

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ann Southam, a one-woman tone poem



Ann Southam, composer, is shown at her piano in 1997. Minimalist composer enjoying new interest in her work

Robert Everett-Green
Tuesday July 9, 2009, R1

When she was a child, in the forties, Ann Southam nearly wore out her parents' recording of Ravel's *Bolero*, especially the third disc (they still had 78s back then). The pleasure was immediate, but it took her a few decades to realize that she too could make something that satisfied the urge to hear music that explored an entire world while seeming to remain in one place.

At 72, Canada's best-known minimalist composer is enjoying something of a rush-hour of interest in her work. In the past few months, her luminous, repetitive piano pieces have been feted and recorded by two important Canadian pianists, Eve Egoyan and Christina Petrowska Quilico, both of whom have put all-Southam discs on the market.

The fact that the composer and her most dedicated performers (another is percussionist Beverley Johnston) are women is not entirely accidental. Southam is proud to call her work women's music, or at least to point out that there's something in what she does that is deeply grounded in women's experience.

"In the very workings of the music there's a reflection of the work that women traditionally do, like weaving and mending and washing dishes," she said, during an energetic conversation at her home in Toronto's Rosedale district. "The kind of work you have to do over and over again."

Southam had to pass through several other phases as a practical musician and composer before she received permission, as she puts it, to write music in her current style. She played piano as a child, loved the keyboard music of Brahms and other romantic composers, and wrote some early pieces that mirrored their expressive sensibility.

When she began to study composition seriously in 1960, her teacher Samuel Dolin steered her toward the 12-tone method that was then seen as the future's gift to the present. Another teacher, Gustav Ciamaga, introduced her to the relatively new field of electronic music.

"I loved the mucking-around quality of it," she said of her time in the University of Toronto's electronic-music studio.

“It was a combination of making things happen and letting things happen. There was no point trying to tune anything. Things would just kind of drift off. It was like a wilderness of sounds. And now that whole wonderful playground has been paved over,” she said, referring to the much more sophisticated equipment available today.

She ran down into the basement to fetch her vintage EMS synthesizer, then came back with a small suitcase that popped open to reveal a built-in AKS machine with a compact array of knobs and a central switching grid that looked like a cribbage board. It's the kind of synth that was used for the space-age, *Dr. Who* -type soundtracks of the sixties, and is now highly sought after by pop musicians with a retro sensibility.

“It's a real jim-dandy thing,” said Southam, whose conversation combines youthful enthusiasm with vintage slang. She was working with her jim-dandy AKS at about the time that choreographer Patricia Beatty founded the New Dance Group in 1967 and invited Southam to contribute to an inaugural program of new Canadian music and dance.

“I was thrilled. I just love modern dance,” she said. “I wish I could do it myself. They gave me an absolutely free hand. The music wasn't material in any way, and there was no regular beat, and somehow they could sense the time-space as much as the physical space. And it was very liberating not having to write anything down, and not having to get musicians to play it.”

The dance world also helped her in other ways. Socially, it was a relatively safe haven for a woman who had been born a few decades too early to express her sexuality openly.

“Being gay and growing up gay in the fifties was not amusing,” she said. “Life was pretty much a social nightmare. The perfect solution was to be an artist. I could be as moody and anti-social as I liked. And of course everything in the dance world was higglety-pigglety anyway.”

A few years after her introduction to the dance, Southam encountered Terry Riley's *A Rainbow in Curved Air*, a pattern-shifting piece of music that satisfied in a new way the same kind of fascination with near-repetition she had experienced years before with *Bolero*. But this was a recent piece, by a living person, who didn't seem to think that you had to give up on conventional tonality to be a serious composer.

“So I thought that maybe it was okay to like tonal centres,” she said. “And I do. I've always liked bagpipe music and drones. Whenever I hear bagpipes I have to go to where they are. I think it's a physiological reaction.”

She began acting on her new freedom in the late seventies, in pieces built from small units that combined again and again, somehow teasing from their interactions a sense of lyricism and openness. She returned to instrumental music and met Petrowska, whose playing became an important catalyst for a series of piano pieces, many of which appear on *Pond Life*, Petrowska's recent two-disc recording on Centrediscs.

Southam didn't entirely discard her previous way of working. Her compositional method is still based on the fairly rigorous note-juggling ("push-pull stuff," she calls it) that Dolin taught her at the Royal Conservatory of Music.

"I cook up a process," she said. "I take a 12-tone row and kind of spin it out one note at a time until the whole thing is there. I've been using the same row for about 20 years. It's just a device, and I'd like to think I'm bringing some tonal sense into it."

The woman who, in the sixties, happily quit dealing with live musicians now loves collaborating with others. They often show her things about her work that she hadn't noticed or wouldn't have tried, she said.

"Christina does a lot of things I wouldn't have thought of, plays some of the fast pieces slow and the slow pieces fast," she said. "I struggled over that, but in the end I thought, 'No, I'll just let it go,' and I'm very glad that I did."

From Egoyan, she said she learned a new way of hearing the piano, the sounds of which go on changing well after the notes have been struck. That became a central feature of *Simple Lines of Enquiry*, a slow, spacious exploration of the ever-changing lives of a four-note cell, which Egoyan recently released on Centrediscs.

"I was just paying attention to the notes," Southam said. "It was Eve who turned me on to what was happening afterwards. She made me very aware of the piano as a sound-world."

Not many composers of Southam's age and achievements could or would admit to learning new and fundamental lessons from younger people. Her receptiveness is maybe the strongest proof that after many years of feeling her way through musical possibilities, she's secure enough in her art to keep her mind open, and her spirit free.