listeners to experience differently. For its part, Cinethone, while it didn't introduce me to avant-garde cinema, opened my mind to the range of vanguard practices in cinema and was a formative influence on me.

Av Isaacs was an important Toronto gallerist. As a supplement for a Michael Snow memorial podcast, I put together a piece on Neo-Dada interests of the artists in Isaacs's circle — tracing them back to their origins in the days of the Gerrard St. Village. This can be found at: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5SIQxejx8HrQOGqiMHRfoo>

The ecological and environmental implications of the piece should be stressed.¹⁵

Glenn Gould (1932–1982) was deeply drawn to the natural world though he did not incorporate its aural forms as obviously as did Schafer. Gould associated hearing music entirely with an intellectual experience, one that could draw one away from the self and its petty interests to a spiritual experience of otherness,¹⁶ though he did not express this as a move towards God.¹⁷ The music that Gould preferred was contrapuntal, meaning contrasting melodies conjoined: “He preferred contrapuntal music for the complexity of its structure [...] and the reason he often played at what were generally considered slow tempos was to make the structure apprehensible” (Elder, 1989, pp. 68–76). Music was “of the mind more than the ear” (Elder, 1989, p. 72). Gould’s radio programs included “the Idea of North” in his Solitude trilogy and he engaged in contrapuntal presentations of comments and dialogues to capture the different perspectives and observations made by different groups of isolated people. The philosophical roots emerge endlessly in Gould’s music, his desire to bring attention to Indigenous culture and his recognition of the power of the *place itself* as an opposition to be respected not dominated or erased.

David Howes, has captured the “Canadianness” of Gould:

Gould had an unusual ability to listen and think contrapuntally. For him, concentrating did not principally involve shutting one thing out to hear another. He cultivated the ability to attend to many different voices simultaneously, and so evidenced what could be called a “federalism of mind.” (Howes, 2023)

Federalism can be recognized in his recognition that there is more to life than the self, and that music can transfigure the mental patterns of rhythms and harmonies into powerful intellectual excursions beyond present simplicities towards the complexities conceived of by the mind drawn into a more holistic world spirit. In all is recognition and respect for the other — a fundamental principle identified in early Canadian philosophy.

My own work in media is generally written about as being forthrightly polyphonic, overwhelming, or massively polyphonic. My films (and more recently digital works) incorporate images — often two or three layers of images imbricated on one another — written (poetic) texts, spoken texts (both narrative and poetic), synthesized (poetic) speech, music, and diegetic and non-diegetic sounds (diegetic sounds are recorded along with the images). In part, this polyphonic composition is motivated by concerns similar to those of the “indeterminate” music that Udo Kasemets advocated and practiced: viewers-listeners are invited to choose which elements from the array

¹⁵ Michael Snow and I engaged in a long conversation about Snow’s work in sound, which includes an extensive discussion of this piece. See Elder & Snow (2023).

¹⁶ Indeed, experience in the natural world can result in the same loss of a sense of self. The indeterminate power around you simply can swallow the ego.

¹⁷ Gould resisted specific religions and did not think they belonged in schools. But he did not reject the thought of an afterlife. Canadian philosophers were constantly adapting their thoughts on religion and God to accommodate increasing multicultural differences. Gould supported a puritan lifestyle; he was proud of “Toronto the Good,” as it was known. Supporting a puritan lifestyle did not mean taking time to attend church, and to him, follow meaningless rituals.

presented at any given moment they will attend to — this method also ensures the uniqueness of each experience of the film.

Along with my interest in encouraging viewers-listeners to compose their individual experience of the work from the array of elements offered them (and so to make any particular experience of the work unique and essentially unrepeatable), a second reason for my interest in contrapuntal, polyphonic forms has to do with my interest in trying to create what, drawing an epithet from Marshall McLuhan, I call “electric poetry.” By “electric poetry,” I refer to a media form of oral poetry. McLuhan points out that the post-print era of electronic communication marks a return to a new, haptic orality of communal interaction (Elder, 2015). It transpires in what McLuhan called “acoustic space.” Visual space, the space of the eye, is grounded in the geometries of Euclidian perspective. It is linear, it focuses on one element after another. By contrast, acoustic space, the space of the ear, is a “sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing” (Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960, p. 67). The ear accepts simultaneous input from a number of sources. It is not focalized. “Auditory space has no point of favored focus [...] It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries; it is indifferent to background” (Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960, p. 67). Learning from Edmund Carpenter, who did fieldwork with the Aivilik Inuit in Canada’s Arctic, McLuhan formulated the idea of a different form of perception and a different *forma mentis* from that of literate humans. Cultures that developed in the absence of a standardized system of writing possess a non-narrative (i.e., non-linear) understanding of reality. Auditory space invites the interplay of senses that resists the focused apprehension of objects — objects are not localized at a single point in space but interact organically with each other.¹⁸ In his interview with *Playboy* magazine, McLuhan says that acoustic space:

has no center and no margin, unlike strictly visual space, which is an extension and intensification of the eye. Acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses; whereas “rational” or pictorial space is uniform, sequential and continuous and creates a closed world with none of the rich resonance of the tribal echoland. (Norden, 1969)

My use of polyphony is simply an effort to create a form of electric poetry that embodies the attributes of electric space. I cannot ignore the impact electricity has had on wilderness survival communication and shared cultural creations. As music transitions through cultural boundaries, how it is heard, what meanings it inspires, can reveal what we share, but also can dramatically unleash how we differ. Such differences, highlighted by more easily sharing the arts with the help of electricity, generate new cultural tensions.

Is nature a shared Canadian source of both music and survival? Certainly, the case can be made that there are examples of nature serving as a catalyst for different artistic expressions that can still sustain a unity that engages the mind. Yet, the country from

¹⁸ As noted earlier, many Canadian visual artists had already been capturing the organic interactions of multiple objects.

coast to coast is remarkably different. Do people in Newfoundland have conceptual turf in common with people in Alberta when it comes to musical expressions of nature?¹⁹ No matter whether there are mountains or fiery winds across open space, snow-storms or tangled wetlands, knowing the sounds of different natural settings is critical to survival anywhere in Canada. We may hear soft but escalating in scale sounds of wind in the trees, yet the slightest change in the sound pattern alerts us to a possible cause, unknown but needing to be registered with our rational faculty. What is common to Canadian culture is recognition of the significance of our local natural sounds. That recognition has found expression in multiple musical sound patterns.

10. Does Canadian Music Continue to Be Written?

Indeed, it does. A recent concert at *The Arts and Letters Club of Toronto* by pianist David Potvin focused entirely on Canadian composers, including Léo Pol Morin.²⁰ Another concert included compositions for voice, some inspired by Canadian poetry and literature themes, such as W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, with unpredictable music by current composers David Jaeger and Celia Livingston.

Jaeger, a member of the Order of Canada, was invited to do graduate studies in the music program at the University of Toronto, having won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin in his home state. After a career as a radio music producer for *Two New Hours* with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (1978–2007), as well as being a founding member of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble, among other music initiatives, Jaeger is now making his mark as a Canadian composer. From a philosophical point of view, many of his compositions fall within the conceptual patterns of Canadian music.

A recent conversation with Jaeger revealed that among his recent compositions, there have been those sharing accommodation principles, dialectic oppositions, the flexibility of melodic patterns, and the uncertain orientations of emotional expressions.²¹ Whereas one is drawn to listening by meaningful musical phrases, one cannot always predict the next note. Such compositions reflect life in the wilderness, life in a multicultural collective, life in an unpredictable changing nation state. There is no predictable outcome except our desire to sustain the other, be they in Nova Scotia or on a First Nations Reserve. Canadians know that to sustain the country, we need each other to help create patterns to unite us. Jaeger associated some inspirations for his work with poetry, often poems that trigger personal emotional memories, though patterns expressing them are also surrounded by uncertainties as all emotions often are.

Of note was Jaeger's expression of what the philosophers also experienced: the freedom to write or to compose, to think ahead, away from the scrutiny of so-called experts. Drawn towards the ecological aspect of music, he describes music as a household component, part of the environment. The technology of electronic music enables him to engage in free form and free association of musical ideas. And not having restraints means

¹⁹ Authors and scholars in Canada have seldom ignored the tensions and uncertainties of survival under multiple conditions. See the work of Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye, and Robin Mathews.

²⁰ I thank David Potvin for his suggestions of references to consider.

²¹ On 10 August 2023.

the standards of perfection established by others does not apply to his new syntheses of notes, ideas, and the birth of new musical meanings and languages.

Until our conversation, Jaeger had not heard of Canadian philosophy, yet his many compositions ring true to form.²² Much to our national pride in his work, he identifies as a Canadian composer, and stands as an ongoing creative link between Canadian philosophy, culture, and their expression in the ever-expanding world of music.

11. Conclusion

For a country just over 150 years old, new musical languages for shared communication among multiple cultural conversations, are surely examples of unity. We can all listen to the same piece of music and then share our thoughts about what we heard. No lyrics, no centuries-long traditions, no judges. Jaeger's new compositions can help to initiate a pattern looking towards the oft unsettled unity that we pursue. Canadian philosophy can be detected in the artistic expressions of Canadian cultural languages, including music.

Conflicting interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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²² This summary of our conversation has been reviewed and approved by David Jaeger. I would also like to thank Professor Emerita Elizabeth Trott, who shared with me some observations from a presentation to the Canadian Aesthetics Society at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, at York University Toronto, in May–June 2023. After that conversation, I put pen to paper to expand this new conceptual turf of Canadian philosophy and music.

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