Newfoundland Studies

Reviews:
Music

Chris McDonald, Carolyn Schiller, Patrick Boyle et Frank Holden

Volume 22, numéro 1, spring 2007

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22_1rv01

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

McDonald, C., Schiller, C., Boyle, P. & Holden, F. (2007). Reviews:: Music. *Newfoundland Studies*, *22*(1), 376–388.

REVIEWS — MUSIC

The Janet Cull Band. 2004. *The Janet Cull Band*. 0205642.
Jill Porter. 2005. *Jill Porter*. [no label or catalogue number]
Cherie Pyne. 2006. *Little Springboard*. [no label or catalogue number]

IN MUCH OF CANADA, the familiar faces of Newfoundland popular music — from Figgy Duff to Great Big Sea to the Navigators — are well known for the way they deliver "local colour," mainly by performing traditional Celtic and Newfoundland repertoire, as well as new songs which carry that traditional style forward. But of course, the musics that can be considered "local" in Newfoundland, and the traditions from which Newfoundland musicians draw, are diverse today. Thanks to the growth of the mass media, regions steeped in their own musical traditions are also nodes in transnational networks of mediated popular culture. Young Newfoundland musicians may now have as much New Orleans, New York, or "new wave" in their musicianship as anything else, and this situation is well reflected in the three artists reviewed here. Janet Cull, Jill Porter, and Cherie Pyne are young women performing in different popular styles that generally eschew overt references to Newfoundland traditional music; yet they find clever ways to weave their experiences of Newfoundland into the fabric of broader popular music discourses. Moreover, their songwriting and musicianship contribute simultaneously to bodies of local, national, and transnational repertoires. Each musician here is a singer (with Porter and Pyne doubling on guitar), and I was struck by how each of them responded to different pop vocal traditions, and deployed the voice in the musical texture in quite distinct ways.

The Janet Cull Band's eponymous CD is illustrative of the local/national/transnational interlocking that I am describing. On her website, Cull describes her band's music as "lodged somewhere between New Orleans and Newfoundland." Jazz, blues, contemporary rhythm and blues, and soft rock intermingle on this album, which showcases Cull's rich vocals on nine tracks, nearly all co-written by Cull and her band's guitarist, Steve Miller. The tracks are generally slow-to-mid tempo, and exhibit a range of related styles. The opening track, "Another Day," has

a fairly contemporary r&b feel, with a soulful organ and swinging bass and guitar groove. Cull does some beautiful crooning over this, enveloping her verses in an intimate, quiet intensity. The second track, "Frankie J," recalls mid-1970s Joni Mitchell, mixing a singer-songwriter style of balladry with jazz chords and instrumentation. In this song, Cull introduces us to her soaring, high-range tessitura in the chorus, and starts to show us how dynamic her vocals can be. "Crazy Love," the third track, is a slow blues number with raunchier guitar and vocal timbres, while "You Say You Do" is a Percy Sledge-style ballad with gospel- or soul-style phrasing, and the band's back-up vocalist, Crystal McCarthy, is integrated well here, with harmonizations and call-response patterns giving further lift to Cull's passionate performance.

If the musical vibe of the album frequently makes me think of the American South, the liner notes — where each track is accompanied by a reflective paragraph — brings the Newfoundland context of this music into relief. "Ocean," a bleak, minor-key r&b-styled ballad, is described as "the result of a characteristically long Newfoundland winter. A desperate theme for desperate times." For the CD's closer, "Silly Dreams," Cull explains that the song was written during a month spent in a cabin in Tors Cove in an attempt to get "back to basics," but in the end, she could not wait to get back to St. John's. Cull sings on this track of quiet despondency while walking through San Francisco streets, but during her reiterations of "I'm standing alone" in the chorus, it's just as easy to imagine that secluded cabin as the appropriate setting for the song.

Cull herself is a jazz-trained singer, a graduate of St. Francis Xavier's music program in Nova Scotia, and has performed in musical theatre productions in Stephenville. After spending a few years as lead singer of the St. John's-based cover band Funky Dory, Cull founded the band that bears her name, and began her songwriting collaborations with guitarist Steve Miller. The voice reigns supreme on this record — Cull is always at the forefront of the mix, and the band supports her unobtrusively. For the most part, the instrumental sounds are mellow and give her voice lots of space; electric piano, gentle organ, jazz or acoustic guitars are the usual accompanying sounds. I found myself wishing for a bit more edge to the instrumental sound at times, since Cull's vocal climaxes were not always supported by the group dynamically. But the ensemble is capable of some spry and clever playing, as evidenced on "From the Town to the City," the CD's only up-tempo number. Cull describes this song as "essentially a jam," and gives the musicians (even the drummer) some room to stretch out with some solos. This track leaves no doubt that the spirit that moves Cull is the spirit of jazz; as she herself told ContactEast.ca, "there's something magical in those old jazz tunes, like Billy Holiday's 'Don't Explain' or Ella's stuff. I just want to extract some of that magic and make it 'now'" (http://ContactEast.ca). She succeeds.

Jill Porter's self-titled CD also sells itself on the power of the voice, but a very different kind of voice. One reviewer on Porter's website likens her voice to "a

partridgeberry-flavoured soft-serve cone from a highway service station" (www.jillporter.com). As an erstwhile central Canadian now living in Cape Breton, I'm not yet sure I fully grasp the subtleties of that analogy, but there is no question that Porter has a strangely compelling vocal style. It belongs to a category of rock singing known as the "character voice," which trades more on the distinctiveness of the personality communicated by the voice than on the rigours of more traditional conventions of vocal technique. Porter's tone and tessitura sounds like that of a young, naive girl, but this is subverted by the abrasive, nasal, working-class "sneer" she puts into almost every lyric she sings. This is a classic "sweet and sour" combination, and perhaps this is why her voice begs a comparison with service-station ice cream. She slides on and off pitch like Bob Dylan or Mick Jagger; she muffles her diction with an effect that reminded me, at times, of the Clash's Joe Strummer, Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks, or the British protest singer Billy Bragg. As a result, the lyrics are not always easily intelligible, but the attitude and intent is.

Porter and her band play a rough-hewn and edgy kind of rock that frequently recalls the Rolling Stones' style from the early 1970s. The blend of Porter's voice and the guitar sound achieved by herself and Brad Power is quite appealing, with its ringing clarity, urgency, and power. The arrangements and production are quite spare, with the standard rock ensemble of voice, two guitars, bass, and drums left instrumentally unaugmented, except on a few tunes. Porter is well schooled in the tradition of the three- or four-chord rock song and the memorable chorus "hook," which she uses to good effect on the majority of the tracks. The first song, "Just Ask," is an excellent example of the confidence of her delivery and her ability to set up an infectious chorus. Her character voice and back-to-basics approach is a two-edged sword, though. What starts off as refreshing and accessible becomes a bit repetitive and predictable towards the end because there is so little variation in vocal style, tempo and guitar sound. For this reason, the acoustic guitar-driven "No Reason" stands out, as does the slower, minor-key "I'll Be Fine," both of which offer necessary breaks from all the major-key, up-tempo rockers. But admittedly, the predominating major-key, upbeat vibe works, in part, because it adds a triumphant swagger to songs that otherwise feature lyrics of complaint, accusation, and refusal. As with her voice, Porter's songs give us the sour with the sweet.

Cherie Pyne's *Little Springboard* CD contrasts the previous two CDs by placing less overt emphasis on the voice. Pyne is a veteran of the punk/garage rock scene in St. John's, having played in the Peepholes and similar bands, and draws influence from alternative rock luminaries such as Sonic Youth, Sleater-Kinney and PJ Harvey, as well as Neil Young. Not surprisingly, the partial subversion of "pop" conventions is a notable feature of Pyne's music. Only a few of her songs are less than five minutes long, with some coming close to eight. Listeners expecting neat alternations of verses and choruses will be confused by the twists and turns that some tracks take. Rather than emphasizing hooks and melodies, Pyne and her band explore the textural and dynamic possibilities of the rock ensemble. For example,

the title track begins with ambient, shimmering guitar sounds accompanied by cymbal rolls and bird sounds. The song progresses like an improvised jam, gradually building in intensity to loud peaks and dying away to dynamically soft valleys, with the musicians feeding off each other instead of (apparently) following a set arrangement. Pyne's voice always seems partially submerged in the texture, contributing to the sound without dominating it. It's difficult to characterize her style, especially in comparison to Porter, since Pyne changes her sound from track to track, and sometimes section to section. On the opening track, "Love Letter From a Dead Man," her vocals are low-tension and low in range, matching the growling, bassy riff that underlies the song. On "Little Springboard," her vocals begin as misty whispers, and build into long, soaring, sustained notes at the song's dynamic peaks. Pyne takes on a very different character on "Broken Legs," where her voice cracks, warbles, and deliberately plays loosely with her tuning, creating a wounded, frayed, and vulnerable sound. Pyne seems to be interested in how the voice can contribute to the overall sound of a song, and less interested in delivering the lyrics with any clarity; even with headphones, I found myself struggling to catch many of the lyrics, and perhaps Pyne never intended for them to be listened to closely.

Perhaps the most appropriate description for this music is "expansive." Many of the songs are long, the guitars frequently bathed in echo and delay, the tempos frequently slow, the phrases long and sometimes circuitous. It brings to mind wide open spaces and soaring, ethereal atmospherics. Pyne's music responds to what has become a tradition of "experimental" rock, where uses of feedback, unusual vocalizations, loosely structured jamming, and asymmetrical song forms have, themselves, become conventions. This CD, perhaps, does not break any new ground, but Pyne and her band have an excellent synergy, and I was particularly impressed with the flexibility and sensitivity with which they collectively sculpt any given song's dynamics. I should also note that Pyne can capably write catchy, more conventional rock fare — the aforementioned "Love Letter" and "Everyone Feels Bad" are mostly straightforward rockers in verse-chorus format — but the band really takes flight when they are less tethered to such forms.

I hope that these artists gain the exposure that they deserve, and I acknowledge the challenges they face as both women and Newfoundlanders who are negating stereotypes on two fronts. "Newfoundland rock" is a category yet to become nationally known, and arguing for the music's validity is obviously a concern: for example, on Porter's website, there is a vehement statement that she is "clearly not a country or traditional singer posing as a rocker. Jill Porter is, indeed, the real deal." Meanwhile, although women rock artists *should* be an established part of the rock tradition by now, lingering chauvenism and exceptionalist attitudes remain an obstacle. As Cherie Pyne (who is also the co-founder of the St. John's-based Rock School for Girls) told the St. John's fanzine *The Scope*,

> One of the things I'm most passionate about and therefore the most active about is women's issues in terms of music, and women feeling shut out, not being taken seriously as musicians ... for example, every time I say that I play music, people go "Oh, what do you do? Jazz?" Or they might say, "You're a folk singer?" And I go, "No, I play in a rock band." And their eyes are like saucers. On the one hand I'm proud because I'm the tough girl my mom wanted me to be, but on the other hand I'm pissed because people can't conceive of a girl who plays rock music. (Lien, *The Scope* 67, 28 August 2006)

Perhaps Cull has the least difficulty validating her work, insofar as the female jazz, soul, or pop singer is a well-established tradition, and it is interesting that of the three musicians, she seemed the most comfortable revealing, in her liner notes, how the Newfoundland context shapes her art. But, as I inferred in the opening, all three musicians respond to different, and valid, traditions. These three CDs help to illustrate, in my opinion, that many different kinds of traditions are alive and well in Newfoundland and waiting to be heard by broader audiences.

Chris McDonald
Cape Breton University

Burry, Dea. *The Vinland Traveler*. 2006.
Hatfield, Stephen. *Ann and Seamus*. 2006.
Chafe, Robert and Jillian Keiley. *Nightingale*. 2006.

TO ENCAPSULATE THE CULTURE and spirit of a people and their place in a work of opera-theatre is a significant achievement. More significant yet is that the cultural and historical landscape of that place could inspire, within the span of a few months, three stories-in-music so completely unique that their only common tie is the generic classification — "Opera."

In 2006, three new theatre works motivated by the lives of Newfoundlanders and rooted in operatic tradition premiered in St. John's.

When we reflect on the rich musical tradition of Newfoundland and Labrador, it is rare that opera is the first genre that springs to mind. However, the use of opera should be of no surprise; it is the ideal medium to express a way of life as complex and multi-textured as that of this island. Opera is a living art-form that animates the past in a way that is impossible for most other narrative types. Employing components that are essential to any good story, opera uses fascinating text, theatrical drama, engaging attire, a remarkable setting, and sound produced at a heightened level to enliven history. All of these elements synthesize faultlessly in the exploration of the powerful and dramatic stories of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Vinland Traveler

Exploration and discovery are fitting themes for an opera spawned from seafaring history. *The Vinland Traveler* is an opera for young audiences commissioned by *The Opera Road Show* of Memorial University of Newfoundland's School of Music. It is written by Newfoundland composer Dean Burry and directed by Caroline Schiller. Adapted from *The Icelandic Sagas*, *The Vinland Traveler* recounts the adventures surrounding the Viking settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows. The work premiered on 6 May 2006 in Petro-Canada Hall at Memorial University. Embarking on a five-week tour of elementary schools after its premiere, *The Vinland Traveler* played to students throughout coastal Labrador and isolated communities on the west coast of Newfoundland. *Opera Road Show* commissioned *The Vinland Traveler* as a means of giving school children a sense of their birthright through music. The opera is written for four voices with piano accompaniment and is a blend of contemporary tonalities and a more familiar indigenous style. This stylistic blending is demonstrated best in the opera's storm scene. The scene evolves from an evocative and musically complicated vocal trio into a traditional jig and reel. Through a change in musical texture, the tempest yields to calm seas and heralds the arrival of the "Puffin," an affable character who ends the scene with a traditional jig and reel. As educational outreach was of primary importance in the creation of this piece, portability and accessibility of both subject matter and design figured prominently. In addition to the historical and cultural implications of the story to the children of this province, *The Vinland Traveler* offers a message that positive change is always possible. As is sung in the finale: "Anyone can change, you only need the will ... and your choice can change the world."

Ann and Seamus

Personal courage in the face of overwhelming odds is the core theme of the chamber opera, *Ann and Seamus.* Written by Stephen Hatfield and commissioned by *Shallaway — Newfoundland and Labrador Youth in Chorus*, *Ann and Seamus* premiered in Memorial University's Reid Theatre on 1 June 2006. Direction and design were provided by Jillian Keiley with musical direction by the work's producer Susan Knight. *Ann and Seamus* is based on the poem by Kevin Major and tells the true story of Ann Harvey. Harvey was a young girl from Isle aux Morts, Newfoundland, who courageously assisted in the rescue of a ship wrecked in 1828. For a period of three full days Ann, her father, and twelve-year-old brother worked tirelessly to ferry 168 survivors to safety in their small skiff. Both Major's poem and Hatfield's chamber opera combine this noble story with a bittersweet love; Ann falls in love with Seamus, a survivor of the shipwreck, and she must choose between her love for him and her home in Isle aux Morts. *Ann and Seamus* is written for treble chorus, four soloists, and small instrumental ensemble. The music is highly rhythmical with a strong connection to the traditional music of this province.

For the opening performances, 110 choristers were divided into two casts ranging in age from seven to eighteen. The decision to use choristers to form the physical set gave the audience the opportunity to see as well as hear these wonderful young singers throughout the duration and made for a visually engaging theatre experience. *Ann and Seamus* is an opera of bravery, selflessness, and love. Its story of serving strangers in a time of need is one that Newfoundlanders identify with easily.

Nightingale

Nightingale explores the inner workings of the artistic psyche as seen through the life of Newfoundland's first operatic diva, Georgina Sterling. This newly created musical-theatrical work directed by Jillian Keiley is based on the character of the nineteenth-century mezzo soprano who left her home in Twillingate, Newfoundland, to pursue an operatic career in Europe. Little is known about Sterling's rise to fame or eventual artistic decline, but her life comes full circle returning to live her final years in her home in Twillingate. *Nightingale* draws from limited known facts to create a work of theatre that is not biography, but rather an intimate look into the public and private personas of an emerging artist. The piece is written for two actors and pianist. The actors portray the multi-levelled personality of Georgina Sterling: the young "Georgie," uncertain and frightened of both her growing vocal potential and the possible failure it offers and her alter ego, the confident and accomplished performer now known to the world as "Marie Toulinguet" who is quick to advise and criticize her efforts at refinement. The polarity of Sterling's personality is reinforced by the physical connection of the two characters. Gestures are often mirrored between these personas and distance is used to indicate support or conflict. The singing in this theatrical work is provided almost exclusively by Marie Toulinguet's character. Music is chosen from operatic and classical vocal works in Sterling's repertoire and from the popular culture of the time. *Nightingale* was written by Jillian Keiley and Robert Chafe on a commission by Jane Leibel and Tom Gordon of Memorial University. *Nightingale* had its premiere on 4 July 2006 in Memorial University's Petro-Canada Hall as a co-production of Artistic Fraud and The Magnetic North Theatre Festival. At its close, *Nightingale*'s Stirling returns to Twillingate having lost her voice, her career and her health. The struggle, success, and tragedy of Marie Toulinguet née Stirling have a breadth and substance of true operatic scope.

Newfoundland and Labrador is a culture that prizes its stories. These stories are told in kitchens, at tables, shared with children and repeated to parents. They are sung in ballads, folk songs, jigs and reels. And now the legends and triumphs of this people can be shared through the medium of opera. Opera compliments and expands Newfoundland's distinctive musical tradition. It is as much like these other musical genres as it is different. Composer Dean Burry comments: "Story-telling through music and drama? I think that's the core of the Newfoundland spirit." *The*

Vinland Traveler, *Ann and Seamus*, and *Nightingale* tell these living stories of Newfoundland with Newfoundland soul.

Carolyn Schiller
Memorial University

Independent Albums from St. John's
Bill Brennan. 2006. *Solo Piano*. Self-published [www.billbrennan.ca]
Sean Panting. 2006. *Victrola*, and *Receiver*. Self-published. [www.seanpanting.com]
Sandy Morris. 2005. *Music from Land & Sea*. Self-published. [www.sandymorrismusic.com]

BILL BRENNAN IS a composer/pianist whose open-ended musicianship allows him to work effectively in many genres. He has worked as musical director of CBC's *The Vinyl Café* and established long-term relationships with Chesterfield Inlet, Vuja De, Evergreen Club Contemporary Gamelan and many other performing groups. With over 70 recording credits, *Solo Piano* is Brennan's independent solo debut.

Solo Piano features four older original compositions and six improvisations, recorded over three days at the MUN School of Music. Skillfully captured by engineer Don Ellis, the recording itself sounds vivid, intimate, and clean. While the musical texture is generally sparse, none of the space is wasted. There is imaginative clarity in each event. The opening track "Time Peace" lures the listener with a bare, deceptively simple ostinato that morphs organically to a climax. The glacial pointillism of "Shale" is reminiscent of the barren landscape of the album artwork. There is a cinematic quality to *Solo Piano* that is no coincidence. Brennan has composed music that has appeared on soundtracks for *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee) and *Antwone Fisher* (Denzel Washington). Brennan masterfully executes each note with conviction and integrity.

It is difficult to name another Newfoundland artist who matches Sean Panting's work ethic and sheer range of abilities. An accomplished actor, director, and radio commentator, Panting upholds his family's tradition of creating boundary breaking Newfoundland music. He simultaneously released two integrated albums in 2006, his third and fourth solo albums. *Receiver* is a flat-out rocker with Adam Staple (drums) and Don Ellis (bass). *Victrola* features solo acoustic interpretations of all the material on *Receiver*, along with rarities and new recordings of older original music.

Despite the complementary material, these are two very different records. *Victrola* is not simply an acoustic facsimile of the tougher sounding *Receiver*. Panting significantly changes his delivery on each record, making it worthwhile to own both. *Victrola* and *Receiver* represent the best in modern Newfoundland popular music and were recorded in a manner that accurately represents a live Panting

performance. The sound is so full on *Receiver* that at times it is difficult to discern all the witty lyrics. Panting's husky baritone is best heard on the stripped-down *Victrola.*

Panting deftly articulates the hardships of an artistic livelihood in St. John's. "Gas Station Sandwich" expresses the gastronomic adversity of life on the road. "Everyone Everywhere" is an autobiographical account of pawning instruments to stay alive. There is no better song on either album than "Solomon's Row," named for an alleyway adjacent to a famous live music venue in St. John's. Here Panting poses crucial questions about Newfoundland music. Why bother to be a professional musician in St. John's when sustaining such a career is so extremely difficult? When should one choose to pack it in? Does one have to play "Newfoundland music" in order to be considered a "Newfoundland musician"? Filled with cliché-free heartbreaking dirge about *living* as a musician, *Victrola* and *Receiver* are the best Newfoundland albums of 2006 in any genre.

For 40 years, the CBC television series "Land & Sea" has chronicled the culture and history of Newfoundland and Labrador. Composer/guitarist/producer Sandy Morris has been involved with the show's instrumental soundtrack for 30 of those years. Morris has always been on the frontier of modern Newfoundland music. He performs regularly with the 8-Track Favorites, Rasa, and Jenny Gear. "The Most Easterly Guitarist in North America" was also musical director for CODCO and an original member of the Wonderful Grand Band.

The key to Morris's music is its emotional authenticity. Morris understands the subject matter he is representing in sound. The expertly filmed program documents real people and places in a personal way. The pictures and stories are compelling even without music. Morris's genius is in getting the most energy out of the smallest musical gesture — he gets to the heart of the matter right away. On each of the fourteen short instrumental tunes, he consistently serves the narrative using traditional instrumentation (guitars, accordion, fiddle), uncomplicated forms, and straightforward diatonic melodies. This music exists comfortably without the visuals. The closing theme of "Land & Sea" (co-written with Ralph Walker) is one of the best-known pieces of instrumental music in Newfoundland. *Music from Land & Sea* stands alone as a compilation of wordless music that many Newfoundlanders feel "speaks" for them.

Patrick Boyle
St. John's, NL

Marjorie Doyle. *Reels, Rock and Rosaries: Confessions of a Newfoundland Musician*. East Lawrencetown, NS: Pottersfield Press, 2005, ISBN 1-895900-73-5

ON A TINY CORNER near an intersection in the heart of St. John's stands an unimposing monument. It is a solitary bronze figure, barely 3 feet high, of a uniformed

young schoolgirl standing absorbed in counting on her fingers. One dark January evening I went for a closer look and found some seasonably sensitive soul had wrapped a black scarf about the statue's neck. "School children have played here for 250 years," the plaque gently begins; then it sketches the history of three nearby church-run girls' schools that served the denser working- and trading-class populations of past decades. Gone now are the intense religious and sectarian divisions; gone are most of the families to the suburbs and beyond, and gone are the schools.

Marjorie Doyle was one of the many hundreds who grew up attending the Presentation Sisters' Convent school in Cathedral Square, below the Basilica of St. John the Baptist that dominates the city. As the Irish Christian Brothers gave many hundreds of boys in their two nearby schools, the sisters gave Doyle a thoroughly Irish and Catholic education (18). She is the only daughter of the late Gerald S. Doyle, successful trader and distributor of medicinals, devoted collector, and non-profiting publisher of successive editions of *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (6). For decades as well, Gerald S. Doyle Limited sponsored the nightly "Doyle Bulletin" news program on Newfoundland radio. His was a household name all over the island.

The Sisters gave young Marjorie a thorough musical education, too, which she herself continued, later becoming a broadcaster, music critic, and columnist (7). We don't always write about what we know, but, somehow, we usually write about what we want to find out. *Reels, Rock and Rosaries* is the informal autobiography of a musician and critic, but also of a woman searching for herself and her place. In what she "confesses" and in what she does not, it appears to have been both the Catholic and the musical regimes that sustained and conflicted her. The study and practice of Classical Western (European) music, taking the time and concentration it does, and providing so complete the mental and emotional sustenance it does, is famous for conferring just these mixed blessings. Not to mention being reared a strict Irish Catholic (98).

*****

Doyle is also troubled by what she calls her "patriotism" (8). She is even angry enough at times over Newfoundland's "loss of nationhood" to have played practical jokes on "mainlanders" (63). She brings it up again and again, yet she never discusses exactly what she means (157). If "nationhood" isn't a self-determining human community with its common public good and future in its own hands, then what, in the name of the Doyle Songbook, is it, exactly? If nationhood is this, then Newfoundland never had a nationhood to lose, for Newfoundland is and has always been in the ruthless grip of a clique of profiteering exploiters of one address or another, who bleed primary resources dry and give as little as possible back to community or ecology. Politicians and media have always done and still do their best to babble about anything else but this greatest and grimmest truth, yet it darkens and distorts every aspect of life, and surely it is the reason the outports are finally dying

and those St. John's schoolchildren and their families have disappeared. End of sermon.

Reels, Rock and Rosaries ranges freely over Doyle's years from the "convent girl" of the 1950s and 1960s to her pranks and passions as an older student, her travels and adventures as a musician. Aside from the often irreverent satires of certain local comedians also raised in it, very little of balanced memoir has otherwise come down to us from that intensely Catholic world that began to dissolve in the late 1960s. Doyle's re-creation of the child's daily regimes with some peculiarly Catholic details are precise and vivid (105). From what my sisters used to tell me, and what I myself recall from roughly the same years spent at St. Bon's College (for boys) up around the corner from Cathedral Square, I can vouch for the accuracy, too.

In the "The Disappearing Concert" (129), she assembles, from her years of performing, reviewing, and just showing up, one composite evening when everything goes hell, west, and weird. Very funny. It ranks with the anecdotes of the great accompanist Gerald Moore in his genial autobiography, *Am I Too Loud?* "A Chorus Girl at Home" (148) is a finely sustained account of a Christmas visit to an old-age home with a pick-up choir of friends. It has something of the modern "creative writing" approach, with its interior monologue on so typically middle class a neurosis as the fear of the aged, but of all Doyle's chapters, this one meanders least in subject and mood.

*****

Then again, proper autobiography is by nature one's private and wayward odyssey of quests and retreats, wanderings and returns. However glamorous or ignominious the camino may be, the pilgrim's journey is really an inner one; s/he is in a lifelong school for souls. So if you don't tell us what's on your mind, you're not writing autobiography.

"When the concert hall turns into a classroom," she comments late in the book, "the concert turns into a lesson, shoving out the magic" (138). Yet, by now, she has many times lectured us on this or that piece of music. However enlightened these rhapsodies are, without the music they become the painful pedagogy Doyle eschews. Pursuant to this theme, let me mention a prank I once pulled in music school. From CBC radio, I taped what began as one of the late Clyde Gilmour's Sunday afternoon sampler programs of music and song. It took me several successive "Gilmour's Albums" of taping, as I was including only his characteristic fawning, drooling, salivating introductions of singers, one after another. Then, in making the presentation to my voice master class, I heaped in a few more delicious declamations of my own. What started as an appreciation of lieder and interpretation ended up in the pastries and *gimutlich* at the Mozart Tea Room, Robson Street, Vancouver. Not a note was sung, but it was a hit. The prof had to give me top marks since he was laughing harder

than anyone. It was welcome comic relief, too, for no musicians are more self-conscious than singers, because their instruments are themselves. Body, voice, childhood, musicianship, ears, habits, health, heart, education, and ego are all there to be seen and heard once you open your mouth and "heave it out of ya." So, as our Kodaly teacher often admonished, "Less talk, more singing, more listening!"

It entirely bewilders me that Marjorie Doyle, who was raised on great singing like John McCormack's, and great songs from near and far, from "The Kelligrews Soiree" and "The Trinity Cake," to "Linden Lea" and "Roses of Picardy" — music that gets into the hearts and veins of very few — should be so impressed with Alan Doyle's version of the Newfoundland ballad about the sporting "Jack Hinks" (33).

*****

Yes, the Great Big Sea band members have sure hands on their instruments; but the singing, the face-pulling, the phony accents, the bounding and swaggering? Oh, come now. I agree that Jim Joyce's version of "Hard, Hard Times" is great indeed, but his approach is quite the opposite (47). What I would call a great interpretation of (almost) a Newfoundland song would be the job McCormack (1884-1946) would have done on "Pat Murphy's Meadow," for example, had it been written a few decades earlier and fallen into his hands, as so many otherwise obscure songs did.

And while we're on the subject of McCormack, Doyle does confess that she sang, learned, and then forgot a lot of songs without ever having understood them (74). Please allow me to note, then, that "The Garden Where the Praties Grow" is clearly a happy song by all measures (no pun intended). He got the girl he wanted. She was lovely and unpretentious and he met her in the potato garden next door. But those pangs of love were so sharp that he'd sooner go to jail than go through it again; he's happy because he won't have to, however, so it's a happy song (115). Songs of the lovelorn, on the other hand, were another of McCormack's specialties. "Terence's Farewell," "Molly Bawn," "Molly Brannigan," and "The Short Cut to the Rosses" may be of and by a singer of the incorrect gender, but they're far more powerful and expressive in lyric, line, and delivery than any of their many derivatives sung by the Dollys and Kittys and Hanks from down in Pennsatucky.

Hard, too, it is to imagine how Doyle reached her thirties without hearing these "country and western" songs (113). I grew up in St. John's in the 1950s and 1960s, too, and I escaped them only when I took to the farm or the woods. If my dad had put a radio in the barn with the cows, as some other farmers did, where could I have retreated with my book on winter evenings?

*****

If I could've heard the "Trio" album, Tom T. Hall, Billy Ed Wheeler, Doc Watson, Judy Collins, Lew Murphy, Omar Blondahl, John McCormack, Paul Robeson, and

Kathleen Ferrier on pop radio all day, I wouldn't have gotten any reading done. But before electrically produced rude impulse rock music took over the air, we were afflicted with characters in cowboy outfits who sounded like they all came from the same "holler," who played the same three chords and forever wailed about their love lives. You'd have to live a very cloistered life not to have heard them (64).

It is not that I am a snob. Quite the contrary. I am a dirt farmin', snake handlin', God fearin', fundamentalist folkie who believes there is folk music (including jazz) classical music and junk (56). As for snobs, who hog and exclude, they're everywhere, high and low, with more per capita in classical music, I've noticed, than in any other music (33). Most popular contemporary "music" is musically derivative and lyrically narcissistic junk. If it was food, many millions would be dead from it, says I. Music and song (like all the arts that interpret life) actually are emotional and spiritual human food (98). What does this say about the spiritual/emotional lives of those millions?

But giving a free choral concert of noble music in the public square is too little too late for those multitudes (97). I, too, believe in miracles, but I can neither perform nor predict them. The ancients were right when they recommended both the noble music of the lyre (harp) and the exuberant music of the aulos (flute) be given in equal portion and from childhood onwards. But if you withhold from one child, while granting to another for no apparent fault or merit, the "have-nots" will henceforward reject what was denied them, and they will despise those who have, because the iniquitous insult remains. This "sour grapes" reaction, when conscientiously used, is a healthy survival tactic for "have-nots." Doyle mentions in passing, that most of her classmates at Presentation "convent school" couldn't read their music, their voice parts (108). She came from a well-to-do family that was doing well enough to afford her private lessons.

*****

This most crucial fact about her musical childhood she never mentions at all. It was as true in 1857, as in 1957, as it is in 2007: The exceptional child is he or she who learns and develops without private lessons, which are still necessary but not yet equally accessible to all.

In the early 1980s, Brother A.F. "Stalks" Brennan hired me one year to teach music in three St. John's east Catholic schools. Though equipped only with guitar and my Kodaly evangelism, I pulled off three successful Christmas concerts. But one dreary February afternoon, the old nun of a principal stuck her head in my door and asked, "Are the children doing any singing?" I took a moment to explain that they were learning how to sight-read voice lines by "moveable Do(e)." In a few years or less, they would be able to pick up a three- or four-part piece, and sight-sing it!

"But they'll all be gone up to the high school by then," was her muttered reply, before she scurried off to no particular emergency that I can remember. I stood blinking a moment before I stepped back into my classroom. If it hadn't hit me eventually, I might be there yet; but, months later, when it did, I stole away and cried a bit. This is where both the exclusivity and the "sour grapes" begin, with schools that deny children a basic musical literacy, while using music to showcase them to pacify parental vanity.

All the trashy music videos, the soft porn with a soundtrack, all the demented country songs, and the unintelligible apeing and squealing on television "idol" shows wouldn't lay a glove on children with half the music education young Marjorie Doyle had, or the even smaller fraction I had. I got myself into music school singing Sarastro's two major arias from "The Magic Flute," and though I placed first a few times, and graduated singing the beautiful Stevenson/Vaughan Williams "Songs of Travel" cycle, I didn't go where Ben Heppner went (135). (He also competed in the Vancouver Kiwanis Festivals of the late 1970s.) However, late and far from home, I finally got that classical music education I wanted, and, as with Marjorie Doyle's Barcelona experience, it has since gotten me through some pretty hairy hayrides, too.

And I'm still Irish and Catholic, in spirit. I don't got to mass, but I go to sleep listening to Palestrina whenever possible.

*****

Dulce et decorum est pro musica viva.
(Sweet and becoming it is to live for music.)

And so, to conclude my theme, I have a request: Could we hear Kathleen Ferrier singing Schubert's "An Die Musik"? It goes out to Marjorie Doyle, and to all those grown children who, as the plaque reads at King and Military in old St. John's, were "relaxed and secure, in their world of Education and Innocence," but were never given enough music to sustain them in life.

*****

Frank Holden
St. John's, NL