

CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAITS SERIES MURRAY ADASKIN DOCUMENTARY

Produced by Eitan Cornfield

Transcription

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The three Adaskin boys made a very remarkable, indeed, a unique contribution to the musical life of Canada, and they had the grace of real humanity, by which they always felt that they were playing for people, and also because they all three of them had a delicious sense of humour, playing with people.

JOHN WEINZWEIG: He studied composition with me. Actually, he was older than me. He was a very good violinist. He had maturity as a musician, and he learned very, very quickly; so he changed his whole life and he became a composer, and he wound up as a professor of composition out at University of Saskatchewan, and then he wound up out in Victoria, after that.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: He's really a remarkable man, a kind of a catalyst in all areas of music. I hardly can think of a single musician who has crossed his path who hasn't been influenced by him, and it's no wonder that most of the players, performers who have met Murray have at some point in their lives asked him to write something for them, because he has a unique gift of being able to give of himself in his composition, not only to create fine music, but also to somehow make each of his pieces, each of his compositions, a personal gift.

ANDREW DAWES: Murray Adaskin is a wonderful person. I've always loved him, and he continues still to be, you know, a really good friend, and whenever I've been making what for me are kind of monumental decisions, like leaving the quartet or moving to Vancouver, whatever, I've always been able to go to him, and talk to him, and know that he felt close to me, and that suggestions that he would give would be for my own best interest. He instilled in me that sense that there was a pleasure to be gained and a certain obligation to play Canadian works, and so, for all of the life of the Orford Quartet, and since then, but to a more limited extent, I've always played Canadian music, and contemporary music in general.

EUGENE KASH: You see, when you are a violinist, there is a certain inherent lyricism in what you are going to do. You don't sit down to a piano and bang out the music. Actually, the music comes from the very fact that the violin really imitates the voice, quite largely, and this usually brings about a very particular kind of composer. I think this lyricism is everywhere in Murray's work.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: It's a very direct music. There's no subterfuge, no hiding behind any false philosophies. I say "false" because I think a lot of composers hid behind philosophies that have nothing to do with music, and as far as a definite Canadian sound, the music of Adaskin, as well as some other composers who write in a similar idiom, you have a feeling of music being written in an open space somewhere. You have a feeling of space, and which perhaps is indicative of our country.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I feel the real contribution to Canada has been the feeling which they transmitted to many pupils and many friends and many associates that music was joyous, not just something that you did for a living or did because you had to. That is Murray's real contribution.

MURRAY ADASKIN: I always have wished that my music had moments of magic.

EITAN CORNFIELD: On a cloudless August day in Victoria, and elfin Murray Adaskin eases himself into a favourite armchair. The window behind him overlooks a golf course. Neither he nor his second wife Dorothea plays the game. "I'll take it up when I turn eighty," she says, in a way that makes you believe her. The living room, in fact, the entire house, is full of Canadian art. Adaskin has been collecting it since the early thirties, when he counted many of the painters of the time among his friends. He has just put a disk into the CD player, a recording of his most recent composition, a piece he calls *Music of Victoria*.

Now, at the age of 95, he says it's his last. He still finds musical ideas exciting. He keeps thinking of the possibilities. Only he just can't summon up the energy to pursue them. Besides, his hands have been giving him trouble. "I don't know. I think it's time to quit," he says, as the music begins to play. What pours out of the speakers is joyful, vital, jazzy, hardly a valedictorian sound. Murray Adaskin has lived all of his 95 years in Canada, but he never would have been a pioneer of Canadian music had his family not fled the oppression of czarist Russia.

MURRAY ADASKIN: My father came about 1901 to Canada. He got to Montreal, and friends that he found in Montreal said if he went to Toronto, it would be very easy to get a job, because there was a very, very big fire of the whole of Front Street, so his first job was hauling bricks up a ladder on Front Street, and that's how he came, and he saved enough money for my mother to come with my two older brothers. Then, I was born in 1906, and the first one to be born in Canada, and that's the beginning of our life.

My father would tell us that if you played the violin beautifully, that would be the open gate to heaven, and we believed him, you know, so he didn't need to do any more convincing. We really believed him. There was music going on in every room of the house. My mother would be doing her work around the house, and she would get to know the pieces that we were trying to play at that time, and, oh, she was just so happy. She would just kind of hum them as she went about her work, and in the summer months, we would go to Muskoka, to a hotel, where we were employed to play for them, so we were away for the summer. My mother could hardly manage getting through the summer, because there was no music, just no sound of music, and it must have been a kind of torture for her.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Harry Adaskin was five years older than Murray. He was a talented violinist and teacher, who played with the original Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Hart House String Quartet. He later became head of the music department of the University of British Columbia, and host commentator for countless CBC radio broadcasts.

MURRAY ADASKIN: To have an older brother who was doing very well with his playing, that had an enormous effect on me. I loved listening to him, and he was a good teacher. At one point, he was teaching at the Canadian Academy of Music, and I

would be the last student of the day. Then, we could walk home together, both of us carrying our violin cases. For me, that was memorable. I mean, the fact that I can remember this, over 95 years, it just meant so much to me.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Murray went to study with Luigi von Kunits. The Viennese-born Kunits was a remarkable figure in Canadian musical history. He had studied violin with the Czech virtuoso Ottokar Sevcik, composition with Anton Bruckner, and music history with the great Viennese musicologist Edvard Hanslik. He knew Brahms and Johann Strauss. Kunits came to Toronto in 1912 and helped found the Toronto Symphony. He taught a generation of fine Canadian string players. Many sustained themselves playing in Toronto's theatre orchestras.

MURRAY ADASKIN: The first places that I played for which I was paid as in a movie house. All the movies were no sound, but they always provided music with a small group in the big theatres. In the small theatres, it would be violin and piano, and I did that for a number of years, when I was very young, and in Toronto, at the Uptown Theater, for instance, which was I think the first really large theatre where they had an orchestra. Well, I played in that orchestra for a couple of years, and we played with a conductor watching the screen, and he had the most fabulous sense of timing, to always be in the right spot and cut off the music when we had to go to some other scene. Well, then, when sound came, that was the end of that.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Murray Adaskin was still a teenager when he joined the Toronto Symphony. He played with the orchestra for thirteen years, then became a member of the trio resident in Toronto's posh Royal York Hotel. He stayed with the trio for almost fifteen years, and along the way, managed to acquire a fine Stradivarius violin. His position at the hotel meant he rubbed shoulders with many of the greats.

MURRAY ADASKIN: Let me tell you the story about the conductor Pierre Montreux, a charming man/ He came to Toronto, gave a concert, and the next day, he and about five gentlemen came in and sat at the back of the restaurant that we – I played in, at the Royal York Hotel. Suddenly, I saw him leave the table and come winding through the tables toward us. We were on a small stage, and he said to me: "Are you playing a 'Strad'?" and I said "yes, I am." And, he said: 'I win a bet,' and I don't know – he never told me what the bet was, but I can imagine and I hoped that it was a handsome one, with these people who said, "oh, how could it be a Stradivarius, with a man playing a restaurant?"

Well, so, he asked me could he hold it for a minute and look at it. Well, I would never let anyone do that, because they usually – well, they always put their finger on the actual body of the – and leave their fingerprints on it, and, you know. He picked it up the way you pick up a violin, holding it at the top scroll, and his hand on the bottom, and he sort of turned it around and said "it's a beautiful violin," and he winked and said, "and, you know how to make it sound beautiful". Well, you know, I almost burst into tears.

And then, another lovely incident took place when the pianist, the famous Russian pianist Rachmaninov came in with his wife, and his wife was dressed in black, and of course he had a black suit on, and I just didn't get enough courage up to walk over and disturb them. They were talking to each other and so on, and what we did was we tried to play music that was fit for a man sitting, of that caliber, in the room, and eventually they finished their meal, and they got up and went out.

Now, outside the dining room, there was a sitting room with chesterfields and beautiful seats and so on, and he evidently left his wife sitting in one of the – and he came back in the room, walked all the way from the door, and stood in front of us, and with his long arms, did a deep bow, and got up, turned around, and walked out. Well, I couldn't hold back the tears. That was the most amazing, amazing touching thing that a human being could do.

EITAN CORNFIELD: The Royal York was one of a string of Canadian Pacific Hotels across the country. CPR in the 1920's and '30s was also one of Canada's most important cultural forces. They produced radio programs, engaged musicians and singers for their hotels, and sponsored music festivals. It was because of the CPR that both Murray Adaskin and the New Brunswick born soprano Frances James came to share a stage at the Banff Springs Hotel.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: From the Mount Stephen Hall in the Banff Springs Hotel, a lovely team of its own composition introduces another Sunday evening music hall by Murray Adaskin and his concert trio, with the lyric soprano voice of Frances James as assisting artist. The trio is composed of Louis Crerar, pianist; Philip Spivak, cellist; and Murray Adaskin, violinist.

MURRAY ADASKIN: I was sent out to play with a trio. It would be in the very early thirties, and we gave a concert every evening, and there were two singers at the hotel, Frances James and a male singer. The first time I heard her sing, I was just overwhelmed by it. It was so beautiful and so perfect. I just really was very deeply moved by it, and that's how I gradually got to know her, and she got to know me.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Frances James and Murray Adaskin married in the year they met: 1931. They often performed together, perhaps most memorably in 1939, before King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. As a leader in oratory singer, and as a pioneer singer of the work of twentieth century Canadian composers, Frances James became one of the country's most familiar voices. Their musical lives were intertwined until her death in 1988, but while Frances James was developing artistically, Murray Adaskin began to feel constrained by the life of the performer. He wanted to be more than a violinist.

MURRAY ADASKIN: I wanted to be a composer, and of course I had absolutely no knowledge of how you write music, and once I decided I'm going to write a string quartet – ha-ha. I got as far as maybe two pages, and that started me off. Then, I decided to – studied with John Weinzweig who was a marvelous teacher, a really great teacher. John Weinzweig was wonderful in explaining forms, all the different forms in music, and how on worked at them and developed them and so on, and finally the time came.

He said “now you're a violinist” --and of course, I was a professional violinist at that time – “why don't you write a violin sonata for yourself?” and that's how I wrote my first sonata which is now on a CD with -- the first violinist of the Lafayette Quartet and her mother recorded it. It's a very lovely recording, and that was my first piece.

The last session that I had with him happened this way. I get into his studio, and he said: “Murray, I've just had a letter from Aaron Copland, and he said if I a talented student, ‘I would like to have him for my summer class,’” so he said “how would you like to go?” I took out a letter, showed it to him, and it was an offer to go and have a

scholarship with Darius Milhaud in California. I said: “John, I came this morning hoping that you would be in favour of this.” He said – he says: “Go to Darius Milhaud.”

When I was studying with Milhaud, there were about seven or eight of us, and we worked with him for the whole summer months, so every day we had a session in the morning, and we had to show him what we had done, the day before. I would work all night to have something to show him, and so, anyways, well, he said, well, who is next, and this girl was in blue jeans. It was the first time I’ve ever seen blue jeans on a young girl, and you know, coming from Canada – they had been doing it in America for a long time. So, anyway, she started going into her back pocket and kind of struggling with this, so finally she pulled it out, and she said to Milhaud: “Milhaud, it’s just an idea.”

He said: “Just an idea?” and he turned to all of us. There were about six of us there, standing around the piano. He said: “Did she say ‘just an idea?’” He said: “I wish I had an idea,” and that started a whole morning’s lecture on how important ideas were, and how you come by them, and how you struggle for them.

When I was studying with Milhaud, we once – he had me over for a coffee, and we were chatting, and I said to him is it possible for a composer like me, a student, that his music would be recognizably Canadian? He asked me, first of all, “how long have you lived in Canada?” I said I was born in Canada. He says then don’t even talk about it, because it’s inevitable. You can’t duck it. He said to me: “Willy-nilly, it will sound ‘Adaskin’, but it will sound Canadian. It won’t be ‘Adaskin American’. It will sound like a Canadian composer,” and he’s right.

You know, Algonquin Park – we had a cottage on that lake, and we would go there whenever we could, when we lived in Toronto, and what we heard is the sound of the loon, that wonderful lonely, wonderful, touchingly beautiful “tuh-ree-rum, tuh-ree-rum, tuh-rah-rah-ree”. I went to the Arctic, and of course, I wanted to come back with something worthwhile for my use, after all, that is Canadian, even though it’s another country – it’s the Arctic.

If you fly towards the Arctic, you look out of the plane, and the last row of trees is like a fence, and you know you’re in the Arctic then. I will never forget that, but anyway, I had them sing for me, and I taped them, and I came back with some music that -- the oldest Eskimo in the Arctic was this woman, and when I went to see her, she was lying in bed, and talking to me. She had one picture on her wall, and it was President Kennedy. Oh, I just – I just fell in love with her – Kawuhmah her name was, and so I got that.

Then, I got some material from a man who came to where we were, and he sang something for me, so I made use of this material, and I think I sort of got caught up in it, and you just can’t be the chooser. You can’t say: “I’m going to do this and that and, you know, it’s going to be in this style.” You really have no choice. You get started on something, and it just starts pouring out, you know, and I couldn’t tell you how did I come to write it that way. “Why didn’t you do it” – well, there’s no answer to that.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Adaskin developed a style that was modern, while maintaining traditional classical elements, and something of the perky French manner of Milhaud had rubbed off on him, but his voice was still uniquely his own. In 1952, his life took a hard turn towards teaching and administration, when he was named head of music at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Despite the new commitment, the compositions continued to flow through the fifties and sixties. Adaskin made use of folk elements in works like the *Algonquin Symphony*, *Qualala* and *Nilaula of the North* and

Saskatchewan Legend. He composed concertos and series of diverimenti for soloists with orchestra., and many works for smaller ensembles, and for voice and choir.

MURRAY ADASKIN: That was a wonderful period for Canadian composers. The CBC had a wonderful orchestra in Toronto, and they gave a concert every week, and in those days, we – all we needed to do is to phone Geoff Waddington to say, “Geoff, I’ve just finished my piece for the orchestra. Do you want me to write another one?” “Yes, yes,” and we would have another commission in, and this was the great days of Canadian composers’ lives.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Good evening. Tonight, as part of CBC Wednesday night, we present part of a concert being given in Massey Hall by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Geoffrey Waddington. This concert which has been organized by the Canadian League of Composers in cooperation with the CBC will consist of a program of music by Canadian contemporary composers. In the broadcast portion, you will hear the *Ballet Symphony* by Murray Adaskin, two movements from *The North Country Sketches* by Harry Somers, *Images of Childhood* by Eldon Rathburn, *Violin Concerto* by Alexander Brott – and a Scherzo from the *Sinfonietta* ---

EITAN CORNFIELD: Composers interested in nation-building had a model to follow in the generation of Canadian artists who had preceded them. The members of the Group of Seven had put Canada on the artistic map largely through the use of Canadian themes, the loneliness of the vast landscape, the country’s lakes and mountains, and its rich native cultures. They all contributed to a distinctive Canadian art. It was only natural then that composers developed along a parallel path, and they were helped by an affinity with their artistic counterparts: R. Murray Schafer and Harry Freedman began their careers as painters. Jean Coulthard, Harry Somers and many others drew much inspiration from Canadian painters. Murray Adaskin isn’t only inspired by Art. He collects it -- among the many works in his home, a representative sampling of the Saskatchewan artist and theorist Eli Bornstein.

MURRAY ADASKIN: When I went to university in 1952, the first person I met was Eli Bornstein, who used to walk past our house every morning on his way to the university, and we could hear him three blocks away from our house, because he always whistled when he walked, and I met him, and I thought he was one of the students. He was very young, and I was terribly surprised to find that he was one of the professors, and later became the head of the department, and we became instant friends, and when I saw his – at that time, he was – his work that we saw were his paintings and drawings, like that one and this one, for instance, and we have – they’re sort of around the house now, and very beautiful ones, and a beautiful work of art grows on you, just a beautiful piece of music grows on you.

A bad piece of music gets worse and worse all the time. You hear it -- and the same thing with art. If it’s a bad piece and not – you know, with no personality, you better get rid of it, so that’s where all this happens there. We have an enormous collection. We’re like alcoholics, only instead of alcohol, it’s art and music, of course.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Murray Adaskin spent twenty years in Saskatoon, a time when the attention of the musical world began to shift away from the domination of Toronto. As a conductor of the Saskatoon Symphony, he saw to it that a new Canadian work was commissioned every year. At the university, he staged the Sunday evening recital series, and presented artists of the stature of the Julian Bream and Benjamin

Britten and Peter Pears. Adaskin was at the heart of the flowering of prairie culture. In 1959, he realized one of his grandest visions.

MURRAY ADASKIN: I put on a summer festival, a very large-scale one, and I brought musicians – for instance, a trombone player from a New York opera orchestra, and people from Quebec, and from all over the place, and American composers – at least musicians, and we had talked of players, and we commissioned twelve works, from twelve different composers, and one of them from Milhaud.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Under Adaskin’s stewardship, the university music department grew from two faculty members to an extended department offering music degrees in performance and education, but it was all at a cost. The administrative load left little time for composing.

MURRAY ADASKIN: You know, being at the university, I really had responsibilities there, and I mainly wrote in the summer months, and I did write a piece in Saskatoon that I remember vividly, because I remember the dean -- Frances Levy at that time was the dean, and he came to my house. I can’t remember the reason he came, and in the living room where the piano was, I had sheets of paper on the floor. At that time, we had to be careful about drying the ink, and I remember Levy came to the door, and on the floor in the living room, I had sheets of papers drying, and he says to me: “Does your wife let you do that?” Well, I said: “Right now, she’s out of town, but I think she wouldn’t mind”.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Adaskin’s music appreciation course began legendary. He introduced thousands of non-music majors to Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, Schoenberg and Milhaud.

MURRAY ADASKIN: Well, it was always a big class, and it was held once a week in Convocation Hall. It was a class that I very much enjoyed giving, and we zeroed in one year, mainly Stravinsky. Well, you know, at that time, Stravinsky, among students in Saskatchewan, they weren’t very close together, and I just kept playing the music over and over again, and talking about it, and get them to listen. You had to listen to any work ten times before you can make any sensible comments about it, and that goes for everything in music.

Now, I wasn’t aware of this, but when we went into the gym to do our final examination, it was at seven o’clock in the evening, but the five o’clock news on the CBC, we heard that Stravinsky had just died, so as I handed out the papers, it was so memorable for me, because all the students heard about it, and many of them, with tears said “thank you, thank you, because I wouldn’t – otherwise I wouldn’t even know who Stravinsky was,” and they knew of course that they were going to write something about Stravinsky that night. Now, wasn’t that a coincidence? That was the last class I gave – ’71.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Shortly afterwards, Adaskin retired from the university. Early in 1973, the Adaskins continued their westward migration, this time to Victoria. The retirement didn’t last long. The Adaskins were quickly pressed into service by the city’s musical community, and soon had a full roster of pupils. Murray reveled in the great musicians the city had to offer, especially the virtuoso double bassist Gary Carr and the Lafayette Quartet who were in residence at the University of Victoria.

Adaskin quickly adapted to his new setting, and it began to be reflected in his music. He had always had a strong sense of place, both nationally and regionally. His

summers at Canoe Lake and Algonquin Park were immortalized in works like the *Algonquin Symphony*; the prairies in *Saskatchewan Legend*; and the north in *Qualala*.

MURRAY ADASKIN: And, wherever you are, there will be something that tells you that it was written there. For instance, the works I've written here, with the Lafayette Quartet, how could you help, you know, not wrote for them? It was a wonderful opportunity for a composer, and so I think I've written four quartets for them. *Tre Vecchi Amici*, "Three Old Friends", each movement was written for some other combination of instruments, and I took three old pieces, and re-wrote them completely for orchestra – or for string quartet – I'm sorry -- so each movement for me were old friends, and so we decided to nickname the piece *Tre Vecchi Amici*: "Three Old Friends".

EITAN CORNFIELD: In the summer of 1988, Murray Adaskin lost his closest friend, with the passing of Frances James. They had been married for fifty-seven years. Still, he bounced back, and the works began once again to flow from his pen: a pair of concertos for viola, the concerto for orchestra, chamber works, including two string quartets, a string quintet, and numerous solo works. They're all evidence of Adaskin's characteristic sense of joy and fun, and each conveys a feeling of warmth toward the musicians for which it was composed.

And yet, the recorded legacy of Murray Adaskin's work is hopelessly inadequate. At this moment, not one of his orchestral works, his many divertimenti or his concertos is available on CD. Adaskin's second wife Dorothea Larsen is some twenty years younger than he is. She's a lively, vibrant woman who has given him a second lease on life. Murray and Dorothea have been releasing a number of his chamber works on their own label. The Adaskin Collection is up to Volume Five now, and they plan to continue with their releases for as long as they can.

MURRAY ADASKIN: Oh, well, Dorothea, she's the kind of person that will come into the house from the garden, and a couple of nails will fall out of her back pocket, and she loves working with her hands, but she has exquisite taste and exquisite understanding of art, and for me, that's the only way I can live. I don't know what I would do, I would be dead by this time, anyway.

EITAN CORNFIELD: There's another secret to Adaskin's longevity. At the age of 95, he has discovered fitness classes.

MURRAY ADASKIN: I went nervously, and I just fell in love with the first session that I had, and the session was all the different exercises to exercise every muscle in your body, so that you came away feeling refreshed and tired. Oh, I just love going. I just can't wait for – I go Tuesday and Thursday morning. Gosh, when I see the kind of people that come to these things, how crippled they are, and then I feel that I'm not the oldest one there, but the youngest one, and I am the oldest one, but I notice that each session, I notice certain people, how they're improving, you know, people within my vision, so you know, an hour and a half of that, I come home feeling very refreshed, but ready to sit down, and have a meal. I always have wished that my music had moments of magic.

You know, when you sit in a concert hall, and listen to an orchestra play or a violinist play or whoever, there is usually a moment in the performance when everyone stops breathing. It's a hush. I'm very, very aware of that. When Dorothea came for the first time to a concert with me, I said: "Dorothea, when I press your hand, you'll notice that there's a hush, just dead silence. Everybody stops breathing. No one is conscious of

it, except a few people, and if there's more than one hush, it's a great piece. You're listening to a first-class piece. That's – that's all I can say about it.

I admire so many of the composers, you know, like Harry Somers and John Weinzweig and Louis Applebaum, and I just feel I'm lucky to be one of them, you know, to be a composer during this era, and of course you don't have a choice. You become a composer because you just can't help it. You just can't help it. I've suffered agonizing moments writing a work, and getting stuck, you know, and of course I've learned a lot about that kind of thing, because everybody goes through that, every composer does. You just see it through. There's nothing you can do about it. You have a bad time, then suddenly, boom, you've got an idea; and you get an idea, you grab it by the tail, and never let go.

- *transcribed by Mara Zibens*