

HARRY SOMERS **CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAITS SERIES**

Produced by Eitan Cornfield

HARRY SOMERS: Composition means reference to a body of tradition and a series of conventions. That's usually what it means, and we are no different than any allied sciences or arts, in music. Suddenly – not so suddenly – say, through the century, we've come to accept the whole range of sound possibilities as viable material for our use. You can compose it; you can put it together; and you're a composer. As far as the term 'music', it ain't Brahms, so I wouldn't worry about it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Harry Somers was perfectly capable of composing within any of the mainstream traditions of classical music, but his restless curiosity kept pushing him beyond the limits of convention.

Born in midtown Toronto in 1925, he was the son of an insurance executive and his Theosophist wife. Somers never played or cared much about music until a fateful summer night in 1939, when everything changed: he started piano lessons, but as soon as he began to play, he got the urge to compose. He grew up to be handsome, charismatic, eloquent, and massively talented. For a time, he was a matinee idol in the cloistered composing world.

His reputation peaked with the opera *Louis Riel* in 1967. *Riel* was the first completely Canadian opera. It was adventurous music and a bold production, and it was a huge critical and popular success; but instead of building on this triumph, Somers followed musical explorers like Charles Ives and John Cage, into the musical wilderness. For listeners and musicians alike, the terrain could be treacherous. So, why follow him on this journey?

The godfather of Canadian composers, John Weinzweig:

JOHN WEINZWEIG: Because it's compelling. It's compelling music, yes. It makes you want to listen.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: Why should you, as a Canadian, care for Canadian authors, who happen to be very good ones, and Canadian painters? Harry falls into that category of our greatest painters and our greatest authors, you know, and our composers have as much to say as composers anywhere in the world.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Victor Feldbrill argues fiercely for Somers' music. Their relationship goes back to that post-war generation of extraordinary young musicians at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

Robert Cram teaches at the University of Ottawa, and before that, for well over twenty years, he was principal flute player of the National Arts Centre Orchestra. Cram came into Harry Somers' life relatively late in the game. Cram and Somers first worked together in the 1970s, but that collaboration turned into a life-long friendship that ended with Harry Somers' death from cancer in 1999.

ROBERT CRAM: He had a natural gift, a natural ability for sound, and an intellect that allowed him to pursue it to the very ends of what is possible by human

beings. His voice is as good as anything happening – that was happening in the world – not very well-known outside Canada, just because of the way the world works.

NORMA BEECROFT: Like all Canadian composers in the 40s and 50s, he was largely ignored.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Composer Norma Beecroft:

NORMA BEECROFT: Perhaps broadcasting helped him develop his image, and television, and maybe in particular television, because Harry was something beautiful to look at, as well as to listen to. Not all of his music was all that accessible, but it all represented parts of him.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Somers' widow, actress Barbara Chilcott, thinks his music doesn't just represent part of him; it is him: you can't know who he is without knowing the music, and even then, he remains elusive.

BARBARA CHILCOTT: He never revealed more of himself than he was willing to let that particular person see at that particular point in time. This Scots background on his mother's side of the family – her name was McKie. She was, you know, fairly buttoned up, as J. B. Priestley would say, and I think that it was through his music that he allowed himself to be unguarded, but what he was guarding I have not quite figured out.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: He lived in a house where mother and father slept at different ends of the house, a mother who was a little bit kooky and off-centre and artistic, and a father who was a president of an insurance company. They never divorced, which is, you know, I don't know whether that would have been better or not. I have no idea, but he grew up in that atmosphere of hatred.

It was two people who had no use for each other. They had two sons. Bob who was more like the father, but a soft-spoken guy, nice guy, actually, Bob; and Harry who was obviously the apple of his mother's eye, very much so, and it must have stirred up a lot of hostility in him.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Harry Somers' old friend Irene Bird thinks that Somers responded to all of this by becoming withdrawn and guarded.

IRENE BIRD: Basically, he was shy. His whole life was his music and his composing. That was everything for Harry. Harry was just special. I mean, he was put into this world in a special planet of his own.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In a conversation with Norma Beecroft in the early 70s, Harry Somers remembered that planet as an enchanted place.

HARRY SOMERS: They say that if you can remember, then it wasn't that unhappy, because I know people who close off. They can't remember before the age of eight or nine, but I certainly can remember, and I can remember a very natural child who simply – and they had to tone me down – I don't know.

At the age of three, I would just get up in the morning, and run screaming out into the street, which I can remember, from the sheer joy of seeing daylight, and touching air, the texture of it, and the sounds; and they had to hide my clothes when I was five, because I loved the night so much. I used to wait until everybody was asleep, and it was a great adventure. I would get up, carefully put on my clothes, and I would get out about one o'clock in the morning, and I would wander the streets by myself at night, because the night was the strange and mysterious, marvelous time. It was the magic world.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Until he hit his teens, Somers' passions were for tennis and model airplanes, but deep down, something was on the boil.

HARRY SOMERS: It was the year of the war, and I think a lot of young people are very susceptible at a certain age. and this was – oh, I don't know. I was twelve, thirteen years old, and summer, the north, which has always been a part of my life. I guess it has been for a number of people who live in this environment. A doctor. a friend of friends, founder of Medic Alert in America, Dr. Max Breudel – I went over there, crossed the lake.

These people I was staying with lived on an island --sat down, and what I fondly remember is that, first, he was of the old school German; he brought out the cheese, and he brought out the beer; and I happened to have loved beer ever since I can remember, which goes back a long way, and I had always drank the dregs in the glasses.

Well, Max Breudel brought out the beer, and my mother was there at the time, and I thought this was magnificent. I was just about to take a gulp, and she was horrified, and he said to me, you know – he said to my mother, as a matter of fact: “How do you expect the boy to grow without beer? He has to drink his beer”.

And then, he sat down, and then his wife later sat down and played Mozart and Brahms and Beethoven, what I recognized as the old war-horses now, but it was a completely new world to me. I don't know whether it was the beer that did it, but from that instant, my whole life was going to be music, and that was it, and it was from – I don't know. It's – perhaps it's a spark-plug, you know. You just need something to ignite it at that age, and that was the ignition, so from there, nothing would do but I had to study music, find out what it was all about, and that's it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: When he got home, at the end of that summer, Harry convinced his parents to buy him a piano. He started taking lessons with a neighbourhood teacher, and almost immediately began to compose. Within two years, he had passed his Grade 7 piano exams, and he had a desk drawer full of compositions. Somers' genius came to the attention of a pianist and teacher at the Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music. His name was Reginald Godden.

Godden took Somers on as a pupil, but more importantly, he suggested Somers show his compositions to John Weinzweig. Weinzweig was Canada's leading composition teacher.

JOHN WEINZWEIG: There were some songs and some piano pieces. I recall that they were influenced by what we called impressionism. I would say the influence was Debussy. Now, Debussy was – at that time, was still a very modern composer, so he was really up to date.

At the age of sixteen, he was very creative, and I thought he had a sense of colour in the piano writing, and I had a feeling after looking over his work that I could not treat him as an average student in composition, because I might be putting the brakes on him.

And so, I put him on a fast course, and I cut out a lot of the text-book harmony. I accelerated his course, and it worked out quite well, because I gave him a chance to make discoveries on his own.

HARRY SOMERS: John would argue with me. He would discourse. We would argue a point, in relation to the composition, and I never had a feeling of some kind of non-equal or an irrational conversation, because he taught me that what I regard

as one of the most basic and important things is that your quality judgements will prohibit you from being able to analyze a score.

And, I would get very snotty at that age about certain Romantic composers, and he says, “Well, you better look at the orchestration”, or look at the continuity of the melodic line, and start to assess it and appraise it, and if you like it or dislike it, that’s your – you know, that’s your business, but it’s not your job as a composer. You must learn to be able to look at things, and, well, it was sort of an invaluable lesson that still remains with me.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: The first time I actually heard him was when he played his own sonata, a thing called *Testament of Youth*, and I mean, it was a hair-raising experience. I was, you know, like, God, this young guy playing this magnificent work was like, you know, like a Canadian Mozart.

It must have been about 1948. The CBC Wednesday Night came into being, and the first thing they did was have a house orchestra.

CBC ANNOUNCER: Tonight, we’re presenting some of the more recent compositions of Harry Somers, the young Toronto composer.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: And, the first thing that we broadcast, with Geoffrey Waddington, was the *North Country*.

CBC ANNOUNCER: Somers is only 23 now, and he has been writing significant ---

VICTOR FELDBRILL: It was Harry Somers’ brand new music.

CBC ANNOUNCER: The work was completed only ten days ago.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: We were breaking our fingers on it. It was not easy.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In 1980, Harry Somers took time to reflect on his musical development. It was in the form of a *Conversation With Myself*. His interlocutor was a certain Mr. Sremos, possessed of a suspicious mid-Atlantic accent, and adept at playing the role of devil’s advocate. Sremos sniffs at Somer’s trail.

MR. SREMOS: Anything more specific about those early works, to confuse the heathen: theoretical basis, technical details, operating principles, tedium like that?

HARRY SOMERS: I don’t think it’s necessary, at all. Those early works were written within a stylistic framework which is easily accessible to the ear of the average listener, and also, I believe, perfectly obvious to the specialist. The music of the first half of the twentieth century is the frame of reference.

MR. SREMOS: Any composers of that period you admired in particular, or who might have influenced your pristine purity?

HARRY SOMERS: Debussy and Bartok were my favourites, and certain works of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, as well as the music of Stravinsky, and some of my older colleagues in Canada.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: In a sense, I compare Harry with the Japanese. He was able to absorb many, many schools of thought, and filter them, and came out in the language of Harry Somers.

EITAN CORNFIELD: What is this language of Harry Somers that Victor Feldbrill is talking about? What rules, what vocabulary does it have? How would you recognize it? Flautist Robert Cram:

ROBERT CRAM: You know, it’s almost a question of how do you recognize a friend of yours in a crowd of a hundred people, and you just know it’s a friend right

away? You know, I mean, that's my first thought: Oh, my God, how do I know that you're Eitan when you're walking down the street?

If one had to use any single word to describe Harry's music, it's "intensity". There's a held focus that he never lets down. The silences are part of that intensity.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: Space and clarity: his music is never cluttered, and I think this has a lot to do with a lot of our Canadian composers who studied with John Weinzweig. John, who never forced his composition styles on his students, always insisted on his students being clear in what they were saying, and clarity was very much part of Harry's thinking.

JOHN WEINZWEIG: Harry was not a Hindemith type of composer. He was not a one-style composer, so, you know, you hear in his music an amalgam of different styles, and of different influences. At the same time, you become aware of a strong feeling for dynamic, and a strong sense of drama.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: He wrote, architecturally, tremendously long lines, unbroken lines, and if you listen to that part of his music, there's a linear beauty to it, but underneath everything he wrote, there is an energy underneath it, a rhythmic energy and restlessness.

EITAN CORNFIELD: At the end of five years of study with John Weinzweig, Harry Somers won a scholarship to study abroad. It was awarded by, of all people, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association. Harry had recently married Catherine Mackie, a girl he had known since high-school. The young couple chose to go to Paris, where Harry planned to study with Arthur Honegger. Honegger played hard to get, so Somers went to Darius Milhaud instead.

Looking back, Somers thought that Milhaud influenced him not so much in matters of style as perspective. Somers wrote that Milhaud's happy attitude to what is loosely termed "light music" and "popular music" had a certain effect on his thinking.

At the end of his year in Paris, Somers returned home to Toronto with four new works in his trunk. These included his second string quartet, and most of what would become the first symphony. It was the fall of 1950, and Toronto didn't offer enough work for a composer to be able to support himself, and a young wife. Somers tried driving cab, but after a couple of accidents, Harry proved himself incompatible with the road.

Luckily, he did have other qualities to complement his musicality. Norma Beecroft:

NORMA BEECROFT: When I first met Harry which was back – I was working in the early days of television, and that would have been 1954/55. He was doing some score for some television show, which I don't remember now, but I remember the impression that I had of him.

He was tall and stunning. He had a very, just striking face: high forehead, blonde curly hair, eyes that were fairly deep-set, and a very sensuous mouth, but his head was really like a marble bust, you know. He was a striking looking man, and I can remember seeing him in this television studio, and saying, "My God, that's the composer". You know, composers don't look like that, usually, right?

JOHN WEINZWEIG: You know, everybody liked Harry. Harry was easy-going. He carried no prejudice against anything or anybody, and so, people took to him,

and he wanted to make it on his own, and he became – he had a wonderful script for music, a very fine script. He was an artist with a pen, so he had another talent there.

HARRY SOMERS: I had always prided myself on my calligraphy and my handwriting in relation to music. I went to Dave Silverstein, who did all the – or a lot of the commercial copying in town. There were a few of them at that time, at the corner of Bay and Bloor, and that was quite an apprenticeship, because all that – I used to rule everything.

Well, you had to work fast, and I remember sitting there for fourteen-hour stretches, and the first few days, I was violently ill to my stomach, simply from the unaccustomed position, and the first week, it was like child labour of the last century. I don't know.

I would work – oh, I can't name the hours, and I maybe drew in about \$32.00 from that whole week's work, but over a period of about six months, I really learned how to copy, and was gradually – well, it got to the point I could go in, a few years later, one day a week, go in for a 24-hour stretch, and that would be my week's wages, and then leave me free to compose.

NORMA BEECROFT: He had a small apartment on Isabella Street, and that's where he was composing. He would spend hours and hours and hours sitting at the drawing board.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Irene Bird and her impresario husband Bailey provided Somers with a refuge from those long hours at the drawing board. Bailey Bird was in the business of promoting Canadian music. He and Irene opened their home to composers and musicians. The emerging young Montreal contralto Maureen Forrester was a frequent visitor.

IRENE BIRD: Any time Maureen was in town, they all came in to have, as we called it, a "social". Like, Harry, and all of these composers and artists were coming to the house, and they met one another, and Harry just thought this voice of Maureen's was something unheard of, and he wrote the *Five Dark Songs for Voice* for her. It's a wonderful work, and still performed a lot.

HARRY SOMERS: In those early years, much of my creative drive came from an inner urge to give intense expression and shape to the emotive side of human experience generally associated with the Romantics.

IRENE BIRD: "Romantic" is a very good word, and his music, I always felt, was so warm. I don't know why, but maybe because I knew the man so well, and you knew what he was thinking, and how important it was to him.

HARRY SOMERS: A good part of the reason I wrote and write is because I want anyone who will to share what I've created. I don't write for other composers. I don't write for history, with all due consideration for what you might say on such a subject: "Oh, how very touching, the bourgeois in bed with the proletariat".

NORMA BEECROFT: Harry did what he felt, and he was a free spirit and his music reflected that kind of free-spirited attitude toward life and people and everything else, and he was not weighted down by feeling he had to say something specific and carry a big serious message. As a matter of fact, he was one of the least serious composers that I know.

As a person, he was deadly serious about his work, when he was working, but he had this remarkable ability to look back and sort of see the world that moves along,

whether he was part of it or not. You know, he could see that this was one thing he had to do, and it didn't really matter whether the rest of the work cared or not. He enjoyed his life, when he was not working, but he also enjoyed his work.

HARRY SOMERS: It's strange the way one works; half by a kind of volition, half by a kind of drive that you don't acknowledge in whatever way this comes from ; half trying to look -- you know, you split yourself. You're a schizophrenic, really. That's what an artist is. Half is involved, and the other half is trying to appraise what that's about.

EITAN CORNFIELD: So, where do the composer and the person intersect? Does knowing one illuminate the other? Victor Feldbrill says you can't separate the two.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: My first impression of Harry was his music. I mean, his music knocked me out, you know, when I first heard it. I didn't really know him yet, and as I got to know him, I got to know his music better. I mean, it was hand in hand. You know, he was sort of a walking portrait of what his music was: long and lean, with this undercurrent going through him all the time. It was always there, under the surface.

I knew that there was a volcano erupting inside, and when occasionally he would hit the bottle, perhaps with just a little too much, there was a – not a meanness, but it wasn't a pleasant drunk, but he buried that as – you know, when he wasn't drinking, and, of course, most of the time, he wasn't.

I mean, he wasn't an alcoholic, but when I think of that energy that we're talking about that came out when he had some drinks was very much the energy we hear underlying the long lines of his music, is a kind of anger in there, and his music portrays that, and, as I say, the more I got to know him, I think the more I understood his music. I think it was hand in hand.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In the early 1960s, Harry Somers began to shift his attention away from instrumental music, to vocal music. It was also a time when he came increasingly under the influence of the American iconoclast John Cage.

HARRY SOMERS: The statement he made that so affected me was: "everything is composition". With that in mind, I then began to approach everything I did as an act of composition, though I'm sure I applied it in a more literal way than Cage intended.

At a gathering in which a few composers, including myself, were asked to give a lecture on how they used the voice in their composition, I sang my presentation, using a series of vocal sounds and phonemes. It later was developed into a piece called *Voiceplay*. "Ah, there's a nasty one. The famous velar nasal. It's named after the late soprano from Romania Velar Nasal. Now, we seem to be moving back to un-voiced sounds, and I'm getting frantic signals from under the piano, so that must mean that Mr. Somers is entering a new phase of his performance. Now, listen."

EITAN CORNFIELD: Although he composed *Voiceplay* for Cathy Berberian, Somers recorded the work himself. He relished the combined role of singer and actor. Barbara Chilcott:

BARBARA CHILCOTT: He was quite capable of putting on a big performance, yes. The theatricality increased in relationship to the alcohol intake, as well. He was very fond of champagne, and we were at my brother's cottage in Muskoka at one point, and Harry had contributed champagne to the evening, and we all decided to

go for a swim, and Harry was heard to shout, “Is there no more champagne left in the entire world?”, echoing across the lake.

NORMA BEECROFT: He was a bit of a nut, you know, when you got to know him. I can remember my being in a gathering of my family. They thought he was absolutely crazy, you know, because he would take off his socks, and he would sit there with his – admiring his prehensile toes, trying to use them as if they were hands, and the family thought he was completely mad, but, I mean, it was very funny, and this was the kind of personality that he was.

He just – he had no inhibitions about his body or his – you know, not that – he wasn’t an exhibitionist or anything like that, but he – I think he was very aware that he was a very good-looking guy, to begin with.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: I don’t think it’s so much as being a ladies’ man, as being adored by a woman, and maybe that’s what he had, -- and I don’t mean in the physical sense -- with his mother. Don’t misunderstand me, but she probably thought this was Adonis. You know, this was the god sent from the heavens to enrich her life, and he didn’t get that from his father. They never got together. I mean, he got just the opposite. He thought this was idiotic, what he was doing.

So, and all these women sort of adored him, and worshipped him, in a way. This is a god, you know. This is something so special, and, yes, I think he did succumb to that kind of – I wouldn’t call it flattery, but adoration. He wouldn’t have been human if he didn’t, I suppose, but the point was that he did, and I think sometimes with disastrous results.

JOHN WEINZWEIG: His wife, she had a sad ending.

EITAN CORNFIELD: What happened?

JOHN WEINZWEIG: She committed suicide. I think – you can only guess, I mean, from what we knew, that she needed him more than he needed her.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: He was, as a creative force, I think it’s probably very difficult to live with a person who is as creative as a person like Harry, and you had to be a very special person to understand that creative force, and I think there were problems that I would rather not go into, because it’s not necessary to the picture of the man, but I tell you, right to his final days, I don’t think he ever got over it.

NORMA BEECROFT: I was back in CBC Radio at that time, and I think I was working as a program organizer, and I heard that he had – that Kay had died, that she had committed suicide. He was devastated, absolutely devastated, and as a friend of his, I got him back to working in radio. I gave him a radio show on contemporary music.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: For listeners to its FM network, the CBC brings you another program in the weekly series, Music of Today. To introduce the program tonight, we’ve invited the well-known composer Harry Somers.

HARRY SOMERS: Tonight’s program consists of music and opinions by that rarely seen and sometimes heard phenomenon, the Canadian composer. Later on, the composers will talk about certain aspects of the composers’ world. The music to be heard will be by John Weinzweig, François Morel, and Harry Freedman.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In radio, Harry Somers had discovered yet another talent, and another source of revenue. Maybe it had something to do with the Cagelan notion that everything is music, but Somers threw himself into school broadcasts, and to teaching music in the community. All this activity culminated in a year spent spreading

the joys of musical discovery in the North York school system. He was increasingly losing himself in his work, and finding love.

Her name was Barbara Chilcott. She was a distinguished actress and co-founder of Toronto's seminal Crest Theatre.

BARBARA CHILCOTT: I can remember actually it wasn't the first time I met him. It would be the second time, which was several years after the first time, and it was at Harvey Hart's. He was a television producer in the sixties. Harvey said, you know, to people in general, "Do you know Barbara Chilcott?", and this voice, in a rocking chair, smoking a pipe, said, "Oh, yes, I know Barbie", so I went and sat on the floor beside him, and we talked endlessly. I don't know, but I didn't sleep all that night. It was just a feeling that I had found the other half of myself.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Love may have had something to do with it, but Harry Somers' explorations of the possibilities of the human voice combined with a tremendous burst of creative energy to culminate in his greatest triumph, the opera *Louis Riel*.

In 1965, he received a commission for an opera based on the contentious story of the Métis leader. The librettist was Mavor Moore; the conductor, Somers' old friend Vietor Feldbrill; and the deadline, Canada's centennial.

This was the very first full-length opera ever to be commissioned in Canada. So, why would the Canadian Opera Company want to mount a political story from Canada's past, and one with no love interest, at that?

HARRY SOMERS: I've had people who have come up to me, and they say, "What are you doing?", and I say, "Well, I'm doing an opera on Riel", and they laugh their head off. "Is there anything interesting in this country?", and I said, "Well, you know, if nothing else, I would love to create legend for young people who come along, that this actually is as dramatic a character as you will find – I don't care – Canada, anywhere".

It happens to be here, and that's what it's about, and I love to deal with something from my own environment, but it's very dramatic, and it's very universal.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: We spent months and months together, you know, as it was being composed, and that's when -- I foolishly had thought this was how all operas are put together, you know, where the composer or the conductor – I mean, when the composer is alive – stage director, set designer, are all in it together, and making it grow from scratch, and it became such an incredible team of people that when we approached the very first rehearsal, which was in that season, '67, the first rehearsals began as if we had already been rehearsing.

There was no guesswork, and the singers were – it was very well prepared, and somehow the excitement of the whole thing started to boil. We could feel the excitement just building up in the rehearsal studios.

HARRY SOMERS: Basically, the structure dramatically is strong as the devil. It is a confrontation of idea, of approach, the romantic and the pragmatist – who is Macdonald – which is marvelous, you know, dramatic material. There's no question about that.

What I've done essentially is juxtaposed Riel and Macdonald. Riel always sings. I think the romantic always sings. I think the political realist sings when necessary, but he uses a rather satirical form of speech.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Such a vast tableaux could only have been played out by a well-oiled team of collaborators, but sometimes the help could come from unexpected places. The third act of *Riel* opens with a moving aria *Kuyas*, Cree, for “Long Ago”. It’s there because one afternoon, a frustrated composer brought his work home with him. Barbara Chilcott:

BARBARA CHILCOTT: It was not written, this part of *Riel*. It was – he wrote it as a test piece for an international vocal competition in Montreal, and he was having trouble trying to find a lullaby for the beginning of the third act of *Riel*, so he called me one afternoon, and said, “Can you come over, because I’m really having difficulty with this, and maybe you have some ideas about it”. So, I took over a couple of bottles of champagne, because I knew that wouldn’t do any harm. I said, well, you know, “what about the *Kuyas*?”

I mean, there is the Indian connection, that it’s in Cree, and it’s talking about long ago, and it has sort of a feeling of – “No, no, that won’t do”. Anyway, after this second bottle of champagne, *Kuyas* was the opening.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: I think there were people who saw every performance of *Louis Riel*, and boasted about it. They loved it, but for me the biggest satisfaction, after all this hard work and everything, was the tremendous success it had with the public, and the world-wide critics – world-wide wrote this as a masterpiece. Some said it was the best opera since *Peter Grimes*. You know, this was in the English opera magazine, and it was a huge, huge, colossal success, for a new work, and the ovation that went on at the end, it was unbelievable.

EITAN CORNFIELD: In Canada’s centennial year, Harry Somers was the darling of classical composition, but he couldn’t stay there long. He was driven to keep experimenting, challenging himself and his audience.

HARRY SOMERS: I feel that the true nature of the arts is evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, no matter how radical it may at first appear. I believe that so-called new ideas appear when two divergent lines of thought intersect.

I always enjoyed another statement of John Cage’s to the effect that all you have to do to discover something is to go off the path.

ROBERT CRAM: I had look at a lot of the works that he wrote, especially starting at the end of the 1960s in through the 1970s and early ‘80s, and the truth is that almost all of the instrumental pieces he wrote during that period – and this is after *Louis Riel*, where he was held in the highest regard in the country -- all of those instrumental works received difficult or bad first performances. Many of them he never expected to hear again.

And, he didn’t write quickly. He would write a piece a year, and when one goes through the list of works during that period, which is one of his most experimental periods, is when he was trying to synthesize different influences, different aspects of music, a lot of experimental music, I think he got burned.

He had a big ego, and when someone has an ego like that, and works that hard, and a year later, there’s a lousy performance, and, well, there were only twenty people there anyway, it makes you wonder what it’s all about.

When you put a whole series of years of work together, and no response, I think he just basically thought, “Why should I waste my time if the response is going to be this way? There are people who have proven to me that they will commit and they will really

try to find my voice through my music”, and he ended up writing for those people, at the end of his life.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Victor Feldbrill was one of those people, and he remains dedicated to Harry’s music. Sometimes they had to share a rocky path, but for Feldbrill, every moment was imbued with meaning.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: I’m saying that a true composer is not somebody who says, “Oh, I know it all. You just do what I write” – sitting down with a performer and say, “Is this going to work? How does this feel? You know, this is what I’m trying to do. Is this the best way or is this the best way?”

To have that kind of shared experience in so many of his compositions, it was an honour to be allowed into the creative world, and I’ve always said, you know, no matter how fine a violinist is or a conductor is, he’s a re-creator, and it’s an important aspect for the composer to have a re-creator, of course, but without the creation, there’s nothing, and to be exposed to these creative forces – and I’ve had a very close relationship with a lot of composers, as you know – but Harry’s is a very special one.

It goes deeper than my relationship with most composers. It has been a privilege, and I think a very enriching experience for my life, no doubt about it.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Harry Somers’ productivity may have declined, going into the ‘70s and ‘80s, but he still attacked his work with focus and intensity. Barbara Chilcott:

BARBARA CHILCOTT: One hot summer day, he was at his desk writing, stark naked and smoking a pipe. For most of the time when we were married, he had his own studio, so then he would, you know, sort of disappear for days at a time, and when he was ready to eat or talk or do something, then he would turn up again, you know, “like a long-legged fly upon the stream, his mind moves upon the silence”. He and his music were indivisible. His life was his music. I certainly knew when we got married that I would never be first, you know.

I don’t think either of us admitted to ourselves that he was actually dying. I certainly wasn’t.

VICTOR FELDBRILL: What happened was I had been after Harry for years. I mean, he never went to see a doctor. You know, and when he went, it was too late. His prostrate had – it was all over, and I was in Florida, and Barbara phoned, and she said, “Victor, I’ve got to tell you. Harry is in his last days. He has asked to see you.” So, I went.

Yeah – and then, my daughters came up to see him with me, and he spoke to them and laughed with them, and he remembered stories about them, and things that they had done. It was very touching, and then, the next day, I flew back to Florida. One day later, he was gone.

- transcribed by Mara Zibens