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VIOLET ARCHER

A Bio-Bibliography

Linda Hartig

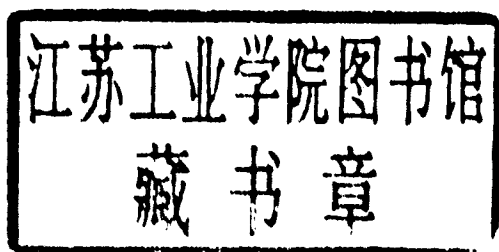
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Preface

Violet Balestreri Archer has become one of Canada's most prolific composers and outspoken advocates of contemporary music. Her influence as composer, educator, and supporter of contemporary Canadian music makes her an appropriate subject for the Greenwood Press composer bio-bibliography series.

The present volume consists of the following sections:

- (1) a short Biography, prepared with the generous assistance of Violet Archer herself;
- (2) a complete list of Works and Performances, classified by medium of performance and then arranged alphabetically by title. Following each title are details of premiere performances and other successive performances. Each work is prefaced by a mnemonic "W" and performances of that work are identified by successive lower case letters. Most manuscripts are available from the Canadian Music Centres, with the Toronto branch having the most complete holdings;
- (3) a selected Discography of commercially produced long-playing records. Each recording is listed alphabetically by title and is prefaced by a mnemonic "D." Reference is made to reviews of the recordings cited in the "Bibliography." The Canadian Music Centres also have taped recordings of performances which were not produced commercially;
- (4) an annotated Bibliography of writings by and about Violet Archer, her life and her achievements, with annotations often in the form of quotations taken from reviews. Each citation is preceded by the mnemonic "B." Entries in the Bibliography refer to the "Works and Performances" and "Discography" sections.

In addition, appendices provide alphabetical and chronological listings of Archer's works and the addresses of the Canadian Music Centres. A complete general index concludes the volume.

Acknowledgments

It has been a delight to work with Dr. Archer on this project. She has given much time to proofing lists and has been very generous with time at her home in Edmonton and with telephone conversations. Without her assistance, this volume would not be possible. I must also thank my husband, Hugo, for his proof-reading skills, and my children for understanding the hours spent at the computer.

Many other people were of great assistance as well. The Interlibrary-Loan Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee--Ewa Barczyk, Merrilan Edwards, Holly Klemmer and Christine Leitner--processed countless requests with a smile. Maria Calderisi of the National Library of Canada in Ottawa was a great help in getting started on this project. Mark Hand, Librarian of the Canadian Music Centre in Toronto, was very helpful with letters and with assistance when I visited the Toronto CMC. John Reid, director of the Violet Archer Library, Canadian Music Centre-Prairie Region, and his assistant, Pamela Yong, graciously searched for and sent many items through the mail. Don Hixon, general editor of this series has been particularly encouraging and patient. My colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee have all served as moral support, and I thank them for their encouragement.

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Biography

Violet Balestreri Archer (b. April 24, 1913) has become one of the leading forces behind contemporary music in Canada. Her energy, drive and intensity have propelled her to the forefront in Canada, not only as a major composer of this century, but also as a prominent educator. Although she retired formally in 1978, she continues to teach at the University of Alberta and gives workshops regularly in Canada and abroad.

Born as Violet Balestreri in Montreal to native Italian parents, Violet was the third of four children, all of whom share a love of music. Violet, however, is the only one to whom music became all-consuming. Even as an infant, she reacted excitedly to the sound of a piano. As a young girl, she loved to play the piano when visiting friends and relatives, but only after years of pleading with her parents did they consent to buying a piano. She was nine years old when the piano arrived in her home.

During the next several years, Violet studied piano, first with Madame Cadieux-Abran, and later with Madame Gagnon (who demanded training in solfège as well). She loved to make up music at the piano, and her first attempt (she calls it an attempt, not a composition) at writing music was at the age of sixteen. She was studying a poem by Lord Tennyson in school and was inspired to set it to music.

Although the family loved music, Violet's father, a chef by profession, was rather conservative when it came to women. He felt women could not possibly make their way in the world as musicians. His daughters were to be teachers or secretaries. And when it came time to go on to college, the Great Depression had made itself felt in Canada as well as the United States. Parents could do nothing to help their children financially through college. The young Miss Archer was determined, nonetheless, to pursue a degree in music at McGill Conservatory.

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At that time, McGill offered a three-year degree in music. Because it was necessary that she work her way through school, Miss Archer took six years to complete her degree. Her jobs were time-consuming, but valuable as musical experiences. At the age of eighteen, she began to teach privately. For two years she was also an accompanist for the students of Merlin Davies, a Welsh vocal coach in Montreal. She arranged time off to attend classes, but much of her homework was done out in the hall while Prof. Davies students did their vocalizing. She had only Sundays to herself. Although she lived at home with her family, she contributed part of her earnings toward room and board, and her private students helped to fund her studies at McGill. Her brothers and sister had similar arrangements, working during the day and attending night school to work on degrees in business.

Montreal and McGill Conservatory offered many wonderful musical opportunities to a talented young musician. Miss Archer accompanied the McGill Choral Society, and it was recommended that she attend at least one rehearsal each week of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, which was conducted by McGill's Dean, Douglas Clarke. She was so enraptured by the symphony that she attended nearly every rehearsal and all of the concerts. From 1939 to 1947 she was deputy organist for several Montreal churches and she played with the Montreal Women's Symphony for nearly eight years as a percussionist. Ethel Stark, a Canadian graduate of Curtis Institute and student of Fritz Reiner, conducted the symphony, incorporating numerous contemporary works into the programming.

Although piano was Miss Archer's first love, her entrance into McGill, as Brian Baillie notes (See: B21), introduced her to an even more exciting instrument--the orchestra. Interestingly enough, the first one of her works she heard in live performance was an orchestra piece titled *Intermezzo*. This work was submitted to McGill's composition jury in 1936 and played later at a graduation concert.

As she became more and more immersed in the musical life of Montreal, and partly because she heard so much symphonic music with her attendance at symphony rehearsals, Miss Archer began to dream, much as Walter Mitty did in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, of one thing--the Montreal Symphony was playing her music. Finally, in 1940, she found the courage to bring her *Scherzo Sinfonico* to Douglas Clarke, Dean of McGill and conductor of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. He played it thoughtfully at the piano, then said, "We shall do it." A performance was scheduled, but that week King George VI died, and the symphony concerts were programmed differently, dashing the hopes of the young composer. Fortunately, the *Scherzo Sinfonico*, the third movement of her *Symphonic Suite*, was rescheduled for performance soon thereafter.

After receiving her licentiate in piano in 1934 and her Bachelor's degree in composition from McGill in 1936, Violet Balestreri Archer (the Balestreri family agreed to add the English translation, Archer, to

their family name in 1940) continued her studies at McGill, receiving four scholarships to study composition with McGill's Dean, Douglas Clarke, from 1939-1943. Dean Clarke's method of directing students in composition was to assign a particular type of composition, for example an overture, and to have his students then study scores of other contemporary overtures as they were writing their own. He did not consult with his students about works in progress, but rather critiqued only their completed compositions. During this time, Miss Archer also earned the Associate Diploma of the Royal Canadian College of Organists while studying organ with John Weatherseed.

Feeling the need for further study in composition, Miss Archer began to search for an appropriate teacher. The music of Bela Bartok had interested her, and when she heard that he would be in Montreal in 1942, she hoped to meet him. Because of the War, however, visa problems kept Bartok from entering Canada. The determined Miss Archer discovered he could be reached through Boosey & Hawkes in New York, and so without introduction of any kind, or accompanying examples of her compositions, she wrote a letter of inquiry to see if Bartok would take her as a student. She was excited to receive a reply asking to see her compositions. After Bartok had reviewed her music, he wrote that he would give her instruction at \$10.00 per lesson, and so began an association with Bartok that lasted his few remaining years.

When lessons began, Bartok humbled the young composer immediately by asking if she knew the symphonies of Haydn. When she answered eagerly in the affirmative, he replied that he had been studying them for years and still did not know them.

The lessons with Bartok not only introduced Miss Archer to Hungarian melodies and rhythms, but heightened her awareness of modality and rhythm in general. He stressed musical clarity and economy of expression. He helped her to develop the capability to have a vision of the overall work, to cultivate a sense of what to use and how much of it. Study with this master left her with an ongoing interest in incorporating folk music into her work.

Just as Miss Archer was finishing her study of composition at McGill in 1943, Claude Champagne, professor of harmony and composition at McGill, took a new position with the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal. Miss Archer was hired then to teach all of the courses she had earlier taken from Prof. Champagne in harmony, counterpoint and fugue. This adjunct position she held for the next four years.

In 1947, the opportunity to study at Yale came in the form of scholarships: the Bradley Keeler Memorial Scholarship in 1947 and the Charles Ditson Fellowship in 1948. These scholarships, along with two grants from the Quebec government (1947 and 1948) gave Miss Archer her first opportunity to study without working, too.

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Courses at Yale included study of twentieth-century techniques with Richard Donovan, and composition with Paul Hindemith. Finding Hindemith to be a teacher of "genius mentality," Miss Archer took every class he taught. Study with Hindemith left its mark on Violet Archer in several ways. He stressed the importance of understanding the fundamentals of harmony, fugue, canon--the traditional disciplines--which she continues to explain to her composition students today, and she follows Hindemith's adage that the composer must be able to play what he has written, however badly, on the instrument for which the music was written. Working with the performer is essential. Fortunately, Miss Archer had previously incorporated into her studies lessons on clarinet at Yale, strings at Juilliard (during a summer workshop), brasses at McGill, and her years as a percussionist with the Montreal Women's Symphony had been preceded by instruction on the various percussion instruments with Louis Decaire, timpanist with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

The classes with Hindemith were demanding. As an example, students were asked to improvise three parts above a bass line, one part at a time, and after the parts had been improvised, and without having jotted any notes, one student was chosen to write out the four parts on the blackboard from memory. Piano was not used. Students had to be able to hear scores in their heads. Hindemith used his own textbook on harmony, but he did not ever speak of his own music in classes.

At the conclusion of her studies at Yale, Miss Archer received not only a Master's degree in Composition, but also the coveted Woods Chandler Prize for Composition for her thesis, *The Bell*, a cantata for mixed chorus and orchestra based on the *Sermons and Devotions* of John Donne.

Upon finishing her degree at Yale in 1949, Miss Archer wanted to take a musical tour of post-war Europe to absorb the atmosphere and possibly also to find a teaching position in England. Using her savings, and with the help of the Montreal Ladies Morning Musical Club's Bursary for Study Abroad, Miss Archer set sail for Europe in 1949. Just before leaving, she learned that Darius Milhaud would be on the same ship. Taking the advice of a friend, she found the courage to approach him and introduce herself. After chatting a bit, he asked to see some of her music and made encouraging comments about it. Although Milhaud invited her to visit him in Paris, she was too shy to do so.

Thoughts of teaching in England were given up after visits and interviews all over London yielded at best "your qualifications are excellent, but we would prefer to hire a man." Positions in the United States were scarce, but in Canada the work scene for musicians was even more hopeless. Miss Archer returned to Montreal, having left applications with agencies in New York and Chicago. Finally, just before school started, she received an offer from North Texas State College in Denton, now the University of North Texas.

The position at North Texas provided several exciting experiences. In addition to teaching theory and composition, Miss Archer taught in the Piano Department, which was filled with talented students, and she taught Italian diction to vocal students. She also had the opportunity to take a doctoral musicology course from a visiting professor, Otto Kinkeldei. This course on Beethoven influenced Miss Archer's study of music by heightening her awareness of the socio-political scene surrounding composers. In her study and teaching, Miss Archer is always aware, and directs her students to be aware, that what is happening around a composer will, to some degree, affect the music that composer writes.

As she would in all future positions, Miss Archer also started a student composer's forum at North Texas. For three years, she enjoyed this fine music department, but then she was to be assigned as a piano teacher only. Not being able to separate herself from theory and composition, she resigned in 1953.

An opportunity to continue teaching theory/composition and piano at the University of Oklahoma presented itself, and in 1953, Miss Archer took up residence in Norman, Oklahoma, for eight years. During her stay in Oklahoma, Miss Archer received two grants for composition: one to compose at the MacDowell Colony the summer of 1956, and the other--a grant from the Canada Council--gave her a year's leave to compose in 1958-59.

Miss Archer also hosted both a radio program and a television program while in Oklahoma. The radio program discussed graded 20th-century piano music; the pieces discussed were then performed by her. The television program also provided a platform for Miss Archer to discuss 20th-century music in general and to perform keyboard music for four hands. She augmented her performances by asking her fellow professors to suggest students who could perform with her.

A long-time member of Sigma Alpha Iota, Miss Archer sponsored the student chapter of this group, the Alpha Iota chapter, at the University of Oklahoma. The students in the chapter were so motivated as to arrange monthly recitals. Much of this recital music was American. It was during this time that Sigma Alpha Iota made Miss Archer an honorary member.

In the summer of 1961, Miss Archer began studies toward a doctorate at the University of Toronto. Unfortunately, her mother became ill with cancer and concerns at home took priority. Another year's leave from teaching was taken, and studies at the University of Toronto were put aside.

In 1962, Richard Eaton, a fellow student from McGill Conservatory, persuaded Miss Archer to remain in Canada to join a young music department at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. At that time, the music division had only a three-year program in music and four

full-time faculty members. By 1967, the music division became a department and the four-year Bachelor of Music degree had been instituted. In 1971, the first master's degree student was admitted. Miss Archer taught all of the new graduate courses in music theory that first year. By the time Miss Archer retired in 1978, having served as chair of the Theory and Composition Department, the music faculty had grown to over thirty, the master's degree had proven successful, and the groundwork was laid for a doctoral program in Applied Music, which began in 1981.

Miss Archer flourished in her adopted home of Edmonton. Her drive to create music continued amid the many teaching responsibilities, and she found time, as usual, to begin a composers' forum for her students. In addition, with Richard Johnston, she helped to found the Alberta Composers Association in 1978, which prospered for a few years, but did not survive. In 1985, the Edmonton Composers Concert Society was founded by Miss Archer and her former students, Ron Hannah (president of the Society), and Gordon Nicholson.

As Miss Archer worked at establishing herself not only as a performing musician and educator, but also as a composer, she formed associations with other musicians who performed her pieces regularly. One such association with George Little, founder of the Montreal Bach Choir, is especially noteworthy. From its beginning in 1951, this choir had many of Miss Archer's choral pieces as part of its standard repertoire. As J. Whittle notes, "successful public performances led to CBC broadcasts, and as the choir became known across the country, so did Archer's music." (See: B218) A broadcast of *The Bell*, Miss Archer's award-winning thesis at Yale, so impressed Geoffrey Waddington, CBC music director, that he arranged to perform it himself with CBC performers, a performance that was distributed to broadcasting agencies around the world.

Although piano was Miss Archer's first love, most of her early compositions were orchestral, probably because she was surrounded by orchestral music with her attendance at Montreal Symphony Orchestra rehearsals and her involvement with the Montreal Women's Symphony. A little later came the chamber and vocal works, although from a very early age, poetry inspired music. When Miss Archer discovered the poems of Walt Whitman, for example, several poems were set to music very quickly, so intense was her response to the poetry (*Leaves of Grass*, W131). Poems by Vachel Lindsay, Althea Bass, David Carter and Dorothy Livesay, to name a few, inspired song cycles.

The tributes to Dr. Archer began to appear in 1968 when Yale University recognized her achievement and dedication with a citation for distinguished service in the field of music. In 1971, McGill University awarded her an honorary Doctor of Music degree. In October, 1985, the city of Edmonton honored Dr. Archer with a three-day festival of her music (See: B164) and named an ornamental park in her honor. The Royal College of Canadian Organists named her a

fellow, as well. Honors bestowed upon her in 1986 came from the University of Windsor (Ontario) with an honorary doctorate, preceded by a program of her music. In 1987, she was awarded the Sir Frederick Haultain Prize of \$25,000 for contribution to music in Alberta (the Alberta government's most prestigious prize).

The year 1987 also saw a gift of \$50,000 from Dr. Archer to the library of the Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region, in Calgary, to support acquisition of scores and recordings by Canadian composers. Dr. Archer is acutely aware of the need to preserve music now being written. As a gesture of gratitude, the library of the Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region, has been named the Violet Archer Library. A full program of her music was presented at the dedication on November 13, 1987. On June 20, 1988, she was awarded a special mention by the Canadian Music Council, for her large donation to the Canadian Music Centre, Prairie Region.

In 1989, the University of Calgary awarded Dr. Archer an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, and the University of Alberta established the Violet Archer Scholarship for composition students. That same year, the National Music Museum of London, England, invited her to submit her biographical information, a handwritten sample of her music and a professional photograph.

One of the greatest tributes to any educator is the success of his or her students. Many of Dr. Archer's former students have made names for themselves as musicians, educators and composers. To mention only a few, Larry Austin is now full professor of composition at the University of North Texas and heads that department's electronic music center. Robert Gauldin is a full professor of theory and analysis at Eastman School of Music. John Ardoin is the author of several biographies of opera singers, most notably of Maria Callas, and is also a music critic in Dallas, Texas. Robert Rosen, a well-known free-lance composer in Canada is now assistant director of the winter program in music at the Banff School of Fine Arts, Allan Bell is professor of theory and composition at the University of Calgary, and Vernon Murgatroyd, a prolific composer, teaches in Red Deer, Alberta.

Since her retirement in 1978, Dr. Archer has continued to be as active as she ever was, composing almost totally on commission, giving workshops and teaching courses for the Department of Music at the University of Alberta. Although the drive to compose is ever present, Dr. Archer has never begrudged the time spent teaching. Teaching is creative in its own right. So in her retirement, she continues teaching, as part-time lecturer at the University of Alberta (1982-83, 1988-90), as Visiting Lecturer in Music at the University of Western Ontario (January 1979), at the University of Saskatchewan (November 1978, March 1990), at the University of Calgary (February 1986) and at Grand Prairie Regional College (September 1987). She was a distinguished lecturer in 1987 at the University of Alaska for a week which culminated with the premiere of her song cycle, *If the Stars are*

Burning. This song cycle was commissioned by the University of Alaska Foundation for Suzanne Summerville, who sang the premiere.

Although Dr. Archer's career has centered largely at McGill and the universities of North Texas, Oklahoma and Alberta, she spent several summers teaching in schools remote to her location at the time. Her fellow student at McGill, Richard Eaton, asked her to teach at the University of Alberta in Edmonton the summers of 1948 and 1949 when she was studying at Yale. During her stay at North Texas, she spent the summer of 1952 teaching an overload at Cornell: harmony, counterpoint, piano and organ. That summer she also directed the summer chorus and played at the chapel services.

Other summers were spent either studying or composing. The MacDowell Club of Norman, Oklahoma, was instrumental in getting Dr. Archer a fellowship to compose at the MacDowell Colony the summer of 1956. Her piano concerto (W8) was written then. The summer of 1968 found her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto studying electronic music. That summer yielded *Circles of Silence* (W288) and *Haiku* (W290). Several months in early 1973 were spent at Goldsmith College in London, England, again studying electronic music. Her major electronic piece from that summer, *Episodes* (W289) has since been recorded by Melbourne Records (D13). She has also been Resident Composer at the Banff School of Fine Arts during the summers of 1978 and 1979.

Always working to promote contemporary music, Dr. Archer understands the importance of introducing the 20th-century musical idiom to children by providing them with contemporary pieces to study which are written at elementary and intermediate levels. If children, who readily take in new ideas, are not made aware of new harmonies, rhythms and melodies, our future audiences for contemporary music will never be created. Dr. Archer is ever encouraging today's composers to consider this factor and to consider writing educational pieces. She is currently in touch with Canada's Minister of Communication in an attempt to encourage the government to give funding to publishers to publish contemporary educational music. She encourages publishers to solicit contemporary educational pieces for publication, but if today's composers are unwilling to write educational pieces, the publishers will have nothing to promote. (See also: B10, B12, B14)

Dr. Archer is currently at work on new commissions, managing to work in a few pieces without commission. Although she would like to compose another symphony, such an undertaking would have to be commissioned; she would have to know it would be performed. She continues to give workshops and teach composition privately. She attends as many musical events as possible so as to be conversant with what is going on. She listens to late-night jazz on the radio to be aware of current trends in that area, and she is ever watchful to be aware of what is happening with electronic and computer-generated music.

Dr. Archer's love of music has manifested itself in nearly every possible way. Her career reflects her dedication as an educator and composer, but her involvement in other aspects of music deserves special mention. She is a member of countless musical organizations, but she is not a silent member. She works for each organization, supporting it to her fullest capability. One such organization is the Alberta Registered Music Teachers' Association. Since 1962, she has chaired the annual Canada Music Week each November, sponsored by the Edmonton Centre of the Alberta Registered Music Teachers' Association. She has also supported this organization and many others by serving as adjudicator at countless competitions. She is and always has been actively involved with what is now SOCAN, the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada, encouraging composers and publishers alike to produce and publish not only contemporary music, but contemporary *educational* music for today's children to study. In May, 1991, she addressed the Canadian League of Composers, of which she is also a member, at its 40th anniversary meeting on the issue of the importance of creating contemporary educational music for today's youth.

