



The Composer Essay Project

Slack: An Essay Around Some Canadian Music

By Martin Arnold

In the March, 2017 issue of the British music magazine *The Wire*, an article written by Tim Rutherford-Johnson appeared titled, “Across the Great Divide: New Experimental Music From Canada.” It deals with a set of composers whose music is or will be part of the Canadian Composers Series of recordings on the Sheffield-based label, Another Timbre. It’s a great pleasure to me that a disc of my work is part this series and that I was one of the composers Rutherford-Johnson interviewed for his article. Tim does a wonderful job of introducing the various musicians involved—something of our histories and influences—and the loose connections between us, always stressing that we are not a group or a school and that we are not linked by methodology or even a shared style (The article touches on the work of Series participants, Mira Benjamin, the Bozzini Quartet, Isaiah Ceccarelli, Cassandra Miller, Marc Sabat, Linda Catlin Smith, Chiyoko Szlavnic and myself as well as related artists including Christopher Butterfield, Allison Cameron, Eric Chenaux, Ryan Driver, Malcolm Goldstein, and John Oswald and two non-Canadians whose influence as teachers in Canada was formative to the work of many of the artists mentioned, Czech Rudolf Komorous and American James Tenney.) At the same time Tim finds that there are vague, elusive, yet common sensibilities discernable in one way or another in the diverse body of work he is considering, qualities he presents in the form of seeming contradictions and questions:

However, in the last few years an experimental side [of Canadian composition]—familiar but disconcerting, serious but warm, loosely formed but crystal clear—has started to break out. [...] Where has this music come from? And in a world saturated with history, how does it manage to sound so fresh?

If there is a shared aesthetic, Tim asks me how I would summarize it; my answer is: “Slack.”

This is a short essay around, a kind of incomplete introduction to, a very personal set of conjectures regarding a cultural politics of aesthetic slackness. And even though there will be plenty of spillage, I’m primarily thinking about a very limited field of production here: notated music-compositional practices, operating in an Anglo-Canadian context (even as it exists in Québec or New Brunswick), in a post-European, post-colonial culture. This is not a piece of scholarly research; I am not too concerned with the stone-cold veracity of many of my speculations and even as I write I’m thinking of numerous exceptions that in no way prove the rule. And if one thinks there might be something kind of Canadian about spending this much space and time setting out provisions, I might sort of agree and suggest that this could possibly, in some way be apropos to the questions at hand.

This essay is also the result of a commission to write something that in some way addresses Canadian music. Rutherford-Johnson is, in part, wondering if there is a Canadian identity inherent in the qualities and questions quoted above. If these qualities and questions in some way point to a shared aesthetic, one I have chosen to summarize with the term “slack”, then I am going to wonder here what might be

Canadian about this slackness. Of course, what I mean by slackness needs some kind of definition (even a provisional one), but before I get to that, I'm going to float a few proposals about the nature of Canadian identity (thinking "Canadian" within the narrow cultural field put forward above). In this endeavour I'm going to briefly draw on some real scholarship: Seymour Lipset's remarkable book *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*, written in 1990 (it's probably significant that both pieces of writing that I refer to in this essay contain the word "divide" in their titles).

Born in NYC, Seymour Lipset died at the age of 84 in 2006. He was an award winning political sociologist who primarily taught at Stanford and Harvard. And he was one of the few high-powered American researcher-academics who took a career-long interest in Canada and its history. *Continental Divide* is based on the observation that the American Revolution gave rise to two countries not just one. Canada came to be because of what it did not do: it did not revolt; it did not defy authority or desire to change the status quo. *Continental Divide* carefully parses the differences and similarities between Canadian and American values and institutions drawing on a wide range of historical scholarly opinion and reams of statistical and polling data. There are so many observations, factual and theoretical, in this book that could be brought to bear on the ideas I'm pursuing here but I'm constrained to (more-or-less) cut to the chase (and I will be chasing ideas more than making a point). Throughout the book, I am struck by the depiction of Canada as a culture in-between, where identifying characteristics are more easily discussed in terms of what Canada is *not* in relation to others (for example, Canada is not entrepreneurial, like the U.S. or Canada does not hold onto an overriding historical narrative, like Europe). The book is filled with outside observers finding Canada more like Europe or more like the United States, significantly, most often as part of arguments that take a pejorative stance towards Canadian social values. One of my favourite indictments comes from Friedrich Engels, co-author with Karl Marx of the *Communist Manifesto*. In 1888 he made a brief tour of North America; writing about it he noted "that north of the border":

"[O]ne thinks one is in a positively retrogressing and decaying country. Here one sees how necessary the feverish speculative spirit of the Americans is for the rapid development of a new country." He pointed to the "economic necessity for an infusion of Yankee blood," not capital, if Canada was to grow, and he looked forward to its incorporation into the United States. [pp. 119-120]

Engels is proposing that Canada would need to embrace the *productive energy* of American capitalism if it was ever going to muster the social resources to mount a communist revolt (but we've already established that Canadians don't revolt).

Tales of various forms of Canadian passivity—a preference to respond rather than act—pervade *Continental Divide*, and they don't only come from non-Canadians:

In comparing North American writing, Margaret Atwood suggests that the symbol for the United States is "the Frontier," which implies "a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded." The central image for Canada [...] is "Survival, *la survivance*, hanging on, staying alive." [p. 60]

And elsewhere:

In *Survival*, Atwood stresses that the heroes of Canadian novels “survive, but just barely. They are born losers failing to do anything but keep alive.” [p. 68]

Atwood and Lipset are talking about national myth-making. And I find personal resonance in the proposition that Canadians are comfortable with the myths of being mere-survivors and losers (I know I am). However, it is important to point out that being a survivor or a loser does not really constitute a national identity; they are states that are remaindered by circumstance: organisms survive in the face of external forces; losers are created by somebody else winning (winners break the records, meet the goals, overcome the odds; everyone else—the also-rans—are losers). Myths of mere-survival and loss don't tell us much directly about the positive, productive attributes of the players involved, whether they are individuals or cultures. Do the Canadian myths above tell me who I am? Not really: I know that I'm staying alive but not much else and I know what I am not: I am not a winner. Do I really think I'm a loser? No. But as a myth to hold lightly, it has another function other than establishing an identity; more about that later.

I don't have a source akin to *Continental Divide* to work through the differences between post-colonial Canadian culture and those of the European nations that did the colonizing, as well as the other European nations that supplied waves of immigration. Lipset's book does supply some testimonials by European scholars who find Canada similar to the U.S. in its general rejection of complex relationships to complex cultural histories (simple loyalty to the Crown lacks substantial depth). Anecdotally, after completing my undergrad training in Edmonton, I studied for a year at the Royal Conservatory in the Hague; I was surprised and confused by the amount of time my Dutch colleagues spent in discussing the Dutch-ness of contemporary Dutch composition, especially in relation to the German-ness of Standard Repertoire. They felt deeply a pressure from national histories, a pressure that bore down heavily on their personal creative practices. It was a pressure I could almost make myself understand, but which I could not relate to in any real way. Chiyoko Szlavnicz speaks to some of these themes in conversation with Tim Rutherford-Johnson:

She is clear about why she left Canada: “Toronto has a fantastic art community. But Canada and Toronto can be very isolated. The problem in Canada is that no one really knows how to talk about music. There's not a culture of talking about it, like in Germany.” Yet when I press her to compare the Canadian and German scenes, she admits that the German composers she knows often struggle with having so many figureheads and the prominent role music plays in German culture. “In Canada you have a lot of space, and so you can find your niche and your area, and you don't necessarily feel confined or challenged to fit into some context that's booming all around you.”

Chiyoko recognizes the lack of an identifiable and vociferously ever-present cultural context in Canada. She also suggests the potential that goes along with this: the possibility that one can find their own creative niche, locate oneself in a space of one's own, a space that is not defined by its opposition to dominant givens.

Composer Linda Catlin Smith takes this idea up and the following quote serves as the conclusion to Rutherford-Johnson's *Wire* article: "In Canada you don't feel examined. The world doesn't care about Canada. We're not on everybody's radar. And that's great. That's really very liberating." Linda's right; moreover, any "we" one might point to is not on the radar of everybody, even in the field of contemporary composition, *within* Canada. This is all the more liberating.

Of course there is a downside to the freedom of not-mattering; I think it relates to why Chiyoko left Canada. I don't quite agree with the first part of her statement—there are people in Canada who know how to talk about music—but agree with her that there is not a *culture* of talking about it; music as a social intervention, as a *shared* experience does not matter enough to generate any deeply felt discourse. For better and worse, there aren't any perceived stakes, no pervasive goals that would require the kind of equally pervasive constructive energy to meet, the kind of energy that Engels found missing in Canadian culture even in the 19th century. However, not-mattering remains filled with unpredictable potentials, potentials that can inspire local energy that is given rise to by a sense of possibility, specific energy that does not precede, motivate and colour the appearance of possibilities.

Continental Divide supplies a quote that's relevant here:

Canada's internationally acclaimed literary critic, Northrop Frye, argues that his country "has passed from a pre-national to a post-national phase without ever having become a nation." [p. 6]

I would contend that this statement primarily applies to English-Canada but, as such, I think it does apply: nations are defined by commonalities, by shared traits (not by their lack); I find it more productive to think of Canada as a collection of citizens, a collection that resists any ideological galvanization, even when the ideas seem as apt as the "mosaic culture" or current narrative around diversity (that is, Canada might be able to be thought of as a mosaic or make claims to embrace diversity, but these ideas remain unabsorbed as defining myths; they continue to receive well-deserved skepticism and critique by many Canadians). Or, as another example, *Continental Divide* identifies a strong current of Tory (conservative) socialism that runs through various Canadian histories. There is too much stuff in that seeming contradiction to unpack here; however, reading Lipset's book, I get the impression that to the degree that Anglo-Canadians share and have shared socialist values, that this sharing has been based on the recognition of various common needs that require group-action to address, not because "we" are all Canadians together striving to fulfill the Canadian dream.

I recently watched *Glenn Gould: The Russian Journey*, a documentary made in 2002 about Gould's wildly successful concert tour of the Soviet Union in 1957. It's a remarkable piece of work; but a statement stood out for me—stood out in an out-of-context kind of way—that seems relevant here. It was a comment made by Vladimir Tchinaev, a musicologist and professor at the Moscow State Conservatory: "The most important thing that separates him [Gould] from the others is that he is a loner. He is by himself." I don't think Tchinaev is talking about individuality. Individualism is very much a quality one can pursue, an idea that one can embrace and aspire to. Indeed, individualism is very much a part of the American national identity, an ideology of personal freedom that is not only fervently celebrated but vigorously marketed. Being alone is very different than being an individual; it's a situation and state of being. It seems to me that if one holds a national identity it must be very difficult

to ever really feel alone; following Frye, not coming from a nation, this was not so difficult for Glenn Gould. This is not at all to say that Canadians as a population are alone or are even inclined to being alone. Being alone is in no way a Canadian national myth. Canadians form communities around all kinds of commonalities; they can even form communities around strongly felt nationalist ideals. But these ideals are values adopted by particular groups of particular citizens; they are not pervasive cultural myths. Being a Canadian nationalist is one possibility for a citizen of Canada. Being alone is another possibility, one that finds little impediment in an Anglo-Canadian context.

Canadian music is not slack. Music written in Canada is many things (including, at times, nationalist, despite the lack of a nation to celebrate that in any concerted way). Some Canadian music is slack, slack in a way I find to be utterly compelling. And, while I can in no way prove this, I think it's slack in a way that would be very difficult for a non-Canadian to embody (and I think this even as the exceptions-that-don't-prove-the-rule continue to suggest themselves to me).

So what do I mean by slack? First of all, I am not talking about a music style (although, it might present itself as such in my own music with its meandering, protracted, somewhat enervated polyphony). Rutherford-Johnson identifies this in his article as well: he introduces Marc Sabat's music with its often crystal clear textures created through the incisive application of intense research into just intonation and its performance practice. As Tim puts it: "Surely, I wonder, this fastidious detail is the opposite of Arnold's slack?" But Marc clarifies that the precision of his constructions is not what interests him *per se*, but rather "the tumbling effect it has on the listener's perception," or as Marc puts it: "That feeling of being able to follow and being completely lost." Tim conjectures: "If there is a slackness to Sabat's music, maybe it's here: in the articulation of a strict construction as a subjective drift through landscapes both familiar and disorienting." Marc continues:

I think that's something that some of the Canadians share in common," he agrees.
"Everybody is exploring their own particular kinds of continuity, but we're all interested in a kind of being lost, where the relationships of things aren't so clearly given, they're being discovered in the listening process."

I think of this getting lost as more than a perceptual experience. Being unable to apprehend relationships also relates to an inability to firmly grasp the motivations of the composer, the inability to confidently reify the significance of the art-object (even an object as ephemeral as a piece of music). Getting lost means you don't know where you are, you can't accurately locate your exact position, your precise point-of-view. Getting lost is slack in its lack of precision (even if it occurs in very precise structures like Marc's music) in its inability to be exact, keeping in mind that "exact" comes from Latin *exact* – "completed, ascertained, enforced," from the verb *exigere*, from *ex*-"thoroughly" + *agere* "perform." When music is slack it does not thoroughly enforce completion. It stays open to be explored, co-created by the listener.

Slackness embraces an open set of unpredictable possibilities. Its lack of clear definition has something in common with how I think of the loser. As I said above, I don't embrace the loser as an identity—that's certainly possible: Beck (and company) did it, made something of it, marketed it, and ended up with an extremely popular song (likewise, I can imagine a slack American art that strives to be the slackest). Rather, it's a term that opens itself to all the not-definitive, inconclusive events that are not-winning.

What is the shape, the form of a tight rope? It is possible to generalize: it's straight, it's a line; it has a tension that will resist external pressures, and its tensility and the material factors that give rise to it can be measured. What is the shape, the form of a slack rope? It is not possible to generalize: slack is different in every instance, it is the specific and particular to the way the rope was dropped; it will respond to outside forces but will take on other specific shapes depending on the specific forces asserted (only if it is made taught can we generalize). Slackness is both form and content; slack can only be slack-shaped (whatever that is) in all its multiplicity.

I think this has something to do with a statement American visual artist Barbara Kruger made in 1987: "How can we encourage work that is not exemplary but merely different?" Slackness is not exemplary. Slackness celebrates difference, difference as unpredictable specificity and particularity, not difference as contrast, juxtaposition and opposition. Slack is the multifarious, fluid shape of a response to forces, not the attempt to enforce completion of a preconceived form. Slackness celebrates difference as radically contingent possibilities and potentials. I'll resist the temptation to find something Canadian in it, but let's end with that question: "How can we encourage work that is not exemplary but merely different?"

Martin Arnold. October 2017. Toronto, Canada.

Martin Arnold is a musician based in Toronto. His notated compositions are performed nationally and internationally. Martin is also an active member of Toronto's improvisation and experimental jazz/roots/rock and is currently the Artistic Director of Toronto's Arraymusic. You can learn more about his work at soundcloud.com/martinarnold.

Music on Main commissioned this essay to share insight into Canadian music at ISCM World New Music Days 2017 which took place in Vancouver, Canada November 2-8, 2017. ISCM2017 was presented by the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), the ISCM Canadian Section, the Canadian League of Composers / La Ligue canadienne des compositeurs, and Music on Main.

Music on Main's Composer Essay Project is supported by the SOCAN Foundation. Read more at musicmain.ca/learn.