

Maxine Thévenot • In The Press

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Sacred Choral Works from Canada By MAXINE THÉVENOT

I am honored to be asked to facilitate an introduction to the world of contemporary sacred music in Canada. Choral singing, an integral part of the Canadian cultural experience, has the power to build communities and transform lives. With a population of approximately 37 million people, the country of Canada has approximately 3.5 million Canadians singing in 28,000 choirs throughout the country. If all of the 3.5 million people who sing in choirs from coast to coast were in one place, they would be the biggest city in the country. Indeed, close to one in every four Canadians under the age of 18 sings in a choir (23 percent)—triple the number that play hockey! Having gained confederation in 1867, Canada is a very young nation. As a country in the new world, Canada has always been a land of both immigrants and aboriginal first nations people. Historically, Canadian culture often has been defined as a Canadian “mosaic”; that is, a constantly evolving fabric of distinctly defined traditions, language, and art, often preserved or sanctioned by Canadian society and government. “is Canadian “mosaic” is changing, and has been shaped especially by assimilation, immigration, geography, demographics, and other cultural and political issues.

Music of Canadian cultures is a wide and diverse accumulation of music from many different individual communities all across Canada. Originally settled by primarily British, French, and American immigrants, Canada’s languages (officially English and French), culture, moral values, and political system reject its early heritage. “roughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new waves of immigration continued—Irish, German, Scandinavian, Russian, Ukrainian, Eastern and Southern European, Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian people immigrated in ever-increasing numbers. A high level of immigration, recently much more racially and geographically diverse, has continued into the twenty-first century, resulting in a truly multicultural land. Canada is geographically vast, and multiculturalism in her creative arts, including music, is related not only to history but also to geographical region. For example,

the eastern province of Quebec, a culturally distinct “nation” settled in the seventeenth century by the French, still reflects the profound influence of French language, art, and culture. The Province of Ontario was originally settled by both English immigrants and American loyalists. The far western province of British Columbia, originally settled in the nineteenth century by the British and Americans, currently attracts increasing numbers of diverse immigrants, many from Asia, India, and Latin America. From the earliest colonial times to the present day, Canadian composers have written works for performance by choirs. Canadian choral contributions include sacred and secular compositions in all categories. Sacred choral offerings by Canadians include anthems, cantatas, masses, and other works with a religious emphasis. In studying the contemporary art music of select Canadian composers representing over 600 Canadian composers, one discovers a divergence of musical traditions, dictated by a composer’s ethnic background, location within Canada, and musical training. Simultaneously, one also senses a profound convergence of approach, as Canadian composers extract rich musical elements, which appeal to them and their audiences, from both familiar and unfamiliar cultures. Finally, it appears that the stylistic “fences” in music are down, at least in Canada, and it is exciting to feel and experience the inevitable resulting world harmony. Below is a select listing of fourteen Canadian composers, highlighting a few of their sacred choral works from which you can begin your own voyage of discovery through many other compositional voices currently shaping the Canadian soundscape. More of their works can be found on the Cypress Choral Music web site (web links at the end of this article) and/or on their personal websites. Cypress is a boutique operation specializing in Canadian choral music and is curated by Larry Nickel. Following are interviews with four of the above mentioned composers: **Larry Nickel [LN]**, **Laura Hawley [LH]**, **Mark Sirett [MS]**, and **Stephanie Martin [SM]**.

What led you to write sacred choral music?

[LN] Mom and Dad were avid Christians and, while at daily vacation Bible School, I made a personal decision to follow Christ when I was eight years old. It’s been said that music comprises forty percent of the average church service (choir, worship, preludes, postludes,

offertories, special music, etc.) and our church was a singing church. I joined the church children's choir when I was three and often sang alto with my Mom in the pews. Music accompanied every important occasion and our family sang in the car while heading out on vacation (I have three younger brothers). I quickly realized that spiritual truths and everything from joyful praise to supplication to repentance were most aptly conveyed in song.

[LH] Sacred choral music has always been a part of my life. In my childhood, my mother led choirs at our church and in the community, and one of my favorite activities was singing through scores with my mom. I grew up as a chorister and remember the magic of learning Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols for the first time. I later directed my own church choirs, and music's role in faith was a natural interest.

[MS] I've been a church musician since I was fifteen and only recently retired as an organist. I began to write carol arrangements often to accommodate the specific needs of the choristers with whom I worked. Later it was to provide a setting of a particularly beautiful or meaningful text for a special service, such as Advent Carols in Procession.

[SM] I learned my musical craft singing in church choirs, so writing sacred choral music was a perfectly natural extension of my lived experience. When I became Director of Music at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Toronto, I was compelled to compose music for the choir, since the liturgy required it, the congregation supported it, and the building cried out for it. I realize how influential my Mennonite community was in fostering young people's musical skills. We sang hymns in four parts, learning through experience all the inner workings of harmony and voice leading. There was a rotation of teenagers who played piano for preludes and occasionally accompanied hymns. Without that constant challenge and support, I doubt if I would have developed the confidence to become a professional musician.

Who are some composers who influenced you and your writing?

[LN] Bach, Brahms, and the Beatles! I'm a James MacMillan fan these days.

[LH] Howells, Willan, Bach, Debussy, and more contemporary composers Rebecca Dale, Caroline Shaw, Sven-David Sandström, James MacMillan, and Ugis Praulins. I'm also influenced by other genres, such as jazz, electronic music, pop music, and music theatre.

[MS] There are many composers that I admire but I'm not sure that I've sought to deliberately emulate their style. As a former Cathedral organist, one is immersed in the English traditions, Howells being my favorite. However, I also did graduate work in the U.S. so I

think that may have introduced me to other styles and therefore broader traditions and possible influences.

[SM] Gregorian chant, Hildegard, Byrd, and all Renaissance composers, Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Wagner, Elgar, Finzi, Vaughan Williams, Stanford, Parry, Bartok, Stravinsky, Benjamin Britten, Canadian composers Healey Willan, Murray Schafer, Matthew Emery, Ruth Watson Henderson, as well as Copland, Tavener, and Randall Thompson, gave me great satisfaction as a singer and conductor. What I enjoy is a piece where every voice has integrity and contributes to the whole, and the words are brought to life.

What makes the music Canadian? What inspires you to write?

[LN] Unless one wants to include some First Nations chant my answer would be "nothing, really." Canada is a melting pot of influences from around the world. Our Mennonite church, for example, sang favorite hymns from the Ukraine and many of those were adopted from the German Lutheran tradition. I suppose one could say that Canada has folk songs, but many of those originated in Europe. I'll never forget the feeling of accomplishment, purpose, and fulfillment I felt when a choir first sang my music. To think that a group of people would take the time and apply their skills to reproduce something that evolved in my brain and from my heart was devastating and humbling. Choral singing is an act of peace on earth, bringing people together. "There is no other activity that comes close to this dynamic. "The need for a constant supply of relevant repertoire plus all the joy it can bring to singers and listeners has been my inspiration and motivation.

[LH] There is a strong connection between the music Canadians are writing for the Anglican Church of Canada and the Anglican tradition of England. Ottawa has two Anglican choirs of men and boys operating in this tradition, and for one of these choirs I wrote Pentecost, an advanced work for SSATTBB with the boys singing the SSA parts and with a strong feature of TTBB. I am inspired by the text and in what context this piece/text will be performed. How many different ways could that text be expressed, and which way is the right fit for me, for these performers, and for the listeners, and what is the vision for the work?

[MS] The words are the source of my inspiration and most recently these have been lyrics by Canadian poets. For me, beautiful words that are in some ways timeless, universal, yet contemporary in thought, is the source of my inspiration.

[SM] Music made in Canada is Canadian. It's not a matter of place of birth but embracing Canada as a homeland. Canadian music is as diverse as our population and that makes it rich and varied. What inspires me to

write choral music is great choirs, and we have many in Canada. Choral music is particularly exciting to write since we must engage with text and confront ideas and emotions.

What sort of compositional techniques do you employ?

[LN] I begin with words first and then write music with the intent to project the text in a compelling and convincing way. I'm embarrassed to admit that I used to write melodies and then try to devise words to fit the flow. I had the cart in front of the horse! Strophic poetry is easier to set than prose, but prose can help a composer to break away from four-by-four writing with less predictable and more interesting phrases. In order: 1) words 2) then melody 3) then harmony 4) then phrasing and form. I try to make sure that every vocal part has an interesting line to sing and I like to pass the special features around, e.g. How often do the altos get to carry the melody?

[LH] I often use mixed meter, asymmetrical phrase lengths, or phrases that overlay in interesting ways. I really enjoy rhythms that can float around the meter and exploring texture and dimension. When appropriate, I think about my own personal take on the text and what I'd like to say in my interpretation of it, which often leads me to work with multiple texts or musical sources in the same piece to bring additional layers of meaning. Examples of mine include O Come, let us sing, Pentecost, and the Christ-Child. Some of my most well known music is very accessible, but I also have dissonant music and am interested in pursuing a range of harmonic and textural language. I use different genres; one piece I recently wrote has a late-Romantic sound, another is tango, and another borrows from electropop.

[MS] One of the things I miss most about no longer being a church organist is the opportunity to improvise. Improvisation can reveal many possibilities for further development in a composition. Although my works are harmonically conceived, I think that the influence of counterpoint can be heard in the independence of the choral lines, and occasional canon and imitation.

[SM] My composing always starts with the text. The words inspire images in my mind, and I try to paint the words, drawing out the meaning of the poetry. My first step is to write out the poem by hand and sit with the words. Then I take a long walk and see what nature gives me. I enjoy creating interesting vocal lines for every voice part. (Perhaps, since I am an alto, I am not thrilled about singing one note throughout a piece merely to sustain proper voice leading in other parts.) I like a good bit of melodic counterpoint so that every singer in the ensemble can be expressive.

Are there specific compositional techniques that are

particularly appropriate or powerful in the creation of sacred music?

[LN] Congregational singing needs to be user-friendly. Church choir music can be more challenging but also something that can be assimilated in one or two rehearsals by amateur singers. Concert hall sacred music can be really adventurous, but the text still needs to lead the way. I mentioned James MacMillan. His "Seven Last Words from the Cross" is not easy on the ears, nor is it meant to be. His music makes me see scripture in a fresh new way.

[LH] In sacred music especially, the music should elevate the text, and should not get in the way of the listener's ability to connect with the meaning of the text. And it must also consider the broader context of the worship experience.

[MS] I've been told that I have a distinctive compositional voice when it comes to sacred a cappella repertoire. Part of that is understanding the resonant acoustic found in most sacred spaces and how it can help to shape and enhance harmonies and sonorities. I love how certain harmonies can be embraced by a sacred space and indeed transformed.

[SM] The liturgical calendar provides an arc to the year, so the occasion of a composition is often very specific and dictates what the mood, scope, tempo, and key of a piece should be. The function of the piece suggests the form.

How would you describe your compositional process?

[LN] I've been fortunate to receive nearly one hundred commissions over the last fourteen years. My earnest goal is to help the commissioning choir achieve success. I don't want the director to be disappointed and struggle with uncooperative singers who despise the music. I consider and carefully weigh three players in the drama: 1) director 2) choir 3) audience. So, my process begins with a long list of questions for the commissioning body. "in this way the choir can feel more involved with the creation process and they perform better when they really buy into it. I don't feel that my integrity as a composer is compromised by inviting a team approach. I'm not an ivorycastle composer. In fact, composition is craft.

[LH] I start with the text. I'm always interested in exploring new processes. Recently, I was working with a new text and had a recording of the poet reading it, so I started by transcribing the rhythm of her reading. It ended up informing much of the rhythm of the piece. Maintaining a sketchbook of ideas, some of which I explore and develop systematically, helps me generate new ideas and build a library of material that I can draw from.

[MS] I spend a great deal of time with the text, often to the point that I have the words memorized. "the text

needs to speak to me at a personal level, otherwise the compositional process can be slow and laborious. “rough improvisation, aspects of the text will conjure melodic fragments, musical gestures, or specific harmonic progressions. After plotting out the overall structure, key scheme, and text development, I begin to compose the climactic point of the work—the destination of the piece.

[SM] I’d describe my compositional process as disciplined but unhealthy. I admire composers who can say “I write music every Tuesday and Thursday from 1 p.m. until 3 p.m.” I’m not like that. I need to set aside intensive time to write, composing all day, every day, until the work is done. “at way the ideas remain in the forefront of my conscience, and I can wake up every morning with only one goal—to write music.

What place does faith have in your compositions? Does the way you compose change when you approach a sacred text versus a secular one?

[LN] Without a doubt, my faith in Christ infuses all my writing. In fact, listen to “All the Little Rivers” to see how matters of faith sneak into my folksong. I’m happy to write songs about turtles or hockey or driving trucks, and there is certainly a place in choral repertoire for the more mundane. I call it “celebrating life” in song, a Godly pursuit. If Christ is Lord of ALL (and He is), then should there be a division between sacred and secular?

[LH] The music I’ve experienced, the mentors and musicians I’ve worked with, and the repertoire I feel a deep connection with as an adult has largely been shaped by my experiences in the church or in community choirs who sing sacred music. I’m a spiritual person, and I think that informs a lot of my writing, even when writing in the secular idiom.

[MS] Although there are certain compositional elements that are shared, I think that my approach is different. One needs to approach the text with a degree of reverence, a depth of understanding, an awareness of the possible history, even affection that a particular text may have for a faith community.

[SM] A composer is an interpreter of text, like a film director, an actor, or indeed a preacher. It’s imperative that the composer understands the words deeply and brings them to life. My lifetime involvement in many Christian denominations (Mennonite, Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, United Church of Canada) has given me helpful tools to understand diverse sacred texts and reflect on them through music.

How do you listen to the voice inside you to get the music outside of you?

[LN] That’s a tough one, a bit spooky. Have you heard of “spiritual breathing,” staying in communion with God at all times (a daunting endeavor)? I don’t wait for special revelations—the Lord has already done that. God’s

word and His love for us is readily apparent and the scriptures are full of timeless, gorgeous, and powerful promises, in words that are dying to be set to music.

[LH] This is a good moment to advocate for theory and musicianship training! I can sit at a table and write the music I can hear in my head. To be able to do this, one must have skills in sight-singing, dictation, and theory.

[MS] In addition to improvisation, I often realize that when gardening, cycling, or doing yoga, that internally I’m hearing parts of the work, analyzing, clarifying, questioning choices. That becomes the stimulus for further work at the keyboard or even direct transcription to the page.

[SM] As I would instruct my students, it’s important to write down those “inside voices” even if the ideas are only fragments. They will become useful sometime down the road. For that reason, it is useful to develop strong skills—sight reading, ear training, memorization—so when those inner tunes begin to spin spontaneously while you are out walking, you have the skills to capture them on the page.

Does the experience of your music change when in a liturgical setting versus a concert setting? Is liturgy the only intended destiny for your music? Is the liturgy a significant motivating factor for composing sacred choral works?

[LN] There seems to be an assumption that liturgy is a common thread among Christians. Not so. I know of massive churches in British Columbia of over 5,000 members that never use liturgy. While writing my thesis, Requiem for Peace, I became quite well acquainted with the Latin liturgy. Other than that, I’ve set very little liturgy to music. You’d have to visit a Mennonite church one day to understand the why not. One of my church choir compositions, “True Evangelical Faith,” has been translated into twelve languages, and a group from Jakarta recently sent me a video of the way their church uses it to rouse the congregation. Another popular piece is “Come unto me” (Matthew 11:28) which I wrote as a teenager. I’m amazed to see the way those words continue to comfort people. I should add that I really enjoy reciting the liturgy when in Anglican and Lutheran churches.

[LH] Making music in a liturgical setting, connecting my work to the faith journey of listeners, and weaving the music into a service’s broader context resonates deeply for me. That being said, more sacred music is being written for a concert setting rather than a liturgical service, and I think listeners are having equally transcendent spiritual experiences in both settings.

[MS] All of my a cappella sacred works can be used in either setting. Many are Christmas works or Latin texts performable by all choirs. However, my sacred

accompanied works are definitely designed specifically for liturgy. Although “keyboard” is the more recent designation, I really think in terms of organ accompaniment.

[SM] Each of my compositions is a “bespoke” item, written with a specific purpose in mind, whether that be for church or concert hall, for a particular conductor and choral group. The parameters of each project shape the composition. For instance, I was recently commissioned to write a piece for an American church dedicating a new organ; thus, the choice of text had to be relevant, the attributes of the choir considered, and the role of the organ heightened. For that project I sought out a text by the African American poet Phillis Wheatley, which brought all these aspects together.

Sacred choral music has swung between simplicity and complexity over the past 500-600 years. Most recently thick, lush textures in choral writing have dominated the choral soundscape.

Do you think that a shift is underway, and do you think the pandemic has accelerated a potential shift? How does or will the pandemic affect the compositional style of sacred choral works now and in the future?

[LN] I’m a fan of lush textures, fat chords, aleatoric music and soundscapes, but sometimes a simple unison line can carry more impact and convey the deepest thoughts. It’s quite possible for music to get in the way of words. And I suppose that sometimes words are not the determining factor (sometimes mood is enough). COVID has had a profound effect on the planet and choral music desperation has undoubtedly been a mother of invention. But singing on Zoom (faces in boxes) is not choir (and never will be).

[LH] The Pandemic has necessitated an interest in and need for aleatoric works and works that can explore the latency issues of singing online as an expressive tool rather than a hindrance; some instances of this are thick, lush textures. From my current vantage point, I would be surprised if the pandemic affected compositional style and content as much as the seismic social shifts we are currently experiencing in North America, and this covers still only a small part of the globe.

[MS] I think that lush textures will continue to predominate in a cappella works that are conceived for larger parishes where there are excellent amateur and professional leads who appreciate challenging and rewarding repertoire. However, I think that a shift will be seen toward simpler music in smaller parishes where there are fewer singers and where there isn’t the technological expertise to deal with the intensive demands of creating virtual choirs and pre-recorded music.

[SM] It’s always tempting to write lushly divided sonorities, but in many of my compositions I have self-

imposed the limitation to write only for four voices, or fewer, knowing full well the limitations which sometimes face conductors. My little Mass for free Voices (Cypress) is widely sung, and my publication Sacred Songs for Small Choirs (Renforth) is a collection of canons and short, easy pieces for the liturgical year. My Missa Chicagoensis is a complete setting of the Latin mass for SATB that can be sung by a quartet. Likewise, my TTBB Mass for Troubled Times is strictly four men’s voices. It’s a good discipline to writing out as much as possible from only a few voices. On the other hand, I’ve recently written eight-part pieces like “Let all Mortal Flesh” (Selah) which are performed by accomplished choirs, like Clare College, Cambridge. The pandemic has been potentially devastating to choirs since we operate in groups and breathe on each other! But I have been so impressed by conductors and choirs who have shown resilience, using technology to carry on through this difficulty. They have persevered, taking this time to build skills and knowledge of music since ensemble singing is impossible. We will come out of this, but we will certainly face a period of re-building, especially in training children and young people in the art of group music making. We have tons of work ahead.

How does art lead a society to be more honest, truer, more equitable? Do you hope that your art music will make for a better world? Is that something that you contemplate as you write?

[LN] When people get together for choir, they deny themselves for the greater good (divas are not welcome). A poor bus driver can stand next to a wealthy senator in the bass section and the two then blend and tune their voices together. In short, people from all walks of life unite to create something beautiful in a choir. That’s the magic of choral singing, a profound act of peace.

[LH] It’s often said that art and music mirror life, and that music gives us a window through which we can look at society. Composers have important agency here. Each person’s distinct collection of life experiences and sound-worlds are brought to bear on their artistic expression. Art also mirrors life in that it is always in flux, which is crucial. All this means that while art CAN lead to more truth and equity, it can also be used to control, divide, and corrupt. What I want in my art is to express myself authentically while also connecting with others in that expression, and I think aiming for something truthful is aiming for a better world. I do hope my offering adds value. Choral singing is one of the most powerful things in the world, and I’m aware of that when I’m writing.

[MS] I’m aware that music can have a dramatic impact on many people’s lives. Indeed, it can be life changing.

As I write, I am very much aware of the singers and also the audience who will experience my work. My hope is that my music provides some of them something that is artful, something of beauty that will touch them, engage, and inspire.

[SM] That is a tough question Maxine! Is art honest? The nightly newscast is honest, we trust, and it brings us down. Music lifts us up, and fuels us to face the truth. Art can give us the strength to face grim realities by envisioning what can be, not what is. The great strength of choral music of all genres is that it brings people together. Strengthening communities, breaking down barriers between people we don't yet know or understand is a step toward peace and a more just society.

What is the future of sacred music?

[LN] I often take confidence in the scripture, which proclaims that the word of God will not go out void (Isaiah 55:11). The word of God will not return without results. So, when Handel's Messiah is being performed by a large secular chorus to an audience of mixed convictions, the scripture can still penetrate the hardest heart. Did you know over ninety percent of the most famous choral works ever written are sacred? Carmina Burana is one of the black sheep—haha. But Christ is Lord over that music too; He's not intimidated by naughty lyrics. These monuments of sacred music composition will live on until Christ returns. One needs to ask, "How is it that the greatest choral music ever written proclaims the love of God?" I don't think it happened by accident. "Singing to the Lord is like praying twice." You've heard the adage. That's because people hum the songs on the way home from church.

[LH] There will always be sacred music, because there will always be sacred moments and rites of passage in life that need musical expression. Perhaps the shift will be in how we define sacred in the future.

[MS] Our whole world is facing enormous challenges. However, let's not forget that sacred music continued to nourish in similarly strenuous times of conflict, economic hardship, hunger, and disease. The church has for centuries been the major patron of the arts and it will continue to be so.

[SM] There's a text to an old round I'm sure you know: "All things must perish under the sky; Music alone shall live, never to die." All music is sacred, and will surely live on, after all of us are long gone.