

CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAITS SERIES
MURRAY SCHAFER DOCUMENTARY

PRODUCED BY EITAN CORNFIELD

TRANSCRIPTION

MURRAY SCHAFER: In our lives today we tend to be too casual. We expect something to happen immediately. We need novel sensory input all the time, everyday a new movie, everyday a new thrill, everyday a new experience. In a way what I'm doing, maybe, is just slowing the process down, so that if you are going to have some kind of an authentic experience you've got to prepare yourself for it, and part of that preparation could be the trip to the site. Part of the preparation could be starving yourself in advance. Part of the preparation – you know, you must prepare yourself in some way for the experience to happen.

I think this is what happens with *Ra*, and this is what happens with *Princess of the Stars*, and with the *Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*, which lasts for a week. These are different kinds of not only artistic experiences, but the temporal framework and the spatial framework is very different from the ordinary entertainment experience that people are accustomed to today.

JOHN WEINZWEIG: Well, Murray, you know, has become our most international composer, and I'm very proud of him. I mean, he has earned it. But, you see, he has got several talents. At one time he had to make up his mind whether he was to be a composer or a painter, but he also has a literary talent, and he has explored what he calls a "sound environment," and of course he made his reputation – he has written several books. You know, he has actually a remarkable mind, and he has had an influence on other younger composers.

EITAN CORNFIELD: R. Murray Schafer is a household name, here in Canada and abroad, and that's remarkable for a contemporary composer. Kids from Newfoundland to Victoria are taught about him in the same breath as Oscar Peterson, and Glenn Gould. Around the world his theories on sound ecology and the acoustic environment are regarded with the same reverence as Marshall McLuhan's pioneering notions about communication.

He's largely a self-taught polymath with a wide range of achievements in education, literature, environmentalism, and the visual arts. For Schafer composing is only one colour of a blazing creative palette he offers up to what he sees as the urgent needs and dreams of humanity today. As a composer he thinks of himself as an engaged artist, with a strong sense of his time and place. For ten summers that place has been a wilderness lake not far from Ontario's Algonquin Park.

MURRAY SCHAFER: My own career has been divided into many sort of sub-categories, and at different times some of these things have perhaps exerted very strong influence over everything that I do. I've not only written music, but I've written books and -- fiction as well as non-fiction, and I live in the country; I live close to nature. I'm ecologically sensitive, and I started many years ago – ten years ago now – a project in

which I invited anyone who wanted to join me to come and spend a week each summer in the wilderness creating a piece which I had simply sketched out as a kind of ritual that we would invent, and the idea was that we would repeat it every year, gradually expanding it and augmenting it.

This past summer we've had sixty adults and about fifteen young people, so about seventy-five people. We're divided into clans. There are eight adult members in each clan, and we were at four different campsites. The campsites are some distance from one another. I'm talking kilometers – two or three or four kilometers from one another – quite a distance in fact. It's a total wilderness environment, and we created our own campsites, our own trails and everything else.

The work lasts for eight days, and it is a ritual throughout the eight days, which doesn't mean that there isn't time for recreation and swimming and things like that. There is, but basically from the moment you move in the first day, you've started to participate in this work which is theatrical, musical, and ritual, and it goes on until the last day, when all the clans, all the people come together, all seventy-five of us get together for what we call the Great Wheel Day, which is the sort of the final celebration and drama which concludes the work. It's the same every year. We do exactly the same every year, except that we add more, and it gets more refined and it gets more beautiful, actually.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: He could draw forms and shapes and was doing it when he was probably three years old or so, and had great muscle control.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: He usually started at the bottom and worked up to the head. The head is the about the last thing he did on any pictures he ever did.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Murray Schafer was born on July 18th, 1933, in the refinery town of Sarnia, Ontario. His parents brought him and his younger brother Paul to Toronto, where Murray developed a hardy dislike of formal schooling early on.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: Oh, he wrote comic books too. He used to have the kids over to read them, and charge them ten cents or something.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: And, take the next edition to school, with him, you know.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: And just as soon as school was out, over the house he would go and he would start to work on his comic books.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: However, you know, he didn't play in sports. You know, he had his defect in his eye and ---

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: He coached the Hilltop what?

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: Hilltop Football Team.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: They never lost a game all season.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: He would take these boys and teach them the formation and the plays.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: Oh, yes, then he would figure out some of his own plays too. You know, he had books and books on football.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: At that time, you know, for that little while that he was interested in that, and there would be a note on the board in the kitchen. He would have all these instructions for Paul to tell the boys at school, and then at the bottom he would write, "Don't ask them to come; tell them to come."

EITAN CORNFIELD: An artistic flair coupled with an enterprising spirit and a supportive family, how bad a childhood could this have been?

MURRAY SCHAFER: Oh, broadly speaking I guess it was relatively happy, with one problem, and that was the problem of having handicap – of having only one eye, which, children being the very cruel malicious creatures that they are, can make it quite miserable for a person. I felt that particularly, I think, in high school, much less in public school. In high school I don't know what happened, but coupled with my own sort of neurotic temperament, that the five years I spent in high school were the worst five years I ever spent in my life. I was entirely expendable; at least I thought I was entirely expendable as a human being.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Schafer blames the bullying he experienced at school for his own imperious streak.

MURRAY SCHAFER: In my dealings with people, I try not to crowd them, but I must admit that I do get impatient with them, if they aren't doing things to my satisfaction, and particularly if I happen to have the kind of position which enables me to direct them or order them, I'll do so. I don't hesitate for a moment, and I suppose that is a kind of bullying technique.

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: After he got out of school, you know, he just turn to the books, and boy, did he ever read all the books in sight, and that seemed to be his main occupation, getting a self-education, really, I guess.

MRS. HAROLD SCHAFER: I would say as he went on through high school, he was more interested in the more literary things than he was in the art classes. He could do quite well in those too, you know, but he didn't really pursue his art, did he, Harold?

MR. HAROLD SCHAFER: No, not after a time when he had – he said he had to make a choice between music and art -- or painting as he was engaged in, and I guess he decided that music was his field.

MURRAY SCHAFER: Well, it's true I wanted to be a painter when I was in high school, and although I was studying music, I was really studying the piano. I wasn't doing any composition, and as I was thinking of either going to study music or visual arts, my preference was for visual arts after high school. I went down to be interviewed, and the person at the art college that interviewed me said, "quite frankly, you'll never be a painter, because you've only got one eye." I think he was wrong about that, but that shifted my attention over to music. It still wasn't really composition, until I met John Weinzweig.

JOHN WEINZWIEG: He came to see me, I think, it was in the fall of 1951, and he wanted to study with me, and that was beginning of our relationship, which lasted for I think a few years, and I brought him into the university when I was invited on staff in 1952, and I got him a scholarship, and we've been in contact with each other ever since.

MURRAY SCHAFER: I think he inspired all of his students with a kind of excitement for finding their own creative powers and destiny. He didn't really interfere with your exploration of yourself; he encouraged it. He didn't have a method, and all of his students sound very different, if you compare some of his better known students; their styles are remarkably different, unlike some other composition teachers where the students really mock the teacher.

In terms of his actual teaching he was very generous with his time, but not terribly generous with his comments. I mean he didn't really praise you, all I can remember John ever saying to me was, "put the stems up here, or the stems down there," or something, or, "you left a flat off this, didn't you?" or something. I mean, they were just little technical things like that, and I appreciated that, because I think that I was a kind of a person with very strong antinomian tendencies at that time.

I never finished high school, and I was eventually expelled from the University of Toronto, and so John knew that you had to treat this maverick very carefully and just let him go his own way, but I think he did that generally with all of his composition students.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Schafer couldn't seem to get along with what he regarded as the musical reactionaries of the University of Toronto. An incident with choral conductor Richard Johnston led to an ultimatum from the dean Arnold Walter. In the end, U of T gave Schafer the boot, but he was there long enough to absorb the eclectic lectures of Marshall McLuhan who instilled in him a passion for the imprisoned poet, Ezra Pound. There were two other figures at the University of Toronto who made a lasting impression on Schafer. One of them was the brilliant Chilean born pianist Alberto Guerrero.

MURRAY SCHAFER: Guerrero again was another teacher who let us go our own ways, and I think that he too was very generous in that respect. He knew that I wasn't going to be a pianist. I had no intention of becoming a pianist, and he used to ask me each week when I would come to a lesson, "did you practice this week?" and I would say "no". He said "well, what did you do?" "Well, I read a book," or "I went to an art gallery," or something, and he said "oh, tell me about it."

So we would sit down, and I would talk to him for about half an hour, and never touched the piano at all, and I appreciated that very much too, because it made it very easy for me to pass my year in piano without ever having touched the instrument. He was a man who was well versed in philosophy, in impressionistic art, in religion, and a well-read man, and I think you can see the evidence certainly in Gould, as well. Gould obviously his sort of polymath tendencies came or were encouraged by Guerrero, although Gould never acknowledged it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: The other momentous encounter Schafer had at U of T was with the Viennese born harpsichordist, pianist, and teacher Greta Kraus. Ever since they met in 1952 Schafer has favoured the harpsichord over the piano.

GRETA KRAUS: Murray came and we hit it off beautifully, because we just chatted together, had a marvelous time, and by the end of that few months I said, "shouldn't you study something to show that we have had lessons?" We just got so involved in talking about music, and so he learned one piece with me, but the essential thing was that we became very good friends, and -- but then he decided to go to Europe, and I said, "well, I don't know how I could help you there, but I have very nice relatives in Vienna. They have no money. They can't do anything for you, but they're nice, so if you get completely stuck, you have an address," and the next I heard was that he was living in my room, in my apartment, and he was the greatest friend of my relatives. Funny.

MURRAY SCHAFER: I don't know that she encouraged me to go there, but I had in my mind that I'd like to go to Vienna, because I thought Vienna was the centre of new music. I thought that, you know, Schoenberg and Berg and Webern were still

walking the streets. I was so naïve at the time I didn't know that they were all dead, and you know that since Vienna was a very conservative place, their music was never performed there anyway, and I went to Vienna and was very discouraged by what I saw around me in the way of musical life, but it was a very cheap place to live.

I managed to live, in fact, on forty dollars a month, which was, well, in those days of course it wasn't very much money, but Vienna was one of the cheapest places in Europe, and that was 1955-56, just after the Russians left, and failing to find a composition teacher that could satisfy me, I tried to learn some medieval German, and I spent most of my time – I found a very strange woman who was translating *Beowulf* into medieval German. I don't know why you would translate medieval English into medieval German, but that was what she was doing, and she recited these poems to me, and I got very intrigued, and I in fact set some of them to music.

I think it was probably the most successful piece that I wrote at that time, but those texts were very beautiful. I used to love the simplicity of the language. For instance, there was one poem – very short. It went something like this: “Du bist min/ ich bin din/ des so duca visin/ du bist beslossen in meinem herzen/ ferloren ist das lucelin/ du must immer drinner sind.” “You are mine/ I am thine/ You are locked in my heart/ I have lost the little key/ You'll always have to remain there.” So simple.

I don't think I'm any more interested in German culture than I am in any other, but I suppose the fact that I went there when I was relatively young, and that I managed to sort of grasp some of it, and comprehend some it, and learned enough of the language to be able to read it, and I, at time -- shortly afterwards, I became quite interested in E.T.A. Hoffman.

Hoffman was perhaps somewhat like myself; he also was a painter, and a musician, and a stage person, and he wrote short stories, and wrote music criticism. He was kind of porte-manteau human being who did a thousand things, and I wrote a book on Hoffman, probably the first, and only, maybe – certainly the best book; and I say that, because I think -- I've seen other books on that subject, but I don't think anyone really understood Hoffman as well as I did in that sense, that he was a man of so many talents, and the talents were spilling out in so many directions that perhaps he had a problem in terms of finding the real core of his life, and he finally found it in literature, and it's a problem which I've sensed in myself at various times.

I'll get pulled into one thing or another, and then I'd discover that I've got to come back to the centre; I've got to find the centre again. In my case I think it's music, but it didn't prevent him from doing all these other things as well, and it doesn't prevent me from doing a lot of other things besides music.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman was a formative influence on the Romantic school of literature, and on the German school of composition, though he's best remembered for his fantastic tales. As a member of the judiciary, Hoffman had an early career as a civil servant. Now here too there's a similarity with Murray Schafer. Hoffman ridiculed the boredom of his position and caricatured his superiors, a lack of respect that got him relegated to a dismal position in an obscure town. Murray Schafer felt and reacted the same way to many of his superiors at the University of Toronto, who also tried to relegate him to obscurity. He credits this experience as the source of his passionate beliefs on music education.

MURRAY SCHAFER: I had a very bad musical education myself, or musical experience – music education experience at the University of Toronto, and also during my school days I just hated the way music was taught, so it took me quite a long time, but by the age of thirty-five or so I had come to a realization that music could be taught to everyone much more effectively than it was being taught, and I say “everyone” meaning literally that, that everybody has a talent for music; everybody should be making music, and should be performing music.

There was a statement that was once made to me by an Indian. He said, “No one in our tribe sings a wrong note.” I think it’s a wonderful statement. You know everybody in the tribe has a place, singing. That doesn’t mean there aren’t some stars, some who are more talented than others. It means that nobody is excluded simply because you don’t have all of the skills – all of the apparatus.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Beginning with an assignment in 1963 as artist and residence at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Schafer dedicated himself to teaching. He went on to spend a decade at Simon Fraser University, where he developed his ideas of creative hearing, and wrote such influential works on music education as: *The Composer in the Classroom*; *Ear Cleaning*; and *When Words Sing*. He also composed didactic works, many of which have become familiar landmarks of Canadian repertoire. Schafer wrote *Epitaph for Moonlight*, perhaps his best known work in collaboration with the members of a grade seven class. They were asked to make up synonyms for moonlight in an invented language.

It was while he was at Simon Fraser that Schafer developed the concept of soundscape as a response to the increasing incursion of noise into the environment. Schafer’s friend, Robert Walsh.

ROBERT WALSH: By the time he had reached Vancouver, noise had become a considerable problem for him, because he couldn’t insulate the house sufficiently to shut out the aircraft noise, and particularly the hovercraft, which had begun operating in the harbor, and their house overlooked the harbor at a distance of about three miles or something on the mountainside, but nevertheless when the hovercraft got busy, it created a tremendous roar, and that was really very, very distressing to him. He was agitated about it to the point where he actually mounted a public campaign to have the hovercraft stopped. He, I think, went around with his friends and succeeded in collecting some, if I’m not mistaken, 5,000 signatures to persuade the city of Vancouver to withdraw its permission to let the hovercraft enter the water of Vancouver.

STEVEN ADAMS: Murray taught the first course on noise pollution, I believe, in 1968, and as he has described it since, met with somewhat skeptical response of “oh, what will they think of next? Noise pollution?” Well, that situation, of course, has change very radically. We don’t have to defend that nowadays. People are very aware of the problems of noise pollution. In ’69 I believe he called for – announced a project that was the soundscape project and called for people to join it and to work with him in that area, and he taught various courses or workshops along those lines.

Then in ’71, I believe it was, the Donner Canadian Foundation really got the soundscape project off the ground with a kind of catalytic sort of grant. There was some money from Unesco for buying equipment, our field recording equipment, and since about 1971, there has been a fantastic amount of field recording done across Canada and through Europe, also in Australia, and this has produced a large number of documents.

The first one I think Murray wrote in 1970, the *The Book of Noise*, that attained quite a wide circulation, and announced a kind of approach towards the acoustic environment as a large composition – “macro-cultural composition,” I think was his phrase.

Of course this was already echoed in *The New Soundscape* booklet earlier than that, so it began, I think as an extension of his interest in music education, and naturally leads to *The New Soundscape*. Sound is all around, and one only has to listen to it; and then once you start listening, then inevitably you’re going to start asking questions and making judgments, and asking what can be done. So, it began with that kind of overview, a rather exciting kind of idea that we have landscape, okay, and why not have soundscape, or the acoustic environment? Why not design it, and why not be concerned about it? And of course it became very appropriate at a time when, not only Vancouver, but I think most of Canada was very much experiencing an awareness of pollution, and of the need for ecological thinking, so it came at a very socially significant kind of time, and then from there it developed through various individual projects, such as the survey of noise by-laws in Canada.

That was 1972, the composition of *Okeanos*, which was a collaboration of Bruce Davis and Brian Fawcett and Murray, which is four-channel composition about the sea and the sounds, and mythology, and imagery of the sea. The first big achievement, though, I think of the soundscape project came in 1972 and ’73, when we produced *The Vancouver Soundscape*, which is two records and a 72- paged booklet describing the Vancouver acoustic environment; past, present, and projections into the future.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Schafer’s biographer Steven Adams points out that Schafer’s soundscape theory goes right back to E.T.A. Hoffman. For Hoffman, nature was like an enormous orchestral score, breathing mysteriously. In time the environmentalist and the composer began to merge. The first of Schafer’s environmental compositions was *Music for Wilderness Lake* created in 1979. The idea was to put the performers and the audience into the natural environment, which itself becomes part of the composition.

It was Schafer’s intent to, in his own words, “return to an era when music took its bearings from the natural environment, a time when musicians played to the water, and to the trees, and then listened for them to play back.” His continuing collaboration with the environment has brought him here to the wilderness of the Haliburton Forest & Wildlife Reserve in central Ontario.

MURRAY SCHAFFER: In the daily ritual, and in the daily sort of recital of activities, each morning you are awakened by what we call “aubade”. An aubade -- it’s an old French word, you know, wake-up call, and it’s sung or played by a musician, usually across the lake, and when you hear the aubade that’s your signal to get up. There’s no talking permitted in the camp on getting up in the morning, so you get up silently and you go and wash, and then we all gather on a big rock, and when everyone is present, then we have a little greeting for the four directions: north, south, east and west, and the rising sun, and then after that we’re permitted to talk.

Margaret Mead somewhere says that, “we need more celebrations in our lives.” I think what she means is that we need more public kind of activities which draw a significant number of people together at regular times, so that they can celebrate something that they have in common, and I think we need that more and more, myself, in our society today, that we are so separate; we are so fragmented, that aside from things

like the Grey Cup, or the Stanley Cup, or something like that, people aren't really brought together to celebrate anything anymore, and so a lot of my works have tended towards the ritualistic ritual, in the sense that they are pieces that are intended to be performed at a particular place, or at a particular time of the year, at a particular time of day in order to celebrate a particular thing that I would hope that we might all be able to share together.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Schafer has moved from the ritualistic to the overtly religious, setting texts from far-flung faiths. These sacred works all share a common theme.

MURRAY SCHAFER: I think they deal with one of the essential issues of existence that tends to be ignored most in our lives, and particularly in our popular music culture; and that is death. If you think about pop music culture, it really just deals with puberty and cash. I don't think it gets any further than that, and so its basic theme is sex, and as important as that is -- I wouldn't deny it for a moment -- there are other things that are equally compelling, and one of them is the fact that our friends die, our parents die, our relatives die, and we will die; and religious works, such as the texts that I have dealt with, really are concerned with that issue, that existential issue, which is very important.

The last book of The Bible is full of drama and excitement, and so I conceived a work, since it's the destruction of the world, for 500 performers. I thought you couldn't kill the world with anything less than at least 500 performers, and so it uses a large number of different choirs, and children's choirs, adult choirs, speech choirs, and soloists, and it is acted out at the same time as it's performed.

EITAN CORNFIELD: *Apocalypsis* is a grand medieval pageant. The first part, *John's Vision*, lasts for an hour and a quarter, and uses hundreds of performers whose sounds and actions are coordinated by an army of conductors. The Toronto Star's music critic William Littler described the 1980 premier of *Apocalypsis* as "one of the most spectacular events in the history of Canadian music. Not only St. John the divine, but Cecil B. DeMille would have been impressed." The second part of *Apocalypsis*, *The Credo*, culminates in a 48-part Tutti, one of the most complex works ever composed. Here Schafer makes an exhaustive exploration of the nature of heaven.

MURRAY SCHAFER: I mean, where do we go? We, anointed, who will ascend, where is it that we're going to go? And instead of treating John's -- John of Patmos's text, well, he describes it of course, and he describes something with a place where there will be no more deserts, and there will be rivers flowing, and there will be trees blowing, and there will be houses for everyone. It sounds just like Don Mills in Toronto, or something, you know, and so I didn't want to set something that sounded like a modern "scruburb", and so I turned to another text by Giordano Bruno, who talks about the universe as being one. The Universe is -- "Lord God is Universe" is the basis of that text, so that was my -- the second part, the elevation to the new Jerusalem.

It seems to me it's only natural that as you develop more competence and more confidence that you want to try to do something larger, to see if you can handle a larger medium. After all, that's what art is really all about: can you handle a larger and more daring kind of scale of things? And so, I think it's just something that I've decided to set myself is these larger tasks, just to see if I can do it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: By far the largest task Schafer has set himself is *Patria*, or "Homeland". This is a monumental cycle of twelve works, some still in progress. Schafer said that in the *Patria* series theatre meets ritual; mythology penetrates art. The

activities of the performer and the audience become blurred. The arts court one another, flow together in confluence. The overall scale of *Patria* is immense.

MURRAY SCHAFER: In fact the conclusion alone of a piece called, *And Wolves Shall Inherit the Moon* which lasts for one week, so it's not – they're of varying durations, and they're of varying scale, and they're intended to be performed in different environments; some of them in theatres, some of them in outdoors environments, some of them at special times of the day; and *Ra* is done all night. It's an all-night ritual, so each one is rather different, and I never imagined them all being done at one time, in one place.

They are united, though, thematically. Some of the same characters recur. Some of the same themes are dealt with, and even some of the same scenes reappear in other works at different times, so there is a unity. Each one is self-contained, but if you knew something about the other works, and had seen the other works, or had read them, or had listened to them, then I think you would be further ahead in your appreciation of one of the other *Patria* pieces.

Our work is quite close idealistically, I guess, or ideologically, to ecology and to nature and our relationship with the environment, and trying to find a better, you know, relationship – a more harmonious relationship, this passes into the music, too. In this work, I mean, one of the things that you'll notice is, since we recorded it at five/six o'clock in the morning, for three mornings, you'll hear the birds; you'll hear birds and animals participating, reacting to the musicians.

One of the things that was quite noticeable, I think, is that different birds, and different animals seemed to react to different instruments, so, you know, trumpets can excite the loons, and clarinets will excite the crows, and it's quite evident really that there is a dialogue between the performers and the other creatures that are at the lake there sharing that space with us.

- transcribed by Darius Truhlar