

CHRIS ELSON

## SONIC REMEMBRANCES

THE ARTISTS' WORKSHOP, run by the University of Saskatchewan at Emma Lake, is not widely known. Painter Barnett Newman, who led the Workshop in 1959, remarked, perhaps apocryphally, "Where the hell is Saskatchewan, and who the hell is Emma Lake?" Nevertheless, it occupies a small but fascinating place in the history of the experimental arts in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, and it has continued its programming into the 21st century.

A laconic entry in composer John Cage's journal tells of an incident that occurred there on August 23, 1965:

Found a large stand of *Hydnum repandum*. When others left for a nearby lake, refused to leave. Arranged to meet on road at 4:00. 3:30 started back. 4:00 hurried. 6:30 lost. Yelling, startled moose. 8:00 darkness, soaked sneakers. Settled for the night on squirrel's midden.

Tom Allen and Jeff Reilly—musicians, composers, and driving forces behind so much important recent CBC Radio music programming—paired up in 2019 to develop a work and a performance format to reflect upon Cage's experience at Emma Lake and on that of being lost in general. Taking inspiration from Cage's lapidary style and the fifteen one-hundred-word pieces he wrote about his fifteen-day stay at the Workshop for *Canadian Art* magazine in 1965, Allen put together fifteen one-hundred-word texts of his own. Using many of Cage's own aesthetic, compositional, and ethical principles—self-consciously and no doubt accidentally, too—these texts were then combined with improvisation, composition, silence, movement between spaces, and individual and collective investigations of physical and aural spaces both outside and indoors. The fifteen moments of the performance, collectively titled "Being Lost," delve cleverly into the experiences and meanings of being lost, and they also constitute a concise narration of musical history,

the emergence of the avant-garde, and Cage's placeless place within it.

The version of the work that was performed three times on June 3rd at Halifax's 18th-century Citadel was strikingly and humorously articulated. The cool, windy, and humid evening provided a slight edge, just suggestive of natural dangers, which helped bring out a universal experience of uncomfortable lostness while constantly recalling the difficult night the wet-sneakered Cage must have spent out there in the dense, boggy southern boreal forest.

The expansive, surprising performance began at the main gate, where spectators made contact with "ancillary musicians," who guided them across the moat and into the large and complex inner spaces of the Citadel. While inviting questions from the audience, they strictly obeyed dice-rolling and question-numbering protocols—a firmness that led to a number of absurd and enjoyable exchanges with audience members.

The first of the fifteen more structured moments occurred outside on the parade square but pushed up against the walls of one of the main buildings. In these first one-hundred-word texts, Allen economically laid down the organizing principles of the performance while also evoking Cage's experience, supported by aleatory and composed musical fragments. With his usual light touch, he filled in a lot of background for less experienced audience members. His text about the proscenium stage of the forest and the various animal and plant cast members was inspired.

We then moved with the musicians (Allen, the narrator, doubling on trombone; Reilly on bass clarinet; Patricia O'Callaghan on vocals; Lori Gemmell on harp; Pete Gemmell on saxophones; Joe Phillips on upright bass; and Erin Donovan on percussion) to two locations on the parade square and inside to a barrel-ceilinged space that may have once been an ammunition magazine. There, a composition by Reilly based on a strict application of indeterminacy to backyard sounds using random combinatorial software was juxtaposed with a textual fragment by Allen that included audience participation and was a real highlight of the whole show. Then we were back out again onto the parade square for another stop and finally inside to the historic library of the garrison. Every location chosen was appropriate to the firmly or delicately enunciated themes and associated compositional and improvisational approaches. At every step the forty or so audience members dealt in particular ways with, in Allen's words, the investigation of "what it means to be lost—whether in the woods or in a Bach fugue or a pandemic or

a shopping mall or a post-colonial society—and ultimately, what it means to be found.”

The piece that Cage wrote shortly after returning from Emma Lake—“Variation VI” (1966)—was not included in the performance, but the audience did get to experience several Cage compositions, including the famous, impossible silence of “4’33”” (1952), conducted by Reilly on the cobblestones using his smartphone as a time piece. The high winds, muted traffic noise, bird notes overhead, and all other natural and urban sound intrusions made for a wonderful exposure to the dilemmas of silence in our heightened listening there in the Citadel.

The final sequence in the library brought all our wandering together—not in the name of an abolition of being lost but in a precarious balance of unsettled stability, like a gentle acknowledgement of personal and artistic freedom. For that, the place of nature clearly remained central. Cage’s “In a Landscape” (1948) was a revealing anchor piece here, and Allen’s punchy texts on Cage’s love of fungi led to some of the freest and best interplay amongst the narrator, players, and singer, all leaning hard on the sonorities and rhythmic implications of *Hydnum repandum*!

The ironic fun of the ensemble’s encore take on Merle Hazard’s “(Gimme Some of That) Ol’ Atonal Music” (2019) took us somewhat outside of what was most central to the evening, but everyone left full of their own reflections and with the sense of having experienced a compact and revelatory straying from the everyday path.

On June 2st, National Indigenous Peoples Day, I turned with a sense of anticipation to the francophone media that I had found to be remarkably rich and instructive in 2021. The airwaves and virtual platforms of Radio-Canada were once again very substantially given over to multiple interventions, interviews, dialogues, guest hosts, and wide-ranging diffusion—all occurring at the intersections of francophone and indigenous Canada. Not to cast any particular aspersions on the CBC, but in terms of the sheer density of content and its aspirational inventiveness I have found the French language side of our public broadcaster to be a more exciting and effective venue for showcasing indigenous creativity in its variety and in its intercultural ambitions.

Samian, an Anishinabeg rapper and an essential figure on the Quebec music scene since at least 2008 when he famously performed “La paix des

braves" (The Great Peace, 2007) at a Saint-Jean-Baptiste concert, was widely featured on the various platforms. He considers the recent flourishing of the June 21st event (known in francophone aboriginal circles as "Le Grand Solstice" or "The Great Solstice") as the beginning of a three-part movement that includes June 23rd (Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day) and July 1st (Canada Day). For Samian, therefore, National Indigenous Peoples Day should be seen as the gateway to a cumulative, energetic ten days of celebration and creativity. If the content featured on public broadcasters is any guide, a great deal of the urgency and energy of such celebrations is now centred on June 21st.

*Le Grand Solstice* was the day's culminating broadcast (still available for streaming on Télé-Québec). This hypermodern powwow was a showcase produced with the creative or technical support of all eleven First Nations of Quebec as well as the participation of indigenous performers from other parts of Canada. It featured both "autochthonous" (indigenous) and "allochthonous" (non-indigenous) performers, to use a language that was new to me. The brisk pacing and beautiful riverside setting of the Village des Écluses used for this showcase made for an engaging and memorable hour of musical television. A few highlights included: Aysanabee, an Oji-Cree from Sandy Lake (Ontario) with a Hey Rosetta!-like indie-rock meditation on intergenerational experience titled "Howling" (2021); multi-instrumentalist Joseph Sarenhes and dancer Aïcha Bastien N'diaye, two performers of mixed Huron-Wendat and West African background; Quebec electro-pop darling Ariane Moffatt laying down an upbeat new song with Anachnid, an urban indigenous performer from Montreal, pursuing the collaboration that also produced the deep EDM of "Sur ton parallèle" (On Your Parallel, 2022) with its geopoetical resonances (here with a breezy evocation of urban encounters as a quasi-paradise); and the very impressive Willows, a Métis/Franco-Manitoban singer-songwriter with a pick-up band of various other indigenous musicians doing an almost hymnlike version of a song dedicated to her female ancestors.

Willows is the nom d'artiste/alter ego of Geneviève Toupin, who is now based in Montreal. Her thoughtful, personal folk music is both rooted and contemporary. "On se ressemble" (We're Alike, 2022) is a homage to her female forbears and their common rootedness in the land using a series of simple natural comparisons (looking at the moon, watching the waves, etc.) and a repetitive, skipping guitar figure that together evoke a complex

web of belonging. In its penultimate verse it makes powerful use of Mitchif, the unique language of prairie Métis: “Ein van parèye ksa souff nô vwè a traverser dju tan” (it seems a wind blows our voices across the ages). The version performed on the television special, the one released on the usual streaming and purchase platforms, and the one on the artist’s own website are all wonderfully different. I admit to a preference for the stripped-down take for acoustic guitar and three female voices that may be found at [wilowsmusique.com](http://wilowsmusique.com).

The unique resonances of June 21st can be explored all year round at [nikamowin.com](http://nikamowin.com), a website offered by the important not-for-profit Montreal promoter Musique nomade. Signifying “Music” in Attikamek, a First Nation from central Quebec, it has a truly pan-Canadian vocation. Most of the artists mentioned above and a great many more can be discovered by browsing its content or referring to its curated monthly playlists.