

Ten Myths about Canadian Music **Fall 2005 Edition BCRMTA Newsletter**

By Colin Miles, Regional Director
Canadian Music Centre

1. Canadian music all sounds the same

Fact is, musical styles are as diverse as the nation's composers. Composers write in a wide spectrum of styles, languages and instrumentation for different kinds of performers. All Canadians aren't the same. Why would composers sound the same?

2. It's all too difficult, too difficult to play, too difficult to teach and too difficult to listen to. Better to avoid it, altogether

No doubt, there is difficult music written in Canada - difficult to play and to listen to - but it may well be worth the effort. There is also music which is very easy to play and a wealth of wonderful music for teaching at all levels. Is there value in exposing young people to the wide variety of styles in which 20th century composers are writing? Are accessibility and excellence necessarily equivalent? Some modern music is challenging, but if we have courage, and continue to expand our horizons it becomes less so. It's worth noting we live in a society where formula-driven commercial pop music encourages a kind of intellectual laziness. Is it worth developing the art of critical listening, opening one's ears, heart and mind to challenging music? Charles Ives chastised a young musician who was complaining that Ruggles' music was too difficult. Ives snorted "when you hear music like that, stand up and use your ears like a man!"

3. Musical creativity died long ago and far away

Musical creativity is as alive as it has ever been. It may take different forms and shapes but the essential impulse is the same. Life has changed through the decades and centuries and so has music. The spirit which inspires Morel and Morawetz inspired Mendelssohn, Mozart, Marais, Monteverdi and Machaut. The results have been different but the impetus has been the same. If we believe musical creativity cannot live in our time, are we not unconsciously stifling our own and our students' innate creativity?

4. Composers in our time are elitist, only interested in writing for others in the ivory tower

Many Canadian composers are particularly interested in writing for children, and put their best efforts into this work which they consider very important. Composers such as Jean Coulthard, Barbara Pentland, Nancy Telfer, Violet Archer and Stephen Chatman have published series of teaching material. There are hundreds of titles in the Canadian Music Centre library of music especially written for young performers (as well as music especially for young audiences.)

5. If it was good enough for my grand-parents and my own teacher's teacher, it's good enough for my students

Of course, the music of past eras can sustain us for a lifetime. Nonetheless, musical growth which is cut off from music here and now will wither and dry up. Students crave experiences which reflect the world in which they live now. Young library patrons often tell us a score they had obtained from the Centre is their favourite. Playing contemporary music sharpens and does not dull the ability to listen to music of earlier times. All music was contemporary when it first appeared and until the mid-nineteenth century, audiences were listening almost exclusively to the music of their own time. Have you noticed that people who avoid listening to music of the last 100 years, still prefer 21st century dentistry? Is it not strange to love modern technology and avoid modern music?

6. My students don't like all this "modern stuff." They prefer Clementi. Start with what they know and explore the far-out stuff later

Students are exposed to a richly diverse sonic environment. In films, TV, videos, on CDs and cassettes they hear things undreamed-of in the past. They often make strong connections with music written here and now. If they are experimenting with computers, they are probably already composing. It may very well be the "far-out" music which is familiar to them. It is good pedagogy to start with what is familiar. Start with Chatman, Coulthard, Cherney, then work your way to Clementi.

7. Music lessons are to mould boys and girls into well-behaved, polite young adults

This is an unchallenged assumption which dates back at least to the Victorian era, that a little musical instruction is part of a well-rounded education - but it is dangerous to go "too far." This is an anti-art bias which some parents and, regrettably some teachers unconsciously hold. Does this bias preclude students from participating fully in the musical experience in all its richness? Is our notion of music too small? New research confirms the value of the holistic education a music student gets. Music involves the emotions, intellect, senses, psychomotor co-ordination and feeds the soul. Music may very well transform a person's life.

8. Canadian music is hard to find

Most Canadian music is easily obtainable. Learn about your Canadian Music Centre. You and your students can borrow at no cost from a library of 17,000 titles. The Centre pays return postage. You may order by mail, phone, fax or email, or visit the Centre in person. Music retailers are helpful and publishers regularly issue new works for teaching.

9. There are no CDs of Canadian music for students to listen to. Students should have recordings to listen to while preparing a new piece

It is true there are not nearly enough CDs, but the situation is improving. The Centre has issued over 100 recordings and distributes about 700 CD titles. There are thousands of archival recordings in the CMC library and dubs are available for many of these. There are two commercially available CD compilations of Canadian pieces children might play. Is it really a good practice to permit or encourage students to choose only music which is recorded and then to listen to a recording over and over, before learning to play the piece? Is it not

worthwhile musically to prepare music oneself without mimicking a recording?
Could the student learn from recordings of other music by the composer?

10 Nothing good could come out of Canada It's too young, too British, too American, too multicultural, too large, etc. Some countries never are musical and never will be. Period. Enjoy the scenery and import musical culture from other places and times

This is an old argument, typical of a nation emerging from its colonial past. The grass is greener in some other time or place. Individually and as a nation, we would do well to shed those outworn attitudes which prevent us from enjoying all the fruits of Canadian creativity. Get to know the 1500 page Encyclopedia of Music in Canada (now on-line) and discover how rich Canada's musical heritage is. Imagine what would happen if we developed a greater sense of ownership of our musical creators. To steal a CBC slogan, our composers' creations - music to call our own.

And yet, Canadians who accomplish things and bring glory to their country are sometimes greeted with indifference or hostility. Some Canadian composers who are well respected abroad are nearly invisible in their own country. We don't celebrate Canadian heroes often enough .

Perhaps it's about time we did. As musicians, we could begin by becoming aware of the composers in Canada who are writing the best music for young people. Supplement your own and your student's musical diet with the best of your new discoveries. See what happens.

There are probably many myths which create obstacles to knowing and loving the best our composers have to offer. As these myths are confronted and lose their potency, new truths will become evident. Use your Centre. Make up your own lists of the best Canadian music. Discuss ideas with other teachers. Keep stretching yourself, by exploring new repertoire. Teachers who are committed to life-long learning inspire their students, don't they? Make a conscious effort to enrich your students' life with Canadian music.

Colin Miles, Regional Director
Canadian Music Centre
837 Davie Street
Vancouver, BC, V6Z 1B7
TEL: 604-734-4622
FAX: 604-734-4627
www.musiccentre.ca