

**Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland**  
**Des compositrices canadiennes sur le terrain moderne: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland**

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Volume 19, Number 1, 2009

Composer au féminin

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019934ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/019934ar>

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1183-1693 (print)

1488-9692 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Danielson, J. H. (2009). Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland / Des compositrices canadiennes sur le terrain moderne: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland. *Circuit*, 19(1), 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019934ar>

Article abstract

The successful compositional careers of Jean Coulthard, Barbara Pentland, and Violet Archer spanned all but the first three decades of the twentieth century. Entering a compositional career at this time had many challenges: as Western Canadians, these composers had to establish their credibility with a public that could not be counted on to recognize the worth of their work due to sexist bias and a prevailing critical stance: public approval was evidence of a lack of true creativity. This was especially problematic for women, who had to keep to the center of progressive composition, away from the experimental and conservative margins, in order to gain recognition. Following World War II, the pressure of modernism increased, due at least in part to initiatives by the U. S. Government in occupied Germany, countering the stereotype of the unsophisticated American with a new narrative of American experimental tradition.

# Canadian Women Composers in Modernist Terrain: Violet Archer, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland

Janet Henshaw Danielson

In the early spring of 2000, three major Canadian women composers died within a five-week period, as if their lives were defined by the twentieth century. Jean Coulthard, Barbara Pentland, and Violet Archer pioneered in what they each saw as the transition to modern music in Canada. “Modern” actually took on various forms over the period of their long careers. Accordingly, this essay will look at the modern context that presented itself to these three composers as they entered their profession; the “affordances” of modernism—what opportunities it offered them, and what pitfalls and disadvantages they had to negotiate,<sup>1</sup> including public, academic, critical and social feedback; and finally the strategies they developed in response to these affordances in order to be true to themselves, their careers, and their communities. These three categories—context, affordances, and strategies—will also serve as test sites for Bruno Latour’s problematization of the concept of “modern”: for Latour modernism is so full of antinomies as to be impossible for anyone to negotiate successfully. Richard Winter goes so far as to call the “modern” a “vacuous self-congratulation, implying that historical periods [...] have led up to this, here, now [...]—to be ‘modern’ is to be ‘up-to-date, sufficient’” (Winter, 1991, p. 471). Yet the undermining of modernism’s critical apparatus has left a vacuum. “Art has long ceased to be an elitist affair: it now is requested to represent cultural identity where the institutions fail to do so. Experts are no longer required to judge but only carry out the expected ritual.” (Belting, 2003, p. 11.) In view of recent moves by the CBC and Radio-Canada to “reflect” rather than to “inform, enlighten and entertain” (which amounts to the privileging of singer-songwriter music),<sup>2</sup> it is perhaps time to consider the legacy of modernism for composers as it is represented by the considerable contributions of Archer, Coulthard, and Pentland.

1. J. J. Gibson has developed the idea of “affordances” in his studies of animal behavior. Affordances are the characteristics of an environment that make possible the performance of actions or behaviours.

2. A state of affairs discussed, with respect to French-language CBC, in Jean Boivin, “Les musiques classique, moderne et contemporaine larguées par la radio publique. Le cas d’Espace musique”, *Circuit*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 95-105; <[http://www.revuecircuit.ca/articles/16\\_3/10-les-musiques-classique-moderne-et/](http://www.revuecircuit.ca/articles/16_3/10-les-musiques-classique-moderne-et/)>

## Conditions and Constitutions of Early Modernism: Artistic, Political, Canadian

The spiritual roots of artistic modernism have generally been ignored if not obscured. Kandinsky's influential manifesto, *On the Spiritual in Art*, was written when our three composers were small children, and its influence spread quickly over Europe. Abstract art was seen as the way to portray the non-material and access the spiritual. With uncanny prescience, leading *de Stijl* painter Piet Mondrian outlined a modernist agenda (or masculinist gender?) for music:

The old tonic scale, along with the usual instruments, must be banished from *music if the new spirit is to be plastically expressed* [ . . . ] The plastic means will achieve it through sounds that will be *definite, plane, and pure* [ . . . ] Strings, winds, brass, etc. , must be replaced by a *battery of hard objects*. The structure and material of the new instruments will be of the greatest importance. Thus “hollow” and “rounded” will be replaced by “flat” and “plane” because timbre depends upon the form and material used. This will require much research. For *production of sound*, it will be preferable to use *electric, magnetic, mechanical* means, for they more easily prevent the intrusion of the individual. (Mondrian, 1920 [1986], p. 146, emphasis original.)

To a great extent, Europe, including Britain, *owned* music in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Chicago Symphony, for example, conducted its rehearsals in German until the outbreak of World War I made it too uncomfortable to continue (Epstein (1992), p. 23). The International Composers' Guild, the first of many such organizations to spring up in these decades, was founded by recent French émigrées Edgard Varèse and Carlos Salzedo in what can only be described as an act of musical colonization: two-thirds of their programming was European, and most of the Americans featured were Varèse's and Salzedo's students (Howard, 2007, p. 326).

In the areas of technology, gender politics, and music composition, significant events marked the years surrounding the births of Coulthard (1908), Pentland (1912), and Archer (1913). Jean Coulthard's birth coincided with the first radio broadcasts and development of phonograph disc technology. Barbara Pentland was born the year that Harriet Quimby became the first woman to fly solo across the English Channel. And Violet Archer was only a month old when the première of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* occasioned audience mayhem. Women's suffrage protests and marches were at their peak, the Austro-Hungarian and British empires were about to collapse, and Schoenberg was hatching his system of twelve-tone music in order to secure German supremacy in music for the next hundred years.

In Canada, the arts and literary scene in the pre-WWI years was tranquil by comparison: these were the years of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). The Group of Seven were attracting acclaim with their impressionistically-influenced way of seeing and painting the Canadian landscape. Their careers, as well as those of composers Healey Willan and Ernest MacMillan, were nurtured at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club, established 1908. The Toronto Symphony completed its first full season in 1907. The Toronto Women's Musical Club had already been mounting concerts for a decade prior, and the compositions of Canadian-born Gena Branscombe (1881-1977) were winning gold medals in the U. S.

### **Coulthard, Pentland, and Archer: A Brief Introduction**

The composers under discussion, however, were all remote from Toronto's burgeoning music scene. Jean Coulthard was born and raised in Vancouver, which remained her home base for her entire life, though she made numerous trips to England, France, and the U. S. for study and to solidify her international stature. Barbara Pentland was born in Winnipeg, tried to launch a career in Toronto, and ended up settling in Vancouver. Violet Archer was born and educated in Montreal, though she spent some of her childhood in Italy, took further studies and her first teaching positions in the U.S., and finally settled in Edmonton. All three women were strongly motivated to compose from an early age; Coulthard's and Archer's musical interests reflected those of their families, while Pentland's was in defiance of hers. All three women had to earn their own way, which meant university teaching. Archer, the least privileged of the three and the only one to remain single, became Head of the Music Department at the University of Alberta; Coulthard and Pentland taught at the University of British Columbia, where Coulthard persisted until retirement despite a very low glass ceiling. Pentland arrived a few years after Coulthard, only to leave the department thirteen years later after an influx of American faculty and administration led to what she perceived as a drop in standards. Archer, Pentland, and Coulthard were each awarded a similar number of CBC commissions. Pentland's first CBC commission came in 1943, a decade before Coulthard's or Archer's first commissions, possibly because Pentland was working in Toronto at the time. All three were versatile composers, though chamber music best suited Pentland's aesthetic, and Archer wrote more choral music than the others. They each wrote an opera: Coulthard composed the massive three-hour *Return of the Native* over a period of decades between 1955-79; Pentland composed *The Lake*, a 27' chamber

opera, in 1952; and Archer composed two operas, *Sganarelle*, 53', in 1973, and *The Meal*, 50', in 1983.

### **Modernism and the Composer in the Early Decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The term “composer” has not always meant what it does now, nor what it meant when Archer, Coulthard, and Pentland were attracted to composing as a career. In his rather polemical article “Museum Pieces” (1989), Peter Burkholder argues that the concept of the “Old Masters” (Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn) and their “masterpieces” was constructed as recently as the mid-nineteenth century in reaction to the popularity of showy music for amateurs that was inundating the market following the rise of the sheet music industry and the establishment of public concerts. He cites William Weber’s statistic that “around the turn of the [nineteenth] century, almost 80% of the music performed in Vienna, Leipzig, Paris, and London was by living composers, while after mid-century the figure was almost exactly the opposite.” (Burkholder, 1989, p. 117.) Producing music of “lasting value,” Burkholder argues, became the primary purpose of composition: “Brahms, Franck, Schoenberg, and their followers developed the uniquely esoteric tradition associated with modernist ‘classical’ music. Communication with an audience became secondary as the ideal of creating music of lasting value became paramount.” (Burkholder, 1989, p. 121.)

The change in attitudes towards new music between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth-century is striking. At the beginning of this period, Eduard Hanslick was able to take for granted that composers communicated best with their contemporary audiences, and that they fell out of fashion once new and more compelling composers appeared:

We need but instance the effects which works by Mozart, Beethoven and Weber produced when they were new, as compared with their effects on us. How many compositions by Mozart were thought by his contemporaries to be the most perfect expression of passion, warmth, and vigour of which music is capable. The placidity and moral sunshine of Haydn’s symphonies were placed in contrast with the violent bursts of passion, the internal strife, the bitter and acute grief embodied in Mozart’s music. Twenty or thirty years later, precisely the same comparison was made between Beethoven and Mozart. Mozart, the emblem of supreme and transcendent passion, was replaced by Beethoven, while he himself was promoted to the Olympic classicalness of Haydn. (Hanslick, 1891 [1974], p. 25.)

“Old Masters” was a gender-specific term; women were explicitly denied a place in this historicist mainstream. Hanslick explained “the paradox that women, who by nature are highly emotional beings, have achieved nothing

as composers” by asserting that “The cause, apart from the general reasons why *women* are less capable of mental achievements, is the plastic element in musical compositions which like sculpture and architecture, though in a different manner, imposes on us the necessity of keeping ourselves *free* from all subjective feelings.” (Hanslick, 1891 [1974], p. 101, emphasis original). Hanslick’s comments show not only pronounced gender bias, but also indicate the modernist programme of *purification*, a Latourian term for the process of polarizing nature (in this case the composition) and society or subject which will be discussed further in this article.

Over the next half-century the story about the Masters and their public changed drastically. British artist and critic Roger Fry articulated a new narrative that was to underwrite artistic activity throughout the twentieth century:

The work of the truly creative artist is not merely useless to the social man—it appears to be noxious and inassimilable. Before art can be “consumed” the artistic idea must go through a process of disinfection [...] An artist attains to a new vision. He grasps this with such conviction that he is able to express it in his work. (Fry, 1920 [1956], p. 70.)

A small number of people with special “aesthetic perception” are excited by this vision, but public acceptance does not come until lesser talents appropriate the original vision and present it in a publicly palatable form:

The misunderstanding between this small minority and the public becomes violent [...] The public, after swallowing innumerable imitations of the new idea, may even at last reluctantly accept the original creator as a great man, but generally not until he has been dead for some time and has become a vague and mythical figure. (Fry, 1920 [1956], pp. 70–71.)

Fry makes clear on p. 70 that he is referring to a specific incident: “We know the process well enough, since an example of it has occurred within the last fifty years”, whereas within thirty years, public rejection of creative art was assumed to be a generalized and inevitable phenomenon. Schoenberg wrote, “works produced at a turn of time—that is, when a new period is in the process of development—have *always* been viciously attacked.” (Schoenberg, 1948 [1975], p. 141, emphasis added.) Yet the idea of the Master Composer—though developed in a context in which it was public acclaim, rather than public disapprobation, that conferred such magisterial status—was hard to relinquish. It was therefore revised so that the Master Composer became someone remarkable for his clairvoyance—his ability to anticipate the music of the future—rather than for his ability to communicate his artistic vision with an audience. “The genius lights the way, and we strive to follow”, said Schoenberg (Schoenberg, 1912 [1975], p. 471). When such an

elevated concept of the composer was combined with Fry's idea that great art is never understood immediately, assessment of what might prove to be of "enduring", or de facto *any* value, became problematic. The emphasis shifted from public or even expert assessment of one's artistic *work*, to one's *identity* as a creative artist, because it was assumed that few, if any, outside of a tiny group of initiates could be expected fully to appreciate the new art's value. Schoenberg claimed in 1928 that composition was a "secret science", reading this idea back onto the 15<sup>th</sup> century:

The true art of composition (like true science) will always remain a secret science. It already counted as such at the time of the Netherlanders, for all the doubting scorn of graceless historians. It has to be so, not just because the initiated are forbidden to make it known, but, particularly, because the others are unable to grasp it. (Schoenberg, 1928 [1975], p. 375.)

Bruno Latour speaks of the "contradictory guarantees" of modernism: on the one hand, that "human beings, and only human beings, are the ones who construct society and freely determine their own destiny," (Latour, 1993, p. 30), while on the other hand, the inexorable forces of history determine progress in musical style and place the composer under the obligation to move humanity forward to the next stage in musical evolution. Thus "The method of composing with twelve tones grew out of a necessity." (Schoenberg, 1941 [1975], p. 216), and "Artists who want to 'go back to a period', who try to obey the laws of an obsolete aesthetic or of a novel one [...] *alienate themselves from nature*. The product shows it—no such product survives *its time*." (Schoenberg, 1946 [1975], p. 134, emphasis added). Modernism, on Latour's view, is characterized by its alternating construction and ritual denunciation of a "traditional" past; by its dualism of nature and subject/society, either of which can transcend the other depending on which is convenient at the moment; by its programme of "purification", that is, the distinguishing of nature and culture achieved through, as Mondrian put it, "preventing the intrusion of the individual" (quoted above); and by its promise of liberation.

This narrative of the Master Composer "on the brink of an undreamt-of sound world, rich in possibilities and practically unexplored," (Boulez, 1957 [1991], p. 178), had the effect of marginalizing both the "conservative", whose music, readily understood by the public, is therefore by definition not "truly creative"; and the experimental composer attempting to redefine what is meant by music. Burkholder thus distinguishes three streams (apart from popular music for mass consumption) that have resulted from the historicization of music. These are the conservative stream, which works within existing styles and techniques; the "progressivist" stream, which assumes a succession

of styles understood by audiences well enough that they can appreciate a composer's innovative technique and stylistic "voice"; and an experimental or "research" stream, which "can be thought of as an experimental branch of music theory, a proving ground for ideas of order, perception and beauty which run counter to the received notions of the tradition." (Burkholder, 1989, p. 131.) Burkholder's thesis echoes the observations made by American composers Marion Bauer (1882-1955) and Clair Reis (1889-1978) on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American League of Composers:

From its inception the League's policy has been to bring the entire range of modern tendencies before the public. The success in attaining this goal is perhaps best illustrated by the reaction at times of a conservative wing of contemporary musicians who have considered the League far too much to the "left" and too experimental; and that of a very radical group which has berated the organization for being "so reactionary." (Bauer and Reis, 1948, p. 2.)

The compositional career path afforded by progressivist thought might well have had great appeal to an ambitious and musically talented young woman in Canada of the 1930s. For one thing, it held out the promise of superhuman prestige and lasting societal impact; the construct of the Master Composer was still very much in circulation:

After [Beethoven's] death, of course, his music entered into the lives not of thousands but millions, and with the passing of generations his name stood not only for music in its sublimest form, but for a Being, strange, passionate, and unapproachable, more God than man. (Brent-Smith, 1927, p. 86.)

Given the gender-specific definition of the Master Composer espoused by influential writers like Hanslick, however, not to mention the denigration of women to mere breeders in the aggressively promoted Eugenics movement<sup>3</sup>, it was next to impossible for a woman to get recognition as a composer outside of the progressivist mainstream. "Conservative" composers such as Britain's redoubtable Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), who had been jeered into oblivion, and Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979), whose compositional output tapered off to the point where she was forced to support herself as a nanny in her middle age, were unable to secure the places in the annals of music history that their male counterparts attained. Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953), also gave up composing at the age of 31. The closest example of an experimental woman composer from this period, she is now remembered only for her String Quartet of 1931. As Hans Belting puts it, "the success of art depends on who collects it, not on who makes it." (Belting, 2003, p. 11), and the work that was collectible in the artistic environment of the early

3. "The higher education of women may connote a general intellectual progress for the community, or, on the other hand, a physical degradation of the race, owing to prolonged study having ill effects on woman's child-bearing efficiency [...] those who are the most earnest supporters of woman's independence ought to be the first to recognise that her duty to society is paramount." (Pearson, 1901, p. 355.)



twentieth century was that of the progressivist Master Composer whose music could be seen as an advance on an increasingly obsolete past.

### **Getting a Foothold: Early Strategies**

Under the early 20<sup>th</sup> century progressivist regime, Jean Coulthard had an easier time getting started than either Pentland or Archer. She was able to model her career on that of her mother, a professional singer and music teacher who had carved out an impressive profile for herself in Vancouver as an artist of international stature; Coulthard was initially entering a family musical business with little competition and a good clientele, taking it a step—a big step—further by becoming a composer. Her mother had acquired credibility through study with the major figures in her profession, and Jean Coulthard also made this a top priority. In 1942, she travelled to California to study with Darius Milhaud and Arnold Schoenberg, and few years later moved to New York for studies with Bernard Wagenaar at Juilliard, as well as with Béla Bartók. Coulthard's Vancouver musical connections were of value in her University of British Columbia teaching position, which started when Harry Adaskin began the music department there in 1946.

Barbara Pentland, on the other hand, lived in Toronto in her late twenties and early thirties, where she found support (and competition) in a group of like-minded composers in Toronto. Harry Adaskin ranked her “a first-rate talent, as good as Russia's Shostakovich or Aaron Copland and Roy Harris”<sup>4</sup> (quoted in Eastman and McGee, 1983, p. 83). Like Coulthard, Pentland studied with Wagenaar at Juilliard and had good success in private lessons with Aaron Copland. Yet Pentland's women teachers were among the most significant: she received her first real encouragement through studies with Cecile Gaultier in Paris in her late teens, and later worked with Dika Newlin.

Violet Archer gained extra credibility through her educational attainments, including early studies with Claude Champagne and Douglas Clarke at McGill, private studies with Béla Bartók, and work with Paul Hindemith at Yale culminating in a Masters degree. Each of our Canadian women composers, then, understood the need to establish an identity as a progressivist composer not only through her compositions, but also through association with the “Modern Immortals”—as Nicholas Slonimsky dubbed composers such as Bartók and Schoenberg (Slonimsky, 2005, p. 129).

### **Entering the Profession: Three Diverging Paths**

As our composers finished their long apprenticeships and established their own artistic identities, their individual strengths and predilections took them

4. Comments like this must have sustained her through the onslaught of derision that she faced for much of her career. Donald Mitchell's review of her 1955 concert in London is a choice example of damning by faint praise: “If she could match her welcome crispness of utterance to compelling musical ideas we might find in Miss Pentland a miniaturist of quality.” (Mitchell, 1955, p. 485.)

in different directions. Coulthard had been helped most in her compositional studies by Bernard Wagenaar, a composer from Utrecht who had undergone a rigorous training in the “classical tradition” at a time when young Dutch composers were looking to France rather than to Germany for inspiration: “French composers, not burdened by the weight of romantic tradition, unfettered by the need to create theoretical systems justifying their new explorations, seemed to offer ready solutions to the problems which confronted the young twentieth-century composer.” (Hoogewerf, 1978, p. 67.) Coulthard had grown up hearing her mother play Debussy, and readily acknowledged his influence in her 1952 *String Quartet No. 1* (Bruneau and Duke, 2005, p. 80). She expressed her impatience with theoretical systems such as serialism: “Many composers have claimed that the serial system freed them, but I myself felt just the opposite, more hampered by it. Though I have often used 12-tone themes, I have rarely felt comfortable working with strict serial ideas.” (Bruneau and Duke, 2005, p. 61.)

Coulthard developed her own version of post-impressionist polytonal harmony, and in 1955 when a grant allowed her to take a year away from teaching, she chose to spend the year in France. Her refusal to adopt an atonal style was undoubtedly a factor in her (rather than Pentland, who had less seniority) being let go from her job at the University of British Columbia in the early 1950s (Bruneau, 1999, p. 103 – 104). Even though she was able to get her position reinstated, the postwar environment had increasing intolerance for tonal musical expression (for reasons discussed below), so Coulthard’s writing was no longer seen as being in the progressivist centre, but moving toward the conservative margins.

Archer was well aware of the Second Vienna School, but like Coulthard, chose not to adopt serial techniques in any thoroughgoing way. Her years of study with Hindemith at Yale had a powerful effect—“I couldn’t help but absorb his ideas, his miraculous memory, and his thoroughness in explaining any teaching point [...] he expected us [...] to not be just paper musicians, so he was very keen on the sound being listened to and heard.” (Cornfield, 2002, p. 4.) Hindemith’s emphasis on non-triadic melodies and independent treatment of intervals can be heard in works such as Archer’s Trio no. 2 from the mid-1950’s. Archer did not mind being called neo-classic, but she was careful to maintain her identity as a progressivist composer by being neo-classic in a non-tonal way: “I have been influenced to a certain extent by serial procedures [...] which I think are valuable to me [...] you could place me as a neo-classic, neo-Baroque composer, but not of the conservative classification.” (Cornfield, 2002, p. 5.)

Pentland attended The MacDowell Colony, and there studied serial technique intensively with composer and Schoenberg pupil Dika Newlin. Serial technique became increasingly important in her work: by the time of her *Symphony in Ten Parts* (1957), she had made it her own. Her music had changed over the decade following the end of the war, growing less tonal and less neo-classic in structure, and becoming sinewy, energetic, and full of brilliant changes of colour. Although she did not strictly follow the serialist grid of transpositions, retrogrades and inversions, serial techniques helped her to avoid sounding “19<sup>th</sup> century” and conveying an emotionalism she despised (see Eastman and McGee, 1983, p. 42). Pentland described herself as an “intuitive” composer: “I couldn’t put a straitjacket on things that wanted to emerge on their own, so to speak. So, I allowed it [serialism] to free reign. I used it as a kind of governing principle, and I have rarely written works that could be called, in any way, in a strict serial technique.” (Cornfield, 2003, p. 12.)

### **Postwar Neo-Webernianism**

A major factor in Pentland’s development that set her apart from Coulthard and Archer was her participation in the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* (International Summer Course for New Music) in Darmstadt in the early 1950s. This event so transformed her music that she spoke of her pre- and post-Darmstadt periods (Cornfield, 2003, p. 11), even admitting how naïve she was in her pre-Darmstadt years. In the years between the wars, in both the U.S. and in Germany, radical composers such as Varèse and Schoenberg had been either forgotten or, in the case of Third Reich Germany, outright forbidden. Copland was successfully incorporating American folk themes in his music, Stravinsky and Hindemith were finding a public for their respective brands of neo-Classicism, and in Canada composers like Pentland’s friend Godfrey Ridout were also maintaining respectable careers (though Pentland once walked out of a Toronto Symphony performance of one of his works, muttering “Nineteenth century!” [Eastman and McGee, 1983, p. 38.]) But following the war, the radical modernism of the beginning of the twentieth century suddenly re-emerged with great vigour, due at least in part to initiatives of the U. S. military (Beal, p. 112; cf. also *Circuit*, vol. 15, no. 3). This time, abstraction and serialism were associated with the advances of science, though materialistic science had earlier been seen by Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and Varèse as a force to be opposed by their early spiritual modernist arts.

In Postwar Darmstadt, the characteristics of modernism as described by Latour were even more pronounced: its promise of complete freedom for

the composer and complete control of sound was to be achieved through total serialism and electroacoustic technology (Boulez, 1991, p. 178). Its ritual denunciation was more vociferous than ever, its programme of “purification” more stringent: “It is not leering demonism but the merest common sense which makes me say that, since the discoveries of the Viennese School, all non-serial composers are USELESS” (Boulez, 1991, p. 214, emphasis original); “Purified as an end in itself, music suffers from its purposelessness no less than the commodity goods suffer from their narrow purposefulness.” (Adorno, 1949 [2006], p. 21.) The purest of all was the sound world of Anton Webern. The radical experimentalism promoted by Darmstadt’s *Ferienkurse* gave Pentland just the encouragement she needed to leave the neo-classical world behind and to embrace the distilled rigor of the serialist style.

The movement of the experimental from margins to mainstream—albeit a maneuver in aid of postwar American diplomacy—had significant repercussions for women composers. Ruth Crawford Seeger resumed writing again, although she completed only one piece before succumbing to cancer. Barbara Pentland’s experiments with serialism convinced Harry Adaskin to offer her a posting at the University of British Columbia to teach the upper-level students, which must have rankled Coulthard terribly: Coulthard had never progressed beyond the Lecturer position, which meant teaching the time-consuming lower level courses. She is quoted as disagreeing with “younger composers” who believed that “the music of the past should be debunked completely, and a new system evolved, that it is a nineteenth century attitude and therefore should be scorned.” (Cornfield, 2002, p. 10), and, given her circumstances, it is not hard to imagine which younger composer Coulthard might have in mind. Coulthard’s decision not to embrace experimentalism came at some cost to her stature—a temporary cost, because her music continues to be in demand. Eventually, Violet Archer also made forays into experimental music: she arranged for a three-month course in electroacoustic music in London in 1973 when she was already 60, managed the technology, and produced a successful electroacoustic work, *Episodes*. The fact that our three women composers all had university appointments is a credit not only to their strategies and compositional attainments, but also to Canada and to the universities concerned. It should be added, though, at the time of Coulthard’s, Pentland’s and Archer’s hirings, the Universities of British Columbia and Alberta music departments were small and isolated places to work. But composers such as Australia’s Margaret Sutherland (1897-1984) and England’s Elizabeth Lutyens (1906-1983) had nothing comparable. On the other hand, even the hidebound *Berlin Hochschule für Musik* hired Elisabeth

Kuyper to teach theory and composition in 1908. Yet the remarkable creative and administrative achievements of Violet Archer as Department Chair at the University of Alberta must be unprecedented in the history of woman composers.

### Conclusion

The artistic ‘freedom’ afforded by the postwar version of modernism was freedom under a narrowly defined concept of the composer, which was taken as self-evident: “*In light of repeated history* the cliché [of being born before one’s time] may be simply the formulation of the *obvious truth* that men of genius, whether in music or in science, anticipate the development of future tastes and future concepts.” (Slonimsky, 1950 [2005], p. 129, italics added.) Pentland would have concurred. In one of my brief conversations with her in the 1980s, she expressed bewilderment at the continuing prevalence of tonal music: “But we’re almost at the twenty-first century!” she said emphatically, the implication being that tonal music was a throwback and people had better get used to the coming new musical order. Latour points out that “a chief oddity of the moderns, [is] the idea of a time that passes irreversibly and annuls the entire past in its wake.” Odd though it may be, it gripped the imagination of Pentland and many others.

Archer was also perplexed at public reaction to what she called the “[musical] language of the present age”: “The closer we get to the twenty-first century, the more I become aware that the classical music of our era does not have a general, sympathetic audience that understands and accepts its language.” (Archer, 1992, p. 8.) Yet Archer’s skillful 1968 *Sinfonietta* shows that she felt quite free to jettison the language of musical modernism when the occasion called for something else.

Coulthard was never able to accept the polarization of human and musical concerns. “In this great age of scientific development, I feel that human values remain the same and that unless music is able to reach the heart in some way, it loses its compelling power to minister to human welfare.” (Bruneau and Duke, 2005, p. 157.) Similarly, Archer felt it of paramount importance to communicate with her audience. There is no question but that Pentland was also deeply concerned about human values. But in the 1970s when Coulthard formulated the above statement it was all too easy to read “reaching the heart” as code for “nineteenth century.” Pentland continued on her carefully experimental path, incorporating aleatory “zones,” quarter-tones, and extended instrumental techniques in her works. But she stopped composing nearly a decade before the others. She had become disillusioned:

musical progressivism was failing to deliver on its promise, and the musical future upon which she had so assiduously based her career was not dawning as she had expected. Whether her disillusionment led to, or resulted from, her final illness, we will never know.

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