

# Lessons in Practicality

## The rewards and challenges of working as a composer in residence with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra

by Robert Rival

My experience, after one year as the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's Composer-in-Residence, has already been richly rewarding; multiple premieres and performances led by a variety of outstanding conductors; access to musicians for consultation on the finer points of scoring for their instruments; and the opportunity to promote contemporary Canadian music through educational and outreach activities.

As the rewards of such a residency are likely obvious to readers of this newsletter, I will focus instead on the challenges – challenges with which I suspect any composer of orchestral concert music working in Canada today must contend. The residency has given me a sustained glimpse into the complex operations of a professional orchestra. With the following, I wish to share some of the lessons I've learned. I hope they may be of some practical use, especially to emerging composers keen on writing for orchestra.

### Lesson No. 1: Earn the Audience's Trust

Previously I had not given much thought to how an orchestra makes programming decisions. I assumed it was a fairly straightforward process relying almost exclusively on aesthetic considerations. I have come to appreciate, however, just how complex a task it is. And no discussion on programming can escape the chief consideration of them all: the budget.

At a recent meeting of the Programming Committee, Rob McAlear, Artistic Administrator, compared the artistic budget to a string of a finite length. You can divide it any way you like but at the end of the day you've only got so much string. We can program a concert of esoteric music and risk underselling. We can program *The Rite of Spring* which requires hiring many extra musicians (as we have for June 2013). In both cases we plan for a loss (for the *Rite* even if it sells out). But we can only do this if we offset the losses by programming other concerts more certain to bring in revenue.

Since the ESO relies to a large extent on individual ticket sales and donations (65% of our operating revenue) it would be fiscally reckless to program without taking into consideration what our audiences will pay to hear. The reality when it comes to new music, sad but true, is that contemporary Canadian composers typically can't draw crowds the way that Mozart does.

The ESO has a long tradition of composers-in-residence (John Estacio and Allan Gilliland before me), whose music has become part of the ESO's repertoire. Initially unknowns, Estacio and Gilliland gradually earned concertgoers' trust. Now subscribers welcome performances of their works whether familiar or new. Audiences are only starting to get to know my music. I will have to earn their trust, too.

### Lesson No. 2: Stack the Odds in Your Favour

The ESO regularly receives unsolicited submissions many of which give little consideration to practical programming matters. One composer, whose music I admire and wish we could program, has not written anything that is both relatively short and scored for less than

four percussion players and triple winds. From the ESO's perspective, it's a non-starter. We'll splurge on Stravinsky. But Stravinsky is Stravinsky.

With McAlear's permission, I exceeded our core (2222/4231/timp/1perc/hp/str) for *Lullaby* by writing for celeste. It incurred no additional expense because we had a keyboardist on hand to play other pieces on the program. However, the celeste limits future performances because the ESO will seek to place it on a program with other works that also require a keyboard. Conversely, while harp is core at the ESO, only about six Canadian orchestras have full-time harpists. My inclusion of harp in all three of my commissions may therefore limit performances elsewhere.

### Lesson No. 3: Expect Imperfection

The large digital clock on prominent display in a wing of the Winspear Centre stage does not mark time so much as dollars. Every second of rehearsal time is precious, especially for an orchestra tackling an unfamiliar work. No matter how well prepared you are, the real measure of your writing's effectiveness reveals itself during the rehearsal process. The art of orchestration, I've concluded, involves making the fewest miscalculations as possible. Despite limited rehearsal time, the musicians (and all the conductors

I've worked with) are gracious and eager to help me find ways to overcome such miscalculations. But there simply isn't time to experiment to solve all the problems that crop up. I can't say: try this; now can we try it this way; how about like that? Aside from small adjustments, I have to make do with what I've written. A good conductor will help by working with the composer to prioritize what needs to be addressed. As a result I no longer expect perfection but hope for a premiere that will make a strong enough impression to invite a repeat performance.

### Lesson No. 4: Write for Musicians, Not for Instruments

Through my residency I've gotten to know the musicians rather well, both their playing — by attending many rehearsals and concerts — and their personalities — by hanging out backstage and chatting with them. So when I write for the ESO the musicians (and conductors) are not abstractions. One surprising thing I've learned is that the "hidden" parts are as important as the big solos. After carefully calculating the doublings to achieve the "perfect" balance in a near-tutti passage in *Achilles & Scamander* I determined that I didn't need a particular woodwind part. After the first rehearsal the player in question asked me why I had written them out of that passage when everyone around them was playing. They suggested that they simply double another part. I said, sure, try it. And so they did—and while it made not one bit of difference to the overall sound it made every bit of difference, psychologically, to the player. This was something of a revelation to me. On the one hand, small additions (or subtractions) from the texture, especially in louder passages, go unnoticed, which makes me reflect continually on what is and isn't necessary. On the other hand, such differences mean a great deal to the players



Current and former composers in residence Robert Rival, John Estacio and Allan Gilliland at the ESO's debut at Carnegie Hall, May 8, 2012.

© 2012 Steve J. Sherman

Cont. on page 12

**Cont. from page 7**

performing the work. If the musicians are convinced by the music there's a chance the audience will be, too.

**Lesson No. 5: No Recordings Is the New Regime**

Previously an arrangement existed in Canada whereby all, or most, orchestral premieres of Canadian works were recorded and broadcast by CBC at the broadcaster's expense. These recordings were then deposited in the CMC archival library (now accessible via online streaming) for consultation by the general public and music presenters, the latter often using this resource to help with Canadian programming. Such archival recordings are indispensable for composers seeking to promote their work and to apply for grants. Aside from commissions, which by definition involve unknown outcomes, orchestras are unlikely to program works

without first being able to hear them.

The most recent cutbacks to the CBC have all but eliminated this longstanding arrangement outside a few big centres like Toronto. As the digital revolution races forward, connecting people and media ever more efficiently, Canadian concert music composers, especially those in the "outlying" regions such as the Prairies, find themselves catapulted to a time, a century ago, before recording and radio, when the only way to hear a new work was to attend a live concert. Leaving the residency without a single recording will severely hamper my efforts to encourage performances by other orchestras.

In the spirit of the times, on February 22 and 23, 2013 I invite you to hop into your horse-drawn carriage and make a lovely winter pilgrimage to Edmonton to hear the world premiere of my *Symphony No. 2 "Water"*—the only way to hear it.

# Have you updated your email?

Prairie Sounds will no longer be available in print format. To ensure continued delivery please email [prairie@musiccentre.ca](mailto:prairie@musiccentre.ca) or call 403-220-7403 to update your information.

Robert Rival joined the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra as its Composer-in-Residence in the 2011/12 season. [www.robertrival.com](http://www.robertrival.com)

## Donors of the Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region Association

### Endowment Builders

The following individuals have made Endowment commitments which, when fully realized, will add over \$100,000 to the CMC Prairie Region Fund of the Calgary Foundation

- Anonymous Violet Archer Calgary Universal Foundation for the Organ**
- David Dahlgren Quenten and Joyce Doolittle**
- Michael Horwood**
- Dr. T. G. Kucera**
- Richard Mercer**
- David McIntyre**
- Isabelle Mills**
- James Picken**
- John Reid**
- Sylvia Shaddick-Taylor**
- Roberta Stephen**
- Brian Unverricht**

### Benefactors (\$1,000 - \$4,999)

Style Craft Printing

### Patrons (\$500-\$999)

ATCO Corporate Match, Calgary, AB  
Esther Ondrack, Spruce Grove, AB  
John Pauls, Richmond, BC  
John Reid, Calgary, AB

### Sustainers (\$250-\$499)

John Burge, Toronto, ON  
Joachim & Marnie Giesbrecht-Segger, Edmonton, AB  
Thomas Kucera, Winnipeg, MB

### Contributors (\$100-\$249)

Adin Bauman, Brandon, MB  
Rolf Boon, Lethbridge, AB  
Philip Creery, Calgary, AB  
Ronald and Beverly Garnett, Lethbridge, AB  
Nancy Henderson, Calgary, AB  
John Kendall, Calgary, AB  
Michael Kim, Brandon, MB  
Richard Mercer, Calgary, AB  
Isabelle Mills, Saskatoon, SK  
Kenneth Nichols, Brandon, MB  
Audrey Poirier, Calgary, AB  
Shauna Powers, Regina, SK  
William Pura, Stonewall, MB  
Leonard Ratzlaff, Edmonton, AB  
Verna Reid, Calgary, AB  
Cathy Robinson, Canmore, AB  
Mary Ross, Calgary, AB

Bill Sands, Calgary, AB  
Jane Sather, Regina, SK  
Peter Savage, Calgary, AB  
Barbara Schmidt, Calgary, AB  
Winnifred Sim, Winnipeg, MB  
Vera Swanson, Calgary, AB  
Phyllis Thomson, Winnipeg, MB  
Linda van Havere, Regina, SK  
Stan Witkin, Toronto, ON  
Diane Zinyk, Edmonton, AB

### Friends (up to \$99)

Roberta Allen, Edmonton, AB  
George Andrix, Edmonton, AB  
Carolyn Arnason, Kitchner, ON  
Raymond Baril, Edmonton, AB  
Allan Bell, Calgary, AB  
Norbert Boehm, Lethbridge, AB  
Gerald Borch, Calgary, AB  
Peter Brehaut, Winnipeg, MB  
Dan Burns, Calgary, AB  
Val Campbell, Calgary, AB  
Tim Church, Winnipeg, MB  
Paula Corbeil, Calgary, AB  
Sondra Corff, Cochrane, AB  
Diane Cox, Calgary, AB  
M Dalton, Calgary, AB  
Keith Davies Jones, Winnipeg, MB  
Patricia Debly, Burlington, ON  
Paul Distefaro, Calgary, AB  
Quenten & Joyce Doolittle, Calgary, AB  
David Eagle, Calgary, AB  
East Kootenay MTA, Cranbrook, BC

Tim Eckert, Edmonton, AB  
Malcolm Edwards, Calgary, AB  
Marc Faw, Norman, OK  
George, Fenwick, Calgary, AB  
Catherine Fisher, Nelson, BC  
Gordon Fitzell, Winnipeg, MB  
Virginia Frampton, Burlington, ON  
Karen Frandsen, Regina, SK  
Paul Fu, Calgary, AB  
Chris Gibbons, Winnipeg, MB  
Janet Gieck, Saskatoon, SK  
Roy Halstead, Winnipeg, MB  
Linda Harlos, Winnipeg, MB  
Elaine Higgin Case, Calgary, AB  
Nolan Hildebrand, Winnipeg, MB  
Lisa Honish, Calgary, AB  
Janos Horvath, Albany, CA  
Michael & Celia Horwood, Cowley, AB  
Patricia Hrynkiw, Calgary, AB  
Mary Ingraham, Edmonton, AB  
Dorothea Johanson, Calgary, AB  
Lucie Jones, Calgary, AB  
Sandra Joy, Edmonton, AB  
Michel Lagacé, Winnipeg, MB  
Ron Lambert, Winnipeg, MB  
Patrick Lawless, Banff, AB  
Hope Lee, Calgary, AB  
Gillian MacKay, Toronto, ON  
Sam Marinucci, Toronto, ON  
Bob McPhee, Calgary, AB  
Tom Mirhady, Calgary, AB  
Carol Moore, Priddis, AB  
Winston Noren, Calgary, AB  
Gillian Nowlan, Regina, SK  
Cody Obst, Calgary, AB

Glady's Odgaard, Edmonton, AB  
Olds & District Music Teachers Association, Olds, AB

Cody Oliver  
Jack Partridge, Regina, SK  
Ravi Pawa, Calgary, AB  
Rudi Peet, Canmore, AB  
Alain Perron, White City, SK  
Randolph Peters, Winnipeg, MB  
Joanne Peterson, Stony Plain, AB  
James Picken, Calgary, AB  
Carmelle Pretzlaw, Regina, SK  
Margaret Ramsay, Calgary, AB  
Melrose Randell, Lacombe, AB  
Judith Ritchie, Winnipeg, MB  
Jean Robin, Lethbridge, AB  
Don Ross, Edmonton, AB  
Lore Ruschiensky, Regina, SK  
GB Scriggins, S Burlington, VT  
Gavin Semple, Calgary, AB  
Doug Shewfelt, Winnipeg, MB  
Angelika Stach, Winnipeg, MB  
John Standing, Winnipeg, MB  
Roberta Stephen, Calgary, AB  
Dale Taylor, Calgary, AB  
Kristin Templin, Winnipeg, MB  
Gloria Rita Thurn, Calgary, AB  
Wayne Toews, Saskatoon, SK  
Ann Trump, Calgary, AB  
Colleen Watters, Winnipeg, MB  
Michael Whalley, Calgary, AB  
John Wright, Calgary, AB

Jan 1 2012 - Sep 30 2012



The Canadian Council of the Arts / Le Conseil canadien des arts et des lettres



Canadian Heritage

Patrimoine canadien



The Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region is supported by Alberta's Community Spirit matching grant program

Return Postage Guaranteed

Return Undeliverables to:  
CANADIAN MUSIC CENTRE  
2500 University Drive NW  
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4

CANADA		POSTES
POST		CANADA
Postage paid		Port payé
Publications Mail		Poste-publications
41092026		
Calgary, Alberta		