**Canadian Composers Portrait Series**

**Brian Cherney Documentary**

**Transcription**

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Brian Cherney’s official photograph shows a dark-haired man with a grey beard, wearing a tweed jacket. Two things immediately draw you in: the intensity of his eyes and the lines of concentration on his forehead.

**RIVKA GOLANI:** He looks very serious, and I mean he is very serious, so he looks fierce. At first, I was very scared dealing with him, but you only have to get closer to him.

**ELENA CHERNEY:** In some ways, the world is a hard place for my father. Things weigh heavily on his soul, and he takes things to heart, and he – you know, he doesn’t move through life easily.

**SEAN FERGUSON:** He’s very, very serious. He can give the impression of having a sombre personality sometimes, depending on the way – on the context in which you meet him. However, I don’t find his music like this at all. I find his music so lush and so beautiful and so incredible; beautiful harmonies, beautiful melodies, everything working beautifully; and yet, to get to that point in his personality where you see the – what it is that causes him to write this extraordinarily beautiful music, I think it’s difficult.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Brian Cherney’s story begins in 1942 in the town of Peterborough, a two-hour drive north-east of Toronto. His father was a successful businessman there. He ran the Cherney Brothers Furniture Store. Brian and his brother Lawrence grew up in relative comfort in this rural community.

**LAWRENCE CHERNEY:** How exactly he ended up as a composer, especially given where we came from, it’s a bit of a mystery. Nobody in Peterborough did that, let alone not that many people anywhere, you know, certainly in this country at that time.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Brian Cherney.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** If you were living in a small town, as I was, if you were going to take up an instrument, the instrument you were going to take up was probably the piano, and with me especially the piano, because my mother played the piano, and so that’s what I was inducted into, at the age of about five.

I never intended to be a musician until I was about eighteen. I planned to study medicine, and the reason I didn’t go ahead with it was because at that time, I was playing piano pretty seriously. I was going into Toronto every week to study at the Royal Conservatory, and I mean I had to practice two, three, four hours a day, and I realized if I tried to do medicine at that point, that I wouldn’t be able to do that, you know. It’s – because it’s just too demanding.

**LAWRENCE CHERNEY:** My brother bore the advantage and the disadvantage of my mother’s own wishes, you know, for success, and I think in my brother she saw certainly – and had the hope – that he would fulfill some of those aspirations.
BRIAN CHERNEY: I think she was far too ambitious for us musically and pushed far too hard. You know, you had to be practicing. You had to do enough practicing to satisfy her. If you didn’t practice, you were in hot water, and it just wasn’t right.

My father was much more realistic, I must say. Somehow he knew that being a musician, it can be a very frustrating life, and he told me that. He said he was worried that I would have a lot of frustration, and he was right. He was right.

He was not thrilled about what I was doing. He would much rather have seen me do medicine. For my mother, you know, if you stopped music – if you don’t do it – this was about the greatest sin you could commit, so of course I was caught between the two of them.

The catalyst here really was when I was – let’s see – seventeen. I went to the National Music Camp, Interlochen, Michigan, for a summer, took lessons, and wrote a short piece for violin and cello, which was finished and played, and then I went back a second time, and the composer I studied with that summer was George Crumb, and it was before he became famous. He was a very nice man. I learned a lot, in terms of my own development of course, his interest and colour and sort of unusual ways of getting colour from traditional instruments was of enormous interest to everybody.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In Toronto, Brian Cherney signed up for composition lessons with Samuel Dolin at the Royal Conservatory of Music. Dolin was dealing with more fundamental issues than musical colour.

BRIAN CHERNEY: Sam was very unusual in the period, because he believed there was no point in having students write pieces unless they got to hear the pieces. Not only that, he believed that the pieces should be played by professional musicians, and he would go to BMI, as it was called then, and badger them to give him a little money, and he would hire musicians, and for us, that was a wonderful thing. The first piece I had done were these pieces for string quartet which were played by players from the Toronto Symphony, you know, and I remember going up to hear the first rehearsal in somebody’s apartment, and it was the first time I had ever heard a string quartet up close like that, and I was just – I couldn’t believe how rich and wonderful the sound was.

TERRI CHERNEY: I didn’t ever really kind of think about what does it mean to be marrying a composer or anything like that. I think I assumed that we would have an academic life, and that appealed to me, but honestly we weren’t very goal oriented. He wrote music because that’s who he is, and we would kind of see where that led.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Cherney’s composing led him, along with his wife Terri, to Montreal. In 1972, he was appointed professor of music at McGill University. Thirty some years later he’s still at the university, and perfectly at home in Montreal.

BRIAN CHERNEY: I mean, I like the French culture, the French milieu. I like speaking French. I suppose I’ve been influenced a lot by French music. You know, Debussy certainly has been one of the major influences. Messiaen I suppose was an important influence in some ways, you know. Just as a city, you know, I mean, it’s important to feel comfortable, and I feel comfortable in Montreal.

TERRI CHERNEY: Sometimes we’ll be out in a restaurant, and he has kind of a faraway look for a minute, and I’ll say, “what are you thinking about?” , and he says, “I’m just listening to something”, and I say, “you’re listening to something?”, and he’ll say “yes”; and he can actually turn on the composition process in his mind, once he’s
working on something. He can – he seems to be able to hear a phrase and play with it in his mind.

BRIAN CHERNEY: As a child, I heard music in my head, and I loved to improvise at the piano, and still when I’m writing even to this day, I mean, it still at some point involves the internal hearing of music in some way, whether it’s fragment or textures or colours, whatever. It’s – it’s hearing it, experiencing it in the mind.

EITAN CORNFIELD: A set of dime-store glass chimes hangs just inside the door of Cherney’s home studio. It provides a touch of lightness in an otherwise dark and cramped lair. His grown children Elena and David still have vivid memories of their father at work.

DAVID CHERNEY: My mental picture of my father is him sitting in the basement where his office is, sort of secluded from the rest of the world, in terms of the quietness and so on.

ELENA CHERNEY: He sort of buries himself in that basement. I mean, you never even know whether he’s home or not.

DAVID CHERNEY: Hunched over a desk with these incredible diagrams and flow-sheets of how he has mathematically figured out how long a piece should be and where a bar should fit in and so on, and it’s silent because it’s lined with books of all kinds, not just music books, but history books and all kinds of things, and every single square centimeter in that room is taken up by records or books or pens or pencils or watches.

ELENA CHERNEY: It had the feeling of an accountant’s office or something very serious and heavy.

EITAN CORNFIELD: But, in his basement, instead of managing numbers in a ledger, he was manipulating sounds in time.

BRIAN CHERNEY: For me, the time in which the piece takes place is just as important a part of the piece, as anything else. It’s, I guess, somewhat analogous to a crime novel. I mean, it’s pretty significant, whether the person gets murdered at the beginning of the novel, or whether it’s halfway through, or whether it’s just before the end – and it’s no less important where things happen in a piece of music.

ELENA CHERNEY: This is what comes out of the basement.

EITAN CORNFIELD: For Cherney, time is the framework that binds the notes, the rhythms, the sounds of the music he writes. Time is also a hobby.

BRIAN CHERNEY: I’ve got to get it going. The first vintage watch I ever got was my father’s Omega Seamaster from the early fifties. That’s it, and it’s a very beautiful watch. It still works perfectly.

DAVID CHERNEY: He’s absolutely nuts for watches. He buys magazines. He goes and looks at them.

BRIAN CHERNEY: These are all mechanical, you know. These are not quartz. They didn’t have quartz watches in those days.

SEAN FERGUSON: As an obsession for a composer, I mean, what could be more appropriate?

EITAN CORNFIELD: Sean Ferguson is a friend and colleague at McGill University.

SEAN FERGUSON: It’s an art that takes place in time, and this fascination with time is central to his music.
BRIAN CHERNEY: There’s a connection there, the most obvious being a piece called *Die klingende Zeit*, which means “The Sound of Time” or something like that, which actually does have a connection with a certain kind of clock or a minute repeater. At certain points in the piece, the instruments actually sound the time and hours, minutes, and – hours, quarters, and minutes.

SEAN FERGUSON: A lot of the intricacy of his music, the way that very small parts are interlocking in certain ways, I mean, I think there’s no question that his fascination with watches stems from the same fascination with very, very small things, all of which work together to create this whole; and of course, then, you slap a case on it, and the workmanship is all inside; nobody can see it.

BRIAN CHERNEY: Nobody has to know. It’s completely woven into the fabric of the piece, so that if you don’t know, it doesn’t make any difference, and that’s exactly what I want.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Listeners to Cherney’s music might be forgiven if they miss some of its intricacies. They might also not immediately pick up on another Cherney trademark: a fondness for musical quotation. He says it’s a way of honouring the music he has taught over the decades. It could be Schubert, Mahler, or Cherney himself. Sean Ferguson.

SEAN FERGUSON: His quotations, rather than take you out of the music, draw you further in to the music, in a very, very special, strange way. I don’t know how he does it, frankly.

BRIAN CHERNEY: I’m not saying it’s a game, but in many ways, maybe it is part of a – the creative game, you know, that enriches whatever I’m doing. I mean, if you know those pieces, you – you know, you would hear these – they’re very brief little references. It’s a kind of collage. You know, that’s what it is, that, I guess, does certainly have to do with memory.

SEAN FERGUSON: We could talk about sort of a cultural memory that we say, okay, I know that I belong to this culture, because I have these memories, but I think that the memories that we get from Brian’s quotations are “I know that I’m a human being because I have these memories.” I have – that they’re somehow quotations that when we hear them, they’re internalized, rather than externalized. You’re into this world that he creates, and then, somehow hearing Schubert doesn’t make you say, “oh, my God, that’s Schubert.” They say, oh, my God, that’s horrible” – or “horrible” in the sense of it’s, you know, it’s heartbreaking.

RIVKA GOLANI: In his music, I find a lot of sadness.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Violist Rivka Golani.

RIVKA GOLANI: Not sadness that brings tears to one’s eye. It’s more philosophical, and I think that’s what I see in Brian, as well. Maybe I’ve touched a very sensitive subject, but I think we all have a bit of that. It has a lot to do with our history, of hardships.

EITAN CORNFIELD: The history that Golani shares with Cherney is the history of the Jews, and its central tragedy the Holocaust. An entire wall of the studio is filled with books on the subject, and he’s drawn to any newly available material about it.

BRIAN CHERNEY: Why it affects me so much as a human being at such a powerful level, I don’t know. I can’t tell you that. I guess there’s another dimension that connects with, and that’s the whole question of spirituality and what it means, and
how you relate to a God after the Holocaust: where was God; and what is the role of God; and is there a role in human affairs? There are so many different aspects of it. It certainly affected my work because, I mean, in many, many ways – I mean, it is an outlet for certain things that I experience and feel, but of course although I’m not turning that into programmatic music, but it’s transformed in some way into sound.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Cherney barely knew Rivka Golani when he appeared in a rehearsal studio with a manuscript.

**RIVKA GOLANI:** When Brian came, he had something in his hand, and he told me, “I brought you something,” and this was the solo piece *Shekhinah*, and he asked me very gently whether I had relatives in Auschwitz, and unfortunately I had to say “yes”. “Shekhinah”, the word “Shekhinah” represents the female spirit in the Kabbalah, which is one of the main mystical and philosophical books in Judaism, and the story with “Shekhinah” was that Brian saw a photograph in one of the papers of children in Auschwitz.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** My attention was drawn to this taller, younger woman in the foreground who was holding – you can see that she’s holding onto the woman beside her, and it’s quite striking. Something about this woman leapt off the page, and I thought, well, probably she’s anonymous, and she was probably gassed immediately because she was with children.

What I imagine was that she was – her soul was not at peace, and that it was sort of scurrying around from one place to another, looking for peace. So, the first part of the piece, in fact, is very active and restless, and constantly moving around, and then, of course, because she was a young woman, I thought of the connection with Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*, and so I used that. Then, the whole thing just sort of dissolves, disintegrates, as if her spirit is floating off somewhere.

**JOEL WAPNICK:** The idea of using stillness as a concept in music is really a fascinating one, since music is never still.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Joel Wapnick is a music professor at McGill, and an old friend.

**JOEL WAPNICK:** And, it’s really a – it’s a way of looking at music which not too many composers have followed. Well, the thing about stillness, stillness encompasses two concepts that are almost opposite, one being peace, and the other being death.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Cherney composed this work *Into the Distant Stillness* in honour of his father. It’s one of seven pieces he wrote over the course of a decade, exploring the idea of stillness. Cherney’s conception of stillness comes from a line in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: “In the stillness Between two waves of the sea.”

Cherney is also fascinated by silence, a theme closely related to stillness. We’re listening to *Dans le crepuscule du souvenir*. Cherney composed the piece in the late 1970s for the pianist Tom Plaunt.

**TOM PLAUNT:** For me, what was interesting with this piece was how sound dies away and how it comes back, and I think he’s concerned with sound dying away.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Like Brian Cherney, Tom Plaunt also grew up in small-town Ontario.

**TOM PLAUNT:** Growing up basically in the late forties and fifties, this was pre-television, and it was possible to go inside a lot more. It was quieter. It was quieter
then. I mean, it’s a different idea. Music in this piece really reflects the experience of growing up in the forties and fifties, when music really could appear out of silence.

**LAWRENCE CHERNEY:** Our family at one time had a cottage that it had for many years on Schmon Lake, in the Kawartha Lakes.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Lawrence Cherney.

**LAWRENCE CHERNEY:** As children, of course, we spent a lot of time there. Later on, Brian spent a lot of time in the summers writing music there. I have a theory that the sounds of that place, the feeling of that place, have somehow been important to him, not necessarily literally, but so much of Brian’s music has revolved around silence, or creating a sense of silence, a sense of quiet, and when you listen on a – seemingly a quiet summer night, if it really is quiet, you become aware of all kinds of things: crickets, the sound of the waves, the sound of the wind, the sound of bats, I mean, so many different things.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** I don’t really believe in that kind of – the kind of inspiration that he’s suggesting. That’s very Mahler like or something like that, but the one definite experience, musical experience, I had there which fed into the music was that one summer, when I was working, there was a bird that was making a very beautiful call. It went like this [whistles melody] – and I wrote it down, because it was so striking, and I used it in a number of pieces actually, most notably in *Illuminations*, in the violin solo that comes near the end of the piece, and it’s – it’s just modeled right after the beginning, the early part of -- with the bird call figure: “yum pum pum pum pee di dur di dee dee dee dee di dom pa pum pum pum”.

**DAVID CHERNEY:** When I was a kid, he would always – if we were doing something, he would stop and listen to a certain bird that was chirping or the wave, wind, would interact with the blowing of trees, or something like that. He would always stop and listen to sounds, and in the cities, he would listen to sounds, the way a bell sounded in a bell tower.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Brian Cherney’s son David.

**DAVID CHERNEY:** I think he loves sound. I think he likes the way sounds interact with each other, and the way they – the emotions that they provoke in him.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** I love the sound of bells going off in the distance, especially the spatial aspect which I’ve always been interested in, the spatial aspect of sound, and I’ve used what I call a tolling bell in a number of piano pieces, by using certain sonorities and different registers of the piano. I love the sound of bells. I guess, to be honest with you, I write to satisfy myself. If I’m satisfied that the piece is a good piece, that’s what’s important. I’m not writing to please people necessarily. On the other hand, I’m obviously – I’m trying to communicate things, in one way or another musically, and you know, I think I do that, but that’s – it’s not a question of pleasing a listener, because if I wanted to do that, I would just write syrupy tonal music, which I don’t do.

**EITAN CORNFIELD:** Mind you, Brian Cherney has composed some lighter music, including this tribute to the French composer Eric Satie. Satie wrote *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear*. Cherney’s three pieces are in the shape of a sandwich. The score he’s describing is the filling in the sandwich.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** This piece is called the *Trois petites pièces de desséchées…en forme de sandwich*, written in 1979, so the first piece – at one point, I
was getting so frustrated because I would write a piece, and then the performance would be cancelled, or something like that, and that happened a few times, and so I figured, okay, I’ll write pieces the scores of which are so intriguing in themselves that the piece doesn’t have to be played – looking on, a little man in the centre here, threatened by all kinds of things that he doesn’t realize that are threatening him, like the steamroller coming along, and the lady looking at him, and the finger pointing, and then all these little people in the violin case – and coming out and looking at – the score is sufficiently interesting that people will want to see the score, and that’s good enough, you know. Maybe that’s me, some aspect of me being threatened. I don’t know. I haven’t sort of psychoanalyzed it.

Somebody – when it was first played – “da da dah rum dum dum” – a number of years, after it was written, the performers actually figured out – there are no instructions on how to do it, but they figured it out. You just start here, and then you go up here, and then you finish over here. It’s a very difficult profession, and I’m not sure what defines success. It’s very hard to get performances, to get more than one performance of a work.

LAWRENCE CHERNEY: Of course, insiders know that there is a creator someplace, and it’s off – and to the public, it’s this mysterious figure that sometimes sort of, you know, creeps up on stage after performances and takes a couple of bows.

BRIAN CHERNEY: And is it worth it? I’m not sure it is. The friendly answer is, of course, it’s worth it. I mean, look at all that music sitting around on my shelf. The honest answer is, no, it’s not worth it, because you spend hours and hours and hours by yourself. As you can see down here, it’s very nice. I have my books and all the things I like, but ---

EITAN CORNFIELD: All those years spent in his basement studio were at the expense of his family. They’ve left him ambivalent about his calling. After all, as a young man, Cherney was determined to become a doctor. His son David fulfilled the father’s dream.

DAVID CHERNEY: He has always told me how proud he is of the line of work that I’ve chosen to go in, and that he would have loved to do it himself. I don’t know. There are lots of doctors around, but there are very few composers around, and I think it’s much more special, in terms of what he has done with his life. I think it’s much more special and unique. He has created something beautiful in the work, and very – I think very few people can say that.

EITAN CORNFIELD: David Cherney and his wife Pearl now live in the Toronto; so does Brian’s daughter Elena along with her husband Michael and young Jacob.

TERRI CHERNEY: When Elena was born in 1972, I made up a little song for her spontaneously, which we called “the hello song”, and I sang that song to her often when she was little, and then, when David was born, I made up a separate special song for him, based on his name, and I sang that song to him. In early 2000, when Brian was writing the music for Elena and Michael’s wedding, he called me to the piano, and he wanted to play a phrase for me, and I listened to the phrase, and I couldn’t believe it: from the little notes on the piano emerged the hello song, and that’s how the wedding music ends, with the hello song, that I had written when Elena was a newborn.

ELENA CHERNEY: And it’s not often in your life that you get a soundtrack, you know, that your great moments in life actually do have a soundtrack, so that was very...
special for me afterwards listening to it again. It was more evocative of my wedding than – of our wedding, than looking at pictures, which we’ve had developed. We’ve never bothered.

**TERRI CHERNEY:** And then, when David was married, two years later, when David and Pearl were married, Brian wove David’s song into the end of the piece, so that now, the piece *Music for a Summer Wedding* contains both lullabies.

**DAVID CHERNEY:** And, how many people can say that their father wrote their wedding music?

**JACOB DAUM:** It’s a pretty tough life, being a composer, and there are so many other things that he could have done. The fact that it might have been imposed on him by an overbearing parent, that may have been true, but I think ultimately I think he made his own decision, and I think he needed to create.

**BRIAN CHERNEY:** What really matters in this crazy world is what kind of person you are. You know, that’s what’s more important in the long run, so that’s what I concentrate on. My legacy is my children. That’s what my legacy is, you know. That’s far more important.

- *transcribed by Mara Zibens*