

Chronicles and Connectedness of Canadian Church Music Composers

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Although Canadian Sacred Music repertoire is limited from a historical time deficit in comparison to that of the overarching body of European Sacred Music, Canadian contributions to Church Music in the last two-hundred years have reflected strong European influence. When one considers the major Canadian Sacred Music composers British-born and Toronto-dweller, Healey Willan, and Quebecois Ernest Gagnon likely come to mind. Since a large amount of energy has been devoted to researching such names, the scope of this paper allows for a thorough examination of a lesser-known Canadian Sacred Music composer, Sister Theresa Hucul, and honourable mention of another, Hattie Rhue Hatchett; there is more content of value than is currently canonic. An analysis of selected vocal works by Sister Hucul points to this. Inspiration from European Sacred Music (a broad label which houses several types of musical structures including Masses, anthems, oratorios, motets, organ music, canticles, hymns, carols, chant, vocal music with instrumental ensembles, and various chamber and ensemble vocal and instrumental works), is seen in biblical text setting, structure, and use of poetic interpretation. These elements are identified from examining text, style, and structure of selected Canadian solo voice and choral pieces against European selections of the same variety. All four composers discussed were influenced by both instrumental, vocal, and liturgical aspects of European Sacred Music. The choice to focus the analysis primarily on a successful female composer is intentional and this is the first scholarly

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article to discuss Sister Hucul's music. She is deserving of a place among the authorities. Focusing on composers from the regions of the Maritimes (Sister Hucul), Québec (Gagnon), and southern Ontario (Hatchett and Willan), congruently reflects the nature of Canadian diversity, within the bounds of a common compositional style.

While these individuals represent different Canadian demographics and cultural backgrounds, they share an appreciation for European Sacred Music, evidenced in their vocal works discussed. Sister Hucul, Willan, Hatchett, and Gagnon created choral music sacred to their Canadian communities, with major inspiration from European predecessors. Willan and Gagnon serve as pillars of European inspiration in Canadian music – Willan the foundation for traditional Anglo-Catholic music and Gagnon for traditional Franco-Catholic music. Their reputations precede them, and the choice was obvious to include the pair. Building on the seminal research of fellow York University scholar, Richard Stewardson, I chose to briefly include Hattie Rhue Hatchett, noting specifically her hymns and spirituals.¹ While reading her biography, I was drawn to her life story – her escape from slavery in the United States and profound impact in Buxton, Ontario. I first discovered Sister Hucul's music when my father gave me the vocal score to *Harvesting* (which I discuss later) after he stumbled upon it accidentally at the Saint Paul University library in Ottawa.² I was intrigued by her creativity and, of course, by the fact that she is a Canadian composer.

Healey Willan (1880-1968)

Healey Willan remains recognized as the Dean of Canadian Composers, not only among Canadian Anglo-Catholics, and devoted decades of service at St. Mary Magdalene's Church in Toronto. His sacred choral compositions range from choral works with orchestra, carols and hymn tunes, hymns, services, motets, choral anthems transcribed for organ, and unaccompanied choral works. Although Willan emigrated to Canada in 1913 from England, he is defined as a Canadian composer, especially since the bulk of his composing occurred during his time in Toronto. Among the important compilations of Willan's choral works are those featured in Vol. V: *The Canadian Musical Heritage Hymn Tunes* edited by John Beckwith, with assistance from Helmut Kallmann, Frederick Hall, Clifford Ford, and Elaine Keillor. The scope of this collection is limited to the period of 1801-1939 and includes the following

hymns: “Veni Creator,” “Eternal Light,” “Stella Orientis,” and “St. Michael.” However, Beckwith acknowledged that a large portion of Willan’s hymn tunes were excluded from the chosen timeframe.

There is no new discovery regarding European inspiration in Willan’s choral church music. The research gathered represents a congruent depiction of Willan’s sacred music writing style, compositional qualities, and his inspiration. Kallmann discussed the Renaissance as a key influence in Willan’s writing:

Because he was attached to the choral and religious tradition of his native country, Willan’s religious works came under the extremely strong influence of the polyphonic works of the Renaissance. If he seems sensitive to the mystic and meditative polyphonies of William Byrd or Palestrina, the harmonic results of his counterpoint nevertheless remain modern. It is not rare to find archaic parallel organum effects in *Apostrophe to the Heavenly Hosts* and in the motet *Hodie Christus Natus Est*. However, in the manner of certain English polyphonists of the Renaissance, he weaves a counterpoint quite independent of vertical sonorities which lend his style a peculiar and archaic charm.³

In addition to his original compositions, Willan has a large catalogue of plain-chant arrangements (one of these is “Veni Creator” as mentioned), enforcing Kallmann’s statement. Timothy McGee reiterated the same notion presented by both Kallmann and Peaker, while adding that Russian church music was also a major influence. Beckwith noted that “the opening of ‘Eternal Light’ recalls a classical instrumental model – Schubert’s “Moment Musical” and then “after the announcement of the opening rhythm, a counterpoint of plain and dotted half-notes creates dissonances.”⁴ Additionally, Willan set this tune to the text of English poet, Thomas Binney. Clearly, Willan paid homage to his European predecessors and contemporaries, and resurrected European plain-song in the Anglican Church in Canada.

Ernest Gagnon (1834-1915)

Ernest Gagnon, prominent Roman Catholic French-Canadian organist and composer, shaped both the Cathedral-Basilica of Notre-Dame de Québec and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church in Québec City. As Kallmann noted, “French Canada with its older traditions produced musicians long

before English Canada.” Continuing, he presented Gagnon as an advocate for French-Canadian musical heritage during a time of reliance on European music structure:

Regrettably, though perhaps naturally in a newly-opened country, musical taste tended to follow traditional European lines and composition was imitative of the sophisticated music of Europe. The folk music brought by the early settlers and still alive at that time, on which a national art might have been based, was ignored. Only in French Canada did music have an intimate link with patriotism, and folk song was not entirely forgotten there.⁵

This quote addresses Gagnon’s role in cataloguing popular French-Canadian music; additionally, Gagnon was a trailblazer for French-Canadian sacred music. Clifford Ford expands on the notion that aside from two pieces (“Ave, maris stella” and “Ave Maria”), the selections found in *Cantiques populaires du Canada français* are in French:

Perhaps of greater historical significance is Gagnon’s collection *Cantiques populaires du Canada français*. The first striking feature is the use of the vernacular. Although texts in the vernacular were not banned in the nineteenth century, their use did meet with considerable resistance by both clergy and laity. The use of the vernacular, of course, had a long history: by the ninth century, Latin had ceased to be intelligible to the majority of people and, by the twelfth century, *cantiques* (religious songs in the vernacular) were appearing in the churches of France.

Gagnon established a French-Canadian niche for Québec Catholics prior to the Second Vatican Council, and while still honouring the European values from which his sacred music is birthed. Ford indicates that Gagnon’s “*cantique* collection represents an extension of Gagnon’s work in folklore” and that “at times, the musical and textual material is quite elementary. Notwithstanding, these quasi-folk songs belong to a period in church history which greatly influenced French-Canadian society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and may be compared to naïve folk art such as wood carving.”

Hattie Rhue Hatchett (1863-1958)

Hattie Rhue Hatchett lived a remarkable life that deserves attention. Her hometown of Buxton, Ontario was a refuge for escaped slaves through the Underground Railroad. The Canadian military valued her work by selecting her 1915 hymn “That Sacred Spot” as the official marching song of the Canadian troops during World War I. Although Canada was and is a safe place for African Americans, the choice of a black woman’s composition to represent the military was nonetheless a monumental decision at the time. Her musical awareness grew out of US hymnbooks, which features a blend of European and American compositions. “Her hymns, for instance, are compared to those found in hymnals with which she was familiar, *The Baptist Standard Hymnal*, *Gospel Pearls*, *Tabernacle Hymns, No. 2*, and *Inspirational Melodies*.”⁶ A common compositional method she employed was to make European Sacred Music more approachable to her congregation. An example of this is found in the original poetry of her hymn “Sinner, Jesus Calls You” – a redacted, simplified version of Charles Wesley’s “Sinners, Obey the Gracious Call” text, seen below.⁷

“Sinners, Obey the Gracious Call”
Charles Wesley

1 Sinners, obey the gracious call,
Unto the Lord your God return,
The dire occasion of your fall—
Your foolishness of folly mourn.
Sin only hath your ruin been;
In humble words your grief express,
Turn to the Lord: Your shameful sin,
The burden of your soul, confess.

2 God of all power, and truth, and grace,
All our iniquity remove,
Spare and accept a fallen race,
God of all power, and truth, and love,
Take all, take all our sins away,
Nor guilt, nor power, nor being have,
Forgive us now, Thine arm display,
Thine own for Jesus’ sake receive.

“Sinner, Jesus Calls You”
Hattie Rhue Hatchett

Sinner, Jesus calls you
From the paths of sin
All is dark around you
All is dark within

Hear his gentle whisper
To your inmost soul
Why not let him guide you
Give him full control

Your way is so cloudy
His is clear and bright
Yours eternal darkness
His eternal light

Everything that sparkles
In your path you’ll find

3 So will we render Thee the praise,
 With joyful lips and hearts renewed,
 Present Thee all our sinless days,
 A living sacrifice to God.
 So will we trust in man no more,
 No more to man for succor fly,
 The works of our own hands adore,
 Or seek ourselves to justify.

4 Not by an arm of flesh, but Thine,
 We look from sin to be set free;
 O Love, O Righteousness divine,
 The helpless all find help in Thee.
 "Surely in me," your God replies,
 "The fatherless shall mercy find,
 Whoe'er on Me for help relies,
 Shall know the Savior of mankind.

5 I (for my Son hath died to seal
 Their peace, and all My wrath remove)
 I will their sin-sick spirits heal,
 And freely the backsliders love.
 I will My sovereign art display,
 To perfect health their soul restore,
 And take their bent to sin away,
 And lift them up to fall no more.

6 In blessings will I then come down,
 And water them with gracious dew,
 And all My former mercies crown,
 And every pardoned soul renew.
 Israel shall as the lily grow,
 As chaste, as beautiful, and white,
 Yet striking deep his roots below,
 And towering as the cedar's height.

7 His branching arms he wide shall
 spread,
 And flourish in eternal bloom –
 Fair as the olive's verdant shade,

Are but fading baubles
 just to keep you blind

And its end death lingers
 Death, eternal death
 Come back to your Saviour
 While you've life and
 breath

He will give you pardon
 For your wicked ways
 And your heart will gladly
 Sing and shout his praise

Only listen to Him
 He is calling now
 Turn your back on Satan
 And to Jesus bow

Hear Him sweetly whisper
 To the soul oppressed
 Come, ye heavy laden
 I will give you rest

Take my yoke upon you
 Grace will make it light
 And He'll walk beside you
 Everyday and night

He will keep your footsteps
 In the narrow way
 If you let Him guide you
 Thro' night and day

Fragrant as Lebanon's perfume.
Whoe'er beneath his shadow dwell,
Shall as the putrid corn revive,
A mortal quickening virtue feel,
And sink to rise, and die to live.

8 Their boughs with fruit ambrosial
crowned,
As Lebanon's thick-clustering vine,
Shall spread their odors all around,
Grateful to human taste, and Mine.
Ephraim, my pleasant child, shall say,
'With idols what have I to do?
I cannot sin: get hence away,
Vain world! I cannot stoop to you.'

9 "God, only God hath all my heart,
My vile idolatries are o'er,
I cannot now from God depart,
For, born of God, I sin no more."
Whoe'er to this high prize aspire,
And long My utmost grace to prove,
I heard, and marked their heart's desire,
And I will perfect them in love.

10 Beneath My love's almighty shade,
O Israel, sit, and rest secure,
On Me thy quiet soul be stayed,
Till pure as I thy God am pure.
Surely I will My people save;
Who on My faithful word depend
Their fruit to holiness shall have,
And glorious all to Heaven ascend.

Although a fair amount of her biographical information is available and there exists the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum in Chatham, Ontario, included in the Virtual Museum of Canada, it is nearly impossible to access her music recordings and scores. Without these materials, further analysis of Hatchett's solo voice and choral church music (particularly her hymns) is incomplete in revealing European influence from prominent hymn-writers such as John and Charles Wesley,

Isaac Watts, William Cowper, and Sarah Flower Adams.

Sister Theresa Hucul (c. 1930)

Sister Theresa Hucul serves the Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (SCIC) in Saint John, New Brunswick with beautiful Mass settings, hymns, songs, choral works, and psalms, many of which feature descants and unique instrumentation. She has spent her adult life in Saint John and the surrounding area of New Brunswick as a devout nun with a proclivity for expressing her creative mind through song, poetry, and visual artwork. As it stands, Sister Hucul's musical works are not included in the Canadian Catholic Book of Worship or other widespread national publications; it seems her collections are known mainly by local churches within the Diocese of Saint John. She focuses her compositions on solo voice and choral music and engages congregational singing under a unified purpose of Catholic worship. While she primarily relies on biblical text for her settings, she also applies her own poetic interpretations and original poetry. When considering European impact in Sister Hucul's compositions, it is important to note that she primarily writes Roman Catholic Mass and devotional settings, adhering to the liturgy and structure centred in Vatican City. Most of her music is suitable for any Protestant denomination though; it need not remain exclusive to Catholic use.

Sister Hucul's untitled four-volume series, published over the course of a decade include *Harvesting* (1987), *All Praise* (1991), *Companion God* (1994), and *Sorrow and Wings: Songs of Transition* (1996).⁸ They progressively include her original poetry with each successive publishing while still undoubtedly adhering to its origins across the Atlantic. The first two volumes, *Harvesting* and *All Praise*, primarily include antiphons, hymns, and verse and refrain songs; simple melodies are rhythmically harmonized in chordal or two-part structure with works for the entire church calendar. "Summer" from *Harvesting* is reminiscent of the hymn "King of Love My Shepherd Is" (1868) by Henry W. Baker to the old Irish melody of "St. Columba." Her hymn is Aeolian and both melodies are in triple metre, not surprisingly, as music of the Maritimes tends toward a Celtic lilt. The emphases fall on either beat two or the 'and of one' beat, typical of an Irish diddy. Sister Hucul's title hymn from *All Praise* sounds an homage echoed from countless European hymns, to name a few: "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Good

Christian Men, Rejoice,” “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” “Lo! How a Rose E’er Blooming,” a German carol, and “Once in Royal David’s City.”

Sister Hucul included a variety of antiphons in each of her volumes. In *Harvesting*, they are “In the Beginning,” “Marana Tha,” “Holy is Your Name,” “You are a Love Song,” and “My Father has Blessed You.” Based on Genesis 1, “In the Beginning” is a two-part antiphon for treble voices with a modest descant. This structure represents the Universal Roman Catholic standard of Cantor and responsorial verses. Her antiphons align with those heard in the Catholic church vernacular around the world. Whether Italian, Spanish, French, German, or Latin set to the tune of Sister Hucul’s compositions, the congregations would not likely notice a difference from the usual weekly Psalm tones and Responsorial tunes. The final volume *Sorrow and Wings* includes no antiphons. One may deduce that the repertoire included within this volume is not suitable for a Mass setting, or at least not at a High Mass. She indicated that these songs and refrains are intended for church settings yet shies away from a traditional musical Mass setting, such as the antiphon.

While almost all the songs in *Harvesting* include biblical text, Sister Hucul ventured to incorporate five songs, out of twelve, with her original poetry in *All Praise*. By the third volume of her series, *Companion God*, each song includes her original poetry, except for a standard memorial acclamation set, and two songs indicate optional dancing to enhance the musical experience. In the final volume, *Sorrow and Wings: Songs of Transition*, only two songs are based solely on biblical text, include eleven songs of her original poetry, and encourage dancing to accompany two songs. Also worth mentioning is the instrumentation development over the course of the series – *Harvesting* and *All Praise*, together, feature unique instrumentation in a total of seven songs but *Companion God* and *Sorrow and Wings* include sixteen, collectively. Both characteristic of her provincial demographic surroundings and indicative of the European influence (particularly Irish) in New Brunswick, is her use of the Celtic harp in two of the songs, “Tapestry” (Vol. III) and “The Dance” (Vol. IV). The chart on the following page details the choral songs from the entire series.

Vol. I: *Harvesting* (1987)

1. In the Beginning ~+
2. Marana Tha !~+
3. A Child is Born ~+
4. The Glory of Yahweh !~+
5. Longing for God ~+
6. Holy is Your Name ~+
7. You Are a Love Song ~+
8. Blessed Are You ~+
9. Only the Spirit Knows ~+
10. Summer ~+
11. Autumn *#!~+
12. Such Is My Beloved ~+
13. Unless a Grain of Wheat !~+
14. My Father Has Blessed You ~+
15. Simple Faithfulness #~+

Vol. II: *All Praise* (1991)

1. All Praise *#!~+
2. I Call You Friend ~+
3. Finest Wheat ~+
4. The Lord Is My Shepherd !~+
5. Song of Tenderness #!~+
6. Your Saving Love ~+
7. A God of Gentleness ~+
8. Transfiguring Love ~+
9. The Secret of Winter *#!~+
10. How I love Your Word ~+
11. Seasons *#!~+
12. Incarnation #!~+

Vol. III: *Companion God* (1994)

1. Companion God #!~+
2. Passover #~+
3. A Time of Love #!~+
4. As Oil Poured Out #~+
5. Anyone Who Loves #!~+
6. Song Of Joseph #~+
7. Soul-Maker #!~+
8. Tapestry #!~+%
9. Jesus By Your Cross and Resurrection ~+
- When We Eat This Bread ~+
- Dying You Destroyed Our Death ~+
- Christ Has Died ~+
10. Behold The Beauty *#!~+
11. Follow The Wind *#!~+%
12. Out Of The Depths #!~+

Vol. IV: *Sorrow and Wings: Songs of Transition* (1996)

1. The Dance *#!%
2. With All My Heart *#!~+
3. Mother Earth *#!~+
4. Solstice #~+
5. Alone *#!~+
6. Sudden Rain #~+
7. Heart of God !~+
8. Sorrow and Wings #~+
9. Together #!~+%
10. Mourning Doves *~+
11. Sheltering Wings #!~+
12. Always My Heart Waits *#!~+
13. Rising Wings: Reprise *#!~+

Key

- * Nature is heavily emphasized, likely inspired by Canadian nature
- # Original poetry
- ! Uses unique instrumentation (anything other than keyboard or organ)⁹
- ~ Suitable for Mass congregational singing (soprano-alto-tenor-bass chorus or soprano-alto chorus)
- + Suitable for Mass or other formal small ensemble settings (likely in convents in soprano-alto chorus or duet)
- % Useful for non-formal group singing (soprano-alto chorus) and with dancing

A comparison of “Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks” from *Four Anthems* (1941) by Herbert Howells and “Longing for God” (1984) from Volume I: *Harvesting* of a four-volume series by Sister Hucul proved to highlight striking textual setting decisions. Howell’s work was based on Psalm 42:1-3, while Sister Hucul’s was based on Psalm 42 in its entirety, as well as Song of Songs 2:10 & 14.¹⁰ Whereas Howell’s choral work aligns nearly verbatim with the biblical translation of Psalm 42:1-3, Sister Hucul’s piece thematically fits the biblical premise of the same text but is dramatically poetic almost to the point of obscuring the textual origin. Of course, one must consider that Sister Hucul’s interpretation is motivated by both the Psalm passage and Song of Songs 2:10:14 – even still – Sister Hucul largely varies her text setting of this passage blended with the Psalm. Considering the 40+ year gap between the compositions, Howell stayed true to English church music composition traditions by setting the biblical text as written, and Sister Hucul felt free as a Canadian church music composer to create new poetry (based heavily in Canadian nature), merely enthused by the two biblical passages. Sister Hucul’s work does not sound obscure in the context of Howell’s piece. It seems clear that Sister Hucul built her compositional style from a European sacred music foundation, while taking creative liberties that, in turn, evoke a new flavour of church music but does not entirely break loose from it.

The book of Psalms has proven a popular textual setting by many European and Canadian Sacred Music composers. This practice appears often in sacred songs wherein European composers employ literal biblical text interpretation and Canadian composers create a new text with the same intention as the original. Whereas European composers use hymn writing primarily to poetically interpret the Bible, Canadian sacred music composers tend toward a poetic display of biblical text over a literal one

in most compositions (aside from Masses). Many European Sacred Music choral works requires a high level of vocal aptitude whereas Sister Hucul's is approachable for common congregational singing.

The research on Healey Willan, Ernest Gagnon, and Hattie Rhue Hatchett is seasoned. However, the new findings presented on the works of Sister Theresa Hucul will perhaps lead to further scholarly, historical, and clerical inquiry. Sister Hucul will hopefully gain greater recognition among the ranks of Willan and Gagnon, and the music of Hatchett will ideally become accessible to the masses in print and recording.

Endnotes

1. Richard George Stewardson, "Hattie Rhue Hatchett (1863-1958): An Interdisciplinary Study of her Life and Music in North Buxton, Ontario," PhD dissertation, York University, 1994.
2. Theresa Hucul, *Harvesting: Songs of Theresa Hucul* (Saint John: Sisters of Charity, 1987).
3. John Beckwith, *Hymn Tunes* (Ottawa: Canadian Musical Heritage Society, 1986).
4. Timothy James McGee, *The Music of Canada* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).
5. *Historical Anthology of Canadian Music* (Ottawa: Canadian Music Heritage Society, Clifford Ford Publications, 2003).
6. Stewardson, "Hattie Rhue Hatchett (1863-1958)."
7. John Rutter and Robert Kind, eds., *English Church Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
8. Hucul, *Harvesting*; Theresa Hucul, *Sorrow and Wings* (Saint John: Sisters of Charity, 1996); Theresa Hucul, *Companion God* (Saint John: Sisters of Charity, 1994); and Theresa Hucul, *All Praise* (Saint John: Sisters of Charity, 1991).
9. Theresa Hucul, "Marana Tha" (trumpet), "The Glory of Yahweh" (trumpet), "Autumn" (cello), and "Unless a Grain of Wheat" (flute), in *Harvesting*, v. 1; Theresa Hucul, "The Lord is My Shepherd" (flute), "Song of Tenderness" (flute or violin), and "Incarnation" (cello) in *All Praise*, v. 2; Theresa Hucul, "Companion God" (oboe, flute, and cello), "A Time of Love" (cello), "Anyone Who Loves" (cello), "Soul-Maker" (cello), "Tapestry (Celtic harp, recorder, and cello), "When We Eat This Bread: Acclamation 3" (cello),

“Behold the Beauty” (oboe and flute), “Follow the Wind” (oboe or flute, and cello), “Out of the Depths” (cello) in *Companion God*, v. 4; Theresa Hucul, “The Dance” (Celtic harp, drum, cello, and flute), “With All My Heart” (cello), “Mother Earth” (flute), “Heart of God” (flute and cello), “Together” (flute), “Sheltering Wings” (cello), and “Always My Heart Waits” (cello) in *Sorrow and Wings: Songs of Transition*, v. 4.

10. Rutter and Kind, eds., *English Church Music*, 126.

