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An Interview with Jeff Enns

Iain Gillis

“I wear my heart on my sleeve most of the time, and I write that way. I can’t be a cerebral composer. Hanging out in lots of church circles, “Contemporary Music,” means a different thing there, as well. So, if you’re talking about the avant-garde, I find that kind of funny. Sure, twelve-tone this and that, blah-blah-blah: that’s old music already. That was twenties, thirties, and forties, and people have been experimenting with it since, but in some ways I’m more modern because I’m neo-Romantic or something – I’m not even sure where I’d get pigeonholed, or why I’d need to be pigeonholed. This is how I’d describe my music: it would be if Vaughan Williams and Duruflé went to a Rush concert. [pauses] Sort of. I mean, there’s a lot of other stuff in there. That covers a lot of influences. Or if Vaughan Williams, Duruflé, and the guys from Rush went to a High Anglican church service... and sang Appalachian tunes.”

Thus Jeff Enns. He has won a number of composition competitions and had his music performed across North America, as well Ireland, the U.K and Japan, and was recently the composer-in-residence for the Canadian Chamber Choir. He has been widely commissioned, by groups that include Victoria-based Vox Humana. It was that choir’s director, Brian Wismath, who first introduced me to Jeff and his music. Jeff teaches violin at the Beckett School in Kitchener, and is music director of St. James Lutheran church in Elmira, ON. In his typically generous way, he agreed to speak to me on the phone from his home in Elmira, where he lives with his family and is a stay-at-home father of 2, in late October 2011.

Would you mind sharing a few words about your personal and musical background?

I was born and raised in Waterloo, in a Mennonite church. My grandfather was a church choir director for forty seven-plus years, and they would always have choir festivals. My grandparents all came from Ukraine in the twenties, and that's a cultural identity in itself. Not that that *necessarily* matters, but it does shape who you are, in where things came from, depending on how much you hold onto that. My mother is still a church organist. Church was a very safe and familiar place, and we spent lots of time there.

I started violin lessons at six, and my mother taught piano at our house. I'd have a lesson, and my mom would play something, and then I'd know how it went and I'd figure it out. My fingerings were just awful. [laughs] I had to re-learn stuff in high school because I wanted to take organ lessons: I loved the organ and I still love it. It's just such a fantastic sound — I never, ever get tired of it.

I picked up cello when I was 9, probably, and I'd sung in choirs since I was very young. I still do: I've sung with Da Capo Chamber Choir¹ in Waterloo for the last five years, and this year I'm singing with the Elora Festival Singers. I studied organ and viola at Wilfred Laurier.² I grew up three blocks away.

¹ The Da Capo Chamber Choir was founded in 1998 in Kitchener-Waterloo by Leonard Enns, to whom Jeff is not related.

² Glenn Buhr, with whom Jeff studied composition, is still the composition professor there. With Bramwell Tovey, current Music Director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, Dr. Buhr co-founded the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra New Music Festival in 1992.

Who were your teachers at Laurier?

The Penderecki Quartet started in residence, I think in my very first year there.³ So I studied with Yariv Aloni, whom you probably know. He's just a fantastic guy! But then he fell in love, got married, moved to Victoria.... [laughs] Dov Scheindlin was the next violist. It was kind of interesting, because he was not even a full year older than me, but he already had a master's, he'd been concertizing. I think he went Julliard; I took a year off and did this for a while, and then took another year off... I hadn't gotten very far.

With the organ, I didn't have the discipline to just sit and do scales. I just wanted to play organ music. It's like trying to run before you can walk.

I always wanted to do composition, to write stuff. I remember being mad as a little kid. I loved Vivaldi and Bach, all sorts of different violin things, and I remember being annoyed listening to Handel's *Water Music* and such, thinking, "I'd like to write that when I get bigger, but now I can't, because they already did it. And they had a three-hundred-year head start on me, so it's just not fair!" I tried to write stuff in high school. I love fugues, but I'm not very mathematical,

³ The current roster of the Penderecki String Quartet, quartet-in-residence at Wilfred Laurier University since 1991, is composed of Jeremy Bell and Jerzy Kaplanek (violins), Christine Vlajk (viola), and Jacob Braun (cello). Yariv Aloni is currently a sessional instructor of chamber music and viola at the University of Victoria, and is very active on the podium as music director of the Galiano Ensemble of Victoria, the Victoria Chamber Orchestra, and the Greater Victoria Youth Orchestra. Dov Scheindlin is currently a member of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and associate member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

and trying to write a five-part fugue in B major when you're in grade eleven... again, running without being able to walk. I just didn't have the depth of knowledge to do it. There was stuff in my head, but I just couldn't get it out. My second or third year I took composition.

What's the earliest piece of your own that you were willing to sign off on?

I found some boxed stuff a little while ago that's from 1994. It's... not very good... at all. [laughs] The first piece that's really quite good? I did a setting of "O magnum mysterium" in 1997, and that was sort of my hit for a while. It won the Amadeus Choir Composition Competition, and Elmer Iseler Singers did it, it was recorded by a choir at Bemidji State University -- it sort of got far and wide for a while.⁴ It was recorded by the Gerald Fagan Singers in London [Ontario], Camerata Singers in Halifax,⁵ and I think some others.

⁴ Both the Amadeus Choir (est. 1975) and Elmer Iseler Singers (est. 1979) are based in Toronto and are currently under the direction of Dr. Lydia Adams.

⁵ Under the direction of their namesake, the Gerald Fagan Singers have long championed Canadian repertoire. The Halifax-based Camerata Singers, founded in 1986 by their director Jeff Joudrey, make a point of their history of commissioning new works.

It was one of those pieces that just happened: I think it took me two hours to write. I get inspired by particular moments, I think. I wrote it in the middle of August. I've written some good Christmas things in August.

That's about the time they put Christmas cards out in stores these days...

[laughs] All that being said, I grew up with an organ in the church, and we always sang everything in four parts. I assumed everyone sang everything in four parts – I mean, why wouldn't you?

Did you grow up with English services?

Yes – my home church still has a German service. I'd play organ for it, but I'd never attend if I didn't have to.

You mentioned in our preliminary conversation that you like the fluid sound of Latin, and so you like to set Latin texts. Do you conceive of other languages as having characteristic sounds that encourage or discourage you to set them to music?

I've done a couple of French texts just recently. I sang a setting of *Sous le Pont Mirabeau*,⁶ I really liked the text, and I wanted to set it. I did: it's in D-flat, and I think of it as very warm, kind of like looking at Paris skyline without my glasses on. It's funny: French makes me think Impressionist, water-flowing-around, Monet, Debussy-Ravel-ish. Not that I'd necessarily write in that style.

⁶ "Sous le Pont Mirabeau" is from Guillaume Apollinaire's (1880-1918) 1913 collection, *Alcools*.

I haven't really set anything in German, but I've been trying to set a couple of German texts – solo songs – for a friend of mine. Not that I've managed to do it yet.

You seem to have a certain historical awareness, even a historical bent. Do these recent settings of yours use contemporary poems, or texts that date a bit further back?

They're not contemporary poems. The German is a hymn text that was read at the funeral of a blind organist from my home church – he was basically responsible for getting the organ we have now; I liked the words.

To stay with texts, then: in preparing for this interview, I came across a clip of you online discussing a piece of yours called “Moonset” —

—at Composers' Circle.⁷ That was a really neat experience.

⁷ The Waterloo Region Composers Choral Song Circle, held at Kitchener's City Hall Rotunda on September 27, 2008, featured the choral music of Glenn Buhr, Barrie Cabena, Leonard Enns, Jeff Enns, Michael Purves-Smith and Carol Ann Weaver.

Speaking about Pauline Johnson and your choice of texts.⁸ You said that you “wait until a text leaps out at you and then you have to run with it, or it’s gone.” Is that still the case, three years later?

I go searching for texts. I’ve probably read more poetry in the last ten years than most people read in their lives. I love poetry—I love the meter of words, and the non-meter of words—but every time I look at a poem, I’m thinking, “How could this be good for music?” Sometimes, things leap to mind right away, and I try to store them in my brain if I don’t have anything to write them down in the moment. I’ve got all sorts of little scraps of stuff all around my piano. Little bits that may work, or may never work. And I’ve got some ideas started that I think are really good ideas, but I haven’t done anything with them. Other times I do go run with them, and the piece just happens.

Like with the “O magnum mysterium?”

Yes, exactly. Anyway, I love Pauline Johnson’s poetry – her way with words. I love the fact that she’s from Ontario – the Six Nations Reserve just outside Brantford. I love that she’s a half-Native woman who bucked just about every trend and was a one-woman show in her twenties. And I like the fact that she’s not under copyright, either. [laughs]

⁸ Pauline Johnson (1861–1913), also known as Tekahionwake, was a writer and performer whose work is notable for its celebration of Johnson’s cultural identity as a First Nations woman. A selection of her poetry is available through the University of Toronto’s e-resource Representative Poetry Online (RPO). See <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poet/177.html>.

How did you first come across her poetry? I've only just come across it through this piece.

I sang somebody else's setting of "I may not go to Bethlehem," which I hadn't read before. I didn't like the piece very much, but I really liked the text. "Brier" is just a fantastic Good Friday poem. Jeff Smallman set that. I tried to set it a bunch of times, but he did such a fantastic job of setting that text. I try to have something different to say, but there are certain texts that I hear set and I think, "*That's* the tune." He got it... Before I did. [laughs]

A cousin of mine had a baby that was born without lungs. "Moonset" was kind of written for little Nathan. The last line is "I never touched your soul in shadow-land." I set it kind of ethereally, a bit like the Duruflé Requiem – unresolved. It wasn't the same chord, but in my mind, it was the same kind of idea. It's not so far from this world to the next world. At least for some people. [pauses]

You said in that same clip that the more you thought about it, the more you were convinced that "Moonset" was actually a sacred poem. Are you able to define what makes something sacred for you?

Faith is kind of a hard thing to talk about. Growing up, it was very much your personal thing. I think it is. I've met too many people who talk very openly about things, but then it just annoys other people. And I don't want to annoy other people.

But music is sacred. I love being a church musician, because that's how I worship. And I don't have to be in church. It certainly helps to focus things, but some of my best, my favourite times are the week are after

choir when everybody's gone, and I just sit with the lights off and play. I still need to practice for Sunday, of course, and sort things out, but I play for me. Sometimes I improvise and it's very inspired, and sometimes I improvise and it's...

Does improvisation inform your compositional process at all?

At university, that's what really opened the doors. I took organ improvisation lessons and composition lessons at the same time. They both helped each other out immensely. I'll often take whatever tune has been floating about in my head and try to grab it and work it into a loose framework. I'm in a bit of a three-minute-prelude rut right now, because that's what I have to do. I'm terrified to improvise postludes because your mistakes are louder. It's much easier to do communion "moonbeams."

Outside of poetry, where do you get your ideas? You mentioned Monet earlier and have talked about images in texts—

I love art, and I'm happy to look at most painters. I love Marc Chagall. I love that he did stained glass. Before I had kids, I did stained glass fairly regularly. I love it. It catches the light so beautifully. I've got a few pieces that I made around the house. I like to look at them, too, once in a while.

Chagall makes me happy. There's a Chagall exhibit on at the Art Gallery of Ontario that my wife and I went to last Saturday.⁹ There were a couple of huge paintings, and as I looked at them, they just made me smile.

Do you hope that your music might have a similar effect on those who hear it?

I do, and that's a very hard part for me about commissions. If I've just written a piece, and no one has paid me money yet for it – the heaps and heaps of money that I'm raking in hand over fist [laughs]... Commissions frighten me. What if they don't like it? Either I haven't written any duds yet, or the people are far too nice to say that they don't like it. I'm gonna go with "people really do like it."

One thing I learned in university: you are a product of your influences. What are my influences? From an early age and through your formative years (and hopefully I'm still forming), you grab onto things that you like. I was raised with a four-part singing tradition, so I really do like harmony, but I also love plainchant. I love organ music, I love strings; I also love crazy out-there heavy metal underground guys. (Not so much the Cookie Monster vocal parts.) There are some really great musicians in those bands and crazy things happening in that music. To jazz... I'd to be able to play jazz. I love listening to it.

⁹ The 118-piece exhibition, "Chagall and the Russian Avant-Garde," ran from October 18, 2011 to January 15, 2012. See <http://www.ago.net/chagall-and-the-russian-avant-garde>.

You said there are certain things you tend to come back to, that evolve. Could you say something specific about your compositional technique?

I try to give everybody a least little bits of melody, or to make everything the melody. My technique... I failed theory a couple of times, and counterpoint. I mean, I eventually passed them, but I like to tell people that I failed them and still did composition. I love added seconds, and major-minor seventh chords. I love to expand and write thick chords, but I like to come back to unisons and two- or three-note clusters. I like parallels and I love Vaughan Williams. I figure if *he* can be so fantastic and write parallel fourths, why can't I? I write parallel fifths partly because the fifth has the overtones set out. It's like power chords in a rock band, or on the full organ with mixtures. The open fifth is a very powerful chord. I know you're not supposed to write parallel fifths, but if you use them for good and not for evil, I suppose.... If I had even one sixtieth of the brain that Bach had, I'd probably find other ways around that.

I want to write music that other people will like to listen to, or at least something that I'll enjoy listening to and hopefully other people will enjoy it, too. And if they don't, I tend to write things that are shorter, so if you really don't like it [smiles audibly] it's gonna be over in a couple of minutes anyway. [laughs]

I always try to put a piece of me or my soul or something into each piece. Maybe that's not the best way to describe it....

I've had a number of people say that there is a "Jeff Enns sound," which makes me really happy. Because

how can you have your own sound? There's a thousand years of music before me, and we've only got 12 pitches to choose from. That makes it a lot more difficult. I find it really hard to write in just four parts. The human voice is so amazing. And when you put a choir together – especially a really good choir, but even a not-that-great choir – it's just one more glimpse of the divine there. There's a reason that there's a saying, "He who sings, prays twice." I'm a firm believer in that. ■