

## CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAIT SERIES

### **JOHN WEINZWEIG DOCUMENTARY**

**Produced by Eitan Cornfield**

#### Transcription

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Very early on, I discovered that politics has invaded all the arts, as well, and that I would have to deal with it, and that just to stay home and write music was not the answer to a life, at all, that I would have to immerse myself in the problems of trying to create a profession in the country, where there would be a knowledge and respect for the artist, because that's the only way that we could have a living culture.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** His father had been jailed as a radical in Poland, before he came to Canada. His mother and his uncle were both of a very romantic and dreamy background. His uncle was, in fact, a published poet, so I looked on those two strains, and I said, here's a guy who has the courage to espouse unpopular ideas, and see them through, a radical and outspoken radical, on one side; and here's a guy who has dreamed, who looks at an instrument like the harp and says, I wonder what other things it can do.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** There was a time not too long ago, when there wasn't a single, full-time composer in all of Canada, a time when no one was even teaching composition. John Weinzweig did more than anyone to change that. You could say he established the profession of composer in Canada. He's professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. He helped found the Canadian League of Composers, and the Canadian Music Centre. He has written some of the most popular and enduring music ever to come from Canada.

John Weinzweig is 89 years old. He's still writing, still fighting for the rights of the composer, still lobbying for Canadians to have their music heard. When he leans against his piano in a studio on a leafy street near downtown Toronto, he resembles a taller and crankier Groucho Marx.

Weinzweig's father Joseph emigrated from Poland in 1908. Four years later, he married Rose Burstein, a young woman from his hometown. He began his working life blocking hats for the Timothy Eaton Company, but had worked his way up to fur-cutter when his first son was born in March of 1913. By the time John was six, Joseph Weinzweig was manufacturing his own fur coats on Toronto's College Street. The family lived above the shop.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Across the road, was a Jewish butcher shop, and there was also a bakery. There was a fish market on the next block, and there were two sons that I used to do gigs with. One was a trumpet player, and the other one I think played trombone, so, you know, it actually was a community, and every once in a while, you know, there were sounds of music, and I think at that time, the parents did encourage the

children to play an instrument or to learn the piano, because there was a great respect for learning, as such.

**VICTOR FELDBRILL:** The school was right smack in the middle of the big Jewish ghetto at the time.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Conductor and violinist Victor Feldbrill.

**VICTOR FELDBRILL:** Our parents were all immigrants, and we were the first generation born here, and many of our parents realized that, first of all, you had to have good schooling, even though they didn't have it. Secondly, it was a very good idea to study music.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I think it was my mother. She decided that my brother and I should take piano lessons. At the time, I was fourteen. He was twelve. I created some problems with my piano teacher, which she recognized. While I was supposed to be practicing some of the finger studies, you know, for technique, my hands would wander away from the job at hand, and I would start to improvise. This had a poor effect on my repertoire, and she recognized it, and she did not discourage me.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Weinzweig also received encouragement from Brian McCool, a teacher of English, physical education, and classical languages, who went on to become a war hero at Dieppe.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Well, Brian McCool was a military man, and I think it was in the late twenties, shortly after he came to Harbord, he formed the Harbord Orchestra, because he found amongst the Jewish community which was the dominant population at Harbord Collegiate, he found string players. If you have string players, you can form an orchestra. My brother played the saxophone, and I played the mandolin which was a pretty small voice, but eventually the tuba player who was a son of a physics teacher, was moving up to a higher grade, and he – he wasn't going to have any time to play, so he turned over the tuba to me, and he gave me one lesson, and says go to it.

Well, after that, I took further lessons, and so I became the bass section of the orchestra. After I left school, for two years I worked as a bookkeeper and typist, and then I went on to university, but in the meantime, I was still involved with the orchestra, and it was Brian McCool who asked me to be his assistant conductor.

**VICTOR FELDBRILL:** They took pride in the fact that they had so much talent around the school, Harbord Collegiate was absolutely a hot-bed of fine talent, at the time.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I left Harbord, after three years. I went to Central High School of Commerce and took a business course. At that time, that was quite common. In the meantime, you know, my experience with -- well, it was love of orchestra. I was also interested in conducting, I was involved in a wide range of music, from *Tiger Rag* to *St. Louis Blues*. I did some dance band work with my brother and his band, sometimes on the tuba, and sometimes on piano, and I – you know, I was living in my mind the life of a composer, and at nineteen, I decided to give in, and that's what I wanted to do, to be a composer.

Well then, I decided that I would go on to university, and I would take the Bachelor of Music course at the University of Toronto.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** John Weinzweig entered the University of Toronto's music program in 1934. There were only three professors, and their musical tastes were decidedly British.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** So, Healey Willan was my teacher for fugue and for counterpoint, and another professor for harmony, and in my last year, I asked for Sir Ernest MacMillan for orchestration. Now, they were all excellent musicians, but they were not teachers. For example, I never got from Healey Willan any of the philosophy that's behind the concept of the fugue, which is a complex composition, which the common subject is bandied about. These things I had to find out for myself, at the time, through reading books, or through my experience after – after U of T. Sir Ernest MacMillan had no ideas about teaching orchestration. He would simply say, 'well, here's a couple of pages from a Beethoven sonata, so score it for orchestra'.

And so, as far as composition, you weren't supposed to get any composition help, at all, and I wrote a string quartet on my own; so actually up to then, I was a self-made composer.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** John Weinzweig's real musical education began after a back-stage encounter with the American composer Howard Hanson. Hanson was the head of the Eastman School of Music, in Rochester, New York. After Weinzweig showed him some of his music, Hanson said, 'when you finish your course at U of T, why don't you come to Eastman?'

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** He goes to Eastman, and there, of course, makes two major discoveries ---

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Elaine Keillor is a pianist and musicologist, and author of *John Weinzweig and His Music: the Radical Romantic of Canada*.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** --- the first being the *Lyric Suite* by Alban Berg, and a second being Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and these two works, of course, went on to be life-long influences on John Weinzweig's work.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I was at Eastman from 1937 to '38. That's when I came across the recording of Alban Berg's *Lyric String Quartet*. I listened to this, this work, by Alban Berg which was written I think in the mid-twenties. I got hot and cold shivers from that piece, so I was determined to find out about the serial technique.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** And, of course, he was aware of the fact that Berg was a student of Arnold Schoenberg, and there was something about this serial school or twelve-tone school.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** And then, one day, I met a professor. He was not my teacher, and I was – and so, I asked him about the Schoenberg method or twelve-tone, and he immediately replied: 'Schoenberg was a perverted Jew'. Well, that was a shocking remark to me. I wasn't quite sure how to interpret it, and I never forgot that.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** The professor's remark was intended to discourage Weinzweig's interest in Schoenberg, but it had the opposite effect. Weinzweig became increasingly attracted to Schoenberg, and was more determined than ever to explore his twelve-tone method. Arnold Schoenberg and his followers generated musical themes by manipulating the twelve notes of the chromatic scale according to strict rules. The results could often be discordant, but the method had power and appealed to many young composers. From the late thirties onward, most of Weinzweig's work would use some element of the twelve-tone method.

Weinzweig's second revelation at Eastman was not thematic, but rhythmic. He discovered Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Weinzweig heard all the tonal colour and

rhythmic vitality he wasn't getting from Berg and Schoenberg. He began searching for a style that would embrace both worlds.

Meanwhile, the pieces Weinzwieg composed at Eastman reflected his early interest in the tone poems of composers like Berlioz and Liszt. He was tempted to capitalize on this flair for the dramatic.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** At the time I went to Eastman, I did consider going to Hollywood, and of course remember this was still Depression era, and the prospects were not very good, and I realized that Hollywood was not waiting for me, and so I came back home in the fall of 1938.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** I think the thing that stunned everybody really about Weinzwieg, when he came back from his graduate work in the States, and started to make a career for himself in Toronto, was that he regarded himself as a professional composer.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Composer John Beckwith.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** There were a lot of people writing music in Canada, going back over a hundred years, 150 years, but most of them didn't primarily think of themselves as composers, and certainly wouldn't have thought of making a career concentrating on composition at that point.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** The typical picture of a composer in Canada up until John Weinzwieg was that this was something that you did on the side, so if we take a composer like Alexis Contant in Montreal, he wrote a wide range of materials, including working on a full-scale grand opera, but at the same time, he was an organist for most of his life, and he had a large class of students, and that was really the way he made his living. His compositional activity was something he did on the side.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** And, Weinzwieg came in, just cutting through all that: 'I think I'm going to be a composer. I'm a composer' – not 'I'm going to be', but 'I'm a composer, and I'm teaching composition', and very, very – students at first, as a freelance teacher, but – but 'I'm a teacher of composition. I'm a composer of film music, of radio music', and that was novel.

**CBC RADIO ANNOUNCER:** Good evening. From Massey Hall in Toronto, the CBC brings you the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, in the first Tuesday evening concert of the 1943 season. Our conductor this evening is, as usual, Sir Ernest MacMillan. The program will open with the tone poem *The Enchanted Hill* by the Toronto composer John Weinzwieg. Mr. Weinzwieg is one of the most important of the younger Canadian composers, and his works have been performed in both England and the United States. *The Enchanted Hill* translates into music the moods of a fantastic poem by Walter De La Mare.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Well, *The Enchanted Hill* was my orchestral theses for the Eastman School of Music, for my Master degree. It was getting its premiere with the Toronto Symphony under Sir Ernest MacMillan, and my wife was giving birth to our first son Paul, on January the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1943, and my wife was at the hospital. She agreed that I should be at Massey Hall for the concert, and that she would be able to hear it on radio, in the hospital; and so, she heard the premiere of the work from Massey Hall at the time that she was giving birth to Paul, so – so that was a double-birth. It was the birth of *The Enchanted Hill* and the birth of my first son.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** John Weinzwieg's early orchestral works caught the attention of conductor and violinist Samuel Herschenhorn. He was leader of the CBC

orchestra that played the incidental music for radio dramas and documentaries. Herschenhorn pioneered the use of original music in CBC's radio productions. He sensed the dramatic potential of Weinzwieg's music, despite its modern sound. Weinzwieg rapidly turned into one of CBC Radio's most prolific in-house composers. Violinist Eugene Kash:

**EUGENE KASH:** This was still at the old CBC studios on Davenport Road, you know. We had the actors in the same studio, the sound effects man, and the orchestra, so the ensemble was complete.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** And so, I was brought in to do the first series. That was called *New Homes For Old*. Now, that sounds like a real estate program, but it wasn't. It was really about people who – who had survived life in their country, and had fled in order for a better life, you know, in the western world, and they had come to Canada, and they had a story to tell, and so that's how it started in May of 1941.

**CBC RADIO ANNOUNCER:** The CBC presents the eighth program in the series *New Homes For Old*. Tonight, we tell the story of one who watched with ever saddening heart the deliverance of Germany into the hands of those lustors after blood who now control her destiny and construe her ruin, one who saw through the eyes of a great German novelist the inevitable end of it all.

**CBC RADIO ANNOUNCER:** The inner landscape is inherent in the soul, and blown with it into the world. It determines the colour and nature of our ideals. Our inner landscape is the crystal centre of life itself, the spot where it flows, agitated, and the source of its actual destiny.

**EUGENE KASH:** Weinzwieg is engaged to do this score. He's just back from Eastman School, and he has got a head full of Schoenberg and twelve-tone system and everything, and I will never forget there's a scene we in the string section played tah-tooh-pooh-pah-tah-tah-pah-pooh-pp , and it's a complete twelve-tone row, and at the rehearsal, some of the string section or the orchestra snickered a little at the unusual harmony, and Sammy stopped the orchestra and said: 'None of that. They laughed at Beethoven, too.'

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Between 1941 and '45, Weinzwieg composed the scores for over 100 CBC radio dramas and documentaries. His radio experience led to work for the National Film Board, where he wrote music for documentaries on nationalist themes. These were the war years, and Weinzwieg did service as a band instructor for the Royal Canadian Air Force. He had started teaching composition at the Toronto Conservatory in 1939. At war's end, he returned to teaching.

He was determined to take Canadian students away from the small world of the English tradition. Along with theory and orchestration, Weinzwieg's students learned the Chinese scale. They studied Balinese music and Indian ragas, along with jazz and the blues. Weinzwieg taught at the Conservatory from 1945 to 1969. In 1952, he was appointed to the Faculty of the University of Toronto.

His new approach to teaching would revolutionize the art of composition in Canada. As a teacher, Weinzwieg's contribution to Canadian music has been huge: Murray Adaskin, Harry Somers, Howard Cable, Samuel Dolan and Harry Freedman studied with him; so did Phil Nimmons, Srul Irving Glick and R. Murray Schafer.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Well, you know, I took my teaching work very seriously. I was a product of bad teaching, and I was determined to be a hell of a good teacher.

**DAVID JAEGER:** He was teaching craft, no question. It was very clear that if you were intending to be a composer, you might as well be a professional composer, and you might as well do your art in a professional manner.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Composer and radio producer David Jaeger studied with John Weinzweig in the 1970's.

**DAVID JAEGER:** All kinds of craft issues were very high on the agenda: orchestration, notation, clarity of expression and, of course, you know, John -- if you look at his own scores -- they're uncomplicated. They're really lucid. They're absolutely clear and, you know, the painstaking with detail is immediately apparent, and so I think he let you know, again, probably within about the first one or two lessons that he expected this of his students as well, that they would aspire to a similar meticulous attention to detail and to clarity. The staff paper would be on the piano. You and he, with pencil in hand -- and he would say, 'we do it like this'.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Composer Harry Somers studied with Weinzweig from 1941 to 1949.

**HARRY SOMERS:** He wouldn't flatter you, no flattery; you analyze the problem, and you go after it; you develop your critical faculties. That's what you have to do, objectify yourself, because of course you think everything you do is the last thing to be said in the world, the most marvelous thing in the world [laughter], but John always gave me that distance to be able to criticize and look at my own music, and others'.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** One of the very important things that John always did in his teaching was he taught from the point of view of how does it sound? He realized that music is something that we take in with our ears, and so one of the courses that he taught when he first came back to Toronto from Eastman, was a very intensive ear-training course, and he used the principals that he had picked up at Eastman. He was always underlining how do you think this is going to sound, in the end, if you do this; so rather than teaching from a strict list of rules which had been the usual way of teaching harmony and counterpoint up to this point in Canada, he put the emphasis on listening to what one was doing.

**DAVID JAEGER:** My experience was not an isolated one. I can't tell you how many dozens and dozens of composers that I have had contact with who were his students, and they all pay him enormous respect. He made you feel that to be a composer was a great honour, that it was something to be extremely proud of. Every time I left John, after a lesson, I usually had that feeling of there's more to learn, but I also had that feeling that I'm involved in an art form that's second to none.,

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** For me, he opened up a new world. He opened up how a composer thinks about making a composition, and this helped me immensely, to understand where composers were coming from in the twentieth century.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** You know, you're supposed to be writing for people. That's quite true, but if I don't gain the confidence of the performer, I've failed. I've got to sell that piece to the violin or to the harpist, before it ever gets to the listener, so I have a responsibility there, because that performer is going to tell me whether I know what the hell I'm doing.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Composer Larry Lake is the host of CBC Radio's Two New Hours, and studied with Weinzweig at the University of Toronto.

**LARRY LAKE:** People always talk about Chopin's music. Pianists talk about how wonderfully it lies under the hand. Violinists talk about Paganini, how beautifully Paganini writes for the instrument, but I think John tries to write for every instrument that way, which is rare among composers.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** When I'm preparing a work, I study the whole sonic personality of the instrument. Let's say the harp. I don't play the harp, but I study the manual. I know something about the harp. Then, I – I sit down, and I write down some musical ideas, that emanate from the nature of the harp.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** I think pre-compositionally, he thinks in those terms: what are the things I can do with this medium; not what's the first note, or what's the first phrase, but what are the things I can do with this medium; and then, maybe, what's the first phrase, and out of that, how can I make it consistent; which might mean, you know, will I turn this into a row or series or something?

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** He would design on twelve pitches for a set, and then he would write it out in every form., actually on music manuscript paper; and then, he went through, and he actually would hum or sing or play these melodies, and when he found a certain little combination of pitches that really seemed to entice him – and it might not be the first part of the set, at all. It might be a group of five or six pitches, in one of the forms of the set. That became the core of the material that he worked with.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** At a later point, I think this having eavesdropped on his studio in the faculty sometimes, in earlier years, there's a lot of improvisation. There's a lot of going over favourite rhythms and repeating them, and repeating them, and repeating them, [laughter] at the piano.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** And then, I begin to feel the form and shape of the work. I even have an idea of just how long the piece will take, and I know which material I'm going to use, and which material I'm going to discard, and then I'm ready to compose.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** I'm Eitan Cornfield, and you're listening to a profile of Canadian composer John Weinzweig. At the end of the forties, Weinzweig received a commission for a new work from the Volkov Canadian Ballet Company. Boris Volkov had introduced Russian classical technique to Canada, in the 1930's.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** It was going to be called *Red Ear of Corn*, and it was based on Iroquois legend, I think, about an Iroquois maiden who was the first to be Christianized, and so on. The work was ready for the performance in 1949, and the CBC was there. It was the first time in the history of broadcasting that a ballet was actually on-air from the Royal Alexandra. This really made a new kind of history.

**CBC RADIO ANNOUNCER:** This broadcast is coming from the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, where the CBC is bringing us Wednesday night listeners a part of the second annual Canadian Ballet Festival. The ballet being performed is the *Red Ear of Corn*, with music by John Weinzweig. The second act of the ballet does not carry on from the first. Instead, it shows the application of the legend, so to speak, in the traditional folk customs of the early white settlers. I should point out, lest you're expecting something different, that the music for this bright and lively scene makes no attempt to be authentic. Like the setting and like the dancing itself, the music is stylized, and the harmonies and tricky rhythms are far more sophisticated than any habitant fiddler

ever dreamed of, so don't go looking for *Alouette* or *En Roulant*, or even an imitation of them.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** The barn dance from the *Red Ear of Corn*, from the second act, that's my most frequently performed work. You know, it reminds me of Sibelius's *Finlandia*, which was the most performed work from his repertoire I remember in the thirties and forties. You heard *Finlandia* just about – just about every week, and I had a feeling that this was my *Finlandia*, and I was very unhappy about it, and actually – actually, of course, it has become my *Finlandia*, but now, I accept it, because I have to be grateful that I've got a *Finlandia*.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** *Finlandia* was a great work of patriotic fervour. It became the theme music for Finnish independents from Russia, and it was banned by the Czar. The *Red Ear of Corn* is not Canada's *Finlandia*, but it does draw on the power of music to define a people. Eugene Kash.

**EUGENE KASH:** By their works of art shall ye know them. Who will know the difference between one country and another, unless that country produces a literature, stage works, and creative musical art. Every civilization ends up being what its art has depicted and reflected of their age, so you only earn your reputation as a country if you foster respect and encourage artists to be themselves.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** It didn't take long for Weinzweig to realize that there had to be more to nation-building than writing pieces on nationalist themes.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Very early on, I discovered that politics has invaded all the arts, as well, and that I would have to deal with it, and that just to stay home and write music was not the answer to a life, at all., that I would have to immerse myself in the problems of trying to create a profession in the country where there would be a knowledge and respect for the artist, because that's the only way that we could have a living culture, and the obstacles were, you know, they were great, because actually we had no publication in the industry. We had no recording industry, and the only industry was the composers writing music, and they needed help.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** There was really getting to be a growing group who were involved as composers, and trying to express what it meant to be a Canadian through sound.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** If you create the repertoire, then you would all be together on behalf of it, and you look around for your friends – at that time, we had a lot of friends in the CBC, particularly, that disappeared in later years, but in the forties and fifties, even well into the sixties, I remember -- and there was a lot of perceived need in the CBC for a national repertoire for broadcast material, for recording material.

It's unheard of today that somebody calls you and says 'what are you working on?', but I can tell you in the forties and fifties, people did, from the CBC, or you would run into somebody and they would say, 'oh, have you got a work for' – I don't know – 'clarinet and piano?', or something. 'because I've got a broadcast coming up, and we need it', and so – so there was lots to be filled, and I think we looked on that as an area where we had friends.

**VICTOR FELDBRILL:** They did have a wonderful outlet in the CBC. There's no doubt about it, but where their obstacle was was with the staid, shall we say, symphony orchestras of each community which simply felt that new music of any kind was poison at the box office.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** And so, there was frustration, and we had a feeling that the only way to improve conditions for composers in this country was for the composers themselves to take a hand.

**HARRY SOMERS:** Well, it's like all of us, but particularly in that lonely area of the creator.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Composer Harry Somers.

**HARRY SOMERS:** You are wanting to contact people; that's why you write. You find yourself rebuffed by the critics; you get tough about that, and say, what the hell, you know, anything new is usually held in suspicion, and sometimes feared and so forth; but damn it, you know, you felt it was a good fight, and of course, it was tough, but in a way, when you're committed to something, that doesn't matter, but you want to reach people, and so you fight for it.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** And, one night, Harry Somers and Sam Dolan and myself got together in my home, and we talked about this problem, and we thought, well, maybe we should organize a small group, like the French Les Six, or what about the Russian Five, and that was -- 'yes, but what's that going to do for composers across the country? What's that going to do for a national problem?' and so we decided eventually, with my wife, who was urging us to make a decision, I think by two o'clock in the morning, that we would definitely help to organize a Canadian League of Composers.

**HARRY SOMERS:** My first feeling, I recall, was that we can't even get angry at each other, because we don't exist in the public mind, and if we don't exist, and we argue with each other, it doesn't mean a damn thing anyway. So let's form an organization we can resign from, if necessary; but first, let's exist on two levels: one as a body that could represent itself to publishers, to copyright agencies, and so forth; two, as a concert-giving agency.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** And, a lot of those early concerts were extremely successful, indeed. I remember one critic saying: 'I have no idea that this kind of strong work was being created in Canada.' It was really an eye-opener.

**LARRY LAKE:** The formation of the League of Composers was an extremely important event, because before that, composers didn't have a voice, and I think after that, and after the founding of the Canadian Music Centre, they did have a voice, and John helped get that voice for them.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Weinzweig also fought for the status of Canadian composers, and along with John Beckwith, proposed the creation of the Canadian Music Centre. It started up in 1959. The Canadian Music Centre maintains a comprehensive library of Canadian material, and operates a record-label devoted to Canadian composers. Its latest project is the publication on-line of its vast holdings of Canadian music. John Beckwith looks at the formation of the League of Composers and the Canadian Music Centre as acts of nation-building.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** The achievement is one of half a dozen examples of the kind of artistic nationalism that was dominant in the fifties and sixties. We were part of a generation that viewed Canadian art, music, literature – culture in general – as something we were very proud of, and very much wanted to trumpet to the rest of the world.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** But, artistic nationalism didn't mean that Weinzweig composed patriotic anthems in the manner of Sibelius.

**EUGENE KASH:** He's a Canadian composer. He's not a composer of Canadian music. I think it's a very important point.

**DAVID JAEGER:** John was really not the sort of person who was that interested in writing impressionistic, soundscape or landscape or pictorially evocative music. John liked the music to be about the music. I think it's just the strength of his personality, the individuality of the composer who was always proud to be Canadian, and the person who has always stood up for Canadian music, stood up and demanded respect for the composer, the person who, as he has been called the dean of Canadian composers, has never stood back from speaking for composers of this country. I think it's more the historical facts of John's career and his music that – that makes it so Canadian.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** For a time, it looked like John Weinzwieg's administrative and lobbying efforts would crowd out the music. When he formed the League of Composers in 1951, he was already well into his most ambitious work to date, the *Violin Concerto*.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** The violin, to me, was the closest thing to the human voice, and for some time, I think I knew I was going to write a violin concerto, and I was ready for it, in the – in the fifties. However, it took me three years, and when somebody asked me why it took me so long to write a violin concerto, I told them I was very busy with the League of Composers. I was involved with the committees. I was selling tickets for concerts and so on, and so the *Violin Concerto* was a long drawn-out affair.

**ELAINE KEILLOR:** The *Violin Concerto*, along with his early Divertimentos, are the ones where he gets away from his rather thick romantic writing that he did in the first period, so that he has a very soaring melody line. This is a characteristic, of course, that has been noted in Canadian music in many different genres, this idea of creating a sense of space in the musical texture, so you tend to have the lines perhaps widely separated; and that, of course, occurs in the *Violin Concerto*, and this idea, also, too, that he starts to develop even more in his later compositional periods, is the use of silence.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** By the late fifties and by the sixties, the climate had changed. The winds of change had come from John Cage, and Xenakis in Europe, and the electroacoustic experiments, and I responded to these.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Weinzwieg also responded to the music of another Schoenberg protégé Anton Webern. Webern's music had been banned by the Nazis, and was virtually unknown until its re-publication in the 1950's. Weinzwieg's first major encounter with the music of Webern was at the hands of a great Canadian musician.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** There was a concert in the Royal Conservatory that was conducted by Glenn Gould, which featured the *Saxophone Quartet* by Webern, and my brother was a saxophone player in that work, and I think that helped to arouse my interest in Webern, and it was mainly because I perceived that this was the purest form of counterpoint. It was the kind of texture where you heard everything.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** I know John Weinzwieg was very interested in Webern; so I saw a change in John Weinzwieg's music because of that. I guess the major piece that came out of – there were a few smaller pieces – but then the major one would have been the third quartet. What is that? It's 1960, a little bit after. It's still, to me, one of his very strongest pieces, that represented a departure. It's different from his earlier music.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** What I got from Alban Berg was a highly emotional response. What I got from Webern was a highly intellectual response, and I lived in both worlds.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** A tension between the emotional and the intellectual responses to the music of Berg and Webern echoed the struggle between the lyrical and the rhythmic sensibilities Weinzweig had been trying to reconcile since his Eastman days. Towards the end of the fifties, the rhythmic drive was winning out, and Weinzweig began to look for inspiration a lot closer to home than Vienna.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I was a lyricist mainly, but my style changed, and the rhythmic aspect that took over – I had to control that lyricism, because they don't live together very well, because when you're dealing with rhythm, you're dealing with short motivic rhythmic elements that you put together, and they're like – they're just like atoms, and they have to explode, and that's the opposite of lyricism. Lyricism is song.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** He was always terribly keen on pupils paying attention to rhythmic continuity. 'It doesn't swing'. You would bring him a piece, and the first thing, he would look at it, and tap it out, and then, he would say: 'It doesn't swing'. Well, I know what he meant. I think it's – music is movement, and his models for that were not the twelve-tone composers. He was quite critical of Schoenberg and Webern, in fact, from the rhythmic point of view. No, his models were more like Stravinsky and Bartok, that generation, I think, and, of course, the rhythms that he knew from popular music.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Elaine Kiellor divides Weinzweig's work into four periods. A typical work of the first period is concerned with orchestration, a symphonic tone-poem, say, like *Enchanted Hill*. The beginning of the second period is sharply marked by Weinzweig's discovery of Stravinsky and the serialists. In his third period, beginning in the late 1950s, Weinzweig finally resolves the old conflict between his yin and yang, of serialism and rhythm, by looking to the music of his time: jazz and swing.

**ELAINE KIELLOR:** In that, what I call, the third compositional period, of course, he is working quite strictly with serial techniques, but he tends to use a much more jazz-like conversational exposure of this material, so you get very short little gestures, which are tossed back and forth. You can hear in the *Piano Concerto* how the piano will state just a little idea, and it's answered by something in the orchestra, and there's usually silence in between, so you listen very carefully, and you pick up that little idea, and then it's worked on, and it's this idea of conversation.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Weinzweig wrote a lot for orchestra, everything from tone poems to divertimenti, songs with orchestra, and concertos for violin, piano and harp, and yet, he still couldn't win the respect of Canadian orchestras. He couldn't then, and he can't now, he says, because of what he calls 'the premiere syndrome'. This infuriates Weinzweig now, as much as it did back in the 1970's, when on top of everything, his hometown Toronto Symphony was ignoring his music.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** We don't really have a tradition in this country, and that is the problem. The composers themselves are happy to get a premiere, especially a young composer. However, as they get older, they begin to feel that the premiere is not the answer, because with the exception of small pieces, the music has not achieved the stage of repertoire.

**VICTOR FELDBRILL:** John was bitter about things with the Toronto Symphony. I mean, he really was. I mean, rightfully so. They weren't playing any of his music, so I said: 'John, how would you feel if I went after a commission for divertimento for orchestra?', because he had written so many divertimentos for single instruments, and he says: 'Well, if you want it, I'll do it', and it was a fine piece, and it hasn't been done since.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** No, it has never been repeated since then, no. It was after that experience that I decided that I wouldn't write any more orchestral works. I would write works using instruments for smaller ensembles, but no more large work, so that goes back to about – that's almost twenty years ago that I stopped writing for orchestra, and orchestra was my passion. I was brought up with orchestra. I was conducting an orchestra in my youth. I was playing in an orchestra in high-school, and I just dreamed of orchestra, and I just wanted to write for orchestra. I didn't even want to write for the human voice at that time. I just wanted to write for the orchestra, and the time came when I said no more, because it was infected by the politics of the podium.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** This self-imposed exile from the orchestral world marks the beginning of Weinzweig's fourth period. Even his old friends like John Beckwith were surprised to see Weinzweig turning from the abstract language of the orchestra to the literal vocabulary of the human voice.

**JOHN BECKWITH:** I wouldn't have predicted Weinzweig to move in that direction. I don't know why, and eventually there were a group of pieces there which have scenarios, visual components to them, and actions.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I had read and I was familiar with the whole Dada movement in Europe, and, of course, eventually across the ocean. *Finnegan's Wake* was a very early influence. I remember when it was published in 1939, I bought the book, and I spent a year reading it in bits and pieces. I didn't understand much of it, but I was fascinated by his use of language – and Gertrude Stein. Gertrude Stein – I have all her writings, and I was interested and fascinated by the use of nonsense, and I'm certain that that had an influence on my later compilation of words, when I wrote my own texts.

I did want to do something that would reflect my experience as a person, and my environment, and that's why, for example, one of my choral works is called *Shopin' Blues*. We're all buying something, and we're all affected by the pressure and the encouragement, you know, to spend more, because there's bargains, bargains everywhere, and I had fun with that.

I think my whole being has been tuned to sound for so many years, that I – you know, I can't dispose of it. I mean, I have to write something, because it's pushing me, and it doesn't take much to spark me into another work.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Weinzweig was browsing the Internet not too long ago, when he was struck by its randomness. He was inspired to impose a musical order on the high-tech chaos.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** Well, it's called *Netscapes*, and it's for solo piano, and I imagined that I was browsing along the Internet, and I came across these rather interesting fragments of music, and they have no relationship between them, and what I would do, since they're only three, four bars long, that each one would be played three times, and then I would go on to the next one.

**HARRY SOMERS:** On one level, John has spent a great deal of time involved with committee work on behalf of the interests of Canadian composers, meeting with government agencies, publishers, all the rest, representing the composer.

**LARRY LAKE:** I think John is a very effective voice for Canadian music. I think he is effective now at this stage of his career, simply because the people he speaks to know that he is not someone who can be ignored. When John speaks, he speaks with the weight of authority, of knowledge, and someone who is there in the beginning, and he knows about Canadian music and the development of Canadian music. He knows where it has been. He knows where it is now, and I would be willing to bet he knows where it is going, because he'll make it go there.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I think it's going to be a world of many voices, and that's healthy, actually. It's the continuous openness and the influx of other ideas that actually helps to keep the music alive, and that will be so, in this country.

**HARRY SOMERS:** John, of course, ultimately, as a composer, has created a body of works which I think can stand on their own internationally, and this is a very important contribution to music in this country, and of course, I feel John has an individuality, which I recognize, which I enjoy tremendously, as a matter of fact. Serious music, if you will, as entertainment, pleasure, insight, experience, are provided in his works.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** At Harbord Collegiate, John Weinzweig played on the school's hockey team. A team photo from 1932 shows he was already a big guy, but all season long, all he did was warm the benches as substitute defenceman, until the semi-final game. That's when the coach finally sent him out, only to have John dump the opposition star forward. John was assessed a major penalty, and that was the end of his hockey career. Still, when he reflects on a lifelong effort on behalf of Canada's composers, and on his own legacy of compositions, he sounds more like a hockey player than the dean of Canadian music.

**JOHN WEINZWEIG:** I'm satisfied that the music I wrote was the best I could do, and I was allowed to give it my best shot.

*- transcribed by Mara Zibens*