

A celebration of Healey Willan's wealth of liturgical music

The Hamilton Spectator · 23 Nov 2017 · LEONARD TURNEVICIUS Leonard Turnevicius writes about classical music for The Hamilton Spectator. leonardturnevicius@gmail.com

“English by birth, Irish by extraction, Canadian by adoption, and Scotch by absorption” was Healey Willan’s witty summary of his ancestry and taste.



And indeed, no summary of Canadian classical music in the first half of the 20th century would be complete without a look at Willan’s contributions.

In 1913, composer-organist-choir director Healey Willan, then 33, came from London, England, to head up the theory department at the Toronto Conservatory and take up the post of organist and choirmaster at St. Paul’s (Anglican), Bloor Street.

The following year, he was appointed lecturer and examiner at U of T, rising to professor of music in 1937. In 1921, Willan left St. Paul’s to become precentor at St. Mary Magdalene Anglican where he served until Christmas Eve 1967, composing a large body of liturgical music and ushering in an era of choral excellence.

Apart from his sacred compositions, Willan wrote symphonies, incidental music, symphonies, a piano concerto, ballad operas, pageants, chamber, organ and piano music, and more.

Yet, as Willan pupil and biographer F.R.C. Clarke rightly observed in his 1983 “Healey Willan: Life and Music,” “there was nothing particularly Canadian about his music” aside from his arrangements of French-Canadian chansons.

Instead, the influences of such European composers as Parry, Rheinberger, Brahms, Wagner, Elgar, Franck, Holst, and others could be detected in his works.

As a composer, Willan was neither cuttingedge nor a trailblazer, but rather conservative. Some would say ultra-conservative or reactionary.

As a result, Willan's compositional destiny was similar to that of his Russian-American contemporary, Alexander Gretchaninov, whose pieces his SMM a cappella gallery choir sang, in that his works from his later decades sounded as though they'd been written decades too late.

And yet, those works were highly admired. His "Symphony No. 1" was premièred in 1936 in Toronto's Varsity Arena before an audience of 7,000 who gave him a 15-minute standing ovation. In 1967, an audience of 3,000 packed St. Paul's for a Willan salute concert.

Other high water marks included his "Te Deum" and "Coronation March" which were played at the coronation of George VI, and his "O Lord, Our Governour," commissioned for and performed at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

Willan was showered with awards during his lifetime, a Lambeth doctorate in 1956, and a D. Litt from McMaster U in 1962 among them. In Roger Blais's 1959 NFB documentary on Willan, "Man of Music," Robert Fleming's and Louis Applebaum's script affectionately referred to their teacher as "the dean of Canadian organists and composers."

He was made a fellow of the Royal Hamilton College of Music in 1965, a year in which the Bach Elgar Choir produced a Willan tribute concert.

Now, to celebrate Canada 150 and to anticipate the 50th anniversary of Willan's death in 1968, Alex Cann and the BEC are holding a Willan legacy concert this Saturday, Nov. 25, at 7:30 p.m. in Christ's Church Cathedral, 252 James St. N.

There, they'll feature some of Willan's best known choral works such as "An Apostrophe to the Heavenly Hosts," "Rise up, my love," "The Responsaries for the Offices of Tenebrae," and others. Michael Bloss, CCC's organist, will be at the console for "IPF," Willan's "Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue," a work the composer played numerous times, including the 1944 opening of the new organ at St. Matthew's Lutheran, Kitchener.

Friday, Nov. 24 at 7:30 p.m. in Grace Lutheran, 1107 Main St. W., Stéphane Potvin's chamber choir Villanella celebrates Canada 150 with the Duet Club Chorus in "O Canada, Our Canada." Tickets: \$25, under 35/senior \$15, parents with children under 17 \$50. Call 905522-6841.

Wednesday, Nov. 29 at 7 p.m. in East Plains United, 375 Plains Rd. E., Burlington, Sabatino Vacca's Southern Ontario Lyric Opera company presents a concert fundraiser, "Opera and Beyond," with soprano Stephanie DeCiantis, tenor Paul Williamson, the SOLO Chorus in favourites by Verdi, Puccini, and Christmas classics. Tickets: \$30. Call 905-4654013.

Wednesday, Nov. 29 at 7:30 p.m. in The Studio at FirstOntario Concert Hall, Gemma New and the HPO get Intimate and Immersive with Britten's "Soirées musicales," Vaughan Williams's "The Lark Ascending," MacMillan's "Two Sketches based on French-Canadian Airs," Bartok's "Romanian Folk Dances," and Schulhoff's "Suite for Chamber Orchestra." Visuals by HAVN. Tickets: \$25. Call 905-526-7756.

Saturday, Dec. 2 at 4 p.m. in Ryerson United, 842 Main St. E., the Hamilton Children's Choir presents its annual holiday concert, this one called "Welcome Christmas, Fah Who Foraze" with special guest Ian Thomas narrating a choral rendition of "The Grinch." Tickets:

VIP seating \$30, \$25, senior \$20, alumnus/a \$15, child/student \$10. Call 905527-1618.

BACH ELGAR SINGS THE LEGACY OF HEALEY WILLAN When: Saturday, Nov. 25, at 7:30 p.m. Where: Christ's Church Cathedral, 252 James St. N. Cost: \$35, senior (60-plus) \$30, student \$15 Call: 905-527-5995