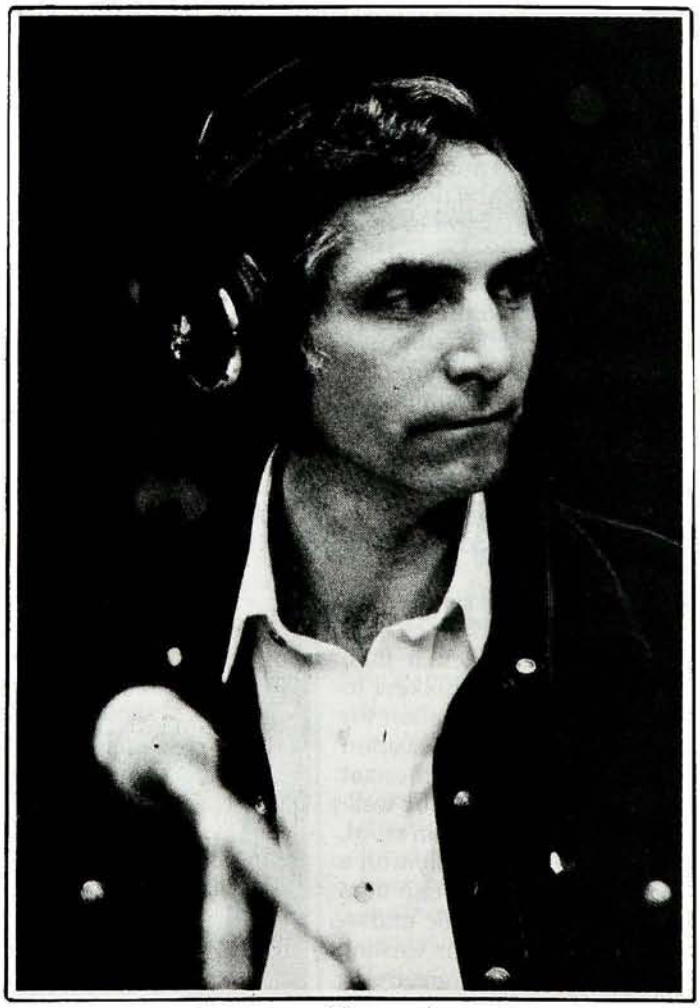
the t.v. composer's untapped potential

by connie filletti

Canadian composers have the talent, but as Connie Filletti explains, a greater musical literacy is needed before the industry can exploit it.

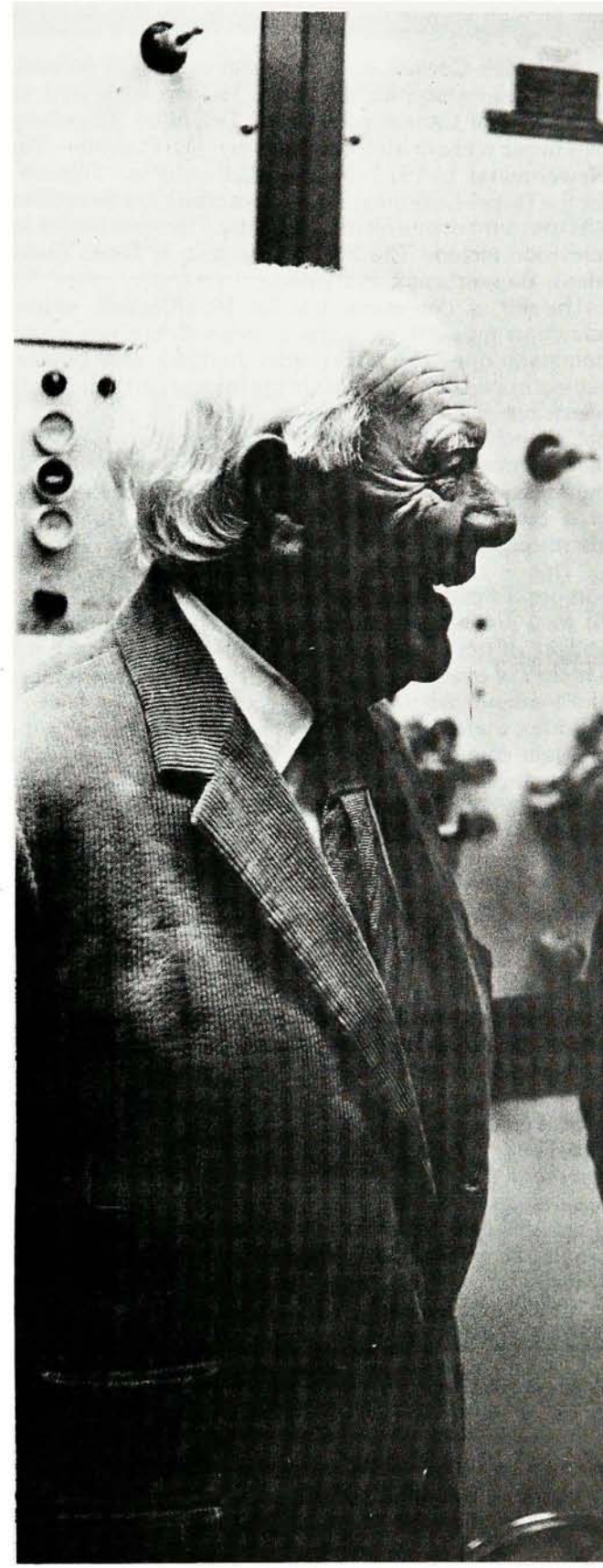


Composer Ron Harrison —wired for sound

Composers have been writing original music for television ever since its invention. But only recently are Canadian composers enjoying steady employment in the industry, and the recognition that they are among the most talented and creative composers in North America, if not worldwide. However, some very real problems still face our composers wishing to work in this medium. The importation of 'big names' from Hollywood, to score television films, is the continuing prejudice of many Canadian producers. The use of stock music is yet another all too common stumbling block for composers. It is often relied upon for economic reasons: producers can save money by going to stock music libraries. But unfortunately, a significant number of Canadian composers simply do not realize the important role original music can play in a production.

Victor Davies, President of the Canadian League of Composers, believes that musical illiteracy in the television and film industry is a global situation, but not a deliberate conspiracy against composers. Davies is quick to point out that film people are, after all, visually oriented, hence their insufficient knowledge about what is happening in music from a composer's point of view. Harry Freedman, one of Canada's most distinguished composers, and a founder of the recently formed Canadian Guild of Film Composers, agrees. Freedman hopes a more musically knowledgeable class of producers will develop in Canada, although he notes that there are already exceptions to the musically illiterate producer. Regrettably, those who *do* know what they want, still harbour the notion that someone famous must be hired to achieve the desired results. As Freedman explains, this is not always the answer. Writing a music score is a specialized venture with many facets. Someone in the business may have a reputation for being a great songwriter, but he may be totally incapable of writing dramatic music — that's the job of a composer. This difference between songwriting and composing is rarely understood by producers and the general public. As a result, some "dreadful scores," says Freedman, have been written by famous names simply because of a lack of knowledge and communication between the two industries.

Ron Harrison, who has been composing for the last twenty years, and whose television credits include **Matt and Jenny, Audubon Wildlife Theatre** and **Adventures in Rainbow Country**, is "very optimistic" about Canadian producers reaching the point where they will attach more importance to music in television and film. Harrison faults the industry for its "reluctance to get serious" about the valuable effects original music can have on a television film or series, and for the fact that setting aside a budget for music is usually a producer's last consideration. Still, Harrison admits that budgets *are* getting larger and some producers are "very well aware" of what music can do. But he estimates that we are some twenty years behind the Americans in developing an original T.V. music. Through experience, producers will, however, eventually accumu-



John Mills-Cockell recently received the CFTA award for his music in **The Newcomers**

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late enough knowledge of the craft to use it to its fullest potential.

John Mills-Cockell is a twelve-year veteran of dramatic music composition for television. He was honoured recently by the Canadian Film and Television Awards for best music score in a television series ("The Present — **The Newcomers**). In 1971, Mills-Cockell's theme, "Tillicum", for the Hobel-Leiterman series **Here come the Seventies,** was the number one hit in the country. His other credits for television include **The Stationary Ark, A Third Testament, Beaverbrook** and **Cities**.

The list is impressive but for Mills-Cockell, writing television music is an ongoing interest, but not a predominant one. He finds better budgets and broader subject material to work with in the feature film industry. In television, Mills-Cockell dislikes having to work with a packaging format, that is, reel changes, playing to commercial breaks and the like. He also finds the use of stock music "far too common" in television, and that the hiring of a composer to write original music is usually "an afterthought.

"This is a matter of contention and regret on the composer's part, but it is also understandable," he admits. "It may just be a matter of a production running over budget, or not enough time to bring in a composer." It is a matter of everyone concerned "learning the techniques and mathematics of it all."

So far, there have been two prevailing solutions to the problem of musical ignorance in the T.V./film industry. One is the increasing trend among composers to study film techniques. Ron Harrison, for example, studied film techniques with Eddie Manson at U.C.L.A. Lou Applebaum, a pioneer in composing original music for television in Canada has a hundred television credits to his name. He teaches a course on the use of music in film at York University. Applebaum believes that composers and producers should work in close collaboration to achieve the objectives of music and film. He regards Canadian composers as "very good, if not better than in any other country. Yet producers still like to play it safe and go to Hollywood and England for their talent."

The second solution is embodied in the Canadian Guild of Film Composers. According to Glenn Morley, Director Pro Tem, the Guild's main aim is to "promote and represent the interests of Canadian film composers." Besides standardizing a contract for film composers, the Guild also hopes to educate producers and directors in general as to the problems existing for T.V./film composers.

Morley is firmly convinced that television has been more responsible for hiring Canadian composers than has the feature film community. He attributes this to the belief that television producers are less concerned with hiring the famous because their budgets are small and cannot accomodate such a practice. In Morley's opinion, the CBC has produced a number of exceptional scores and interesting opportunities for Canadian composers. He also states that the CTV Network has not been as active, because it does not do as many productions.

Ralph Ellis, Executive Producer of Manitou Productions is one of those exceptional producers who knows that "the contribution music makes it tremendous." He has a personal policy of hiring a composer for original music whenever possible.

"Stock music is just not the same," Ellis says. "There is more choice when you are using original music in a dramatic series. So many effects can be created and feelings heightened, that is why I have a great preoccupation with original music. I am glad to see an upswing in the use of it. Writing original music is a very special skill."

Certain mechanics are the same in writing music for television and scoring a feature film; such as the "lay in" which is done by a sound editor, generally in consultation with the composer, followed by the "mix" of music, dialogue and special sound effects. Also, the material must be "spotted" — determining where music is or isn't needed in the film or program. Most composers would also maintain that the function of music is the same in both television and film. Music can provide psychological insight into characters, it can set the mood or tone of a scene, provide clues in a plot, characterize relationships, advance the development of emotion, provide relief from too much dialogue, and even replace dialogue itself.

The only notable difference in writing music for television as opposed to film is concerned with time. Ron Harrison finds that working on a film is much easier, because he can view the film and run it through as often as necessary to sync the music with the action. The same luxury does not exist in television, where the standard procedure is to receive only an outline of the program to be scored. This involves more anticipation on the composer's part, making the job that much more difficult. Of course, exceptions to this procedure exist.

The future seems bright for Canadian composers wishing to work in television. As long as the medium exists, so will the demand for original music to enhance it. Not only is there enough work for our composers here, but many of them are being hired abroad to score films and compose dramatic music for television: a fine testimony to the wealth of talent in our music industry. □