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An Interview with Allan Gordon Bell

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Alberta-born composer Allan Gordon Bell is a well-known representative of what is a true “Canadian” music. Bell's music is not contemporary in the sense that he is trying to confuse the audience and apply theories that can only be understood by the few academics that wish to analyze it. Instead, his music derives its sounds from aural experiences from the Albertan landscape. Bell is fascinated with the outer world of his land. Mapping the musical sounds of his environment through ‘pure’ listening, Bell has developed a compositional language that challenges listeners to find experiential connections in his music, calling out for us to find our place in this land we call Canada. His music evokes aural memories of our Canadian surroundings, to inform us and remind us of the beauty we so often neglect. Bell is a Professor of Music at the University of Calgary, and former President of the Canadian Music Centre. I spoke with the composer via telephone on October 20, 2011.

[interview begins verso]

I've read you completed your undergraduate degree in philosophy. Could you tell us the connection and transition between your studies in philosophy and later focus on composition? How did you decide to pursue composition?

I began university thinking I wanted to be a writer. However when I entered English, I determined that was probably not the right direction. I was pursuing philosophy because I wanted to gain a greater understanding of what was going on in the world. I had been a musician in various capacities since my teens. During my philosophy degree, I was able to take some serious music courses in theory, and eventually composition, which led to my discovery that my true interests lay there.

My turnover to composition however did not diminish the importance of my thinking deeply. I continued to read philosophy and read people who were thinking deeply about the nature of what it means to be human on this planet from all points of view; that could be of writers as well as philosophers, scientists, and others. This intellectual pursuit is extremely important to me at the same time, as is the creative element of making music. I try to combine them both. So often my pieces now have a thrust towards the ultimate question of what it now means to be human on this planet and the meaning behind being connected to it?

How would you say your compositional style has evolved over the years?

Well, when one begins their craft, there is an *apprenticeship* time; this time consisted of my grad school studies and post-academic work as a freelancer and also early work as a teacher in the university. This *apprenticeship* period was a time of trying to absorb as much vocabulary and challenge myself with as many different possible avenues of work in order to acquire my fundamental basic craft.

After that it was necessary to carve out a space for myself, and that happened a few years after I left the school. I had a crisis of sorts, however, this brought me to understand what place I had in the crowded artistic community. Because there is so much fine music out there one has to find a space to create in. My space ultimately turned to be about trying to find how to capture the beauty of the music of the land that surrounds me, which is basically this part of Western Canada (Alberta).

This began another process, in that I had no idea how to do this, so I needed to experiment with a lot of technical things in composition; how to deal with polychromic events in an easy way so that musicians could still perform them but still create a sense of multiplicities and time happening, and how to capture the ‘aurages’ that are actually present and how to make them into musical ideas and work with them as such.

Now that I’ve learnt to do this, it still continues to be part of what I do, but I focus on further challenging myself. When I don’t know how to do something, I try to follow that pathway; for example, in 2001 I

finally agreed to do an opera for Calgary Opera Association. The reason I had turned it down for so much time was because I didn't know how to do it and I finally realized that not knowing how to was exactly the reason to try to do it. So that opens up all sorts of new possibilities of thinking and new challenges that keep everything alive. The only thing I don't want to do is repeat myself. I have to continue to incorporate new challenges.

You mention here that there have been different compositional periods in your life. This periodization of a composers' composing style between an early, middle, late period has been a hot discussion of debate. Do you think these periods fit into your career as a composer, and if so, which stage would you say you are currently in?

Well I hope I am in the middle stage of my composing career, although seven years ago I thought I was in my last stage after I had a major crisis. I do believe there is something called the late work. If you have read Edward Said's book on 'the late work', he makes a good case to what happens when an artist reaches a certain stage. I know that I have experienced the 'beginning', but more so, it feels like a continuum. For me, it feels like I am actually writing one really big work with little sections called pieces that I give out to people. In this one really big life work, that goes on indefinitely, when I encounter something I don't know how to do, (for example when I did the opera), I become a beginner all over again. So in all, it is really hard to put those nice

musicological categories onto one's own work. We'll let others think about that. I am sure however, on reflection, that there are trends I am currently unaware of.

In terms of your musical influences, are there any particular composers you feel have played a major impact on your musical aesthetic and language, and if so who and in what ways?

Oh yes. There is a large list. There are of course my teachers Violet Archer, Malcolm Forsyth, Manus Sasonkin who were and continue to be posthumously very important and informative musicians and composers. In terms of listening, Bach without question has been on top of my list, especially through the contrapuntal elements. I always start my composing day banging my way through one of his fugues. I use it as a reminder of being the highest standard of what the musical world can achieve. No one in the twentieth century goes untouched by Stravinsky; and no one goes untouched by Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. I also did some work with Bruce Mather, which gave me a profound introduction to his teachers, Messiaen and Boulez. Boulez in particular has played his part as a sort of opposition to the type of thinking I have towards music. Nonetheless I have been fascinated with the aural result of his work. Of course, Murray Schafer's careful listening to the world, his creation of the Soundscape Project, and his astonishing output has been of great influence. My good friend Alexina Louie's music moves me and one cannot but be influenced by her music. My teaching of certain courses has also allowed me the opportunity to listen to the greats of other traditions: Indian, Chinese

classical music, African, and Arabic; all of this goes into my musical language. However, the world music element is not so much influenced on the sound of my music but more so is addressed in some of the of the philosophical underpinnings of my work.

Has literature specifically Canadian literature played a role or influence on your work? And if so in what ways?

Yes, in some profound ways, however not on specific pieces. The project of Canadian writers has been to get a sense of knowing where we are. Margaret Atwood's book *Survival* traces that whole notion of confronting this formidable landscape. If you're not living in a city, you need to know what you're doing to survive. The notion all these writers had, of really getting to know this place, was something that influenced me because I was not only interested in the stories but very much in getting to know the sound, rhythm and music of the place, (which is ultimately my project).

Then there are particularly Canadian poets like Tim Lilburn (UVic), who is deeply engaged with the ideas of trying to be at home here in this land. This is very difficult for those of us that are sensitive about the realization that we (the ancestors of the Europeans) came and stole the land for those who knew how to be at home here. Basically until we can reconcile with that, we will live in fundamental shame. We can only begin to get to know the land in the way that took them ten thousand years to get to know, and we should approach it with certain humility. At the same time Lilburn's poetry also is filled with what he calls the 'erotics' of the landscape; a real desire to be here and understand the relationship between person,

place, creature, vegetation, sky and water and all the rest. Others from this group of poets that I much admire are, Jan Zwicky, Don McKay, and Lorna Crozier.

You are an Albertan boy, born and raised, and this is very much reflected in your compositional output. However, some of your activity as a composer and university professor has led you on trips abroad, such as Europe, Taiwan and other places. Did your travels have any impact on any aspect of your compositional outlook or musical aesthetic?

Without question. When you go away from some place, you gain perspective. Travelling abroad, and trying to become immersed in other cultures, allows the opportunity to reflect upon difference. You see Canada for the difference it has, and when you leave for some time and return, then the things that are important are amplified. I also like travelling because I am always curious to know what other artists/composers are doing elsewhere. Because the CBC radio doesn't give us as much exposure anymore, to what is going on in our country and more so with the world, composers need to travel, listen to concerts, talk to the artists, see what there concerns are, go to the galleries watch the choreography, see the architecture, and listen to the sounds of the streets. It's all food for the creative juices and food for the soul.

You've been commissioned to write a lot of works, most of which have ended being your most acknowledged. Are you a composer that likes working under this kind of pressure, and would you say that your final product represents what you want to say through your music?

The commissioning process has changed for me now, but the important part of the profession is to enter into an agreement with a group of performers, or a performer, or a performing organization in which they will commit to performing a piece that I have created. In acknowledging that they have deadlines I have to fit those deadlines into my schedule and accept them. Generally deadlines are not a problem, although the composing problem doesn't always line up with those deadlines. But the exciting aspect is the knowledge of the performers. Knowing what their sounds are, knowing what they are interested in doing and what they are capable of achieving, provides an interesting type of challenge of trying to create a piece they will connect with. The third important factor is that the piece reaches an audience. Knowing whether or not a piece will be performed is a large factor in the composing process.

So do you keep a close contact between you and the performers?

Well, they ask and I go ahead and write. After they get the piece, they get nervous and ask me questions, which spark a further dialogue. Because notation does not capture everything, performers want to be careful to do what you want which frequently leads into the rehearsal process. That's an exciting realm. I know a piece has begun to work when a performer

approaches me with questions of interpretation. This means the performer is trying to make something out of it, not that they don't know what to make of it. This is priceless.

From what I already understand about your concept of the 'aurage', is that you listen to 'pure' sounds, without the intervention of visual or tactile imagery. You then collect from these sounds, aural images or 'aurages', which you then transform into music. Could you elaborate?

Yes. There is a kind of simplicity behind the concept, even in the fundamental definition of it. Basically, an 'aurage' is to the mind's ear, what an image is to the mind's eye. For example, your hearing of a cat purring creates a sound event that can expand to emotional associations. For example hearing your own cat's purring would conjure up an element of connection. I am interested in the sounds that can carry with them emotional affects. I coined the word cause I was tired of people referring to things as 'aural images'. When it comes to my composing, I decided that listeners need to be challenged and use a sense of imagination simply to see what is happening in the composer's mind, what he is trying to convey. So in my music, there becomes a primacy of a sound I want to bring in. I am listening to sounds all the time. I'm like a sonic sponge. I don't use a tape recorder unless I'm trying to capture a sound for an electroacoustic means for manipulation. But normally, I just listen and the sounds that interest me, and I will then try to transcribe into some kind of pitch and rhythmic relationship. The moment I've done that I've created another type of 'aurage', which is different from the original, sort of a photograph (by analogy). This

becomes musically useful because it then has rhythm, contour, and timbre. The timbre may be more important than the pitch contour in a sound which is more leaned towards a type of noise, (less pitch content). For example, the squeal of a hawk is high-pitched, with a scrapy element to it. This scrapy element is the most important so I would ask string players to scrape their strings. Once the sounds become musical, the music proceeds in a normal way of working with these musical ideas and developing them and generating forms that emerge from them. My hope is that something from the original 'aurage' will continue to permeate the piece and lend the sense of where it came from.

It seems the corpus of works is written for the traditional performance space with traditional instruments. What is your reason of keeping within this traditional sphere?

A lot of the performances of my works have taken place in a landscape. The performances outside present interesting challenges, I know that from experiencing the pieces of Murray Schafer's work. Nonetheless, my composing for traditional means is mostly because I profoundly admire what practicing musicians do and are capable of doing. The second reason is that I have a hope that through listening to my pieces in a concert like setting people will realize and reminded that they too love the land in which they live and would want to go out there. The third reason is when I step outside or go for a hike, there is so much music out there already, that there is no reason for me to impose my music on it. I think people should listen to the world as the world and discover all the deep pleasures that are there in all the

birdsong, sounds of the wind, grass the endless list of things that are taking place that are deeply musical and see this earth as a large musical instrument. You don't need a symphony orchestra out there; just sit, be quiet and listen and it will all come to you.

I noticed in your list of works that in the eighties and nineties you composed some computer music and worked with electronic mediums. Is this still a medium you can see yourself revisiting in the future. Have any of your thoughts changed in terms of your relationship with electronic technology?

Actually, last year in January I had a piece performed by the University of Calgary String Quartet, involving interactive electronics, where I had a computer diffusing the sound throughout the audience. This was the most recent electronic work I wrote which required a considerable amount of expertise. My university has two people, David Eagle and Lori Radford who have deep expertise with this working with this medium. When I get the chance, I listen to what they do and occasionally will have an opportunity to explore what it may mean to my musical language. I am mostly interested with a live performer having an interaction with the electronic medium. It is becoming easier for this interaction to take place because of the burgeoning expertise people have nowadays. So yes, this is still part of what I do. I haven't done it for large ensemble yet. But it is worth knowing about and it still interests me. Especially when a project comes forward and I don't know how to do it, I'm curious to find out. For instance, how to make the string quartet work with eight speakers, diffuse the sound, and create a situation so that

people don't know where the music is coming from at any given time, even by watching the performers and have it still sound like a piece of chamber music.

What piece is this?

The piece was called *A Cast, a Charm and Exaltation*, based on its pluralization: a cast of hawks, a charm of finches, an exaltation of larks. My notion was to create an allusion of flocking. I am interested in how birds shift shape and location in time and space with amazing speed. The work was performed once, and not yet published. There does exist a recording, however, it was not successful in capturing the spationalization of this experience.

May last question before we end is do you have any dream projects?

No. There is no one thing I have to do before I die. I lost some of that ambition in my 30s. The desire to write a piece that would be internationally known and recognized as a masterpiece, just seems to me like a waste of time. My job is to write one piece at a time and do the best I can on that piece, and then move on to the next one. Again it's that idea of writing a life's work and I'll see what it is when I'm finished. I nonetheless have very many interests and am still continuing to create. ■