

# UNHEARD OF

MEMOIRS  
OF A CANADIAN  
COMPOSER

*John  
Beckwith*

Two performers with whom I worked at Sharon, the soprano Rosemarie Landry and the clarinetist James Campbell, commissioned me to write something for a tour they planned with the pianist André Laplante. While turning over various possible texts in my mind, I found myself starting to sketch possible combinations and contrasts for the trio of voice, clarinet, and piano. One of these was a trio without the piano, the three parts being high clarinet, mid-range soprano, and low clarinet. Out of that evolved another sequence with high soprano, mid-range clarinet, and the soprano in her low chest tones, to which I added some percussion noises from the pianist. Without meaning to, I found I had the beginnings of a piece in which the voice part would be textless. As with some of my works for chorus, I invented a syllabic continuity, avoiding the monotony of a limited number of vowel sounds (as found in many classical vocalises). It was a synthetic approach to composing, and I gave the finished work the title *Synthetic Trios*. The three participants are each assigned some passages of percussion. When I played the seven short trios for Rosemarie, she said she thought the sequence resembled a life-to-death cycle. The parts for voice and for clarinet are dramatic and showy (I was well acquainted with the performers' abilities), the piano part somewhat less so. As it turned out, Laplante was unavailable for the tour and it never took



*Performing Synthetic Trios (1986) in Walter Hall, 19 September 2010. Left to right: Peter Stoll, John Beckwith, Vivienne Spiteri (page turner), Teri Dunn. Photo by André Leduc.*



place. The first performance of *Synthetic Trios* was by Carolyn Hart, Paul Bendzsa, and Edmund Dawe at a conference in Quebec City. This group, from St John's, performed the work several times, and it was repeated by Teresa Costes, Connie Gitlin, and Delores Kay-Hee at the Canadian League of Composers annual meeting in Winnipeg in 1991<sup>6</sup> and by Barbara Hannigan, Ameene Shishakly, and Stephen Clarke at the Faculty of Music in Toronto in 1993. These were all exceptionally communicative performances. I used the recording from Winnipeg as an illustration for talks about my work during a visit to several university music departments in Australia in 1992. I enjoyed undertaking the piano part in a performance with Teri Dunn and Peter Stoll in 2010.

My vocal music was featured several times in the Toronto series *The Aldeburgh Connection*, and in 1997 the directors of the series, Bruce Ubukata and Stephen Ralls, asked me to compose a new work for a concert in memory of Lois Marshall, who had died in February of that year. My association with Lois went back to student days, and I had wonderful recollections of her performances, including some of my own works. I thought the text should be something by a Canadian woman writer. My son Symon wondered if instead of poetry I should be considering prose sources: he suggested I reread Margaret Laurence's novel *The Fire-Dwellers*. In it, the central character, Stacey MacAindra, a married woman with four children, feels life has her trapped. Her imaginary dialogues with God challenge received concepts of Christian doctrine, including the figure of a male god. The novel also has musical points of reference—a Victorian hymn tune, some dance music by Tommy Dorsey. It was the tenth anniversary of Margaret Laurence's death—another link. I knew her writings fairly well and had a few personal contacts with her. Was Stacey an auto-portrait? The period and the locale, North Vancouver, hinted that she might be. I recognized that many of the pressures of her character—the horrible reports of the Vietnam war, the trials of maintaining a marriage and bringing up a family in the new social scene of the sixties—were those of Laurence's generation, which was also mine. *Stacey*, the eventual “sung monologue” or one-character mini-opera, was introduced by Monica Whicher and Stephen Ralls in 1998. Whicher projected the character of Stacey with remarkable vividness; she has performed the piece several times and recorded it twice. Among others who have brought it to life successfully is the team of Teri Dunn and William Aide; they have also recorded it.<sup>7</sup>

Adrienne Clarkson's installation as Governor General of Canada in Ottawa in 1999 was, I imagine at her request, a long and lavish ceremony