DMA Thesis Proposal

A Voice in the Wilderness:

Place in the Outdoor Solo Vocal Works of R. Murray Schafer

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Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer has achieved international recognition through his work in the fields of composition, music education, and soundscape research. His music is performed extensively in Canada and internationally, and he is the winner of several prestigious prizes, including the Molson Prize and the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement. In 2013, he was named a Companion of the Order of Canada, which is the highest award of recognition and merit granted by the Federal Government. Writing for voices is a major portion of his output, and he has composed over thirty concert works for solo female voice with various instrumental ensembles, in addition to his many musical theatre works.

Schafer’s work draws attention to the importance of performance context—the place in which music is performed. His creations are often site-related and designed for non-traditional locations. For example, he has composed a large body of work for outdoor, ‘wilderness’ performance. Among these are several pieces for female solo voice. Performing these works can provide unique opportunities and challenges for the vocalist.

My dissertation will investigate the implications of place on the performance of Schafer’s wilderness works for solo female voice. What effect does place have on the singer’s hearing, listening, and production, and how can the singer prepare for and/or manage these effects? By coupling conventional score analysis techniques with critical embodied engagement and when possible, the study of recordings, I use *Ariadne’s Aria*, *Aubade for two voices*, and *Sun Father/Earth Mother* as case studies to help singers practically approach and optimally perform this repertoire.

Schafer’s site-specific score directives and profound understanding of how sound interacts with its environment make the consideration of place an essential component of any performance guide to his music. Since the place that contains a performance substantially affects the sound and concert experience for performers and audience alike, a performer’s ability to read and adjust to their physical environment creates conditions of possibility for an optimal performance experience for both parties. Given that singers have, in general, considerably greater experience performing in concert halls than in the outdoors, my paper examines considerations relevant to outdoor settings. I will explore what new challenges and opportunities outdoor performance engenders, how it impacts sound
production and listening from the performer’s perspective, and what singers might do to make the most out of the combination of music and place for both themselves and their listeners. Schafer’s songs are designed to interact with their environment. This paper will aim to assist singers in understanding and practically navigating this important feature of Schafer’s outdoor vocal works by integrating insights from research in the fields of musicology, architectural acoustics, voice science and pedagogy, and performance studies.

My exploration of this aspect of Schafer’s repertoire is of significance for Canadian studies, performance and voice studies, and musicology. Research into the impact of place of performance on singing is of importance to singers, voice pedagogues, coaches, and musical directors. Issues arising from the location of performance, especially in outdoor settings, will be of interest to musicians other than singers, to scholars working in environmental humanities, and to those who conduct performance studies outside of music.

**Literature review**

My project contributes to a small but growing body of literature that can be glossed as “Shafer Studies.” Among the existing research, the composer’s outdoor vocal music has exclusively been studied as an element of his *Patria* music theatre works. Much of this research articulates the importance of participating in Schafer’s works in order to understand them, and accordingly most of these scholars have been participants in the works they discuss.

Kirk MacKenzie’s doctoral dissertation is the first study of the *Patria* works, and provides a good overview of the primary themes (1991). Its perspective is limited in that five of the *Patria* works were yet to be written at the time of writing, but the study nevertheless provides an excellent starting point for contextualizing the outdoor works, which were predominantly written for *Patria*. MacKenzie briefly mentions the interaction of the soundscape and site with Schafer’s music in performance but does not pursue this direction (1991, 120 and 129).
A major portion of Kathleen Galloway’s doctoral dissertation on Schafer’s *Patria* works considers the impact of his “unorthodox performance locales and contexts” on audience and performers (Galloway 2010). This ethnographic study is written from a participant’s perspective and covers four of the *Patria* works, each taking place at least partially outdoors. Her discussion of these outdoor spatial contexts is revealing, and centers on their impact on the production elements – props, sets, design, etc – and on the audience experience. Schafer’s use of what Galloway calls elastic performance spaces and ‘non-places’ in these works, and the resulting effects upon audience and production members is considered. The musician’s perspective in these various contexts is hinted at, but not pursued, and the music itself is not explored. I will extend Galloway’s observations to include and focus on the performing singer, and three representative musical scores will be considered. The intangible features of site that Galloway describes do certainly affect performers of outdoor works; however, in the interest of creating a practical tool for singers and voice teachers, my study will limit the consideration of the implications of place on singers to physical and aural phenomena.

Ellen Waterman’s doctoral dissertation is a detailed description of the *Patria* epilogue *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (referred to as the *Wolf Project*). Her discussion includes descriptions of how the specific locations of this outdoor, site-specific work are used, and analysis of selections of the epilogue’s music written both by Schafer and also by the project members, for both professional and amateur musicians. As the nature of the *Wolf Project* is to change and grow annually, many of the ideas, places, music, and events described are no longer present in the current version; however, Waterman’s dissertation remains an important snapshot of the *Patria* epilogue at a pivotal time, with Schafer still heavily involved, and at the peak of his outdoor composing period.

Waterman’s fifth chapter is of particular relevance to my research, as it observes how the outdoor setting influences and shapes Schafer’s compositional style, exemplified by his increased use of tonal harmonic language, bird song imitation, frequent unmetered sections, etc. In building this argument, Waterman draws on selections from several of Schafer’s vocal works. Waterman considers the performer’s perspective in this chapter, noting for example, that ensembles have difficulty maintaining tuning outdoors, but her consideration of these performance issues is brief. This is natural given her aim, which is to
produce a historical documentation of the *Wolf Project*. My paper aims to facilitate and improve performance of Schafer’s outdoor music, and therefore makes the performer’s experience central. Waterman includes a brief performance journal which details the experience of producing a recording in Schafer’s chosen forest and lake setting. This is useful and related to my work, but the focus is on difficulties with recording technology and process; recording is an entirely distinct phenomenon from live performance, with different concerns. Nevertheless, I will build on several concepts developed in Waterman’s brief observations about recording outdoors and elaborate upon the physical and acoustical implications of these types of sites as they relate to live performance from the performer’s perspective.

Research on Schafer’s solo vocal works is limited. The most comprehensive source is Stephen Adams’ book from the University of Toronto Press’s Canadian Composers series (Adams 1983). Adams describes the solo vocal repertoire composed up to 1981 in varying detail. Schafer’s ‘environmental works’ period began in 1979, but the only reference to the outdoor vocal works is a description of the plot and general context of *Princess of the Stars* (1981), with no musical examples, analysis, or even reference to the vocal part.

An essay by Robin Elliott presents a musicological analysis of *Adieu Robert Schumann*, a piece for voice and orchestra, looking particularly at intertextuality in the score and text (2003). Although Schafer’s outdoor compositional style diverges from his writing for indoors, Elliott’s observations hold true in some of the songs I am analyzing: Schafer references and quotes himself across the Patria works, and ‘quotes’ nature by inserting notated bird song into his vocal works.

Other non-wilderness solo vocal works have been explored in dissertations by Mari Hahn (Hahn 2002) and Linda Beaupré (Beaupré 1984), both of whom examine works from *Patria 3*. Hahn details a specific production of Schafer’s musical theatre work, *Beauty and the Beast*. She analyzes the work and offers interpretive guidance from her own perspective as a participating performer. She provides a performance guide, with artistic
suggestions (e.g., tonal colour, phrasing, etc.) and pedagogical suggestions to assist the
singer in preparation for this performance. Her discussion of the challenges of the work do
not consider spatial context; she performed her production as an isolated chamber work in a
controlled concert environment rather than as part of \textit{Patria} 3, and the implications of this
dramatic contextual change are not discussed. Beaupré’s master’s thesis on \textit{La Testa D’
Ariadne} is necessarily limited in its perspective, given its brief size and early date of
publication. Written decades before the completion of the \textit{Patria}, and with only a very
limited analysis of the score, its assessment of the work and of Schafer’s use of the figure
of Ariadne can only function as an introduction. It does however offer a thorough
description of the use of the \textit{Patria} tone row in this score.

In the \textit{Patria}-focused dissertations mentioned previously there is some study of
Schafer’s vocal music. Like Beaupré, MacKenzie offers a similarly limited analysis
of \textit{Ariadne’s aria}, focusing exclusively on Schafer’s use of the 12-tone \textit{Patria} tone row
(1991). The piece’s interaction with its environment, a major shaping force in this score, is
entirely absent. Waterman’s dissertation includes examples of vocal works and some useful
analysis, but her scope – examining works written by the Project’s other composers, works
written for different instrumental forces, and works for amateurs as well as professionals –
combined with her primary focus on the Project’s foundational philosophies and history,
necessarily limits her information on professional outdoor vocal works by Schafer. I will
develop her musicological observations on Schafer’s ‘wilderness’ music and extend them
specifically to the vocal repertoire. In addition, my exploration of selected pieces will be
aimed at the performer; it will offer practical suggestions for performance based on
information about the acoustic and physiological effects of the setting.

My dissertation also engages with the growing number of studies that examine the
relationships between music, space, and listening. Sonic architects Ruth Blesser and Barry
Salter (2007), for example, have explored the implications of listening environments,
including musical and performance contexts, showing how inextricably linked sound is to
the space that contains it. Listening in turn has been shown to impact vocal production –
singers intuitively make use of an auditory feedback loop to monitor and adjust such details
as intonation, resonance, coordination with other musicians, and diction (see Tomatis 2005,
Maudaule 2001, Olsen 2010). An article by Raoul Husson (1962) moves beyond listening to look at how the acoustic qualities of a hall affect the physiology of the vocal instrument, and how that is subjectively experienced by the singer. These sources all assume that a musical performance’s acoustics will be consistent with some version of a concert hall. In much of this literature, the experience of singing outdoors is treated as something that is unpleasant and even dangerous. DeVore and Cookman briefly address public speaking outdoors, naming it a “major vocal challenge”, and warning of poor acoustics and unwanted competing noises potentially leading to vocal fatigue (DeVore and Cookman 2009, 158). Understanding and managing these challenges is important for singers who undertake Schafer’s outdoor works.

My dissertation treats the ‘outdoors’ in a manner that is very different from the existing research, which not only glosses it as a problem or a novelty, but which also ignores the many subtleties and distinct features of particular outdoor locations. For example, ‘outdoors’ is not entirely open, unreverberant meadow or a sonically inert forest. There are a tremendous variety of spectacular acoustic spaces outdoors, with myriad unique characteristics, certainly as varied as actual indoor performance spaces. When I investigate the phenomenon of singing outdoors, I will not only consider the acoustically ‘dry’ spaces, but also the more ‘musical’ spaces that function as natural amphitheatres with their own unique aural acoustics.

**Methodology**

My research into performing Schafer’s wilderness compositions for voice will be based on literature review, score study and performance, and recording analysis. I will draw from scholarship in the fields of musicology; acoustics and architectural acoustics; and voice science, performance, and pedagogy.

To illuminate the experience of performing these works outdoors, I will draw upon my journals from previous and upcoming performances of these works in the outdoor context. I will also consult with other experienced ‘outdoor’ singers through personal correspondence as a way to move beyond my own perspectives. With additional
experimenting singing these works in concert hall and outdoor settings, I will develop new insight into the implications of performance location through embodied experience. In order to develop performance suggestions, the information I gain experientially and ethnographically will be situated in relation to Schafer’s writings and interviews, and the literature on acoustics and voice science.

Recording comparison is only possible for Ariadne’s aria, but will be particularly interesting there, given that recordings have been done by both a mezzo- and a soprano voice, with only one having had experience with Schafer’s *Patria*. Acknowledging the impact of their different recording processes, I will consider how the singers’ artistic choices allow the music of the aria to work within the natural soundscape. Elements considered will include the length of pauses, and the effects of any vowel modifications or dynamic choices. I will also observe the effect of artistic choices in illuminating the musical structure of the work (for example highlighting the use of the tone row and/or its extra-musical connotations), and how the singers approach the notated bird song.

The University of Toronto is my base for performing this research. Dr. Robin Elliott is a Canadian Music scholar who has written on Schafer and his contemporaries, and will co-supervise this project with Dr. Jeff Packman, who can provide guidance for researching place and performance. Dr. Lorna MacDonald, while also being a performing soprano, is a vocal pedagogy expert and can advise regarding those aspects of my work.

**My fitness for the project**

As a singer with almost two decades of experience in professional new-music performance and who has worked with Schafer extensively in both his wilderness and traditional concert works, I am well positioned to discuss the repertoire, its interpretation, and issues pertaining to its performance. In addition to performing his works, I have studied and written on various aspects of his output throughout my schooling, in courses on soundscape, music education, music history, and performance studies.
My master’s degree in vocal pedagogy, my continuing doctoral coursework in this field and my experience teaching applied voice and opera at multiple levels including undergraduate and young-professional make me qualified to discuss pedagogical approaches to prepare for outdoor singing. My fluency in French is an additional asset, as it allows me to understand and make use of Schafer’s French interviews in the CMC archive. In combination with the above assets, my strong personal connections to the composer and to his network of interpreters and collaborators, past and present, make me the ideal person to do this work.

Outline

My study of the outdoor vocal works of R. Murray Schafer will comprise an introduction, seven chapters, and a concluding section.

Introduction: An opening chapter will frame the project and the issues raised.

The first three chapters will form an introduction to the composer and his wilderness works, and will be based on Schafer studies, primarily Adams, Galloway, and Waterman, and also on Schafer’s own publications, as well as on primary research into the scores for outdoor voice:

Chapter one will be a summary introduction to Schafer’s life and work, including an overview of his non-musical activities and his major creative preoccupations and influences, and highlighting the soundscape work, which was crucial to his outdoor period. This will provide context for the chapters that follow.

Chapter two will focus on his move into composing for the outdoors. It will trace the history of this period in Schafer’s creative thought, and it will describe how this setting impacted Schafer’s compositional style. It will contain an overview of the outdoor works generally.

Chapter three will focus in more detail on the outdoor works for solo voice, describing their specific settings and contexts, and the characteristic musical themes and
gestures found in these pieces. This discussion will include correspondence from Schafer’s regular singers to help illuminate the performer’s experience of these works. A table of all of the outdoor vocal works will accompany the chapter.

Chapter four will discuss the implications of Schafer’s outdoor venues on vocal performance. This chapter will synthesize existing research from the fields of voice science, acoustics, and soundscape studies, and critical reflection on my own experiences of performing these pieces. It will provide information aimed to help singers to operate with the greatest possible ease and effectiveness in this performance context. Performance time will be included in this exploration, as outdoor locations are acoustically different at different times of day, and Schafer’s scores provide time as well as place directives. Weather conditions will be included as well, given that variation in weather affects acoustics, and many of Schafer’s performances happen regardless of the weather. The practical physical/acoustic implications of atypical spatial relationships to the audience will also be discussed, as they are an essential feature of all Schafer’s outdoor works.

The final three chapters will be case studies of representative works, Aubade for Two voices, Sun Father/Earth Mother, and Ariadne’s Aria. In these chapters, conventional score analysis techniques will be coupled with critical embodied engagement and when possible, the study of recordings to help singers practically approach and optimally perform this repertoire. Each chapter will detail the piece’s performance location and time, contextual information, and spatial relationships of audience and performers. Interpretive suggestions will be provided based on the score, Schafer literature, and likely interactions with the audience and intended acoustic environment. Suggestions will also be provided for using performer placement in concert halls to simulate the effects of the appropriate outdoor acoustic, in acknowledgement that in reality these pieces may occasionally be performed indoors.

Chapter five will discuss Aubade for Two Voices. With this work I will consider an edge-of-lake setting, and examine the complexities of singing outdoors at dawn and of singing in ensemble across large distances.

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1 The validity of this kind of investigation is pointed to by the work of Elisabeth Le Guin, who developed insight into Boccherini’s cello music through her experience of performing it (Le Guin 2006).
Chapter six will discuss *Sun Father/Earth Mother*. This work is one of the few outdoor vocal pieces with text, allowing for a consideration of diction and narrative communication strategies for the outdoors. It is in sections and is written for a variety of sites. It will be a study of a mid-day piece in meadow, rocky, and forest settings.

Chapter seven will discuss *Ariadne’s Aria*. This a cappella aria bookends the *Patria* cycle. Here I will consider singing outdoors late at night, in the middle of a lake, and in a moving canoe. I will include a comparison of the recorded versions by mezzo-soprano Patricia Green and soprano Wendy Humphreys.

Conclusion: A concluding chapter will summarize the main points of value for performers and determine areas for further research.

**Conclusion**

Despite the importance of voice to Schafer’s aesthetic and to his overall output, and despite the unique contextual features of many of these works, there has been limited study of Schafer’s solo vocal works to date. Schafer’s outdoor pieces represent a particularly important and unexplored area of this composer’s oeuvre. They reflect major themes of his life and work: his passion for the Canadian wilderness, his profound attunement to soundscape, and his insight into how environments can interact with composed music to create a unique and heightened experience for both audience and performer. Research into his process and output in this area will contribute to Schafer studies, Canadian studies, the environmental humanities, and musicology.

These songs and arias should be widely performed, given the strength and relative accessibility of the outdoor vocal writing, and given that audience and performers alike have described their experiences with this music as ‘unforgettable’. However, the outdoor location is an unfamiliar one to most “classical” singers and is often considered unpleasant or even dangerous; this misunderstanding will limit the performance of these beautiful and unique works. My dissertation will aid in overcoming practical and perceived barriers to this repertoire by drawing attention to the opportunities inherent in outdoor singing, by
clarifying where the challenges lie, and by providing suggestions for managing these challenges. Through a greater understanding of the style requirements of this “genre” of song, singers will be able to make more informed artistic choices in their interpretation of the repertoire. Not only singers but also composers, voice pedagogues, coaches, and directors will all benefit from insight into Schafer’s intentions, and from the subsequent case studies showing the application of theory in specific works and spaces. Finally, researchers in such fields as musicology, performance studies, architectural acoustics, and place studies may find useful the preoccupation that lies at the core of this project--namely, the way in which performance space affects the performer’s experience. The ‘wild’ outdoor performance space considered in these pages is the exception or limit that throws into relief hidden assumptions about the relationship between performer and performance context as it play out in any and all locations.

References


DeVore, Kate, and Starr Cookman. 2009. *The voice book: Caring for, protecting, and*


Audiovisual Materials


Websites

http://www.musiccentre.ca

http://www.patria.org

Writings by Schafer

Books


**Periodicals and Articles**


