

William Bruneau and David Gordon Duke
Jean Coulthard: A Life in Music.

Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2005. 216 pp.

William J. Egnatoff

She “made sense of life by composing.” (p. 146) “My aim is simply to write music that is good . . . to minister to human welfare . . . [A] composer’s musical language should be instinctive, personal, and natural to him.” (p. 157)

Bruneau and Duke’s illuminating guide to the life and music of Vancouver composer Jean Coulthard (“th” pronounced as in “*Earth Music*” (cello, 1986) or “*Threnody*” (various choral and instrumental, 1933, 1947, 1960, 1968, 1970, 1981, 1986) contributes substantially and distinctively in form and detail to the growing array of biographical material on internationally-known Canadian composers of the twentieth century. Coulthard (1908–2000) began writing music in childhood and continued as long as she could. Composition dates in the 428-page catalogue of the Coulthard manuscripts which can be found at the Web page http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/u_arch/2007.06.27.cat.pdf, and was prepared by the authors to accompany the posthumous third accession to the composer’s archives, range from 1917 to 1997. The catalogue is housed at the University of British Columbia at the Web site http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/u_arch/coulth.html. Her works span all forms from delightful graded pieces for young piano students, through choral and chamber music, to opera and large orchestral scores. The book addresses students of Canadian classical music, women’s issues, and the performing arts.

The reader would do well to start from the back of the book, playing from the listing of “Recordings on Compact Disk” (p. 185), the CD of Coulthard’s music found in *Ovations*, vol. 1 (Toronto: CBC, 2002), a series designed to introduce listeners to well-established Canadian composers. The *Ovations* sampling begins shortly after World War II with her popular choral work *Quebec May* (1948), with text by her friend, Canadian poet Earle Birney. Her own musical voice as a composer was then well established. Duke’s program notes for the CD overlap those provided in the book, which include score fragments and just enough detail on six of her works rang-

ing from 1933 to 1990 to whet the reader's appetite for score analysis. Also included in the *Ovations* CD is a re-worked small selection from *Canada Mosaic*, a work for large orchestra written for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra to premiere in China, just after Canada had opened diplomatic relations. When the Chinese invitation was withdrawn, Kazyoshi Akiyama and the Vancouver Symphony premiered *Mosaic* in Japan in 1974. The work draws from folk songs across Canada and quotes one of the themes from *Quebec May*, which was orchestrated at Elmer Eisler's request in 1987 by Coulthard and her former pupil Frederick Schipizky.

The reader might next examine the book's two-column chronology "Jean Coulthard: Life and Times" (p. 167) that lines up events in the composer's life with major events in world history and with important events in the history of the music (especially of Bartok and Debussy) that inspired Coulthard. In the year of the stock market crash (1929), she was studying with her first major composition teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams who was born in England in 1872, one year after her physician father was born in Gananoque, Ontario. The population of Vancouver to whose cultural life both she and her interior designer husband Donald Adams contributed so generously grew from 27,010 in 1901 (when her mother was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston) to 1,986,965 in 2001, the year after Coulthard's death. World War II drove major European composers to the United States, making possible formative study and consultation. The chronology reflects Coulthard's late blossoming as a composer, listing many works written after her retirement from the University of British Columbia in 1973.

Third, the reader would do well to examine the index, a "who's who" of the many interesting and influential people in Coulthard's life. The entries consist primarily of names of musicians, family members, and friends, and secondarily of choirs, orchestras, and artistic and cultural organizations. The entry under "Coulthard, Jean" gives a five-column sequential summary of the book. That is followed by rotated indexes with subheadings: family, flowers, performers, pupils, teachers, travel, and works. The book, richly illustrated with seventy-nine photographs and figures and twenty-three score fragments, is a finely crafted instrument to guide further study and to give multiple ways of viewing the life of a person whose substantial legacy of music deserves to be accompanied by a story of her privileged and highly disciplined life as student, mother, wife, gardener, home entertainer, friend, and teacher (including twenty-five years at the University of British Columbia from 1948–1973) of piano, theory, and composition.

In spite of living through some difficult times, she led a happy and well-balanced life. Together, she and her husband raised one child, Jane, an artist who produced illustrations for many of the publications of her mother's pieces for students. Jean was also very close to her sister, especially after the untimely death of her husband in 1985. She had several very close friends and travelled often to England and continental Europe for work and renewal, but home was always in Vancouver. West coast geography and her love of nature and ecological concern for it were imprinted in her music.

Although Coulthard kept extensive diaries and journals and gave addresses on

her work and interests, she neither published much auto-biographical detail nor felt that anything was needed other than her music to tell her story. Nevertheless, she came to approve of the biographical project and the archiving of her professional and personal papers, photographs, and recordings. Bruneau drew heavily on this material and on over fifty interviews, while Duke relied on his direct experience, to provide an account that rings true without imposing their own interpretive agenda. They attend well to the discrimination and marginalization Coulthard faced as a woman composer, particularly during her twenty-five years as an instructor of theory and composition at the University of British Columbia, including her successful but disheartening fight in 1951 against dismissal by music department head Harry Adaskin. For the most part she avoided university politics, but “developed a political idea of the arts” (p. 128) in striving to advance not only her own work and career but also opportunities for young performers and composers, as well as public support for the contemporary arts in Canada. She became active in music festivals, was a founding member of The Canadian League of Composers, and sought funding for commissions. Just as she had been encouraged and supported by teachers and composers, notably Arthur Benjamin during his years in Vancouver, and Bernard Wagenaar at Julliard during an intensive and foundational year of study 1944–45, she did the same for others. Shortly before her death, the Vancouver Symphony organized the Coulthard Readings, an annual series of performances of new works by promising young composers.

Both authors have lifelong investments in music and decades of interest in Jean Coulthard. Bruneau, a retired University of British Columbia historian of higher education, and a fine and highly dedicated amateur pianist, continues to write on Coulthard's life. In 1993, when he caught sight of the freshly organized Coulthard fonds (W.A. Bruneau, personal communication, August 23, 2007), he dropped his project on the history of the University of British Columbia, sought Duke's collaboration, and through him became a close friend and confidant of the composer. Duke, music critic, composer, educator, and now Dean of Language, Literature, and Performing Arts at Douglas College; studied composition with Coulthard (1970–75); served her for two decades as copyist and assistant; and devoted his doctoral studies at the University of Victoria to a critical assessment of her orchestral works (1993). Both continue to keep alive the Coulthard legacy.

“Whether I am writing a little teaching piece or a long and complicated work, love and delight is for me the heart of it.”

—Jean Coulthard (p. 166)