# Voicing the Wilderness: Chant as an Expression of Canadian Culture in R. Murray Schafer's *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*

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## Introduction

A discussion of R. Murray Schafer's environmental music theatre is, inevitably, a discussion of culture. The outspoken composer, writer and educator is deeply engaged in the perennial Canadian question: what constitutes an authentic Canadian art? Yet Schafer has sometimes been accused of cultural misappropriation, of helping himself too freely from the great stewing pot of world myths and musics, and in particular of an imperialistic attitude towards First Nations culture. To dismiss Schafer in this way is to ignore the importance of his explorations in culture, community and art; for in borrowing from world cultures, Schafer acknowledges the multiplicity of cultures within his homeland even as he attempts to give voice to a necessarily hybrid yet indigenous art, rooted in the Canadian wilderness. Schafer's collaborative music drama *Patria the Epilogue: And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* epitomizes this artistic synthesis which is best seen through the work's use of chant as an expression of a community founded in an environmental context.

## Canadian Culture: the Idea of the North

Over the 30 years that Schafer has been creating his *Patria* series of 12 music dramas, the composer has striven to situate Canadian music within a mythogenic "Idea of the North." Schafer has said that with the writing of *Patria the Prologue: The Princess of the Stars* (1981), which is performed at dawn on a wilderness lake, he "conceived the idea that the whole cycle could start from our own treasure house of Canada. Then the characters could migrate, could wander the earth—more or less the way we all do in our time...Ultimately, though, we come back to the same place where we were: enriched, changed, transformed but definitely we come back to the Canadian wilderness" (personal communication, June 19, 1996). It is important to add that Schafer does not see this identification as the exclusive feature of Canadian music, but rather "as a trait against which other identities [may] be measured" (1984, p. 79).

Schafer argues that the single unifying element within Canada's multiplicity of ethnic cultures is place—the vast northern wilderness which Northrop Frye (1971) wryly called humanly undigested. In a politically and socially unfashionable argument, Schafer maintains that Canada's cultural-mosaic policy has worked against the creation of an authentically Canadian art. The composer insists that,

"we have made an enthusiastic virtue out of a condition in which everyone speaks of a different homeland, to which we have given the name multi-culturalism" (1984, p. ix). Like Frye (1971), Schafer believes that the question of Canadian identity is not so much "who are we?" but "where is here?", a question implicit in the very name of the *Patria* cycle, which is Latin for "homeland." Indeed, Schafer's objections to immigration are not racist but placist. As he states, "the roots we seek are inside the borders. Roots mean place not race" (1984, p. ix).

Roots may mean place, but Schafer's polemic begs the question of whose voice constitutes an authentic expression of that place. One could easily argue that the true voice of the Canadian wilderness is that of the First Nations, yet *Patria* borrows widely from world cultures, past and present. Ancient Greek texts and Coptic melodies exist alongside Amerindian chants and Jungian archetypes, carnival tunes and wolf howls. The entire cycle is framed by a prologue and epilogue set in the Canadian wilderness, borrowing heavily from the totemic and nature-based traditional culture of the First Nations. Schafer seems to be guilty of a cultural imperialism in sharp contrast to his hermetic views on Canadian culture. After all, there is a long tradition in Canada of the romantic Anglo who "goes native." A closer look at Schafer's environmental music theatre, however, shows that far from the mimetic model of such historical icons as Grey Owl and Earnest Thompson Seton, Schafer is striving to realize a vision of an integrated cultural expression embedded in its specific physical and social contexts.

## *Patria the Epilogue: And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*

Perhaps the most potent example of Schafer's attempt to find a truly Canadian voice can be found in *Patria the Epilogue: And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*. This week-long music drama takes place every August at the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve adjacent to Ontario's Algonquin Park. Begun in 1988, the Wolf Project (as it is known colloquially) is a collective of about 60 musicians, dancers, artists, thespians and woodcrafters who are co-creating the work under Schafer's direction. The group includes professionals and amateurs, senior citizens and young children from a variety of backgrounds, but pre-dominantly white and middle-class. Both Anglo- and French-Canadians are represented as well as various other ethnicities, including a few members from other countries[1]. Everyone contributes to the cost of this completely self-sustaining project. Travel is by hiking and canoeing, cooking is done over the camp-fire, and the latrine is a trench dug in the woods. All participants join in camp tasks as well as artistic endeavours; indeed, they are all simultaneously creators, performers and audience. Divided into eight clans, they camp together at three remote sites which are separated from one another by lakes and forests[2]. Each clan is signified by a totem drawn from animals indigenous to the area: fox, loon, deer, turtle, crow, bear, beaver and squirrel.

The Wolf Project is framed by daily rituals involving music, poetry and dance. In addition, there are eight ritualistic dramas called forest encounters, which the clans create and perform for one another. Throughout the week the clans weave a ritualistic tapestry of legends, poems, dances, costumes and music which celebrates the central theme of transformation. The week culminates in a pageant involving all the clans who participate in a ritual designed to bring Wolf

and the Princess of the Stars (male and female Jungianesque archetypes) into the Great Wheel of Life, thus restoring harmony to the earth. In the Wolf Project, scripted theatre intersects with ritual to create a hierophany or sacred drama, and the camaraderie of daily camp life and collaborative creation creates a close-knit if transitory community. The one thing all project members have in common is their sympathetic connection to the wilderness context of *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*, for the transformation they seek is at once mythic and personal, symbolized by the desire to become re-integrated with nature.

Schafer has written a large body of instrumental and vocal music for *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*[3]. One form, chant (which is defined here as a short song meant to be sung repetitively by a group), involves the entire community of the project in Schafer's attempt to voice the Canadian wilderness.

## Collaboration: chant as an expression of community

Chant may be seen as a musical thread which winds its way through *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*, infusing every aspect of the project from rituals to theatre to daily camp life. Short and tuneful, chants are accessible to everyone. They are sung around the campfire and invented on long hikes; they celebrate clan culture and release group energy; they provide the chorus for theatrical events and sanctify rituals; they entertain, soothe, and invigorate.

The following analysis of chant in the Wolf Project is based on a collection of 61 chants written over seven years from 1990 to 1996. Given the numerous references to Amerindian culture in the Wolf Project, one would expect these chants to borrow heavily from, or at least to bear strong resemblance to, Amerindian song forms. Having considered the provenance, language and musical content of the chants it appears, rather, that they tend to express the personal roots of their authors, to have, in fact, a "common-practice period" bias. About 87% of the chants were written by project members, either individually or in groups. Only 13% were brought in directly from other cultures, and these included African, South American and European as well as Amerindian chants. Similarly, only 11% of the chants used Amerindian words, while half the chants favoured nonsense words from a variety of linguistic sources, and 20% used English. Table One details the musical content of the collection by length, metre, tonality and form. As Table One shows, the typical Wolf Project chant would have one or more symmetrical four or eight bar phrases in common time and be sung in a major or a minor key. (Even the modal chants tend to favour the mixolydian mode beloved of pop-music.)

It is in their performative context and function, more than their musical content, that chants express the ethos of the Wolf Project community. Chants reflect and celebrate clan culture so that, for instance, a fox chant includes sly body movements and onomatopoeic vocables: "pum pum pum pum pum" as the fox stalks its prey, and a whispered "shwaaaa!" to accompany a sudden turn of the head. In contrast, the beaver chants reflect the bumptious nature of the clan as expressed in a Gilbert and Sullivan style drinking song which proclaims: "wouldn't it be good if we didn't need wood, we could sit and drink beer all day..." While the through-composed loon chant, *The Great Bird of the North*, is in a melismatic plain-chant style suited to the haunting call of the bird.

As the Wolf Project has matured, a significant body of chants have been

Table One: Musical content of chants

| **Length** | | **Metre** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 measures | 25.0% | 4/4 | 45.0% |
| 4 measures | 22.0% | mixed | 6.7% |
| more than 8 | 13.3% | 2/4 | 10.0% |
| 3 measures | 11.7% | unmetred | 10.0% |
| 6 measures | 6.7% | 6/8 | 6.7% |
| 2 measures | 5.0% | 3/4 | 5.0% |
| 5 measures | 3.3% | 3/2 | 2.0% |
| 9 measures | 3.3% | 10/4 | 2.0% |
| 1 measure | 2.0% | 10/8 | 2.0% |
| **Tonality** | | **Form** | |
| modal | 38.3% | one or more repeating phrases | 56.3% |
| major | 31.7% | two or more parts | 16.7% |
| minor | 25.0% | round | 11.7% |
| pentatonic | 2.0% | antiphonal | 5.0% |
| spoken | 2.0% | strophic | 5.0% |
| | | multipart round | 3.3% |
| | | through composed | 2.0% |

written directly out of the wilderness experience, drawn from the environment itself. A whimsical example, the *Leech Chant*, was composed at the site by a group of four project members in response to the proliferation of large ugly leeches in the summer of 1996. It utilizes an English text to convey ahumourously ghoulish lust (presented from the leech's point of view). The chant is in four parts beginning with an ostinato "slurp, slurp" to which is added an undulating "ah" meant to convey the deceptively beautiful motion of a leech swimming. As the leech sings of its desire to be "intoxicated by your ruby elixir" an undercurrent of sinister voices murmurs "I want your blood, I suck your blood." The chant is deliberately silly, but anyone who has ever emerged from the water with two inches of slimy leech attached to his or her leg will empathize.

The Wolf Project chants vary widely in sophistication depending on their genesis and function. Taken individually, most chants are clever at best, banal at worst; however, looked on as a whole, the Wolf Project chants embody much of the ideals, spirit and liveliness of the endeavour. Here the creation and performance of music is not the provence of experts, to be digested by a passive audience, but the lively expression of a community culture, developed directly out of its wilderness context.

## Context: *The Wolf Chant*

Murray Schafer has played a significant role in the chant culture of the Wolf Project, having written about one fifth of the chants used in the work. Several of his chants began life as a choral cycle called *Magic Songs*, commissioned by the

Orphei Dränger men's choir of Uppsala, Sweden in 1988. Schafer's notes to the score of *Magic Songs* (1992) reveal mystic and environmental concerns which he later brought to *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*. "*Magic Songs*," he writes, "leads us back to the era of 'tone magic,' when the purpose of singing was not merely to give pleasure but was intended to bring about a desired effect in the physical world. In spirit culture, everything has its voice and the aim of the singer is to unify himself with this voice...The aim of these songs, with magic texts in a language spoken by no human, is to restore aspects of nature which have been destroyed or neglected by humanity. To the extent that the performers and the audience believe in them, they will be successful."

The first of the *Magic Songs, The Chant to Bring Back the Wolf*, is a good example of Schafer's use of multiple transformations of voice in order to arrive at a music which comes from, and belongs to, its environmental and performative context. The *Chant to Bring Back the Wolf* seems not to have originated with Schafer, but is an instance of cultural borrowing. The Brazilian anthropologist, Marisa Fonterrada (1996, p.33) identified a similar Blackfoot Indian *Wolf Song* in H.B. Lopez's book *Of Wolves and Men* (1978). The first phrase is identical to Schafer's (although the Blackfoot song contains no vocables) and, like the *Chant to Bring Back the Wolf*, it culminates in a wolf howl. But, clearly, Schafer's version has travelled far from its putative source. The composer has no specific memory of extracting the chant from Lopez's book (which he owns), but does not rule out the possibility that he heard or saw such a chant and was influenced by it. The point is, that for Schafer, it is not the provenance but the performative context of the chant which situates it within his "Idea of the North."

A simplified version of the chant is used in *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* as an invocation to call the alienated character Wolf back into the Great Wheel of Life (itself a metaphor for the re-integration of humans with nature and more specifically of Canadians with their northern environment). Returning closer to its (probable) Amerindian roots, the chant is sung in unison, always accompanied by a stamping circle dance which derives much of its energy from the ingressive repeated vocable "um-a-ha."

The singers include both trained and untrained voices, children and adults, men and women. Because the chant exploits dramatic leaps and a wide range, the result is a raw heterophonic texture with variable pitch. But as implied in his notes to the *Magic Songs*, it is the ecstacy of the moment, born out of the wilderness performance environment which Schafer requires—an atavistic potency meant to reconnect the singer to the land and, in fact, to recover the voice of the land itself.

## Conclusion

In his essay *Sharing the Continent*, Northrop Frye addresses the uneasy relationship of Canadians to the northern wilderness they inhabit. He states that "everywhere we turn in Canadian literature and painting, we are haunted by the natural world, and even the most sophisticated Canadian artists can hardly keep something very primitive and archaic out of their imaginations. This sense is not that of the possession of the land, but precisely the absence of possession, a feeling that here is a nature that man has polluted and imprisoned and violated but has never really lived with" (1982, in Mandel & Taras, 1987, p. 214). In creating

a collaborative community of amateur and professional artists drawn from different aspects of Canadian society, Schafer is attempting to foster a positive relationship with the land—to live with it, rather than in opposition to it. His use, then, of materials drawn from First Nations culture may be seen as an acknowledgment of its ancestral role as a voice of the land, to which Canadians are necessarily related, and from which we must learn and evolve. Schafer's work seems to belong to the same camp as the body of Canadian literature which, again in Frye's words, treats the First Nations as if they are "our direct cultural ancestors whose traditions continue in them and in us" (1982, in Mandel & Taras, 1987, p. 215). Indeed, Frye goes so far as to remark that "it seems clear that for Canadian culture the old imperialist phrase 'going native' has come home to roost. We are no longer an army of occupation, and the natives are ourselves" (p. 215).

The goal of *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* is to enact Schafer's transformative ideal of the wilderness as an expression of Canadian culture. The work's emphasis on simple and direct vocal music underlines this goal, for it empowers each participant with a creative role in voicing the wilderness. At the Wolf Project the sound of chanting rings through the forest and haunts the trails, and one suspects that the forest continues to sing long after all the people have gone home.

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## Endnotes

[1] There are no Native-Canadian participants in the Wolf Project at this time—a matter of circumstance rather than design. People who want to become members of the Wolf Project simply write a letter of intent and find two sponsors from within the project. Anyone who wants to can apply, and the main criterion is a commitment to the long-term goals of the project. Approximately 100 people have experienced the Wolf Project during its decade of existence.

[2] The script calls for four sites and a total of 64 adult participants (with any number of children). See Waterman, 1997, for the complete ninth draft of the script for *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*.

[3] See Waterman (1997) for a complete analysis of Schafer's music for *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*.