

Two Sketches for Strings

Sir Ernest MacMillan (1893 – 1973)

'I can't play for nuts and I've never written anything worthwhile but I *can* conduct.' Sir Ernest MacMillan

Sir Ernest MacMillan is regarded as one of Canada's prominent composers of the early 20th. century. Born in Mimico, Toronto on August 18, 1893, MacMillan began studying music at eight with Arthur Blakeley, an organist-choirmaster at Sherbourne St Methodist Church (1897 – 1911). At the tender age of ten, he performed in public for the first time at the Festival of the Lilies at Massey Hall. He secured his job at Knox Presbyterian Church as an organist when he was only 15. Shortly after he returned from WWI, he became organist-choirmaster at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, Toronto; a position that he held until 1925.

Although MacMillan began his career as an organist, he was also known as a composer, conductor (Toronto Mendelssohn Choir/Toronto Symphony Orchestra, BBC Orchestra, etc.), and administrator (Dean of Music, University of Toronto) and "classical music disc jockey" (CKEY). He was instrumental in the founding of the Canadian Music Council and the Canadian Music Centre. During his lifetime, he received numerous honorary degrees from various institutions such as the University of Toronto, Queen's University, University of Oxford. MacMillan was also knighted by King George V in 1935 for '**services to music in Canada**'; and in 1964, the Faculty of Music of University of Toronto decided to name their main concert hall the "MacMillan" Theatre. Last but not least, he was also made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1970.

MacMillan passed away on May 6, 1973 in Toronto following a stroke. Soon after, MacMillan's family founded the Sir Ernest MacMillan Foundation in 1984 and its principal goal is "**to assist young musicians in their advanced education at the graduate level and in so doing commemorate a great Canadian and his/her unique career.**" Scholarships were also established by the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and CAPAC in his memory.

The **Two Sketches for Strings** were written for the Hart House String Quartet and was first performed at the Folksong and Handicraft Festival in Quebec City in 1927. They are based on two French folk melodies (Notre Seigneur en pauvre and À Saint-Malo) and were written during a time where many Canadian composers were in search of the Canadian identity in their music. There is no doubt that it was MacMillan's intention to incorporate these two French Canadian folk tunes to focus on the distinct musical flavours of the Canadian East coast. Other notable works by MacMillan include **a String Quartet in C Minor, Fantasy on Scottish Melodies for Orchestra, Six Bergerettes du Bas-Canada** for chamber ensemble, **England** and a **Te Deum** for choir, and the opera **Prince Charming**.

**"Here lyes Henry Purcell Esq., who left this life and is gone to that blessed place
where only his harmony can be exceeded."**

Henry Purcell's Epitaph

Henry Purcell was born in Westminster, England 1658/59? and died there in 1695. He was one of the three children of Henry Senior. Unfortunately, his father passed away when Purcell was only seven years and was placed under the guardianship of his uncle Thomas. His first music teachers were Captain Henry Cooke, Pelham Humfrey and Dr. John Blow. In 1680, Dr. Blow resigned his position as the organist at Westminster Abbey in favour of the Purcell. In 1682, Purcell was appointed organist of the Chapel-Royale, a position that he was able to hold simultaneously with his commitment with Westminster Abbey.

Purcell's first composition was believed to be an ode for the king's birthday in 1670. His greatest works include his *Te Deum* and *Jubilate*, written for St. Cecilia's Day in 1694. He also composed a number of Baroque operas including the famous ***Dido and Aeneas*** (1689) and ***The Fairy Queen*** (1692; an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), some 250 songs, 12 fantasias for viol consort, a limited number of suites for harpsichord, numerous anthems and other incidental music. He also set music to many plays such as **Thomas d'Urfey's** comedy "***The Virtuous Wife***" or "***Good Luck at Last***" (1679) and was premiered at the Dukes Theatre by King's servants.

Henry Purcell died on November 21, 1695 in Dean's Yard, Westminster and was laid to rest near the organ of Westminster Abbey. Ironically, Dr. Blow reassumed his position as the organist at the Abbey after the death of Purcell. Although his music was never published during his lifetime, his widow managed to accomplish that before she died in 1706.

Thomas d'Urfey's "***The Virtuous Wife***" is a restoration comedy. These comedies are mostly written between 1660 – 1710 and they are famous for their sexual explicitness. In fact, Charles II encouraged the production of such theatrical works. This particular instrumental suite is scored for strings and basso continuo, and is consisted of eight short movements that include a number of Baroque dances and airs. The main reason for their brevity is probably because the music was set to accommodate the actual scenes in the play.

"The Four Seasons", Op. 8, Nos. 1 – 4

Antonio Vivaldi (1678 – 1741)

Antonio Vivaldi, nicknamed "il prete rosso" (the red priest), was born on March 4, 1678 in Venice to Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, a professional violinist at the church of St. Mark's, and Camilla Calicchio. Although Antonio was a gifted violinist, he was actually ordained a priest in 1703. (However, he presided at very few masses due to his chronic asthma.) Immediately after his ordination, Vivaldi was appointed *maestro di violino* at the Ospedale della Pieta, a girls' orphanage in Venice; then in 1711, he was promoted to *maestro de' concerti* (music director); and in 1735, he became *maestro di cappella*. This was a position that he held between 1703 and 1738. During his lifetime, Vivaldi wrote more than 500 concerti, some 50 operas, numerous cantatas, trio sonatas, the Magnificat in G minor and his most famous choral work "**Gloria**".

Vivaldi's signature composition "**The Four Seasons**" violin concertos is undisputedly one of the world's most recorded works with each one depicts the moods and scenery of each season. They were published in 1725 in Amsterdam by Le Cène under the title "*Il Cimento dell'Armenia e dell'invenzione*" (The trial of harmony and invention). There are a total of twelve concertos in this particular opus, seven of which have descriptive titles such as **The Four Seasons**, *Storm at Sea*, *Pleasure* and *The Hunt*. Presumably, Vivaldi has set the music of the "Four Seasons" to the sonnets that he penned. It is scored for strings and harpsichord, and there are three movements in each concerto (fast-slow-fast). They are considered early examples of program music, which means that the music is written based on a play or a poem or a story. While listening to the music, one should pay attention to the following sounds imitated by various combinations of instruments: barking dogs in the second movement of the "*Spring*" concerto, frozen landscapes in the "*Winter*" concerto, and other musical materials that mimic the sound of a bird or the rustling of leaves.

Unfortunately, Vivaldi's music did not receive the recognition that he deserved while he was still alive. In fact, it was not until the 20th. century that there was a revival of his music. Vivaldi died on July 28, 1741 and was buried at the Vienna's Cathedral of St. Stephen.

Program notes written by Eric D. Fahn ©