



*MusicCanadaMusique 2000, a multi-million dollar Millennium celebration under the artistic directorship of Nicholas Goldschmidt, commissioned works by more than sixty Canadian musicians covering a variety of musical genres. With financial support from Commission Patron Ernst & Young and Commission Benefactor Ontario Power Generation, Oscar Peterson was commissioned to create Trail of Dreams: A Canadian Suite.*

There is an identifiable Oscar Peterson sound, recognizable but not categorizable. His original style does not fall easily into any specific idiom and he likes it that way. “I just do what I do and I don’t categorize myself in one category or another.” He is even reluctant to accept the title of

composer. “Well I don’t pretend to be Berlioz or Haydn or Ellington,” he demurs despite a lengthy list of compositional credits that includes his 1964 pictorial suite, *Canadiana; Fields of Endless Day*, a work that traced the escape railroad used by blacks escaping to Canada during the slavery era; a special waltz for the city of Toronto called *City Lights*, commissioned by Les Ballets Jazz du Canada; *A Royal Wedding Suite*; and a commissioned salute to Bach’s 300<sup>th</sup> birthday for trio and orchestra that, like *Trail of Dreams*, debuted at Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto.

*Trail of Dreams*, comprising of twelve “sound scapes,” is inspired by a 16,000-kilometre recreation trail that spans Canada. “I feel that the music speaks to the picturesque and photographic scenic quality of various places in Canada that the Trans Canada Trail passes through,” explains Peterson. The sound scapes depict scenes ranging from the Eastern shores of the island province of Newfoundland all the way west to the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, passing through Prince Edward Island, Montreal, the Highlands of Ontario, the Manitoba Province in central Canada and the prairie lands of the Alberta province and Western Canada.

Oscar Peterson was born in Montreal and he is a Canadian through and through. These sound scapes are aural depictions of visual and emotional memories of people, places, and wildlife; of glacial peaks, emerging dawns, and setting suns; of dancing, eating, and communing with nature. To collaborate on this suite for jazz quartet and chamber orchestra Peterson needed someone who shares his appreciation of musical paintings and who better for the job than Academy Award winning composer, conductor, orchestrator and pianist Michel Legrand. Peterson and Legrand have been close friends for many years, but have had only one prior opportunity to work together and that was a three-piano engagement with Claude Bolling.

These two men, both masters of their musical craft, share a deep and abiding dedication to music as one of life’s most powerful means of communication. While Peterson wrote from his love and knowledge of Canada, Legrand was not familiar with the specific trail, nor with the breadth of Canada. “I didn’t know this trail, but there was no need because the music says it all. Music is a language that Oscar and I speak,” explains Legrand. Peterson concurs, “That’s the whole intent of music – it’s the best communication in the world.”

Jazz, by its very nature, involves spontaneous composition, but to write it down first and play it later is a very different process. “It gives a different perspective altogether,” explains Peterson. “Writing gives you a chance to look back at what you’ve done whereas the playing is spontaneous, it’s there and it’s delivered immediately.” For some composers that can mean endlessly working and reworking a piece, but

that is not Peterson's approach. "I operate with the writing much the same as I do with the playing. When I write something, I write it and usually complete it as one unit. That's the way it goes out because I feel that the feelings that went into it at that time have to be pursued. If you're honest, you have to actually portray them as what there were when you conceived them."

Peterson clearly has deep feelings for all of the memories and images evoked by each composition in the suite, and he shared some of his thoughts with the audience at the concert premiere. The suite begins with OPEN SPACES, a view of the vast prairie lands of western Canada. "I conceived this selection to give you the feeling of the ever-ongoing prairie land." Prairie lands can evoke many different feelings and this view is a lively one; the strings chase playfully across the prairies, giving right of way to the swinging the quartet passing through.

Clear across the country to an eastern island province, strings set the dawn scene of MORNING IN NEWFOUNDLAND. Delicate guitar and piano lines awaken to the morning and float effortlessly on top of the lush strings anchored by large, ripe, and deeply resonant bass notes – if everyone could awaken to such beauty the world would be a happier place.

In the next selection it is the bass, backed by strings, that sets a peaceful tone. When the piano glides in with a clear and gentle line, a vision of THE OKANAGAN VALLEY emerges. "Perhaps one of the prettiest areas of Canada—it happens to be a place, in British Columbia, that also supplies us with wonderful and eagerly awaited fruits and vegetables."

DANCETRON was written for the Arcadians, a Canadian Celtic group. "I wanted to recreate the spirit and effervescent joy of Arcadian music. Many times I've watched, not just listened, but watched the dancers. It's a dedicated thing with them, a matter of *dancing the music*, rather than just dancing. It's written for the click of their feet." The happy country feeling evoked by the strings at the opening is infused with rich harmonies that give way to a jazzy exuberance when the quartet bursts forth. At the end, the dancing fiddles fade away into the countryside.

In BALLAD TO PEI Ulf Wakenius's guitar lines ripple over piano chords like waves lapping the shoreline. "Being a region that nestles quietly on our East Coast, Prince Edward Island is renowned for its beauty and tranquility. I hope this selection conveys that feeling."

Peterson describes the inspiration for COOKIN' ON THE TRAIL as "a vision of youngsters enjoying the new Trail of Dreams, and stopping to have a happy trailside meal." The quartet starts out swinging down the trail and as they travel the strings swell in and out illuminating the surroundings with a sense of childlike wonder.

"Whenever I see photographs of Banff I am reminded of the snowy peaks with the sun twinkling at intervals on these huge glacier-like mountains. This is the way I see Banff." BANFF THE BEAUTIFUL is steeped in a gentle majesty. The piano enters with graceful simplicity atop the strings, and together scale the heights, modulating to new plateaus and vistas.

Leaving the glacier-like mountains in Alberta, LONESOME PRAIRIE, featuring bassist Niels Pedersen, returns to another view of the ongoing prairie lands of Western Canada. This lonesome prairie seems to invite a solitary communing with the land.

THE FRENCH FIDDLER is a happy, swinging mélange of country fiddle and jazz sophistication. As a teenager growing up in Montreal, Peterson would from time to time sneak into the Café St. Michel to listen to the jazz players working there. "I was in perennial awe of the talents of a minute French-speaking violinist by the name of Willie Gerrard," recalls Peterson. "I think his musical spirit reflects the

people of the Quebec area, and I wrote this as a salute to his huge talent that somehow was never recognized.”

“I shall never forget sitting on the dock on Big Straggle Lake watching the beauty of evening approach,” says Peterson reminiscing about the cottage he had for almost thirty years in the Haliburton Highlands of Ontario. Harcourt Park, to be exact. “I would use its beauty and tranquility as a healing salve for my road sores and touring ills. This particular piece, HARCOURT NIGHTS, reaches deeply into my innards. From the first rehearsal, I have had the feeling that the intent of this composition also reached Michel, as I think you will hear from the wonderful orchestral interlude he wrote after the melody.”

Minuets originated as a French dance of rustic origin and were introduced into the court of Louis XIV in the mid 1600s. A minuet is a dance of graceful dignity in moderate 3/4 tempo and MANITOBA MINUET is no exception. “Having traveled through Manitoba on various occasions I have always had the feeling that this community had a delicacy about it in its efforts to become one of the major regions of Canada. I tried to portray this delicate undercurrent with my composition.”

From the solidity of the opening chords to Martin Drew’s ending drum roll, ANTHEM TO A NEW LAND is a majestic and elegant salute the newest area of northern Canadian wildlife and beauty and to the spirit of the people there. “I think Canada took a great step in the form of recognition when it created the area that we now know as Nunavut,” explains Peterson. “The people of this region have certainly gone unrecognized for more than long enough. As a tribute, I decided that, along with the government’s decision in recognizing them, they deserved an anthem dedicated to their culture. So I wrote one.”

*Trail of Dreams: A Canadian Suite* premiered at Roy Thompson Hall on April 11, 2000 after only a single day of rehearsal. Was it an amazing feat or an act of consummate trust? Both. Peterson had not even heard Legrand’s orchestrations prior to the rehearsal. “I called upon Michel’s talents to supply the orchestral needs as I saw and heard them,” Peterson explains. “I sent him a tape of the music that I had written and used some electronic instruments to give him just an idea of what I had in mind for the background.” The rest was up to Legrand. “I think that not having any prior knowledge of what he had written was even more inspirational because it gave me a boost. That’s the essence of jazz, the spontaneity of it.”

Looking back at the rehearsal Peterson recalls “how well it came off and how well the strings assimilated themselves into the music and what the quartet was doing. Michel effected an immediate communication with all the players and explained how he would like to hear every part of the music. I attribute much of our success to Michel.” Legrand says the key is simple, “You have only to make the orchestra love what they are going to play.” Add in the stellar musicians that make up the Peterson Quartet - guitarist Ulf Wakenius, bassist Nils Henning-Ørsted Pederson, and drummer Martin Drew – and top-notch string players from the Toronto Symphony, and the result can only be magical. In the words of Michel Legrand, “Make silence around you, close your eyes, and enjoy.”

— Devra Hall

Devra Hall is a prolific chronicler of jazz luminaries. In addition to her role as writer and music/talent coordinator for several jazz videos and a syndicated television show hosted by Nancy Wilson, she is the author of numerous books and magazine articles. Her current project is a biography of influential jazz manager John Levy.