

A BRIEF LOOK AT MUSIC FOR THE ORGAN WRITTEN BY CANADIAN WOMEN COMPOSERS

by ANGELIQUE PO

CANADA IS HOME to several talented women composers, but few have written for the organ. Few...but far from zero! In honour of International Women's Day (March 8), I'd like to share a few composers and highlights, shining a spotlight on five pieces that I think everyone should know.

The legendary **Violet Archer** wrote several pieces for solo organ, along with organ and choir. She is most well-known for writing highly chromatic yet melodic music, with influences from her teachers Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith. She is less well-known for having been an organist early in her career. Her *Variations on Aberystwyth* (1988) is a theme with variations for solo organ on the Welsh hymn tune commonly sung with the words "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." It is one particularly approachable example of her work. Archer finds and amplifies all the haunting turns in this melody and digs into them to produce something strikingly unsettling. Yet, the piece ends with a brightly shining climax.

Jean Coulthard is another legendary Canadian composer. She worked with a number of prominent composers through the 1900s and taught generations of musicians on the west coast. Her *Music to Saint Cecilia* (1968) is a work for string orchestra with organ soloist. (There is an earlier version for full orchestra, but the author of this article tends to favour the one with organ.) Inspired by W. H. Auden's poem "Song on Saint Cecilia's Day" and a painting of St. Cecilia, this piece is essentially an organ concerto. The style is beautifully romantic, soaring with prominent, virtuosic organ lines.

Ruth Watson Henderson is well-known as a composer of music for choirs. She has written pieces not only for choir and organ, but also solo voice and various solo instruments with organ, and organ solos. Among her organ solos, Henderson's *Chromatic Partita* is perhaps played and recorded most frequently, having received the Honorable Mention prize in the 1989 International Competition for Women

Composers in Mannheim, Germany. It is certainly chromatic. The highly virtuosic organ writing shifts moodily from variation to variation, taking dark detours through twisty little melodies. In contrast, her piece *Celebration* is an approachable and brilliant fanfare, written for the 100th anniversary of the RCCO in 2009. It is a short, but fascinating piece. In the traditional fanfare texture of the piece, there is an unusual depth and darkness to its harmonies.

Before **Jocelyn Morlock's** sudden passing last year, she wrote one piece for solo organ: *Premonition*, which was commissioned by organists Hugh Davidson and David Stratkauskas, and premiered in Victoria in 2012 by David Stratkauskas. This creepy little piece was inspired by William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming." Like an old silent horror picture trapped in its organ photoplay, the atmosphere begins tensely, with disembodied organ motives slowly growing in number, before turning into an increasingly demonic rhythmic dance. Perfect for Halloween!

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

Compared to their male counterparts, women composers for the organ are still underrepresented in the organ world. One way to change this is simply to play more of

such music, to assure this country's young composers that their work will be heard. The five pieces I've presented here are not even close to an exhaustive list of works written by women composers in Canada. There are lots more pieces of interesting music out there, ready to be discovered, and composers who might write for organ if only they knew it would be performed. Go out and meet them!

NOTES ON HOW TO ACQUIRE SCORES:

Archer's *Variations on Aberystwyth* is not currently available for purchase, but a recording is available in the Canadian Music Centre online library at <CMCCanada.org> and a scan of the manuscript may be requested from CMC Toronto or Sackville. Coulthard's *Music to Saint Cecilia* may be purchased or rented from the Canadian Music Centre at <CMCCanada.org>. Henderson's *Chromatic Partita* is available for purchase from <JWPepper.com>. *Celebration* is available for purchase from <RCCO.ca>. Jocelyn Morlock's *Premonition* is not currently in print, but organists interested in the score may contact the author of this article.

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STUDENT CORNER

THE YOUNG ORGANIST PILOT PROJECT

FOR SOME TIME NOW, the recruitment, training, and formation of new organists from a young age—essential for the long-term viability of our profession—has been a central focus of the College. In Ottawa, Christ Church

Cathedral is also doing important work on this front. Its complement of choirs for boys and for girls has long been a distinguishing component of its offering and reputation, and a gateway for many generations of young people to encounter

and embrace excellence in sacred music, both choral and organ. There has been a boy treble line at Christ Church for well over a hundred years and the Cathedral Girls Choir is now in its third decade of service. Together, they are the largest

youth group in the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa. Whether rehearsing and singing on their own, alongside semi-professional lay clerks, at home or on tour in the U.S., U.K., Europe, and Asia, these choristers (ranging in age from 8

to 18) are introduced to and experience first-hand many ways in which the organ, working in concert with their own voices, enriches and invigorates music in liturgy and in concert. Many of these boys and girls have chosen to take these experiences and continue their studies in music at university. All have left with a keen appreciation and understanding of the organ and its literature.

Recently the Cathedral has developed a close relationship with the organ and church music department at McGill University's Schulich School of Music. This collaboration with distinguished faculty, first Hans Ola Ericsson, now **Isabelle Demers**, has given students and recent graduates there the chance to work as Assistant Organist in Ottawa alongside Cathedral choristers and music directors (**Owen Spicer** is the current incumbent). While there, these junior professionals learn the craft and art of sacred music-making in the Anglican tradition, and this experience does much to equip them for future leadership in the field.

Encouraged by and building on the legacy of these investments by the Cathedral in its choirs and musical apprenticeships, last summer **Professor Isabelle Demers** approached Director of Music **James Calkin** and the College's Executive Director **Elizabeth Shannon** with a



Shireen Kwok studying with James Calkin at CCC Ottawa



Young organist and cathedral chorister Eva Liu



The Christ Church Cathedral Girls Choir with alumni on Christmas Eve 2023.

vision to reach and encourage even more young people (especially girls) to take up organ studies through an introductory set of free lessons. This barrier-free approach has in the past paved the way for many new players to encounter and embrace the instrument. Collegial conversations, including with Dr. **Sarah Svendsen** (Rosedale United Church Toronto, Curriculum Design and Program Coordinator for the RCCO Summer Organ Academy) made that vision a reality, and last fall two students were recruited in Ottawa and began their tranche of twenty lessons. Jointly funded by the RCCO and Christ Church Cathedral, this pilot project expands on the good work over many years by local Centres in offering tuition scholarships. Equally, it leverages the infrastructure, resources, and community of the Cathedral's own musical outreach to youth, providing not only space for the lessons and practice time but also performance opportunities and a teacher. And, as hoped, one of the freshman class is a member of the Cathedral Girls Choir. In addition to their weekly lessons, Shireen and Eva have attended McGill's Organ Discovery Day (itself an exciting piece of evangelizing for our instrument!) and provided preludes to the Cathedral's service of Nine Lessons and Carols at Christmas. In April they will perform at the Ottawa Kiwanis Music Festival.

Though modest in scope, this pilot project has been a success. Already, one of the girls has decided to continue her lessons indefinitely, announcing that "she's more passionate about learning the organ than singing and piano!" More broadly, though, it points to the strategic importance and value of creative collaboration and sharing of resources and energy between sacred music foundations in this country and the College. Especially in these early post-pandemic days, there is much good and important work needing and being done in both spaces in building communities and in the formation of leaders and enthusiasts in our field.

—*JAMES CALKIN*

James Calkin is Director of Music and Organist at Christ Church Cathedral in the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa.

RCCO EDMONTON ORGAN SCHOLARSHIPS NOVEMBER 2023 AUDITIONS AND FEBRUARY 2024 RECITAL

The Edmonton Centre is experiencing an ongoing interest in organ study; as a result, a new round of auditions for organ scholarships took place in November 2023. Eight applicants auditioned and were awarded the following scholarships:

- Bradley Pierson (Edmonton Centre Beginning Organ Scholarship)
- Rachele Playford (Edmonton Centre Beginning Organ Scholarship)
- Kaitlyn Winsky (Edmonton Centre Beginning Organ Scholarship)
- Rachel Winsky (Edmonton Centre Beginning Organ Scholarship)
- Maximilian Wileczynski (Edmonton Centre Intermediate Scholarship)
- Edmund Wasowicz (Edmonton Centre Intermediate Scholarship)
- Mark Rico-Lam (Harry Farmer Scholarship)
- Elizaveta Karpenko (Arnold Rumbold Senior Organ Scholarship)

The annual recipients' concert, held at St. John's Anglican Church on February 5, 2024, was well attended. Before an enthusiastic audience, seven recipients (one as young as fourteen) performed works on organ and piano. These ranged from Buxtehude and the Romantics to the present, including John Rutter's *Toccata in 7* and an arrangement for organ by Karpenko of Hanz Zimmer's film music *Interstellar*. The seven performers were joined by three Edmonton Centre members, two of whom were past recipients of scholarships (see accompanying photo of performers, teachers, and donor, Mr. Arnold Rumbold).

—*JACOBUS KLOPPERS*

(RCCO Edmonton Organ Scholarships Coordinator)



From left to right: Kobie Kloppers (teacher), Arnold Rumbold (donor), Edmund Wasowicz (recipient), Gerry Schwalfenberg (Edmonton Centre member), Kaitlyn Winsky (recipient), Cari Astleford (teacher), Rachel Winsky (recipient), Maximilian Wileczynski (recipient), Marnie Giesbrecht (teacher), Mark Rico-Lam (recipient), Elizaveta Karpenko (recipient), Rachele Playford (recipient), Leanne Fidan (former recipient), Jennifer Maxfield (former recipient), and Tammy-Jo Mortensen (teacher).