

CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAIT SERIES  
ANN SOUTHAM DOCUMENTARY

Produced by Eitan Cornfield

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** Her music is extremely alive. Her sound quality, it's like jewellery, to me. The sounds are so pure and so vibrant, even when she got to the – her electronic stage, which was totally extraordinary; when the music was more atmospheric, it was still so rich

**EVE EGOYAN:** She, for me, as a woman composer, she's a composer who has kept a really unique voice. She does write pattern music, but she has been doing it in her own way for so long, that she is her own school. Like, she has – she has this body of work that really is Ann Southam's sound, so in that way, for me, she is a feminist, but she has a very – she's a very strong, creative personality that has nothing to do with schools that are often fronted by men.

**RACHEL BROWNE:** An impression that one might have of her, at first meeting, more kind of intellectual, very – very thoughtful, very curious. In her music, I hear all of that, but I also hear a tremendous kind of emotional expressiveness, upheaval, oftentimes about as tender as music can get. What I like about Ann's music is that, to me, she's – she's dancing. She's – even when the music is very minimal, and has a lot of spaciousness, there's a dance, always.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam blasts the stereotype of a Canadian composer. She's proudly politically female in a stuffy male universe. She has rejected the academic life. She has never had to worry about money, and she has made her name, not in the concert hall, but in the world of dance.

In 1966, Ann Southam was studying composition at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music. She received a phone call from a dancer, Patricia Beatty. Today, we recognize Beatty as a pioneer of modern dance in Canada, and as founder of the Toronto Dance Theatre, one of the country's most successful modern dance companies, but back in 1966, Beatty had just returned from New York, where she had been studying modern dance with the movement's founder Martha Graham. A Canadian company was a glimmer in Beatty's eye. Over the phone, Beatty shared her vision with Ann Southam. The two agreed to meet.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** The first time we met, we just spent hours together. I had to dance for her, to show her what modern dance looked like. I can remember what she said. I mean, she said: "Wow, that makes the ballet look effete", and I thought, "this lady gets it".

**ANN SOUTHAM:** It was all brand new to me, brand new to me, and I loved it right from the word go, modern dance, loved it, and so, off we went, and I wrote the first piece for her. It was a piece called *Momentum* and it was based on, very loosely, on *Macbeth*.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** I wasn't doing the whole play. I thought I had a point of view, and Ann wrote this incredible score for viola, cello, percussion and the inside of the piano. Wow! It blew the music world away, because they weren't expecting a score like

that, and we sort of didn't know the difference. I mean, we were just cooking together, you know, and we found out we had very similar background. We were of similar age. We laughed at the same things. We were just diving into everything together.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** That first encounter with modern dance led to a fifteen-year association with the Toronto Dance Theatre. Southam has also composed for the Danny Grossman Company, Dancemakers, and for Rachel Browne's Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers. From the start, there has been something fundamental about Ann Southam's commitment to the world of dance.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** The sound, I see it, just shapes and textures, so that when it came to working with dance, you know, the space for me would be filled with sound that had physical properties.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** It's all about space. If you're going to dance to a piece of music, and you don't want to just run along the top of it or use it as a conveyer belt, there has to be space for you in the music. There has to be space for the dancer to be in there, and that's key, and there was huge space in Ann's music.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I don't know that there was a kind of an awakening to music, because I think it was just something that I – it was always a part of my life.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann was born in Winnipeg in 1937. Her earliest memory is from the age of three.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I can remember sitting in my high-chair at noon, looking out the window, and watching kids come home from school, and having bacon, and thinking that the bacon was wonderful. That's my memory. Food runs through my entire life. More than anything, I remember what I ate - pineapple up-side down cake - I actually liked Pabulum; snow pudding. I'm a terrible cook.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Her discomfort in the kitchen could be a legacy of a patrician upbringing. Ann is a member of the Southam family, founders of Canada's oldest and largest newspaper chain.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I had a nanny, so she did the nitty-gritty, I think. My parents had a good record collection, you know, all the standard things, like Tchaikovsky's B flat Piano Concerto; and there would be some Beethoven in there; and Smetana, Hansel and Gretel; Ravel's Bolero which I loved to play over and over. Can you believe it? It's already going over and over, and I play it over and over.

Another kind of music that had a huge impact on me when I was young was bagpipe music, because nanny, don't you know, I think she knew a fellow by the name of Pipe Major Fraser, back in those days, who used to pipe at a lot of weddings, and if there were neighbourhood weddings that he was piping at, she somehow got us into the reception, so I've always loved bagpipe music; with a passion, I love it; whenever I hear them, I have to go to where they are, drop everything and go. I think maybe listening to that bagpipe music is how I got as attached to drones as I have been, ever since.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** As a young girl, Ann Southam loved building things and climbing trees. She had an ever-expanding Mechano set. She loved to draw and paint. She had a chemistry lab in the basement. She could do anything she wanted to: her livelihood was provided for. So where did the idea to compose come from?

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I don't know. I guess I might have been around fifteen, and I wouldn't even call it composing. I think it's kind of an emotional acting out, a way of giving some sort of expression to feelings, you know, angst, and all that kind of stuff.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam had a brief, unhappy stint at university. She became an occasional student, and as she puts it, ‘faked’ her way along. She went to Shaw’s Business School to learn how to become a secretary. It was only after a lot of searching that Ann Southam decided to pursue composition seriously.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** It seemed like a world in which you could -- or into which you could escape, a world that you could create and have some control over; so it’s for kind of non-musical reasons that I got into it. I went to John Weinzweig, first of all, and he told me that I needed the fundamentals in harmony and counterpoint, and everything like that, and sent me off to Sam.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** ‘Sam’ was Samuel Dolin, a composer who taught thousands of students during a fifty-six year career at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I can see him forever smoking his pipe or his cigar. Rules were not his big thing; I mean, for him, rules were tools, which was kind of nice. You can – they help you rather than hinder you. I always felt he took me seriously, that there was never – there was nothing patronizing about him, and I would say he was a mentor. He was – yeah, he was a mentor.

Sam decided that I should study electroacoustic music -- called electronic music in those days, and he somehow managed to get another of his students John Mills-Cockell who was part of a group called Syrinx back in those days – he got John and I into the studio at the Faculty of Music. I don’t know how he did that, because we weren’t students there, but that changed everything for me. It was just the most extraordinary experience I have ever had.

I just loved having direct access to the sound, without having to write anything down, without having to worry about performers, none of that, and it was just in this most remarkable world of sound. The only way I can describe it, you’re kind of into this stuff in a visceral sort of way. It’s almost like the sound had physical properties for me, and it was just exciting new territory, and I don’t know.

I happen to think that electroacoustic music serves dance extremely well, because it can go places that conventional instruments can’t go, because you’re always -- in my mind, you’re always anchored to the actual instrument; but an electroacoustic sound, it’s not the sound of anything. It’s not the sound of a piano or a violin. It’s just the sound, and it just seems to me it can go places that acoustic instruments can’t.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann’s sound has traveled to over a hundred stages. Over twenty years, she scored more than forty dances. Ever wonder which comes first, the dance or the music? Patricia Beatty shares the secret.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** Instead of starting with the music, like making a tapestry together, I would shape the dance, while the music was going on, and lo and behold if it didn’t happen that the dance fell on the music a certain way, when the movement was -- this was magic to me: when the movement was organic and right for the idea, it met the music a certain way.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam’s contribution to modern dance in Canada has been immense, but it was a two-way street. Champions of modern dance, like Patricia Beatty, Christopher House and Danny Grossman were establishing her as a composer.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** Ann would get very excited about dance, and she told me at the beginning, she didn't know whether she had the competence to really be a composer and really go for it, and we didn't give her any time to think about it. I mean, the three of us were commissioning – once we heard her music – what did we get – forty scores or something over the twenty years, so we just sort of fooled her into it [laughter].

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam's long and productive association with modern dance ensured that her work would be heard by a wide audience. This wasn't necessarily the case for many of her contemporaries. She had another advantage over her fellow composers: being independent of financial concerns meant that she didn't have to have a day job, teaching at a university or at a conservatory.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I'm very lucky, and it's hard to rationalize sometimes, you know, to be very fortunate, and I'm aware of the fact that most of my colleagues have to do other kind of work, as well, and don't have the time to just, you know, as much time as you need. Sometimes you feel you have to be absolutely brilliant at what you do in order to justify this, these advantages.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam has translated these advantages into support for a wide range of causes. Patricia Beatty.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** She's just one of those people that takes responsibility for the money she inherited, great responsibility. She's extremely generous. That phone call, that first phone call I made was incredible. Not only did we get a great composer and a great friend, but we got a benefactor.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann Southam lives in an elegant old townhome on a quiet street close to downtown Toronto. In the basement, an eighties vintage electronic studio, complete with reel-to-reel tape recorders, gathers dust. Upstairs, where a non-musician would have their dining room, there's a gleaming grand piano. I'm hoping that Ann will use this instrument to show me just how she works.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** Actually, I've had this piano for a long time. I bought it in 1964, which is when I was involved in electroacoustic music, so I never composed for it or used it for composing, but when I started to be interested in minimalist music, I started doing minimalist music for piano.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Draw me then into your work pattern at this point. How are you working and are you beginning to compose in this vein, on the piano?

**ANN SOUTHAM:** Well, I would work at the piano, and just play around with patterns. I'm trying to remember. There was an early piece that I did, very slow piece called *Soundstill*. I can't remember how the piece – I've got four notes which I'm just turning around, and I don't know whether you can hear it. I can't remember what happens, so – no, I can't remember.

This is a twelve-tone row, and it just does the same thing, so I'm just turning the notes around and around, and then back to the first, and I just work my way through a whole twelve-tone row, four notes at a time, the first four – one, two, three, four – two, three, four, five – making these little cells, and turning them around and around. It's kind of like asking a question of the material. It has just got an inquiring feel to it. Now, that's a minimalist process.

Terry Riley's *A Rainbow in Curved Air* was I think the first piece of minimalist music that I heard, and I loved it because it was truly so sunny.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Since the end of the eighties, Ann Southam has been composing primarily for acoustic instruments. Much of this work has been for piano, in a style that's best described as minimalism. Pianist Christina Petrowska Quilico has long been a champion of Ann Southam's music. Her recording of the epic *Rivers* cycle forms an integral part of this Composers Portrait of Ann Southam. She's an authority on the minimal style.

**CHRISTINA PETROWSKA QUILICO:** You've got various rhythmic patterns, first of all, that keep repeating, alternating hands. The two hands have to work very methodically. If you cease to pay attention to detail, then it's going to be just off, and you'll be able to hear it. There is also a sense of hypnotism. You can get into a trance. There is also a sense of flow, and the flow has a feeling of rhythm and repetition.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I'm not sure that I ever thought that anybody would actually play these things, could actually get through them, because I was just having a good time. I just – I loved the sound, and I loved what was happening, you know, as the hands interacted, and I loved the little tunes and motifs that can be found in the interaction between the hands, and it takes a whiz-bang pianist to make those heard, which she does. God, I don't know how she does it.

**CHRISTINA PETROWSKA QUILICO:** I love playing *Rivers*, and I really enjoy it. They've got various interpretations on different CD's, and I still love to do it. It's similar to *Bohème*. There are minimal changes, and suddenly you find yourself at this very forte passage, and then, before you know it, you're back into a quiet section -- and you don't have to know music. You don't have to know anything about the style, but you can respond, and it, to me, it's the sense of flow in the music, the colour.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** You know, it makes me think of the fall, you know, when you're out in a field, and the grasses are just singing, singing with all these – it's just like life is singing, and you can hear all – little things happening, all around – or the same thing for birds in the spring – or frogs. You know, just a kind of a constant singing. I guess that, for me, is also a metaphor for life. It's this constant song.

At about the time that I became interested in – well, sort of – into my interest in minimalist process music, I started to become very interested in feminism; so this would be the mid-seventies, I think, when feminism started to get through to me. I thought, for one thing, writing for piano is hand-work, which I – it seems that so much of women's work is hand-work: maintenance work, mending work; and, it just seemed to me that minimalist processes in piano music were just, in my mind, a perfect metaphor for this, and I know that feminists certainly for a while were trying to find art-forms that worked, where you didn't kind of superimpose things on one another that just didn't go together.

So that it seemed to me that minimalist process music, in the very workings of the music, was a reflection of women's work, traditionally speaking. The world would fall apart if it weren't for this work.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Try to tell that to the heads of Canada's university music departments. The stories of Barbara Pentland, Violet Archer, and Jean Coulthard remind us that during the mid-century explosion of academic hiring, women were systematically excluded, but there was much more to it than that. Ann Southam's old friend the composer and teacher Mary Gardiner.

**MARY GARDINER:** It was a – it was just a feeling that we were really sort of overwhelmed by the maleness of music, in particular, music composition. I mean, there

were a lot of—there are a lot of wonderful women poets, writers; but music seemed to be the one where women were really under-represented in the compositional field, and it became really almost a mission to champion women.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** This sense of mission led Ann Southam and Mary Gardiner to help found the Association of Canadian Women Composers in 1980. The association lobbied on behalf of women composers, and provided encouragement, by commissioning and presenting their works. This movement to find a path away from the male domination of music had certain aesthetic implications. Ann Southam.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** Rather than going for the heroic and the ideals and all the posturing, why not say that you've got this kind of bottom-line work that has to be done, and if it can be reflected in the way in which a piece of music is put together, then that's a good thing. I mean, that was kind of a marriage for me, between sort of feminist thinking and musical thinking, that to my mind worked.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** The pianist Eve Egoyan sees something ironic in Southam's effort to avoid the heroic impulse in music.

**EVE EGOYAN:** I don't even know how you would describe the heroic as opposed to the more feminine – or whatever that would mean, and then would you say that a women could not be heroic? But, I think of Ann as actually being a hero, so tell her that. She's heroic, and what she's doing is heroic, especially for her generation, what she did and what she stuck out, was totally heroic.

**MARY GARDINER:** I think primarily the women who were struggling to get recognition were ones who had come to composition later in life. A lot of women came to composing after they had established themselves as family members, family people, raised children, and had always wanted to write, may have started to write, but had already a good musical background, and I was the same: I came to – I didn't come to composition until I was in my forties. Knowing her has helped to confirm me as a composer.

**EVE EGOYAN:** Well, she's a role model. I mean, even for me – and I think she's – I mean, what better role model could you have? So, a woman who has pursued her voice, and who is supportive of other women, and is a very caring kind person, and I mean, commands her musical space, because of her honest musical voice, but doesn't impose it. So, she's – yes, she is the Canadian female role model, for me, in new music. I don't think there is a – I can't even think -- I mean, who else that would be – especially, you know, of her generation, for me.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I think it was a long time, for – a long time, before I became interested in composing as a way of problem-solving, not an emotional problem-solving, but just musical problems, which is how it interests me now.

**MARY GARDINER:** She has told me that she has been working with the same tone row for several years, and I guess the problem is to set it out in such a way, and then see what happens to it, and where it's going to go, and perhaps devise the pathways it's going to go in, and I think the idea is to bring something different out of the tone row each time.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I mean, I suppose, you know, mucking around and finding things, I mean, composing is a way of finding things, and you kind of – sometimes it's, 'wow, is this ever neat'; and if you're walking along the beach and you find something

marvelous, I mean, it's nice to be able to share it with somebody, but it's still marvelous, and you just think, 'wow!'.

One time, I was out in Banff, in early spring, and I was standing in the woods, and I heard this strange bird-song, just single notes, very widely spaced. What started me off was just the – was the feeling of stillness in the woods. It was totally quiet, and then this mysterious song.

I wasn't out to re-create it. I think sometimes maybe just something gives you a way of formulating a musical idea, so again, it was probably this same row, don't you know, that's going around and around, and being presented in various ways. The piece might be yet one more way of getting through this row. It's just a starting point. It's something to push against.

The mountains have tremendous energy for me. Just the sense of vast space, and just, you know, forces butting up against one another, and the light of the mountains, you know, if – especially blue sky days. They just – it seems to reflect off the mountains. Everything is just shining.

**CHRISTINA PETROWSKA QUILICO:** It almost reminds me of Olivier Messaien ---

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Pianist Christina Petrowska.

**CHRISTINA PETROWSKA QUILICO:** --- who is, to me, the same type of temperament. He was very much into nature, writing down all the bird music, very spiritual, so it's nothing to do with an organized religion, but just that tapping into the spirituality, the depth and soul of humans, and I find that's what she's like as a person. She probably would be very embarrassed to hear me say this, but to me, the whole topic, the music is ---

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I suppose you would say spiritual. You know, I have to admit, I don't know what that means. When you come right down to it, I don't know – I mean, I know what it means to keep your spirits up, and I'm supposing that it might have something to do with that, but I really have to admit that I don't know what it means.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** That's how Ann speaks.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Ann's long-time friend Patricia Beatty.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** But, there's a very deep believer in there, in life and beauty. It's in her music, and it's in her love of certain parts of nature, and she has had – and I understand this – too much defined by men, too much written about the subject. All of the religions, the five great religions were started by men. I mean, it's true. When you really look into it, it's – and I can see – you know, we both had very – well, we're both WASP, you know. We had very strong upbringing that said don't draw attention to yourself. This is the way you do everything, so you don't use that word. You use other words.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** I like the idea that the world and all of creation is just inventing itself as it goes along, and so that every decision you make, every decision that I make, is part of this, and essential to this – this evolving whatever. I quite like that. It kind of tickles my brain.

I'm happiest composing for people I know. I've started to work recently with Eve Egoyan, and I've enjoyed working with her immensely. This may sound like a funny thing to say, but I feel very safe with her. She's really very dedicated to the music, and to understanding the music, and to giving it its best chance. It means that I can make

mistakes, and not feel badly, and maybe she can make mistakes, not that she ever does; but I mean I'm writing such slow music these days, and I think that Eve plays that kind of music very well, because she loves to listen to the piano, and to sounds decaying, and what – all kinds of things that are happening after the note is played.

**EVE EGOYAN:** Her use of the piano plays on things that I think are for me spiritual about the instrument, which are about space and resonance and decay. Even if that's sort of an irritating thing about the piano, that it's always in decay, that it's very much like we are: we're always in decay, and we're working through time. We're passing through time, so there's a sound that's passing through time, and you're always working with that, sound passing through time, so her use of harmony allows me and my audience to experience resonance and decay, so time that is suspended like that, that only the piano can do, in a way that I think is extremely spiritual, like this cloud that's moving through time. Like, we're sort of like these clouds moving through time.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** There's something so pure about her music and so ruthless and rich, and it's her. We're the same as our work. It's thrilling. It's – it's empowering, and it's – and it's Canadian, because it has this size in it. That's what it's about, and that's what she's about, but also the amount she has given. I mean, you know, the Spirit made sure she was there, the way Lawren Harris was there in the Group of Seven, with the money, so she has made a difference, and that's all you can ask for.

**EVE EGOYAN:** For me, she is of that generation of women. She is the most unique voice, and she is stubborn, and there's something about her stubbornness that is extremely important.

**PATRICIA BEATTY:** When I was growing up, for example, new music meant Boulez and Stockhausen and that whole crowd, and that was you know pretty elitist and anybody who didn't write in that style was just no good, and then in the States, they had their own school. Here in Toronto, they had their little cliques, and they all wrote extremely difficult music, very complicated, so if you had mentioned Ann Southam, you know, minimal composers, to them -- oh, my God -- they would not have taken her seriously; so you really have to give her credit for remaining independent and rising to the top, in spite of it all. I think she's totally unique, because of it.

**EVE EGOYAN:** She has continued with her voice, unrelentingly, over many years, and has survived. It doesn't matter if she has money or no money. It has to do with her creative drive. Her creative drive is what I would say is her greatest gift.

**ANN SOUTHAM:** If something is in the works, I'm very happy, and if something is not in the works, I'm just not – I mean, it keeps me from going crazy. It does. I mean, sometimes life just gets very confusing, and it's a place to go, where I'm just a happier person, I think.

*- transcribed by Mara Zibens*