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40th season | 330th event

New Music Concerts presents

LETS HEAR IT FROM BECKWITH

Sunday September 19, 2010
Walter Hall, University of Toronto

co-production with

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Canadian New Music Network
Réseau canadien pour les musiques nouvelles



40th season | 330th event
Sunday September 19, 2010
Walter Hall, University of Toronto
7:15 Introduction | 8:00 pm Concert

LET'S HEAR IT FROM BECKWITH

Robert Aitken, artistic director

I

[PLEASE HOLD YOUR APPLAUSE UNTIL THE END OF THIS SECTION]

Duo (1982) for 2 clarinets [3'] (Premiere)
Max Christie & Michele Verheul

Animals with Horns (2007) for trumpet & euphonium [3'] (Premiere)
Gillian Mackay & Cameron Rawlins

Solo (2008) for bassoon [4']
Nadine Mackie Jackson

Duo on H.E.S.A.E.S (1984) for 2 trumpets [3']
Gillian MacKay & James Gardiner

Topical Flutes (1999) with coda (2010) for 2 flutes [3'] (Premiere)
Dianne Aitken & Robert Aitken

II

Synthetic Trios (1987) for soprano, clarinet & piano [18']
Teri Dunn, Peter Stoll & John Beckwith

III

Back to Bolivia (2006) for 4 clarinets [14'] (Premiere)
Peter Stoll, Max Christie, Michele Verheul & David Bourque

— Intermission —

IV

Eureka (1996) [19']

Dianne Aitken flute, Keith Atkinson oboe, Max Christie clarinet,
Nadine Mackie Jackson bassoon, Joan Watson horn, Gillian MacKay &
James Gardiner trumpets, John Jasavala trombone, Mark Tetreault tuba



radio 2

Tonight's concert is being recorded by
CBC Radio 2 for future broadcast on
The Signal at 10^{pm} with host Laurie Brown

co-production with Faculty of Music, University of Toronto



New Music Concerts

Robert Aitken, c.m., Artistic Director

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JOHN BECKWITH composer, music educator, and writer, was born in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1927. He received his musical education in Toronto (1945-50) and Paris (1950-52). He was associated with the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, from 1952, serving as dean 1970-77 and as first director of its Institute for Canadian Music from 1985 until his early retirement in 1990.

His more than 150 compositions include four operas, a dozen orchestral works, chamber and solo works, songs, and works for chorus. Since his university retirement, major premières have included *Round and Round* for orchestra (Winnipeg, 1992); the opera *Taptoo!*, libretto by James Reaney (Montreal, 1999, Toronto, 2003); *Eureka* for nine wind instruments (Toronto, 1996); *Stacey*, for voice and piano, on texts from Margaret Laurence (Toronto, 1997); four chamber works with harpsichord (Toronto and Montreal, 1996-8); *Basic Music*, for children's choir, youth choir, and orchestra (Guelph, 1998); *Workout* for percussion ensemble (Toronto, 2001); *A New Pibroch* for pipes, percussion, and strings (Toronto, 2003); *Fractions* for microtonal piano and string quartet (Toronto, 2006); and *Derailed* for two choirs and percussion (Mississauga, 2008). His three sets of transcriptions from J. S. Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* were introduced by Symphony Nova Scotia, Halifax, in 1993, 96, and 99 respectively, making up a complete orchestral version of the 45 chorales in this famous collection. His realization in 1991 of the early Canadian comic opera *Lucas et Cécile* by Joseph Quesnel was published (Quebec, 1992), performed in concert (Toronto, 1994), and staged in both Montreal (1999) and Toronto (2001).

Beckwith has edited or co-edited ten books, including volumes 5 and 18 of *The Canadian Musical Heritage*. He is the author of *Music Papers: articles and talks by a Canadian composer, 1961-1994* (Ottawa, 1997) and *In search of Alberto Guerrero* (Waterloo, 2006). He is a former music columnist and reviewer for the *Toronto Star* and script writer and program planner for CBC Radio, and continues to contribute articles and reviews to musical journals in Canada, Britain, and the United States.

He is a member of the Order of Canada, holds honorary degrees from five Canadian universities, and is an honorary member of the Canadian University Music Society and the Société québécoise de recherche en musique. He received the Canadian Music Council Composer of the Year award in 1984, the Toronto Arts Award for music in 1994, and the diplôme d'honneur of the Canadian Conference of the Arts in 1996. Marking his 80th birthday in 2007, the Institute for Canadian Music and the Canadian Music Centre co-sponsored a concert and a one-day symposium devoted to his career (see ICM Newsletter 5/3, Sept. 2007).

Program Notes by John Beckwith

This concert was my idea. Hoping for a first performance of *Back to Bolivia* and for a revival of *Eureka*, I thought of putting these two works together (for contrast) with an earlier score that had been revived on occasion but not lately, *Synthetic Trios*. (This work is a “vocalise” with a purely syllabic “text”: in it, the human voice is treated as a wind instrument.) Then I imagined preceding these main offerings by a selection of shorter and slighter wind pieces. The Faculty of Music, which had hosted a concert of my vocal music in 1999, accepted the program as part of its 2010 fall schedule. When I told Robert Aitken of the plan, I learned that, unknown to me, New Music Concerts was considering a concert of my music for its fall schedule, featuring the same two works that had started me thinking in the first place: I had mentioned *Back to Bolivia* to Bob and shown him the score, and we had spoken at various times of repeating *Eureka*, which NMC commissioned and premiered in 1996. I was delighted when it seemed possible for these two organizations to co-sponsor the event, since I have had a long association with both – “long” for NMC meaning forty years and for the Faculty of Music sixty-five!

Occasional Pieces My teacher in Paris (1950-51), Nadia Boulanger, assigned me to compose duets for wind instruments, as a discipline in part-writing. The opening group illustrates some later examples – a solo and four duos written on a whim or for a friend or relative, or commissioned for some occasion.

The **Duo** for clarinets, 1982, is a spontaneous sketch which resembles an eighteenth-century dance in its rhythm and form. **Animals with Horns**, 2007, was composed for Duncan and Alasdair Campbell, my teenaged grand-nephews, who play trumpet and euphonium respectively (Alasdair has now switched to tuba). A reflective prelude leads to an allegro, following which a postlude repeats the prelude in a brighter mode. Working in 2008 as co-editor of a collection of essays about the life and music of John Weinzweig, I was in touch with the Vancouver bassoonist George Zukerman, a longtime friend of Weinzweig and frequent soloist in his *Divertimento No. 3* for bassoon and strings. He was preparing a concert of music for solo bassoon, and invited me to write a short piece for the occasion. The result, entitled **Solo**, is based on a twelve-tone series, recalling our mutual friend,

Weinzweig. The other two works represent the genre of note-name compositions, for example the treatments of the phrase B-flat, A, C, B-natural (spelling “Bach” in German musical nomenclature) employed by many from J. S. Bach himself to Liszt and Dallapiccola. **Duo on H.E.S.A.E.S.**, first played at the opening of Chalmers House, Toronto headquarters of the Canadian Music Centre, in 1984, is a tribute to Henry Mutsaers, the librarian and copyist of the Centre in its early years, and is based on the musical notes in his name (again from German nomenclature, where H = B-natural and S = E-flat). There are four short sections, the last being a muted repetition of the first. The duo **Topical Flutes**, 1999, was a sixtieth-birthday gift for Bob Aitken. The letters in his name cover a range from A to T – the first twenty letters of the alphabet. Against a variable twenty-note upward scale, played three times in one part, at the tempo of one note per second, the other part spells out “Robert Aitken”; the two flutes present the resulting phrases in one minute of denser counterpoint, and then repeat the scale-plus-name patterns in a downward direction. For this concert I have added a thirty-second coda representing an additional decade in his vigorous career. In my family, a concoction of pineapple, banana, papaya, and clementines is sometimes called a topical flute salad.

Synthetic Trios In 1986 Rosemarie Landry and James Campbell, with whom I worked in the Music at Sharon summer series, asked me for a piece for soprano, clarinet, and piano, for a tour which never took place. I was stimulated by my admiration for both these artists to start sketching ideas before deciding on a text. As the work took shape, its central concern seemed to be the particular trio combination, for which no text was needed. Various three-character musical situations emerged, to which I gave the title **Synthetic Trios**. The first of the seven trios is in fact a trio for voice and two different clarinet registers, one higher and the other lower than the voice. In the second trio, as the piano enters the scene in a purely percussive background role, the voice and clarinet lines change register phrase by phrase, as if suggesting different characters in the story. Clarinetist and singer supply further percussion in later trios, and wider contrasts are afforded – an athletic scherzo, virtuosic and dramatic highs, a moody epilogue. Rosemarie Landry said she thought the seven sections made up a birth-to-death cycle – which is one way of listening, though I had in mind no such specific “program.”

Back to Bolivia Like many composers, when I look back on past scores I sometimes find passages that suggest further possibilities. A phrase sung by the leading mezzo-soprano character in my 1989 opera *Crazy to Kill* had often struck me as suitable for new treatment. It is sung to the words (by my librettist, James Reaney) "oh, silence!— a silence more fearful than the loudest noise." In my head I heard it played expressively by a clarinet. This was the germ of **Back to Bolivia**. I was led to develop the phrase in a scheme where each member of the clarinet quartet plays a transformation of it while the others interject brief *sotto voce* comments. Bringing four players together for such a short piece seemed impractical, so I added two complementary movements. Both are based on a photo I received from my old friend the music historian Helmut Kallmann. The photo shows a snow-covered stairway in a little park near his home in Ottawa, with strong shadows creating geometric patterns alongside the brightly outlined seven steps and their handrail. That there were seven presented a musical stimulus, Kallmann imagined, thinking of basic seven-note scales. But the steps were all the same size, and I couldn't fancy working with a scale of equal intervals that wouldn't be full of clichés. A succession of perfect fourths isn't a scale, but my solution was to create a series of mini-scales each with a different pattern of small intervals, always within a fourth. The second movement of the clarinet piece would develop cantabile melodies from my scales quietly and conversationally, in a free rhythm, while the third, for contrast, would be a rondo in strict rhythm in a fast tempo, exploiting the scales with many fast repeated notes.

The title **Back to Bolivia** may be recognized as the spine designation of volume 2 in the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, a phrase I was always fond of. Of the twenty volumes of *Grove*, this one is especially rich, containing entries on composers such as Bartok, Beethoven, Bellini, Berg, Berio, Berlioz, Bernstein, Bizet, Blow, and Boccherini, places such as Bangladesh, Barcelona, Birmingham, and Bolivia, and musical terms such as bagpipe, ballata, bassoon, and blues. Both Berlin (the city) and Berlin, Irving, are there; there's even a paragraph or so (modest cough) on me.

Eureka My interest in spatial or directional treatment of instrumental ensembles was inspired by my study of the works of Ives and my several encounters with Henry Brant and his music. In the 1960s I explored the medium of musical collages – simultaneous or overlapping dialogues – in a series of works for singing and speaking voices with a few instruments. Beginning with *Taking a Stand*, a 1972 commission from the Canadian Brass, and continuing with the string quintet *Musical Chairs* (1973), I expanded this style by imagining acoustic positioning of players and their movement through the performing area and the audience space as elements of musical expression. In *Keyboard Practice* (1979), an array of ten different keyboard instruments engaged the actions of four players; *Case Study* (1980) a multi-purpose quintet, included the instrument cases as sound-sources; *Peregrine* (1990) applied some of my findings in a work for orchestra with two wandering (i.e., peregrinating) soloists, a violist and a percussionist. The sketches and charts for **Eureka** date as far back as 1983, but it was not until 1996 that I received encouragement from Bob Aitken to write the piece.

Eureka may be considered as a drama for nine players, whose characters and interactions are suggested in the music. Solos, duets, and trios are overlapped by quasi-conversational comments; phrases circle the stage, again in solo, duo, or trio form, or are echoed from side to side or from front to back of the stage; at two points, three trios in three quite distinct tempi and moods occur simultaneously. A dramatic or operatic ensemble may be evoked; another similarity may be to a visual-art collage. The title derives from various sources including the town of Eureka, California, which I passed through around the time the work was in formation, and Edgar Allan Poe's long prose-poem *Eureka*, composed in the year before his death, 1848, in which he invents a philosophical communication written in the year 2842 projecting numerous geometric and astronomic theories of the meaning of existence. These influences were, I believe, incidental. Harry Freedman, when asked why he borrowed Freud's title *Totem and Taboo* for one of his compositions, replied "I just liked the sound." The word "eureka" means "I have found it." I have found nothing; I just liked the sound.

— John Beckwith



radio 2

Broadcast announcement

Our Friday May 28, 2010 concert,
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The Signal with host Laurie Brown

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