

“The Idea of Canada”: Conceptual and Creative Approaches to the Human Soundscape

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The Idea of Canada, a radio documentary/composition commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was the author’s first foray into the world of soundscape composition. This essay examines the author’s distinction between what he calls “natural” and “human” soundscape the theological/philosophical foundations for this distinction and how his philosophy about music composition and the world in general are reflected in, and gave impetus to, this particular project.

The Human Soundscape

The year 2007 marks 25 years of my professional life as a composer and also the 15th anniversary of *The Idea of Canada*, my first foray into the world of radio documentary/composition, Partly due to these anniversaries and partly due to my continuing effort to consciously understand my engagement with the creative process by examining the results of this engagement *post factum*, I have decided to pay some particular attention this year to the human soundscape aspect of my work. By “human soundscape” I am referring to the sounds and sonic expression of humans as distinct from those of the natural world around us. I don’t believe that the human soundscape is something clearly distinct from the environment in which humans live, and such distinction is not actually made in my own creative work. Having said that, humanity is what fascinates me the most. Because I don’t believe that human beings are merely a more advanced stage of primate evolution, to me human expression and its sounds partake of the natural and the environmental but also of the heavenly and the hellish which we also embody thanks to our pre-cosmic spiritual lineage and our relatively more recent rebellion against it.

My approach to the human soundscape is the approach of an artist and a person of vision and faith first and foremost and only secondarily that of a documentary maker. It is perhaps because of this that, for the two works in my compositional opus that are actual ra-

dio documentaries, I collaborated with two radio documentary makers, Steve Wadhams in *The Idea of Canada* and Keith Horner in *Footprints in New Snow*. In works where my examination of humanity focuses on particulars, the management of the documentary particulars has so far been trusted to people who are experienced in this type of management.

My artistic approach to documentary subjects, however, is rather different than that of the documentary makers whose paths have crossed with mine. If treating one's materials from a certain "arm's length" distance is a documentary maker's ideal, I am invariably tempted to "push the material around" until it begins to tell a different story than the story it would tell if left alone, or to so seriously amplify the story it was telling in the first place, as to amount to a new, inescapable experience for the listener. This kind of heavy-handed engagement is something I am prepared to defend in my work, even though I admire the work of people who have the ability to step back and let their recorded material tell its own story with very discreet interference by the storyteller, like in some of the work by Hildegard Westercamp for instance. Thinking as an artist first and foremost, I feel at my best with this first person narrative approach, no matter who or what is doing the actual speaking. Although I admire meekness (it is central to my own worldview and to the person I am hoping to be able to become one day), I am invariably a person of temper and quick action and my work will remain honest only if I continue to chronicle who I am presently, as well as who I aspire to be, through it.

Counter to what all of the above may suggest, I do not consider myself to be an unsuitable artistic collaborator. That having been said, I do not believe in projects whose creative contributors do not see eye-to-eye as far as the deeper aspects of the project are concerned and are instead engaging in a synchronous development of parallel streams of independent discourses which may engage in a conversation on the surface but do not meld into one singular vision in their core. I would rather subordinate myself completely to another artist's vision (if that vision was compatible with my own spiritual orientation) than to engage in a "parallel" discourse propounding my ideas alongside some one else's. Since it is very difficult to find true "soul mates" among other artists, I invariably end up doing my best work alone. When, however, collaborators appear that make it possible to

create important work within a transpersonal context, these collaborations have the most profound effect on my own artistic thinking and subsequent work.

Whether in the solitude of my own studio or in a busy, noisy collaborative context, I can only work on subjects that really excite me. Whatever the level of my compositional technique is, it is never enough to be solely responsible for the conception and incubation of a new work. Because my understanding of what constitutes a work of art is inextricably tied to this sense of excitement and inspiration, skill alone is never able to get me engaged and keep me going with the actual process of music-making. Like a lot of artists, I feel I know nothing and I am capable of nothing when I stare at the blank page and, paradoxically, whatever that nebulous and sudden understanding of having “got it” is, it is miraculously all is needed to get me going creatively, regardless of whether or not this “understanding” proves to be of lasting value for the work in question.

Moreover, I *need* to work on subjects that ascribe to my creative activity a deeper sense of purpose, over and beyond the natural (and often temporary) pleasure it imparts on me alone. I have been fortunate in recent years to be surrounded by natural beauty. My wife, Beverley Johnston, and I live in the Oakridge Moraine, a natural wildlife habitat surrounding Toronto from the north side, which in recent years has been protected from further industrial and residential development. Our back yard is a wetland which we share with all kinds of wildlife, including deer, wild rabbits, coyotes, a gray wolf (only very briefly a couple of years ago) and many species of birds in great profusion, as we live in a valley surrounded by hills. Our sonic environment, particularly in spring time is truly a feast for the ears. Bev routinely will say “you should be recording this or that...and use it in one of your compositions”. I probably should, but hardly ever do. This is the kind of beauty that I prefer to take in as is. I don’t think I can improve on it, although I appreciate how city folk could be enticed by such sound bites to interface more with the natural world in their daily lives. In fact I remember that, when I was exclusively a city dweller, I used to delight in playing Dan Gibson’s “Solitudes” CDs in my apartment—the ones with no music added to the environmental sound recordings. I could play these soundscapes on my stereo, close my eyes and be transported by my imagination into a greener environ-

ment. Now I live in such an environment. But the phasing rhythmic patterns of pairs of Canadian geese staking claim to the pond next to our home during mating season, while a very pleasant experience, is not something I want to translate into pitch/rhythmic ideas in a musical composition, partly because Steve Reich has already done this a good forty years ago, but more importantly because, if these aural impressions manage to become a *lived* experience within me, they will invariably find their way into my musical thinking in some way or another that I do not need to consciously scrutinize.

On the other hand, when I spend my days at the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto with my students and I try to understand how they think in order for me to be of some assistance to them, or what frustrates and impedes upon their creativity so that we may together find a way of unlocking their creative impulse, then....their thoughts, their frustrations their dreams and their hopelessness, their euphoric moments, when the whole world lies at their feet or the moments of utter darkness, when there seems to be no escape exit ...I see/hear all of these things as complex patterns that emit their own sound, an infinitely more complex soundscape than what I encounter around my home in Uxbridge, Ontario. It is this soundscape that I understand as “human soundscape”, the artistic exploration of which has become my creative life’s “Holy Grail”. It is the utterly complex web of thoughts, actions, convergences and divergences, love and resentment, understanding and conflict which comprises the composite experience which we call the “human condition”.

In human soundscape composition, the observer cannot exist as distinct from the observed. The sooner one realizes this, the easier it is for one to become an active agent in this experiment that transforms the observer, as well as the observed. This mutually transformative action is important, for composition is no solitary walk. Our work should, *must*, transform our own living, breathing humanscape. If it fails to do this for whatever reason, we as creative individuals fail in the most significant thrust of our undertaking. The commitment to transform one’s human environment is of paramount importance because, depending on how one interprets or addresses this commitment, it will radically affect one’s music-making, let alone one’s life. Phrased in a different way, the question is: How

high up in our list of artistic priorities does this commitment lie? Does it lie above the so-called “aesthetic integrity” or below it? Does it lie above our understanding of our present moment as a link in a causal chain of “historical succession” (for lack of a better word) or below it? Ultimately the question (at least to someone like me who comes from a very deeply religious perspective into this discussion) translates into this: Does the “Other” lie above or below the “Self” in our list of priorities, artistic or otherwise?

Even though this sounds overtly metaphysical and religious, it is a question the answer to which affects everyone’s creative products. Music-making is considered by many to be a solitary, self-centred activity and, as far as classical contemporary composition is concerned, it is something that is produced mostly in the isolation of one’s studio. As such, and also because it raises artistic freedom to a supreme value, it is the celebration of Self and self-expression and, in religious terms at least, it is the celebration of our rebellion against our collective spiritual source¹. This particular definition of music-making is also a purely Western European concept: it has been alien from a number of other musical traditions around the world. So, how is it that in its most Promethean, Lucifer-like expressions this approach to composition yields the kind of results that many people instinctively understand as a bridge to the Divine, like in, say, Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* or Mozart’s *Requiem*? There is no simple answer to this, but I believe that it has to do with this constantly shifting balance between the Self and the Other in a creator’s psyche and its products thereof.

This inner interplay is what makes a socially challenged and personally tormented individual, like Beethoven, preach to millions the virtues of Joy through his music and be convincing in doing so. Extreme self-involvement, destructive as it may be to an individual practicing it, as the cases of Beethoven, Mozart and countless others demonstrate, may ultimately reveal at its very core something of the universal we all share, that is the

¹ For it raises the concept of the individual creator as something apart from the Creator. Cf. “Music for God’s Sake” and “On Religion, Politics and Contemporary Music” (at www.hatzis.com under “Writings”).

thing we generally understand as the “divine spark” in us.² That Self and the Other may have a tight-knit relationship, that belies the radical opposition we normally ascribe to these concepts is clearly something for the psychologists to scrutinize, but for the rest of us it suggests a view about our species as many different and occasionally competing plants which, however, are sharing one common root system. The greedier an individual plant becomes and the more it seeks to absorb nutrients from the ground at the expense of the neighbouring plants, the more it focuses its concentration on its root structure and, as a result, the more it becomes aware of the symbiotic relationship it has by nature with its neighbours. It becomes aware that at a deeper root level, the plant and its neighbour are one and the same.

Humans versus Nature—Spirituality versus Evolution

Respect for the Other is not something we learn from nature. Competition and exploitation between or even within species is common in nature and what we call a natural balance in the non-human world may be a fantasy which we, humans, are projecting upon this world. The fact of the matter is that there is little balance in the natural world occurring naturally, and that species have been obliterated and have disappeared from the face of the earth long before humans became a catalyst for such destructive processes. Place a herd of deer and a pack of wolves on a small island with a terrain that provides easy access to both species and before too long the deer population will dwindle and/or completely disappear and the population of the wolves, after an initial explosion, will also dwindle and disappear soon afterwards. There will not be much “deer management” on the part of the wolves or hunting seasons that expire during mating season...etc. This fantasy about the natural world as a great equalizer and a great teacher for humans was cultivated by the Enlightenment philosophy and, to a smaller degree earlier, by the Renaissance. The philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance was in desperate need of a paradigm drawn from the physical world upon which to build its own moral edifice and establish it as distinct from, or in opposition to, Christian ethics or metaphysics of

² A similar case was the paradoxical experience of Grace by one of the two condemned thieves at each side of the cross of Christ who suddenly switched from a state of self-involvement to one of universal awareness.

any kind. But what kind of moral edifice could this possibly be? In the natural world, charity is absent (there is no tolerance for the weak), love is calculating (mating with the best progenitors for better chances of survival) and self-sacrifice is almost non-existent (with the exception of rare cases where a relatively weak species survival instinct kicks in).

The thing we object most in the disastrous interaction between humans and the environment is a behaviour which, paradoxically, humans have learned from observing the physical world around them, or carry in their genes. If the concept of the “survival of the fittest”, which itself leads to unchecked competition and ultimate concentration of power to very few centres, is increasingly plaguing our culture while endangering our democratic institutions and social fabric in general, we have no one but Nature to thank for it. The only reason one sees this behaviour as prevalent in human societies and not within other species is because humans are a self-programming species with a strong sense of individual need and ability to gather, and capable of long-term strategic planning that other species lack by comparison. Preying on the weak, exploiting available resources for our immediate needs or desires, procreating profusely when the very survival of our clan, national group or race appears to be threatened (and no matter how adversely the resulting demographic explosions may affect the future of our species on the long term), these are some of the behavioural patterns that have either been embedded in our biological program, version 1.0, or we have incorporated them into subsequent versions by observing and learning from the world around us. These programs are not unique to just a few members of our species who have been successful in concentrating an unusually large degree of power or visibility upon their persons through the relentless application of these programs. That such people become “celebrities” and occupy the front pages of our newspapers and our television screens testifies to the fact that these individuals represent the “fulfillment” of programs that are widespread within our larger genetic code. We are feeling indirectly “fulfilled” by observing the behaviour of such people and by voraciously feeding on *their* implementation of these programs. No matter how one understands all this, the fact remains that these are natural programs designed for species survival which, in the case of humans, have gone terribly wrong.

This brings me to my main point, which I will present as a series of questions: Why is it that biological programs whose purpose, proven effectiveness, foresight and/or wisdom (choose any of the above depending on your orientation) has been demonstrated and understood as far as natural evolution is concerned go so terribly wrong when they are applied to the human species? What has nature stumbled upon with the advent of the human species that has turned its painstakingly developed and *effective* survival programs into self destructive mechanisms? What kind of controls, if any, has nature developed during the presence of humans on earth to counter human perversion of its existing evolutionary program?

No matter what your take on evolution is, there is no denying that humans are an anomaly in the large scheme of evolution. It is not that specific species have not overrun the planet before or that they have not endangered the diversity of the biosphere as we do now. They have, to their own detriment, I might add, turning themselves into “dinosaurs” in the process. So one could argue that random mutations don’t always turn good and that “bad things happen” and that what some of us call Providence is just an accident that brought us to where we currently are instead of some other, largely unthinkable, evolutionary state. Hard to argue convincingly against such a position except by saying that the people who normally advance such arguments—like the “scientifically-minded”—would be hard pressed to explain the moral code that determines their own everyday behaviour along similar lines of argument. Cosmic “accidents”, random mutations, what have you, invariably favour the “fittest” and moral code is there to safeguard against exploiting the “weak”, at variance with evolutionary protocol. I am not aware of any scientist who has proposed the “Gospel according to Machiavelli” as the moral basis of a justice system tailor-made for a society that accepts the Darwinian Theory of Evolution, since it is this “gospel” that best reflects the principles of evolution as we currently understand them. The moral equivalent to Darwin is Machiavelli’s “Prince”. Imagine for a moment a society that not only ends up functioning according to the postulates of “The Prince”, but advocates these postulates in its moral code, justice system and public education. Then imagine what kind of relationship such a society might have with the environment we all

live in. No need to stretch your imagination too thin: just contemplate on the direction towards which our present day human societies are fast evolving.

So, if humans are just the latest link in this evolutionary chain of “Russian roulette”, then Nature has been on a self-destructive course all along, the end of which is as predictable as the eventual outcome of a game of “Russian roulette”. With the exception of humans, nothing else in the progress of natural evolution appears to point to such a conclusion. No matter what the mechanics of its internal evolutionary engine, Nature has proven itself to be a *survivor* countless times in the past. Cosmic collisions, gigantic volcanic eruptions, ice ages, none of these have managed to permanently eradicate life on this planet. This much at least we do know about the physical world around us. Given the complexity of the system, however, it can be argued that the barrel can hold a near infinite number of “bullets” and with as few as one bullet in the barrel, the success of evolution so far cannot conclusively prove that Nature is “wise” or at least non-suicidal. It could be argued that Nature finally pressed the trigger with the bullet in the hole. The result was humanity.

While this argument cannot be refuted mathematically, it is not a *probable* explanation. It also does not explain a great deal about our psychology as a species: our deep sense of morality; our lack of contentment with the present mode of our existence as physical, social animals. If Nature is essentially amoral and we, as a species, are its most complex expression so far, what can account for this intense longing and essential discontentment with our own condition that permeates our existence? What can account for our unstoppable desire to understand our nature as lying beyond Nature itself? How could Nature program into us (therefore into itself) its very own negation? What is this force of “negentropy” that forces Nature to constantly mutate in search of a more desirable state (revealing perhaps Nature’s own discontentment with itself) and pushes us constantly into creatively expressing and improving ourselves? Why is it that we instinctively perceive our very own makeup as purposeful and intelligent but we argue logically that Nature’s is random? And if this is simply because we are delusional, is not Nature delusional for having issued forth delusional beings? It must be that either Nature is some-

thing fundamentally different that what we claim it is, or that we as a species are not entirely the simple result of one of its random mutations.

To accept ourselves as having a dual nature, partaking of the natural world with all its biological programs as they have evolved over time, but also of a world that cannot be explained by the tools of natural science alone, would not only explain our species psychologically as a divided and conflicted one, but also our ability to see Nature “from the outside” as it were, understand it and manipulate its programs in a way that no other species on record has been able to. Accepting the possibility that we are partaking of this other essence would explain the mythic aspect deeply embedded in our species, our collective unconscious “memory” that is at variance with scientifically construed “facts” and our deep seated urges, codes and understandings that are not in cahoots with the natural processes of the physical world, at least at present. It might also explain this very pronounced sense of *subjectivity* which is a quality particular to our species and virtually unknown to the rest of the physical world.

My Theology

The concept of the human species as “fallen angels” is as old as religion itself. The word “fallen” indicates misplaced, having descended into a realm in which one does not belong. It implies an aberration to the normal evolutionary process which naturally could have not accounted for this fall beforehand. So, if you thought that my previous statements implicitly endorsed “Intelligent Design” and “Creationism” simply in order to prove that humans were created and have not evolved from apes, well....you could not have not been more wrong. As far as I am concerned, humanity was the most *unintelligent* thing that could have possibly happened to the evolution of life on this planet and, in its physical aspect, it has evolved from the higher primates, but not naturally. It has had from the beginning a disruptive effect on evolution, with tragic consequences for both humans and Nature. The deepest essence of Humanity and Nature are therefore in continuous confrontation and locked in an uncomfortable, painful coexistence from the very beginning. Throughout our mythological and religious lore, God appears invariably as an exasper-

ated maintenance person or sysop, trying to fix systemic problems that we have created, sometimes in more drastic ways than others (like with the Flood) but mostly by patiently introducing various “covenants” that are meant to help us transcend our current schizophrenic existence by adapting to a gradually evolving moral code, that ultimately requires a significant demonstration of self-sacrifice, for Self and the selfish application of Free Will was the cause of the original fall from Grace in the first place and our species original “enmeshment” with the physical world.

According to this view, ever since the original Fall, evolution on this planet has been tampered with “from the outside” in order to prepare an escape for us from a realm we were not meant to inhabit in the first place. This is what the theological plan of Redemption, common among many religions in the world, is all about. Not a system of heavenly reward or demerit points (which is unfortunately what Medieval and subsequent Christianity has devolved into), but an exit strategy from endless and non-creative engagement with materiality through the gateway of the Cross which everyone has to eventually personally carry and experience. In the process of this Redemption, materiality becomes spiritualized, for through the Cross we transubstantiate our earthly part into ethereal substance. Thus, the Earth which we have abused since our Fall becomes transformed into the New Jerusalem through our own, self-directed Redemption (guided, of course and directed by Grace itself) and therefore, in hindsight, even our Fall becomes a creative part of the Divine plan for the world, although initiated and acted upon by our misguided free choice alone.

Far fetched as all this may seem to the materially minded, it is a more *probable* model than the one of the self-inflicting, suicidal Nature presented earlier (the only other explanation for our species and the way it behaves within Nature). Moreover, it is one that accounts for more of the pieces of the puzzle, if one is willing to examine *all* the evidence in the formation of a satisfying theory. Our continuing sense that in its essence human life is tragic, which dates back to Diogenes and the cynic philosophers or even earlier to the advent of individual consciousness, and the accompanying feelings of individual and collective alienation which this tragic existence engenders are not (*cannot* be) psychological

by-products of an expanding Universe and a burgeoning Nature. Nature has every reason to be exuberant and so normally would the life forms that emanate entirely and exclusively from it. This sense of hopelessness and alienation that we alone feel on this planet betrays a different lineage. What makes this sense of alienation even darker is the awareness that it is self-inflicted, no matter which direction we point the finger to in our desperate search for the causes of our unbearable condition. So we sense that spiritual light and darkness are the primary forces that shape our psychological make up while (our scientific mind informs us) these forces have very little relevance in the make up of our external environment. This contradiction is at the heart of the human condition and it informs our character and our relationship with the natural world. As such, it also informs this divide between the environmental soundscape and the human soundscape of which I spoke earlier, at least as far as my own conceptual and artistic approach to this subject is concerned.

The Idea of Canada

The first evidence of my interest in human soundscape was in a series of mixed media works created during the nineteen seventies collectively called *Earthrise*. In these, my first eclectic works, the human soundscape entered my compositional space either as very short sound clips (a monaural digital sampler with very limited memory was all that was available to me at the time) or through borrowing musical ideas from a number of world cultures and incorporating them into the body of what were otherwise classical contemporary compositions. These mixed media works (*The Temptation of St. Anthony, Nadir, Crucifix, Orbiting Garden, The Mega4 Meta4*), all written between the middle to late nineteen eighties, carried within them the seeds of the ideas that inform my more mature works and they continue to hold the interest of audiences twenty years after they were written. (In fact earlier this month, one work from this cycle, *The Mega4 Meta4* for viola and tape, had its premiere as a concerto for viola and orchestra under the appropriate title *Rebirth*).

It would be fair to say, however, that my baptism of fire with human soundscape composition came in 1992 when CBC Radio documentary producer Steve Wadhams asked me if I might be interested in becoming involved with a radio documentary/composition project that he had conceived and which was to be a tribute commemorating Glenn Gould's 60th anniversary as well as 10 years since the renowned Canadian pianist's death. I was not familiar at the time with Glenn Gould's ground-breaking work in the realm of radio documentary and his radio documentary trilogy, *The Idea of North*, so when Steve started talking to me about people speaking in counterpoint, let alone in a fugue I initially thought he was joking. Speech, being a serial information stream, in contrast to music which is a parallel stream (to use the early computer terminology of serial and parallel ports), does not readily lend itself to this kind of contrapuntal treatment without resulting in semantic noise in the process. In fact, after Steve introduced to me Gould's experiments in this genre, I was still unconvinced about their artistic worth or their potential for future use. In the intervening time, however, technology had evolved significantly and I thought that it might be possible, and certainly worthwhile, to try and see if the ideas behind these experiments were conceptually and intrinsically flawed or perhaps the technology was not there at the time to make the full implementation of these conceptual ideas possible.

While the idea of people speaking in the form of a fugue is still one that I do not give much thought to (I believe that it is conceptually flawed), the idea of textual counterpoint intrigued me at the time. Would it be possible to have a stream of parallel textual meanings while maintaining the serial character of text delivery? It occurred to me that J. S. Bach does a similar thing in his instrumental music, where various contrapuntal lines are implied in the serial delivery of a single melodic line by interpolating small fragments of each line and allowing the brain of the listener to decipher and "reconstruct" the multiple threads even though the ear hears only a serial presentation of pitches—one pitch at a time. Could something like this happen with text? If we recorded four separate people speaking four separate sentences and then we interpolated words from each of these four streams so that the listener hears only one word at a time, would the listener be able to reconstruct the meaning of all four sentences in such a linear presentation?

After a few experiments, it became apparent that this was still a difficult proposition for the listener: it required an inordinate amount of attention which radio listeners may or may not be capable of or willing to devote to an “environmental” signal such as radio. This special radio program that Steve Wadhams was commissioned to produce was meant to be delivered to a significant radio audience (significant in numbers, that is) and not just one that willingly tunes in to experimental work on specialty radio channels. However the results of this initial experiment constituted a semantically clearer delivery than Gould’s textual fugues so it confirmed that we were moving in the right direction at least. The next stage of the experiment was prompted by the realization that, for whatever reason, our brain seems to be comfortable processing various streams of musical meaning at the same time (multiple melodies and/or rhythms, for example) but only a single stream of text. Moreover, the brain is also capable of processing a single stream of text *and* multiple streams of music at the same time, as is the case in the aural processing and semantic decoding of a song, for instance. So, if a system of equivalency could be established whereby a small sample of text was indelibly associated with a musical motif or a non-text sound sample in the mind of the listener, then the simple introduction of the motif or sound sample should invoke the meaning of the associated text in the mind of the listener. *Since sound samples can be processed in parallel by the brain, then one might be able to trick the brain into believing that it is processing text in parallel through such text-sound associations.*

One of the technologies that were relatively new in the early nineteen nineties was pitch-to-MIDI conversion. I got my hands on one such commercially available device that was developed by Toronto-based computer music specialist Bill Baxton and started converting spoken language into its “sound shadows” within the MIDI domain. This technology was not without its practical problems at that time, but made it possible to capture the *prosody* of a text, the text’s melodic and rhythmic profile, while dispensing with the text itself, its symbolic aspects and even the actual sound. After a few experiments, I was amazed how much of the sound quality and recognisability of spoken language can actually be maintained by means of this mechanical extrapolation of its prosody. In the sec-

ond movement, for example, the phrase “Do you believe in Canada?” was transformed via this method into an electric guitar and big band sound sample which repeats together with the phrase for a while before it is introduced repeatedly on its own without its textual equivalent. During these latter repetitions, when the same voice goes on making other statements, the “Do you believe in Canada?” sound sample is juxtaposed against the newer statements, attributing unique meaning to them, as if someone was actually interjecting by saying “Do you believe in Canada?” at that point. It is a case of juxtaposing a textual statement and a musical statement that has specific textual meaning, thus creating the textual counterpoint that Glenn Gould was after, but without multiple threads of text obscuring the meaning of each other, but rather by applying semantically enriched sound comment on text and enriching the meaning of the text through this process. This technique of extrapolating prosody established a bridge between the purely textual and the purely musical aspects of the work and by establishing a continuum between the two, it prevented the music from devolving into a soundtrack to a documentary as opposed to a central contributor to the articulation of the work’s structure.

These few techniques, plus an incredible wealth of documentary sound material that Steve Wadhams and our two engineers/co-creators, Laurence Stevenson and Rod Crocker collected from CBC archives across the country formed the primary sonic pallet of the radio documentary/composition that was titled *The Idea of Canada*, in reference to Glenn Gould’s *The Idea of North*, but also to the fact that in mid-1992 the country’s collective psyche was occupied by the Meach Lake Accord and the national referendum on the nature of Canada’s Confederation that was soon to follow. It was a period of manic excitement and work habits for me. We had originally planned to work on this project for about six weeks but, as I embarked on the project, a very dear friend of mine, Chari Polatos, was killed in a traffic accident and I immediately switched gear trying to get his and his young family’s affairs in order, so this tragedy put our project on the back burner by at least a couple of weeks and shortened the overall duration of the project by an equal amount of time. Partly due of my own personal devastation which almost immediately turned into manic energy and partly due to the excitement of seeing the early efforts at artistically combining all these sound resources pay off strange but worthwhile dividends,

all four of us soon discovered that we had forgotten CBC Radio work hours and other commitments and we were working around the clock, sometimes days and nights, combining and recombining material, creating short lists of archival material that might be likely candidates for the project, and building thematic and semantic streams comprising of unrelated material with no particular idea as to their eventual usefulness.

We were guided by no grand plan which might give meaning to all or any of these efforts. Sometimes Steve Wadhams, as executive producer, would try to introduce some method to our madness, but we would soon discover that the project was not going to be developed along traditional lines of documentary cause-and-effect, but most likely chaotically, with order suddenly emerging out of nowhere. After cutting and re-cutting endless reels of tape of interview and other material, at the end we realized that we did not have enough content of the kind that we needed to articulate the kind of up, close and personal view of what this country means to Canadians so we invited selected people into the CBC studios to ask them questions about their country and record their responses. Six of the respondents developed into distinctive voices throughout *The Idea of Canada* and four of them were combined into a four-part counterpoint in one of the sections of the work. One of them, Marie Lynn Hammond, a well-known folk singer, was asked at the end of the interview if she would sing *a cappella* a few tunes that best remind her of Canada. At the end of a French Canadian song and as she got the words wrong she declared on the mike “I forgot the words, but it doesn’t matter because no one will understand”. Towards the end of the project when I was having a hard time finding a final cadence for this inconclusive work—not an unexpected problem for a work that already had everything and the kitchen sink in it—Steve Wadhams suggested that we revisit Marie Lynn’s impromptu statement about no one understanding what she sung. It was perfect: a work that is informed by a musical structure is concluded with a textual cadence. In fact, in typical documentary fashion, we had to restage the moment: Marie Lynn’s original statement was not intended to be recorded and sounded a bit like mumbling and it was important that there was no ambiguity about what she said at the very end, so we had to ask her to come back into the CBC Radio studio to rerecord her statement, ridiculous as, I am sure, this request must have sounded to her at the time. At another point in the interview, when

she broke down after expressing strong emotions about what it would mean for her, a mixture of British, French and native blood, to live in a divided Canada, the music stops suddenly and completely to allow for this powerful moment to be experienced raw by the radio listeners without any musical underscoring.

The relationship of textual and musical meaning in *The Idea of Canada* is very complex and it is constantly redefined as the work unfolds. In the end, however, the thing that keeps this tapestry together, even though, at the foreground level, it constantly tries to tear itself apart, is the deeper awareness of being human that is common to all of us even though experienced only through the voices of Canadians in this particular case. The deep discontentment with our predicament, accompanied by the usual finger-pointing and name-calling is definitely there, but so is the sense that, below the discontentment, there is a living, beating human heart yearning and aching to return to its spiritual home where there is no conflict between human beings, but a convergence; a meeting at our ultimate depth. This is, I believe, the one theme that invariably runs through all my compositions.

Pluralism versus Structure

The idea of Canada was a watershed moment in my understanding of musical structure or the concept of structure in general, no matter where one may encounter it. In this particular work structure is very much connected to the idea of national identity or lack thereof. As a person who, at the time of composing this work, was personally struggling with the concept of Canadian identity, this exploration was of much deeper interest to me than it might have been otherwise. What a lot of people generally understand as “structure” in composition is defined as much by the things it leaves out as by the things it includes. Often we try to understand who we are by defining what we are not. In *The Idea of Canada*, the Canadians who have their moment in the spotlight do a great deal of this. But the way they do it, the way they let their discontentment out straight from the heart, allows the listener to sense a commonality of feeling, of strong emotion, of humanity. This commonality of feeling permeates the entire work and this is the work’s structure. Of course, so long as Canadians leave people and ideas out of their definition of Canada, as

we all do sometimes, Canadian identity is not within anyone's grasp. What we usually call Canadian identity is rather our own sense of individual or smaller group identity that we project on other, unwilling parties.

I believe that there is a parallel between one's sense of identity and his/her understanding of structure. To me musical structure is not only about control. We all know artists who structure materials by controlling them minutely (I am one of them) but also by creating a sense of uniformity and similarity through picking and choosing materials that are "compatible" with one another, while discarding others that are foreign or incompatible with the main thrust of the argument or with the sonic universe the composer is trying to reveal. My own composition teacher, American composer Morton Feldman, used to say that "structure is what you leave out, not what you include". It is an approach to structure that is not unique to music alone. We encounter it in our daily and public life: in the friends we keep company with, in our national immigration policies, in the way we want our politics, our tastes, our religion and our beliefs to be tidy and unambiguous. Anything that challenges these cherished patterns that determine our daily lives is felt as unsettling or even downright threatening.

The more insecure we feel about the world around us, the more controlling we are, and in the case of music, the more "structure" and uniformity we want to impose on the world of our own creativity. Since insecurity is a surface psychological phenomenon (hardly ever we feel threatened, for example, when we are in the deep meditation or prayer), we tend to want to control the surface in order to alleviate our insecurity. The surface, however, is the place which is densely populated by the Other, that is human beings, ideas, creeds and patterns different than our own. So it is not surprising that most collisions between any of the above take place on the surface, not at depth. Truce may be negotiated on the surface too, but lasting peace is a deeper operation that politics and negotiations are unable to reach and the effect of the latter is therefore only temporary.

So, when I speak of pluralism, I am not talking about surface negotiation or anything else, for that matter, which has to do with the surface of our existence. Tolerance is not accep-

tance; truce is not meekness; reluctantly conceding to other people's terms is not understanding. Pluralism to me is similar to the metaphor I used earlier with the various competing plants that are unaware of their common root system, which suffers when any of the individual plants suffer. Recognizing the Other is the first step in this process, but understanding one's inseparable connection with it is a far more significant step towards understanding true structure, musical or otherwise. Once one has this connection with the depth of all things, or at least has made some significant progress in this direction, one is not afraid of the contradictions, seismic faults, differences of appearance, or lack of consistency that may be operating on the surface of one's life, or musical composition. Organizing the surface in a way that it reveals consistency and lack of ambiguity without a similar integration at deeper levels is an exercise in denial, for life is much more tumultuous than this and we don't learn any long lasting life-lessons from such surface organization of material in art. Conversely, letting the surface go with little or no negotiation and searching at depth for connections and lessons thereof can have a life-altering effect on listeners. Subliminally, listeners begin to understand that the patterns emanating from the music and the patterns emanating from their own soul struggling to enter consciousness are similar and, at the moment of this understanding, profound musical communication happens.

Thus, the rampant pluralism of *The Idea of Canada* did not make musical and documentary structure weak, although it has been criticized by some along these lines of argument. It made structure possible at a depth that might have not been visible otherwise. By removing "forced" structure from the surface, we forced ourselves to investigate the possibility of structure deeper within the work, using tools that we might have not ordinarily considered useful, such as the textual ending to the entire work that I mentioned earlier. The subject matter too was a great inducer to our search for deep structure, for we all became aware that the concepts of structure and identity are two faces of the same coin. Neither structure nor identity can be negotiated on the surface.

In 1992 the architects of the Meach Lake Accord had managed something unprecedented in the history of Canada. They negotiated a political blueprint that had the approval of the

English and French political interests, native political leadership, all three levels of government, all political parties as well as the financial market. There were very few voices of dissent, the most prominent among them being that of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who stepped out of retirement to voice his opposition to the accord. Yet, in a rare display of connection with their national psyche, Canadians overwhelmingly voted “No” to the Meach Lake Accord during the national referendum that followed. The public response was shocking, unexpected and, one could argue in view of the wide ranging interests supporting the deal, a triumph of the democratic process. The Meach Lake Accord had surface convergence, but no structure. Discord runs much deeper within the Canadian psyche than the tenuous political agreement reached by the accord. Canadians wanted a deeper sense of national identity than that which a surface negotiation, remarkable as it was in its own right, managed to produce.

This seminal event in Canadian history exemplifies for me my idea of structure, my *Idea of Canada* and my idea of humanity and its deep connection to the Divine.