



new music concerts presents

Harry Somers

a portrait...

Harry Somers was born in Toronto in 1925. He entered the Royal Conservatory at the age of 16 where he was a scholarship student of pianists Reginald Godden and Weldon Kilburn and composer John Weinzweig. An Amateur Hockey Association scholarship in 1949 provided an opportunity to study with Darius Milhaud in Paris.

The day following the premiere of his opera *Loius Riel* in 1967 saw the marriage of Harry Somers to the distinguished Canadian actress Barbara Chilcott. Her influence on Somers has been profound in both musical, theatrical, and spiritual terms. A student of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi at his *ashram* in Rishikish, Kasmir since the early 60's, Barbara's interest in Eastern religions brought Harry full circle to his childhood and his mother's deep involvement with comparative religions, in particular the study of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Indeed it was the piano solos and duets he heard at a summer retreat of her Theosophical group in 1939 that lead to his obsession with music.

In 1971, after two years in Rome on a grant from the Canada Council, Somers and his wife returned to Canada. Later they visited the East, spending time in India, Nepal, Thailand and Bali. **Chura-churum** is the direct result of these experiences.

"I selected the phrase, **Chura-churum** for the title both for its wonderful sound and its meaning. **Chura-churum**-all manifest-unmanifest creation. To the sages the manifested and unmanifested fields of life comprise the whole of reality. I figured that about covered everything, all right. Fascinating, but I was not writing philosophy. I was creating a sonoral composition. It was by extension of the phrase that the shape and substance of the piece was created; all formed-unformed, to the adverbial forming-unforming, and so on. Here's a thumbnail sketch:

After crotale cymbals announce the commencement of the work, the two tenors chant short streams of vowels and consonants. There follows a period of unvoiced and breath sounds of all types. Periodically lines of the verse appear

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as do sung notes. This all accumulates to a peak of density of spoken and chanted sounds with, at the same time, extreme activity by the instruments. Following a tapering down and dying out of this activity, all suddenly forms into a stretch of rhythmic shouting and clapping, which breaks apart, then forms again with the chorus engaged in rhythmic shouting while the orchestra punctuates main beats. This finally tapers, and following a silence (sound and silence are regarded as two essential components forming a totality throughout the work, **Chura-churum**) the harp introduces one of the motives which are central to the piece and which evolve in various ways with the vibraphone and marimba doing the same, while gongs, cymbals, and drums setting up different vibrations and the chorus presents fragmentations of the **puja** intoned and sung.

At the termination of the previous section, marked by a period of silence, all coalesces, the chorus singing lines of the **puja** in alternation with dynamic statements from the orchestra. Two gong notes, of long duration, terminate this section and from this emerges the most extended 'formed' part of the work with clear rhythmic chanting, singing, intoning, and sustained sounds from the chorus with the orchestra joining in with punctuations, counterpoint, and movement on diverse rhythmic planes. All these elements gather and accumulate to a peak of intensity.

Instant break to solo voices engaged in a stretch of virtuosity: a kind of vocal cadenza display, with percussion eventually joining in and leading everything to a final peak of rhythmic shouting of the **puja** by the chorus with instruments making great punctuations.

There follows a fragmentation and dissolution of the composition's main elements until a series of long, and audible, inhalations and exhalations of breath terminates the work.

Harry Somers

Somers' **Movement for String Quartet** of 1982 was commissioned with the assistance of the Canada Council as the imposed work of the 50th Anniversary String Quartet Competition at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts.

Charles Ives (1874-1954), reclusive composer, expansive insurance broker, reluctant millionaire and transcendent visionary, created in the first decades of this century a body of audacious works that expressed in uncompromising terms a uniquely indigenous musical expression.

Ives has long been noted for his innovations in multiple tonalities, rhythms, and textures.

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Though created in an atmosphere of almost total artistic isolation, his music gradually came to be seen as the embodiment of the American populist spirit.

Typical of Ives' iconoclastic sense of adventure are his settings of Psalm texts dating from the early 1890's, when the composer was still a teenager. His 1894 *a cappella* setting of Psalm 67, for example (described by Ives authority John Kirkpatrick as "a prophetic masterpiece"), caused considerable consternation in Ives' hometown of Danbury, Connecticut due to its newfangled use of two simultaneous tonalities. Throughout the work the women sing in the key of C major while the men sing in G minor. When questioned about this precocious example of polytonality Ives replied that this particular combination of keys best conveyed an expression of "dignity and a sense of finality."

Two earlier versions of **Psalm 90** from the 1890's were lost. Some thirty years later, after a fruitless attempt at reconstructing the original from memory, he recomposed the work. It is this version, completed in 1923, that his widow (*née* Harmony Twitchell) described as the only one of his works with which Ives was satisfied. It proved to be among his last original works. Though he lived to see another three decades, his composing came to an end in the following year, just as his astonishingly original music was beginning to receive international acclaim. In failing health, he retired from business in 1930 and devoted the remainder of his life to fitful revisions of his earlier works and anonymous acts of philanthropy.

To contemporary ears unfamiliar with the context of Ives' era, **General William Booth Enters into Heaven** may convey a twinge of irony. This misunderstanding often arises due to Ives' characteristic quotation of hymns and popular songs in a dissonant context, in this case the evangelical tune, *Cleansing Fountain* ("There is a fountain filled with blood..."). For Ives, however, the melody conjured up memories of boyhood camp meetings and his heartfelt belief in the Baptist 'old-time religion'. This 1914 setting of a part of Vachel Lindsay's poetic homage to the founder of the Salvation Army is considered by many to be the greatest of Ives' 180 songs.

Timothy Sullivan was born in Ottawa in 1954. He obtained both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Music from the University of Toronto after studying with Samuel Dolin at the Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto. He also taught at the R.C.M. throughout the 1980's.

In recent years Sullivan has devoted himself to composing works in theatrical genres. The first of his three operas, **Tomorrow and Tomorrow**, was first produced in New York in 1987 and subsequently in a broadcast version by CBC television in 1989. **Dream Play** was composed and produced while he was composer-in-residence with the Canadian Opera Company in 1988. His latest opera, **Florence**, was the centrepiece of the 1992 Elora Festival and will receive its British premiere this August at London's Bloomsbury Theatre.

Sullivan has been particularly active of late composing music for modern dance, collaborating with Tedd Robinson (**No First Storey**, Ottawa, 1992), William Douglas (**Saffron, Thorn, Echo** and **Apollo**, Montreal 1993), Menaka Thakkar (**Untitled**, Ottawa and Toronto 1993) and most recently creating the score for **The Archeology of Karl... A Romantic Adventure** in a production by John Alleyne and Ballet British Columbia. Upcoming projects include pieces for choreographers Katherine Labelle, Roger Sinha and William Douglas as well as concert works for the Aldeburgh Connection and the Mississauga Sinfonia.

Either/Or, commissioned by New Music Concerts with the assistance of the Canada Council, is a study in progressive relationships between simultaneous tempi. Cast in the form of 15 simultaneous études for eight soloists, the composition explores the timbral and temporal resources of the instruments and their combinations. The solos, duos and trios that constitute the various études are sometimes strongly individuated yet at other moments share a common cyclic tempo and metre.

Featuring: The Rosedale United Church Choir and Tapestry Music Theatre under the direction of Wayne Strongman, the Accordes String Quartet, David Swan, piano, Brian Nickel, baritone, and the New Music Concerts Ensemble under the direction of Robert Aitken

Sunday, April 24, 1994

Walter Hall,

**Edward Johnson Building, U of T
(Museum subway, behind the Planetarium)**

7:15 pm discussion

8:00 pm concert

tickets:

\$18 adults, \$9 students/seniors

call 961 9594 for advance tickets

or further information