

Violet Archer - Composer, Educator, Visionary

by Mason Green

In the early 1900s, women were often viewed as “less than” men by the justice system, legal system, the government, and society itself. This was a time where the words on your birth certificate could determine whether your achievements were valued and your accomplishments were recognized. Violet Louise Archer defied these societal constraints and grew into a virtuoso musician, experimental and pedagogical composer, and music teacher, whose hard work, rigorous study, and lifelong dedication to music would lead her to be one of the most influential Canadian composers of the 20th century. She became a leader among musicians and was one of the first North American women to be recognized for her brilliance.

Violet was born in Montréal on April 24th of 1913. She moved to Italy at 14 months old, where she stayed for the entirety of World War I. This also happened to be the place where she gained her first musical impressions, specifically from a piano in her hotel’s dining hall; Violet loved hearing it played, and upon returning to Canada five years later, she described missing the sound of the instrument. Her parents were supportive of this musical connection, and enrolled her in piano lessons at age 10.

In 1930, Violet began studying at McGill University, at which point she started working as a piano accompanist. She earned a Licentiate in Pianoforte from McGill in 1934, a Bachelor of Music in 1936, and an Associate Diploma of the Royal Canadian College of Organists in 1938.

Two years later, the family changed their surname to a rough English translation, Archer, which is the surname that Violet is known by today. In this same year, she became a percussionist with the Montréal Women’s Symphony Orchestra, taught piano and music theory, performed as a deputy organist at many Montréal churches, and made her orchestral debut, Scherzo Sinfonico. In 1942, one of her compositions, “Britannia - A Joyful Overture”, was selected for a BBC broadcast, and the famous Hungarian composer Béla Bartók consequently selected her for private composition study in New York. Bartók inspired her to take an interest in folk music and to explore new modes and rhythms for her compositions. Upon returning from New York, Archer taught at McGill Conservatory and published her first composition, “Three Scenes for Piano - Habitant Sketches”, in 1946.

In the following years of her career, Archer’s creativity flourished, and after receiving recognitions such as the Bradley-Keeler Memorial Scholarship (1947), Quebec Government Scholarships (1948 and 1949), and the Charles-Ditson Fellowship (1948), she studied at Yale University from 1947-1949. There, she learned from Paul Hindemith, who was one of the brightest composing minds of the time, and earned a Bachelor of Music degree in 1948 and a Master of Music degree in 1949. Archer won the Woods-Chandler Memorial Prize in 1949 for her choral-orchestral work, “The Bell”, which was then premiered in 1953 by the Montréal Bach

Choir, and had her “Fanfare and Passacaglia” premiered at the 1949 International Student Symposium of Music in Boston.

Archer taught at Cornell University in 1952 and became a professor of composition at the University of Oklahoma from 1953-1961. While at the university, she hosted 20th century music radio broadcasts and television and acted as a state and national judge for many young composer competitions, and received a Composer Grant at the MacDowell Colony in the summer of 1956.

She joined the music faculty at the University of Alberta in 1962, and was made the chair of music theory and composition. She remained there until 1968, and received a citation in Distinguished Service in Music from the Yale School of Music Alumni Association. Much later on, she took up lecturing at the University of Saskatchewan in 1990 and the University of Alaska in 1992, and became the Resident Composer at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Her work used modern technique and was very chromatically adventurous, going outside of basic musical harmonies to create unique and colourful sounds. She was innovative, expressive, and not afraid to try out new methods of composition, including new ideas about rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. Her inspiration came from folk music, and her experience in percussion led to percussive, aggressively rhythmic movements in her pieces. Archer learned and composed for dozens of instruments, and though her earlier compositions were for solo piano, she gradually expanded to more orchestral productions. She created music for television programs, such as the score for the film documentary “Someone Cares”, 1976, and the score for her very own comic opera play, “Sganarelle”, 1973. She also wrote educational music for children to inspire and educate youth on the folk music of the 20th century.

Violet Archer ended up composing over 300 pieces of music, and became a member of the Order of Canada. She was also a recipient of the Alberta Life Achievement Award, the Canadian Music Council’s Composer of the Year Award, the Canada 125 Award, and the Queen’s Silver Jubilee Medal. In her lifetime she was the organizer of Edmonton’s “Canada Music Week”, was a part of the Western Board of Music from 1965-1968, co-founded Alberta Composers’ Association in 1977, was elected to the council of the Canadian League of Composers in 1975, and was on the advisory board for Edmonton’s celebration of women in the arts in 1988. Near the end of her lifetime, she moved back to Ottawa in 1998 to spend time with her family, and kept composing all the way to the end, completing her final concerto in 1999, the year before her death. In 1985, a three-day Violet Archer festival was hosted in Edmonton, being the first time a Canadian female composer had been recognized in this way. She was given a concert gala for her 80th birthday, and a second one on her departure from Edmonton in 1998, and the city then named a small park in her honour. The University of Alberta named a composition scholarship after her in 1992, and, after she came to rest on February 21st of the year 2000, a library at the University of Calgary was named after her in 2007. Her preserved manuscripts are now kept at both the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta.

Inspiration

COMPOSITION: I began playing piano at age 3, and have enjoyed the journey of learning this beautiful instrument. After listening to a variety of compositions by Violet Archer, I was inspired to try composing my own piece in her style. I used a whole-tone scale and brightly dissonant harmonies to create two contrasting sections, one made up of dreamy, falling scales, and the other a punchy, driving rhythm built on discordant tritones. The piece then resolves on B flat major. The composition is for solo piano, as were most of Archer's earlier compositions, and I had a lot of fun experimenting with ideas I found in her Piano Concerto and Sinfonietta. I have shared my piece in the attached video.

VIEWING MANUSCRIPTS: When I found out that some of Archer's original manuscripts were kept in a library at the University of Calgary, I quickly booked an appointment to see them. I spent almost two hours looking through her handwritten compositions and taking notes on the ideas present. I was able to see the different stages of her work, and got to explore her editing thought process, and how she expanded her ideas throughout her pieces. In the archives I found first drafts of symphonies she wrote and many folk melodies for piano that inspired the second half of my composition.

PERFORMANCE: Two years ago, I performed one of my first compositions, "Upsurge", at my school talent show. Our drama teacher requested it to be used as the soundtrack for the school play. My music was played in the background of the performance, just like Archer's pieces were used in documentaries and broadcasts.

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE: Last year, through my piano lessons, I signed up for a volunteering session with a group of other musicians to perform at a seniors' home. I enjoyed the experience and plan to reach out to other retirement communities to continue volunteering over the summer. I also hope to begin teaching piano to others in the near future. Through my research I have learned that most advanced recognized musicians in Alberta were students of Violet Archer, as she taught at nearly a dozen universities over the span of 50 years. I would aspire to also make this kind of impact on future generations.

In conclusion, Violet Archer was a contemporary Canadian composer who explored modern forms of music and took 20th century symphonic works to another level. She spent her entire life learning and making music, and went on to inspire others to do the same. I am grateful to have discovered her compositions through this contest, as it has allowed me to take the next step in my musical journey. I wish to continue to compose, grow, and inspire throughout my lifetime as well.

References:

"Profiles of Alberta Women - Violet Archer." *Violet Archer : Profiles of Alberta Women : The Alberta Women's Memory Project*, (n.d.) awmp.athabascau.ca/profiles/varcher/.

"Violet Archer." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Nov. 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violet_Archer.

"The Most Admired Woman of the Decade - Violet Archer." *Beechwood*, 10 Aug. 2023, beechwoodottawa.ca/en/blog/most-admired-woman-decade-violet-archer.

“Violet Archer.” *Canadian Music Centre | SydneyEnterprise (Final)*, (n.d.) collections.cmccanada.org/final/Portal/Composer-Showcase.aspx?component=AAIL&record=1a45d683-9ad7-4840-8b04-74a33e3465b4.

Keillor, Elaine, et al. “Violet Archer | the Canadian Encyclopedia.” *Violet Archer*, 20 Jan. 2010, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/violet-archer.

Violet Archer Composition Examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiFPxyG4Jh8&t=1s>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PbhPyUYZXg&t=1s