

Commissioning Brian Cherney's String Trio

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Article abstract

The author offers a personal account of the events that led him to commission Brian Cherney's String Trio in 1976 for CBC Radio Music. The trio was first heard on the *Two New Hours* radio program in 1978, along with solo works for violin, viola, and cello by the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann. In 1979 the trio was submitted for consideration to the International Rostrum of Composers, and it was chosen as a recommended work, which resulted in the trio being broadcast in twenty-five countries, significantly enhancing Cherney's international reputation. The performers who premiered the trio also recorded it, allowing further audiences to appreciate this important work.

COMMISSIONING BRIAN CHERNEY'S STRING TRIO¹

David Jaeger

My story is about Brian Cherney's remarkable String Trio, a work composed for performance over the CBC FM radio network. This presentation is not an analysis of the trio. Arlan Schultz will bring that dimension to us tomorrow, and I think you will find that a fascinating topic. My story is one of the context, the conversations, and the circumstances behind the commissioning of what I consider to be one of the truly great works of chamber music in the entire Canadian repertoire. It is a work of great significance not only because of its scale (at twenty-one minutes, it is one of the longest string trios in the Canadian canon), but also because of the complexity of its construction and its range of techniques and expressive devices.

The story starts with John Peter Lee Roberts. John was the head of the CBC Radio Music department, and as such, he was the person who hired me to come to CBC Radio in 1973, for which I am eternally grateful. He served as head of CBC Radio Music from 1965 to 1975. John reserved for himself the authority to commission original works for broadcast on CBC music programs. Over the ten-year span of his leadership of CBC Radio Music, John commissioned about 150 works, or about 15 a year. By comparison, in my own period of just under thirty years producing *Two New Hours*, I commissioned about 250 works, which is a lower per annum count. So my hat is off to John. He was a true believer in the value of sharing our culture across the network, to all Canadians, and to stimulating its enrichment through the commissioning of new, original work.

In 1975 John moved on, and with his departure there was an interim head, while the search went on to find his true successor. Robert Wagstaff was there for a year to manage the change, and it was very much a period of change. In that time, while operations at Radio Music were restructured, it was proposed that the program leaders, the executive producers and the producers, should actually have the authority over their programs and their budgets. It was further proposed that the program makers would be the logical people to have

¹ This is an edited transcript of a spoken presentation, given at "Illuminations: Brian Cherney at Seventy-Five," held at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Montreal, 27 and 28 October 2017.

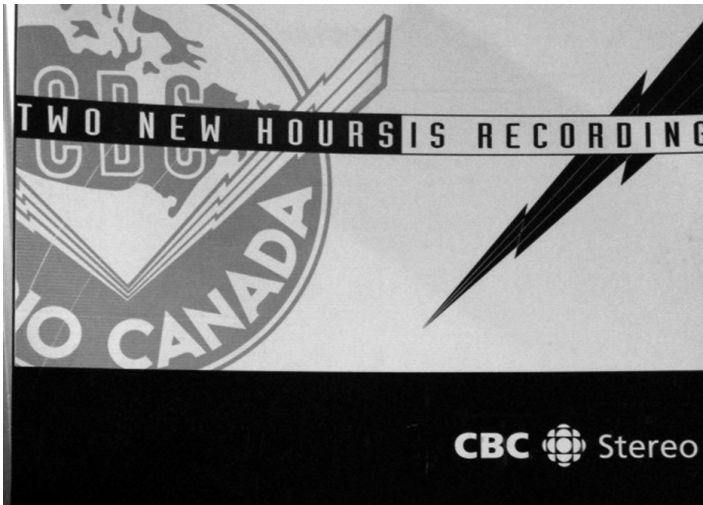


Figure 1. *Two New Hours* logo

the authority to commission. It seems practical enough: since they were going to make the programs, why should they not commission the works those programs were to be built upon?

At this same time, it was suggested that a national network program for new music might be created. I was asked to make a draft design and a pitch for such a program. The program that we began to design as early as 1976 would emerge as *Two New Hours* in 1978. As we grew closer to the creation of this new program series, it was clear that we would need content. We would need new repertoire. We would need to commission.

My first commission as a member of the CBC Radio Music department was John Weinzwieg's song cycle, *Private Collection*, commissioned in 1975. Imagine having your former, but still quite recent, composition professor sitting across from your desk, suggesting that you should commission him. It was an awkward situation. But we did it. We took the high road, managed to avoid any apparent conflicts, and John produced his song cycle.

In 1974 the violist Rivka Golani had immigrated to Canada. I was the first person to work with her at CBC Radio. One day she came into my office with her viola and a big stack of music. She put it down and we sorted that stack of music into two piles: one very small pile, which was the work we found truly interesting and sincerely felt we might want to produce, and another very large pile of music we would not look at any further. One work that she and I discussed was the Sonata for Solo Viola (1955) by the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann (1918–70), which she thought, initially, was unplayable. However, the technical issues were resolved, and this sonata eventually became a cornerstone work in Golani's recital repertoire.

Around this same time I began speaking to Brian Cherney about the possibility of a commission. And in the course of our conversation, B.A. Zimmermann came up. We found we both shared interest in the music of Zimmermann.

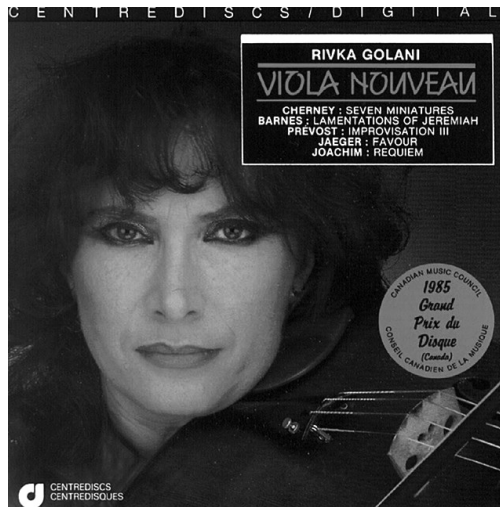


Figure 2. Rivka Golani, on her first Centrediscs recording (CMC CD o883, originally released as an LP in 1983), featuring Cherney's *Seven Miniatures*

Now this was a much newer experience for me than it was for Brian, because he had spent a great deal of time in Germany, getting to know many major figures of the German avant-garde. But I was a keen listener. I learned that Zimmermann's concept was that all music is connected. He called it a continuum. It was this kind of thinking that led Zimmermann to devise collage techniques, in which he introduced quotations of other classical repertoire into his own works. He was one of the first of the postmodern composers to do so. In any case, Brian Cherney and I, in the conversation leading to this commission, discussed Zimmermann's theories, and we probably had as many questions as answers.

In my conversation with Brian, I mentioned that Rivka Golani and I had looked at the Sonata for Solo Viola by Zimmermann. Brian, who had studied the German avant-garde extensively, advised me about two more solo sonatas by Zimmermann, for violin and for cello. Rivka had met the violinist Otto Armin and the cellist Peter Schenkman soon after arriving in Canada. In the course of this discussion with Brian, we agreed on a project: a string trio! To go along with the proposed string trio, Otto would learn Zimmermann's violin solo sonata, and Peter would learn his cello solo sonata. This was a process where the creative discussion leading to a commission already encapsulated a concept for program making. So we already knew we would have these three sonatas by Zimmermann, and we would have a trio by Cherney. It was at once sensible, but also interesting and inspiring.

Brian delivered the completed String Trio in the fall of 1976. Clearly this was a significant work. For one thing, the players would need to play from a full score, since close coordination between the parts was vital, especially given the use of graphical elements. Then there is the unusual opening of the work: the first notes of the trio sound as though the instruments are tuning up. When I asked Brian about the function of this opening, he explained that the

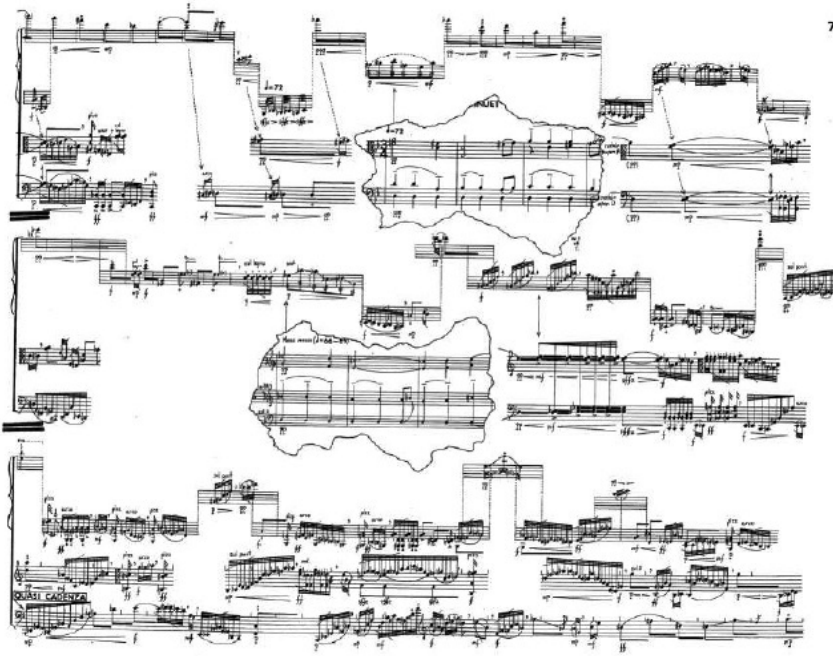


Figure 3. An excerpt (p. 7) from the score of Brian Cherney's String Trio

tuning idea generates a number of outcomes, including a pseudo “quotation,” a snippet of tonal music that appears out of nowhere, in stark contrast to the atonal texture around it. He also wrote, “There are other elements such as the polarity between quiet, restrained music and impetuous, virtuoso music which the instruments break into once in a while, only to subside back into something less flamboyant” (email communication, 15 June 2018). It is a remarkably coherent work that embraces a wide range of moods, textures, and styles of string playing.

I noticed that the work is dedicated to Brian's father—it was not the first, and there would be others. It was also clear that, given the complexity of the structure and the range of techniques and textures in the work, it would be a challenge to produce a compelling and convincing recording for broadcast. The work was recorded in May 1978, somewhat ironically, at the Club Harmonie, a German social club on Sherbourne Street, not far from the CBC Radio building on Jarvis Street in Toronto.

We recorded those three solo sonatas by Zimmermann, and we recorded the Cherney String Trio there. One aspect we were fascinated with was the juxtaposition of contrasting styles of music. Now, thinking as a radio person, of course this sort of approach invites all kinds of recording creativity. So, in the process of producing the work in the studio, we did try all manner of different spatial settings and mic settings and so on. The musicians responded brilliantly, and the resulting recording was, we all felt, entirely successful.

On New Year's Day 1978 the very first broadcast of *Two New Hours* happened on what was then called the CBC FM Network. And within that first year, we included the premieres of both Weinzwieg's *Private Collection* and Brian Cherney's String Trio. I have a piece of audio for you: this is actually the broadcast, the introduction to Cherney's trio. We had just heard the third of the Zimmermann sonatas at this point in the broadcast. And we now turn to a historical snippet of audio, including the spoken introduction by the host, Warren Davis.

Audio clip from Two New Hours

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo8ntNRvIc&feature=youtu.be>

Of course we will hear that work in concert tomorrow. It was a very exciting time, that first year of *Two New Hours*, commissioning and recording Canadian composers. Another highlight of that first year was Harry Somers's *Voiceplay*, which he had created for the American soprano Cathy Berberian and which appeared in our programming, not sung by Cathy, but rather by Harry himself, whose abilities as a performer are often overlooked.

In 1977, as the progress of creating this new program accelerated, the push was on to generate content for *Two New Hours*, and I was invited to represent CBC Radio at the International Rostrum of Composers (IRC). This would be the first of my thirty-one consecutive visits to the Rostrum. Prior to this, the CBC's International Service sent delegates to Paris to share Canadian repertoire with our international colleagues. The stated purpose of the Rostrum was to be "an international forum of representatives of public broadcasting organizations who come together for the purpose of exchanging and broadcasting contemporary art music." And it was exactly that. When you submitted your work and your notice of delegation, you presented them as cleared for unlimited broadcast, and that meant that each work presented over the week could be played in each respective country. We heard an amazing amount of music.

The Rostrum of Composers taught me how international program exchange worked, and how these meetings between producers from different countries led to discussions about collaboration, about exchange of recordings, and even co-funded productions across national borders. In the spring of 1979 I submitted Brian's String Trio as CBC English Radio's entry to the IRC. Each year a winner is chosen as the "Selected" work, and up to nine other works are chosen as "Recommended." The trio received the second-highest number of votes in 1979 and so was at the top of the "Recommended" list. The composition *Pour un monde noir* by the French composer Charles Chaynes for soprano and orchestra achieved the highest number of votes that year, and so was the "Selected" work. Our production of Brian's String Trio was broadcast on the public radio services of twenty-five nations around the globe. This was the second-highest number of broadcasts of an IRC work in 1979, and Brian suddenly found himself an internationally recognized composer. So while his String Trio has been performed in concert only a small number of times, as a result of all these broadcasts in so many countries the work has been heard by a very large number of listeners. Our *Two New Hours* recording of the work was subsequently released on LP in 1983

(on the Radio Canada International recording RCI 537, together with Cherney's Chamber Concerto for Viola and Ten Players). The recording was re-released on CD in a compilation of Cherney's music on volume four of CBC's Ovation series in 2011, which is available for purchase at the Canadian Music Centre, and also for download and streaming on iTunes and other digital music services.

Brian Cherney's String Trio was an important work for us at CBC Radio, for our listeners, and for Brian himself, and it certainly expressed a new approach in his creative voice. It was a breakthrough for Brian and cleared the way for the many other important works that followed.

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ABSTRACT

The author offers a personal account of the events that led him to commission Brian Cherney's String Trio in 1976 for CBC Radio Music. The trio was first heard on the *Two New Hours* radio program in 1978, along with solo works for violin, viola, and cello by the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann. In 1979 the trio was submitted for consideration to the International Rostrum of Composers, and it was chosen as a recommended work, which resulted in the trio being broadcast in twenty-five countries, significantly enhancing Cherney's international reputation. The performers who premiered the trio also recorded it, allowing further audiences to appreciate this important work.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur offre un compte rendu personnel des événements qui l'ont poussé en 1976 à commander à Brian Cherney la composition de son *String Trio* pour CBC Radio Music. L'œuvre a été entendue pour la première fois en 1978 à l'émission radiophonique *Two New Hours*, au côté d'œuvres pour violon, alto et violoncelle solo du compositeur allemand Bernd Alois Zimmermann. En 1979, soumise à la Tribune internationale des compositeurs et choisie comme œuvre recommandée, elle a été diffusée dans 25 pays, ce qui a grandement accru la renommée internationale de Cherney. Les musiciens qui l'ont exécutée en première l'ont aussi enregistrée, ce qui a permis à de plus vastes auditoires d'apprécier cette œuvre importante.

BIOGRAPHY

David Jaeger is a music producer, composer, and broadcaster, and was a member of the CBC Radio Music department staff from 1973 to 2013. In 1978 he created the radio program *Two New Hours*, heard on the national CBC Radio Two network until the spring of 2007. He studied composition with John Weinzwieg at the University of Toronto and established a digital sound synthesis facility there. In 2018 he was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada.