# Pentland, Barbara Lally (1912-2000)

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Barbara Pentland was arguably the most rigorously modernist Canadian composer of her generation. During the late 1940s she adopted serial techniques and by the mid-1950s had forged her mature style: spare, elegantly constructed, abstract, yet with a rich timbral palette and surprising lyricism. She made adept use of new techniques throughout her career. She taught at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto (1942-1949); then at the University of British Columbia (1949-1963). She received a Diplôme d’honneur from the Canadian Conference for the Arts (1977); honorary doctorates from the University of Manitoba (1976) and Simon Fraser University (1985); the Order of Canada (1989); and the Order of British Columbia (1993). Situated within the confluence of early women’s rights struggles and Canada’s search for identity at the official end of colonial rule in 1931, Pentland’s musical modernism lent authenticity and authority to her artistic voice: her music sounded neither British nor stereotypically feminine. As one reviewer observed, Pentland’s music had “that cool remoteness which conjures wide-open spaces and is probably as close to a national sound as anything Canadian composers have achieved.”

Barbara Pentland was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to a well-off family whose ambition to make a socialite of their daughter was persistently thwarted by her interest in music and in the life of the mind. Undaunted by parental opposition and the bleak prospects of the Great Depression, Pentland acquired an education rivaling that of any of her Canadian peers. In Paris in 1929, ostensibly attending finishing school, she studied with composer Cécile Gauthiez, receiving a thorough grounding in harmony, analysis, and counterpoint, and strong encouragement to compose: “You have the flame, you must go on.” Once back in Winnipeg, Pentland used her dress allowance to pay Gauthiez for correspondence lessons.

Pentland won a fellowship to Juilliard in 1936, earning her degree in three years. Unable to secure a position in New York or Montreal, she returned to Winnipeg, producing music for a radio drama, *Payload,* and a children’s ballet, *Beauty and the Beast*. On the strength of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Symphony for Full Orchestra* (1940), she became the first woman composer to attend Tanglewood, where she studied with Aaron Copland.

Pentland met Harry Adaskin and John Weinzweig on a 1941 visit to Toronto, and subsequently moved there on Weinzweig’s encouragement, barely supporting herself teaching at the Royal Conservatory of Music. Her *Studies in Line* (1941) for piano were performed in New York in 1942. Reflecting the burgeoning national interest in Canadian music, the CBC International Service presented a broadcast on Pentland in 1946, including *Studies in Line*, *Song Cycle*, and *Sonata for Cello and Piano*. Pentland met composer and recent Schoenberg student Dika Newlin (1923-2006) at the MacDowell Colony in the summers of 1947 and 1948. Together they studied Newlin’s collection of Schoenberg and Webern scores as well as René Leibowitz’s overblown manifesto of musical modernism, *Schoenberg and His School*. Pentland appreciated the organizational potential of serial technique and employed it in her 1948 *Wind Quintet*.

In 1949 Harry Adaskin, now head of the University of British Columbia Music Department, offered Pentland a teaching post, citing her reputation as a proponent of modernism. In 1950 she participated in “An Investigation into Modernism in the Arts,” a symposium hosted by CBC Toronto, and wrote an article in *Northern Review* outlining her artistic concerns: “Our American contemporaries have the music of Copland, Piston and many others which they can respect […] We have had no such important innovators to make our expression unfold from the material around us.” For Pentland, the innovative efforts of pioneering composers were essential both to the development of a distinctively Canadian form of musical expression and to the natural evolution of culture. Pentland’s chamber opera, *The Lake* (1953, libretto by Dorothy Livesay), treats of these themes through the conceit of pioneer/colonist Susan Allison, who aimed to “nurture the land from wilderness.” Pentland, like Allison, decried patriarchy—while excepting Schoenberg, Bartok, Stravinsky, and Hindemith, whose work constituted music’s “natural heritage.” Pentland’s exposure to postwar serialism at Darmstadt’s 1955 New Music Course helped solidify her mature style. A BBC broadcast of her piano works in 1955 and a performance of her organ concerto in Westminster Abbey in 1957 attestted to her growing international acclaim. *String Quartet No. 2* (1953) was the first Canadian work ever to be selected for performance at an International Society of Contemporary Music Festival. This coup was marred by an evident betrayal: the Canadian League of Composers withdrew its ISCM membership by telegram during the 1956 Festival, leaving Pentland, as League delegate, stranded in Stockholm.

Pentland’s first large work in her mature style, *Symphony in Ten Parts* (1956), was composed during a 1957-1958 European sojourn. She returned to a music department with new head, an increasingly American faculty, and, to Pentland’s consternation, no counterpoint requirement for composition students. Pentland was now getting numerous commissions, including one from the Winnipeg Symphony for *Symphony No. 4* (1960), which occasioned a triumphal return to her hometown. Her growing success, her 1958 marriage to John Huberman, and a recent inheritance enabled Pentland to resign the contentious UBC post in 1963 in order to compose full-time.

Canada’s 1967 Centennial brought her three important commissions: *Trio con Alea*, incorporating aleatoric zones; *Septet*; and her large *Suite Borealis* for piano. The anti-war movement inspired Pentland’s *News* (1970) for soprano, prepared tape, and orchestra. After 1970, Pentland focused on chamber, piano, and vocal works such as *Interplay* (1972) for accordion and string quartet; a brass quintet, *Occasions* (1974); a song-cycle of Dorothy Livesay’s poetry, *Disasters of the Sun* (1976) for mezzo-soprano, nine instruments, and prepared tape—Pentland’s longest work; and *Éventa* (1978) for large ensemble and harp.

The 1980s were the last decade of Pentland’s composing life. She explored environmental themes in *Tellus* (1982) for mixed quartet and in *Ice Age* (1986) for voice and piano. After *Canticum, Burlesca and Finale* (1987) for piano, her productivity was hampered both by health problems and by disillusionment: the modernistic style Pentland had cultivated with such imagination, sophistication, and exquisite musicality had not supplanted the diatonic tonality which modernism had relegated to the past.

Further Reading:

Beckwith, John and Kenneth Winters (1992). “Barbara Pentland.” *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, Second Edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press. (An extensive and authoritative entry including a works list categorized by instrumentation)

Cornfield, Eitan (2003). “Pentland Documentary,”  *Canadian Composers Portrait Series*, Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCD 9203, Disc 1. (An insightful assemblage of commentary by Pentland herself, her friends and colleagues, former students, performers, and scholars.)

Danielson, Janet Henshaw (2009). “Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland,” *Circuit: Musiques Contemporaines* Vol. 19 No. 1. (A comparison of three Canadian women composers’ strategies in the face of twentieth-century modernism.)

DeGraaf, Melissa J. (2008). “‘Never Call Us Lady Composers,’ Gendered Receptions in the New York Composers’ Forum 1935-1940,” *American Music*, Vol. 6, no. 3. (Provides detailed background about women musician’s struggles against poverty and against ideologies such as the virility of modernism, during the years Pentland was in New York.)

Duke, David (1998).  “Notes towards a Portrait of Barbara Pentland: Issues of Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Canadian Music,” Musicworks 70. (A helpful reminder of some of the questions left unanswered which pertain to Pentland’s political context.)

Eastman, Sheila, and Timothy J. McGee (1983). *Barbara Pentland*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press. (The main biography of Pentland.)

Eastman, Sheila (1974). Barbara Pentland: A Biography. PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia.

Keyes, Daniel (2011). "Whites Singing Red Face in British Columbia in the 1950s," *Theatre Research in Canada/ Recherches Théâtrales au Canada (TRiC/RTaC*) 32.1 (Includes insightful critical analysis of Pentland’s *The Lake* in relation to colonial culture.)

Selected Works in Chronological Order:

Lament (1939), full orchestra

Rhapsody 1939 (1939), piano

Beauty and the Beast (1940), ballet-pantomime for two pianos

Studies in Line (1941), piano

Arioso and Rondo (1941), full orchestra

Holiday Suite (1941), chamber orchestra

Variations (1942), piano

Concerto for Violin and Small Orchestra (1942)

Song Cycle (Anne Marriot) (1942-5), soprano and piano

Sonata for Cello and Piano (1943)

String Quartet No. 1 (1945)

Piano Sonata (1945)

Symphony No. 1 (1945-8), full orchestra

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1946)

Colony Music (1948), piano and strings

Variations on a Boccherini Tune (1948), full orchestra

Octet for Winds (1948), woodwind and brass ensemble

Dirge (1948), piano

Concerto for Organ and Strings (1948)

Symphony No. 2 (1950), full orchestra

Ave atque vale (1951), full orchestra

Two-Piano Sonata (1953)

String Quartet No. 2 (1953)

Ricercare for Strings (1955), string orchestra

Interlude (1955), piano

Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra (1956)

Symphony for Ten Parts ‘Symphony No. 3’ (1957), small orchestra

Toccata (1958), piano

Three Duets after Pictures by Paul Klee (1959), piano 4-hands

Canzona (1961), flute, oboe, harpsichord

Cavazzoni for Brass (1961), brass quintet

Fantasy (1962), piano

Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano (1963)

Strata (1964), string orchestra

Trio con alea (1966) string trio

Suite Borealis (1966), piano

Septet (1967), horn, trumpet, trombone, organ, violin, viola, violoncello

Cinéscene (1968), chamber orchestra

String Quartet No. 3 (1969)

News (1970), violin, orchestra, and prepared tape

Variations Concertantes (1970), piano and orchestra

Sung Songs No. 4 and 5 (H’Sin Ch’I-Chi, transl. C. M. Candlin, 1971), mezzo and piano

Interplay (1972), accordion and string quartet

Vita Brevis (1973), piano

Occasions (1974), brass quintet

Ephemera (1974-78), piano

Res Musica (1975), string orchestra

Disasters of the Sun (Dorothy Livesay) (1976), mezzo, nine instruments, and tape

Éventa (1978), flute, clarinet, trombone, violin, violoncello, two percussion

Trance (1978), flute and harp

String Quartet No. 4 (1980)

Elegy for Horn and Piano (1980)

Commenta (1981), harp

Tellus (1982), flute, violoncello, percussion, celesta

Quintet for Piano and Strings (1983)

Vincula (1983), piano

Horizons (1983), piano

String Quartet No. 5 (1985)

Ice Age (Dorothy Livesay) (1986), soprano and piano

Canticum, Burlesca and Finale (1987), piano

Collections:

Music of Now, Books 1, 2, 3 (1969-70), piano

Articles by Pentland:

“An experiment in music,” *Canadian Review of Music and Art*, Vol. 2, Aug.-Sept. 1943, “Canadian Music, 1950,” *Northern Review* Vol. 3, Feb.-Mar. 1950

The Canadian Music Centre

<http://www.musiccentre.ca/apps/index.cfm?fuseaction=composer.FA_dsp_biography&authpeopleid=1016&by=P>

This very helpful site has a searchable list of works, discography, and archival recordings.

Selected Discography:

“Barbara Pentland” *Canadian Composers Portraits*. Toronto: Centrediscs, 2003. CMCD 9203

*By A Canadian Lady* (Elaine Keillor) 1999 Carleton Sound CSCD-1006

*Delicate Fires* (Tiresias Ensemble) 2007 Redshift TK 421

*Disasters of the Sun* (Turning Point Ensemble, Owen Underhill, conductor) 2006  Centrediscs / Centredisques CMCCD 11806

Videos: Disasters of the Sun Part 1 and 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-JL4smuLPM>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzr24ymqAv4>

