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for women 50+



A New Year, a New You...
and a Box of Chocolates!

January - February 2011

VIVA!



Have you ever wondered what happened to the Greek philosophy of making music? Was it really possible that the Greeks could actually produce poetry as music and music as poetry,

without any division? As some now believe, the answer was “yes”. However, soon after the Greeks lost their empire, music and poetry became separate entities, if not completely different, artistic endeavors.

In 2007, I was asked to perform in a fund-raising concert for the Alzheimer’s Society. It was produced by Dr. Katherine Oakley, a friend since 1972 when we met in Joy Kogawa’s Poetry Writing Workshop at Carleton University. Because she was working with the aging population and knew of my multi-disciplinary arts involvement, she asked me to help produce and perform in this concert. I performed a set of improvisations, then was part of an ensemble which improvised music to one of her poems. The poem was about a skater on the frozen Rideau Canal. I and a trumpeter, plus Kate using a saw, wove music in and out as her poem. Was being narrated. Although it was a great success, it was not what one would call a strict return to the Greek definition of ‘musipoetry’ or ‘poemusic’.

It was not until several weeks ago, when I sat down with Susan McMaster that I knew I had found a poet who has, indeed, returned us to the Greek method of making Music.

Susan McMaster, Canadian performance poet, has managed to synthesize the two ‘arts’ into one production. She insists on calling herself a ‘performance poet’, rather than a multi-disciplinary artist, but, in my opinion, has demonstrated a true return to the Greek definition of ‘poetry’ (or music). Her recent book, *Crossing Arcs: Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me*, has been recognized for several awards, including the prestigious national Acorn-Plantos prize. To demonstrate my point about her work, I’d like to go back into her earlier writing history, as recounted in an interview I had with her in my home in late November.

Susan McMaster began writing poetry as soon as she could hold a pencil, “according to my mother”, and is now about sixty; so has been writing for almost six decades. However, she was diffident about sending her poems out for publication, and didn’t publish her first piece until the age of thirty, in the small literary magazine *Writers’ Life Line*.

About the same time, around 1980, she began writing collaborative work with her brother, Andrew McClure, who is a composer. While we sat on antique dining chairs at my laptop computer with rudimentary recording facilities in my studio, she described the system they developed together for notating the musical aspects of the spoken voice, and for blending this with instrumental music. “it is a system of notation which was new and had never been heard of in the past in this particular form. We called it ‘wordmusic’.

Within a year, they had opened the group to other creators, notably poet Colin Morton, and began meeting weekly under the name ‘*First Draft*’. First Draft quickly expanded to include a rich and changing intermedia group of visual artists, writers, ►

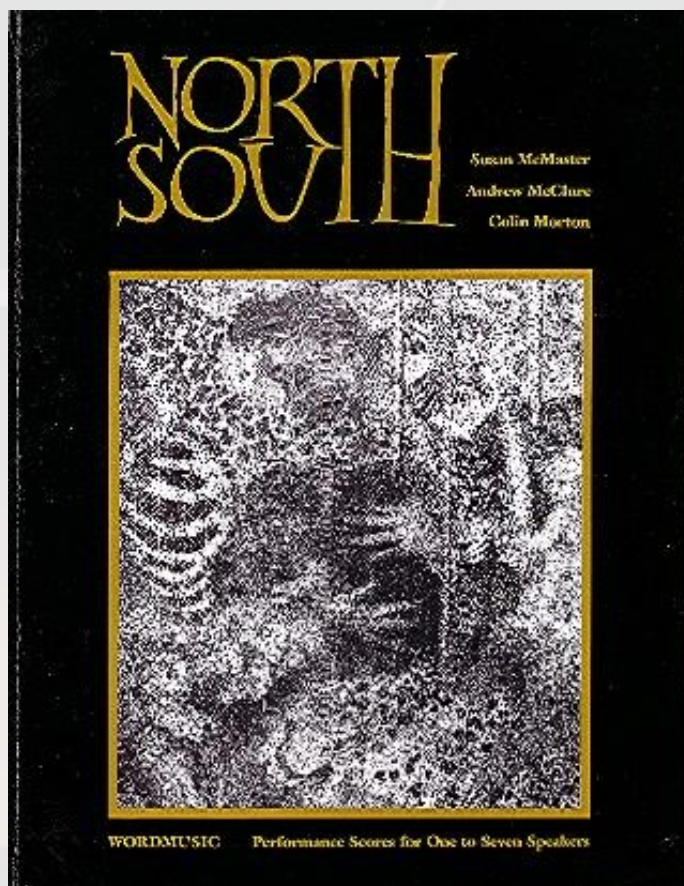
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dancers, musicians, and contributors. Soon they were talking about staging their collaborative works, and in the next ten years, performed some fifty times, in Ottawa, Toronto, and as far away as the Banff Centre. They also appeared on broadcasts like CBC's 'Morningside' with Peter Gzowski.

They published two collaborative books of wordmusic for multiple and solo speakers. This was achieved using poet, bpNichol, at Underwhich Editions. Then *Pass this way again* and *North/South*, the interactive intermedia anthology *The Scream*, with Ouroboros press, became an independent studio audio recording entitled simply *Wordmusic*. Susan also published her first poetry book, *Dark Galaxies* (Ouroboros, 1986), at that time and edited *Dangerous Graces: Women's Poetry on Stage* (Balmuir, 1987), documenting a performance at the Great Canadian Theatre Company, which included some of her wordmusic, and used a piano score by Andrew.

At the end of the eighties, the group dissolved. "After that, I took a break from this synthesized art form, and wrote poetry only, publishing in various literary journals and anthologies, and in three books, *The Hummingbird Murders* in 1992, *Learning to Ride* in 1994, and *Uncommon Prayer* in 1997, all from Quarry Press, as well as editing some anthologies." Collaborating with such artists as Claude Dupuis, Susan Feindel, Roberta Huebener, Pat Durr, and Robert Verrall; *Waging Peace* (ed., Penumbra, 2003) draws on work by 108 artists and poets from across Canada, almost all Susan's books, including the First Draft series.

As a musician and poet myself, what immediately caught my attention was Susan's integration of those two arts. In order for WOTMAG readers to understand how this synthesis was created, I will describe



the process in more detail, not only as a 'return' to the archetypal Greek definition, but how it evolved in Susan and Andrew's hands, emerging as a new and contemporary form.

One of Susan's earliest productions was the book of poetry and wordmusic scores, *Pass this way again* (Underwhich, 1983). In the preface, the notes on performance state that:

[Wordmusic] combines words and music by using spoken voices to create musical compositions.

Vertical placement of words indicate pitch. Horizontal dotted lines represent normal spoken pitch for each speaker. Rhythm is indi-

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cated spatially and each bar [marks] a time unit of two or three seconds' duration. Solid vertical lines indicate sections to be spoken in unison. Horizontal lines following or dividing words, indicate the prolongation of a vowel. Words in broken lettering are to be whispered. Standard musical signs are used for dynamics.

The title piece, “*Pass this way again*”, is written by McMaster and scored by McClure as a trio for soprano, alto and bass voices. However, it is not sung in the ‘*traditional*’ Western style of singing, but rather performed by spoken voices in the Ancient Greek style. Sometimes the effect produced is an interweaving of speakers similar in sound to musical counterpoint, and sometimes it is closer to chant or chorus. In addition, there is the usage of musical repetition so often found in the works of ancient Greece.

What is noticeable in this work is the phrase “(*enter further nuances to all desires*)”, which the alto voice says alone and once only, seems to act not only as part of the text to be spoken, but as a direction for delivery. By contrast, the repetition of the text “*stones of ancient disaster*” insinuates both the stones, as well as the “*ancient disasters*”, into the mind of the listener.

In “*La Vibora Gosta do Vento Calor*” (“*the viper savors the desert wind*”, McMaster/McClure, First Draft Scores #3), a wordmusic/music piece for solo spoken voice and violon/cello, the cello at In the phrase “*she dries to a chord in the wind*” (referring to an old woman sitting and remembering), both voice and cello are heard simultaneously, and they continue alternating and interweaving through to the last repeated word, “*she*”, that fades off like a viper’s dying hiss in both music and voice.

The wind is used extensively throughout this piece, and so becomes the meme. The perspective McMaster has on the old woman is that of watching her from a safe distance. This would seem to infer that McMaster was still a rather young woman at the time of writing. The impression the audience gets is that of someone who sees the phenomenon of old woman and snake as strange, yet hypnotic.

The integrated blending of music and poetry in this work and others, reinforces my premise that Susan McMaster has returned to the Greek practice of dramatized, performed ‘*musipoetry*’ or ‘*poemusic*’. Why do I think these poems cannot live without the ‘*scoring*’ which she and a co-creative team gave them? While she does publish her poems by themselves, reading them in solitude is like attending a concert alone. You can attend any event by yourself, but if you go with a friend, sit together, and review it together, it changes the whole perception of what you just experienced. Your memory of the event is intimately bound together with the shared experience of you and your friend.

McMaster thrives on working with other people, an approach that is very evident in the book *The Scream: First Draft, the Third Annual Group Show* (Ouroboros, 1984), edited by Colin Morton, designed by Claude Dupuis and Carol English. It includes three completely different presentations of her poem “*Spring Over Grown*”: the poem itself, and both a wordmusic score and a ‘*traditional*’ score by Andrew McClure. The first one is for solo spoken voice, with musical notations for rhythm, dynamics, pitch, and timbre, all within the natural spoken range. This is described by the composer in the book as “*heightened speech which lies halfway between the spoken voice and the sung voice*”; while the sec-

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ond is a conventional western notational score for a soprano singer. Of the poem, McMaster says: “*This is an old poem...which found its centre only recently, when I dropped half the words and re-placed every syllable.*”

In 1995, a new group called “*SugarBeat Music & Poetry*”, consisting of Colin Morton as poet, Alrick Huebner on bass, Jennifer Giles on keyboards, and Gavin McLintock on sax, lost its poet when Colin left town for a year. The remaining members asked Susan to take his place. This group combined solo spoken voice, with musical compositions by group members, often in a jazz or new music style. Over the next decade, they performed in over fifty different venues, such as the National Arts Centre Fourth Stage and the Elora Music Festival. They produced the demo recording *Dangerous Times* in 1996, then (with a slightly new configuration of members) *SugarBeat* in 1998, and (after changing the group’s name to *Geode*) *Geode Music & Poetry* in 2000.

A book/CD combination followed called, *Until the Light Bends*, in 2004 with publishers Pendas Productions and Black Moss. The combination book/CD was short-listed for both the Archibald Lampman Poetry Prize and the Ottawa Book Awards.

Geode almost disbanded in 2005, says McMaster. “Most collaborative projects such as this seem to last between seven and ten years”. But they still occasionally come together to demonstrate their variations on creative teamwork, using solo poetry with different styles of improvisation.

Since then, Susan has again concentrated on her writing, notably with *The Gargoyle’s Left Ear: Writing in Ottawa* (Black Moss, 2007), a memoir. In the last twelve months alone, she has published three

poetry collections. *Pith & Wry: Canadian Poetry* (Scrivener Press), Collected new work in a wide variety of voices and styles by forty-five writers from across the country, including Margaret Atwood, Dave Margoshes, Erin Mouré, Don McKay, Lorna Crozier, Mary Dalton, and Sarah Klassen.

The aforementioned *Crossing Arcs: Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me* (Black Moss), already in its second printing, has prompted a flood of mail from readers, including such comments as “a wonderful combination of poetry, photos, your mother’s quotes”; “like an intimate play”; “the right complex of sorrow, anger, and even joy”; “how can heartbreak be so lovely?”; “simple and yet evocative”, “thoughtful,



honest, funny, eye-opening”; “totally inspiring...a reprieve”.

Paper Affair: Poems Selected & New (Black Moss) collects McMaster’s best poetry from the last three decades, and is described, as: “Winsome, muscular, candid, intimate yet universal [with] an open, seemingly effortless control of her craft and the genius to

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bring each poem to a startling, inevitable (and beautiful) conclusion.”

Susan recently turned sixty. For her, these last four books - a memoir, a collection of poetry by her friends and peers (dedicated to her father, who read poetry to her as a child), a selection of her best work, and a tribute to her mother - mark a significant coming together of the main influences on her writing life: her family, friends, her writing community and her preoccupation with the body, the spirit, nature, and human relationships.

The themes may remain constant, but McMaster's approach to them has changed, as can be seen by looking through her early work in *Paper Affair*, and then at the mature voice of *Crossing Arcs*. When I asked her what signs in her creativity point to the fact that her writing has changed, she answered frankly: “Now that I am older, what has changed is that I am much more direct and simpler in my poetry. A young writer is diffident about their emotions and experiences, so they hide behind a veil of words.”

I told Susan that her perspective reminds me of the songs of Barbara Strozzi (1619-1664), whose songs and subject matter also reflected that very statement. Strozzi, in the latter part of her life, was far ahead of

her time, having the courage to laugh at herself in her songs.

Neither Strozzi nor McMaster worry overly about gossips or commentaries, whether in blogs, or on paper. When younger musicians and poets write, they involve themselves in elaborate language and forms, but it is not the only way, nor necessarily the most effective way to express a message. The work in *Crossing Arcs*, McMaster's most recent poetry book, is very plainspoken to the untutored ear. She says some readers consider it almost not poetry. Although she uses such poetic techniques as repetition, concision, rhyme, assonance, and metaphor, these are downplayed. McMaster also employs elemental musical techniques, including metre and accent, hidden behind a dialogue that sounds casual,

almost spoken. An example of her directness can be found in the first poem, which begins:

Mother, I am lost

in the spaces

you leave behind...

Each poem is matched with a verbatim quote from Betty Page, Susan's mother. Betty's reply to the above is:

“I don't think I have Alzheimer's. My memory is my own, and I'm going to keep it!”



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The dialogue between them rings very true and familiar. There are many such examples within the covers of this amazing book. *Crossing Arcs* also demonstrates how mature writers, musicians, and other creative women approach their art, letting it emerge through the engaging involvement of other people, with revelations of what they're thinking, rather than taking a purely self-centered outlook.

Of course, there is much more humor, even in the middle of disaster, in mature creative output. In her book *Uncommon Ground* (Quarry Press) there are many poems about aging, including "*The Old Woman's Chair*", which takes a rare viewpoint: told from the chair's perspective! Notice the contrasts between the first and second lines: "*holding on / springing back*". She then goes into those "grooves" more deeply: "*I want to sink into its creases / with the other dust and grime*", but counters this with "*let my stuffing hang out under cat-scratched arms*", and finally ends with the chair's wish to "*outlive you, every one!*"

I believe many of us have just such a chair somewhere in our lives. For example, I have a rocking chair which I was given in 1977 when I was pregnant with my daughter. I nursed her in it and I still teach music from that same chair. I recently had it restained, and intend to keep it until my death; whereupon it will be given to my daughter.

I asked Susan if she sometimes creates works in her head in the middle of the night, or in early morning. She answered: "*The opening lines of a poem often come at quiet times, at night, or when I'm doing something repetitive and somewhat mindless, like ironing, bicycling, walking about the house or garden, lying awake, and when the lines come, I have to catch them right away, or they're gone. That's why*

some of my first drafts are on paper bags or the margin of a newspaper."

"I do write from dreams sometimes, but I'm careful, because dreams are personal and not that communicative. And poetry is not a kind of staring at one's belly button, but is a type of sharing with others."

I then asked her: "Do you ever write something that might just as easily become a short story, novel, or play, like a set of poems?"

She replied that she concentrates on the moment, because that is what makes a poem, but that is not true of her longer works. I agree with her. For me, a poem is like a 'sonic photograph' of an instant experience from a certain perspective, or, with a set of poems, various perspectives.

Although she comes from a teaching family, she's chosen not to teach for a living "because it uses the same creative, imaginative energy as writing." What she discovered she enjoyed doing instead was editing. In 1973 she gathered a group together in Edmonton who published *Branching Out*, the first national feminist magazine. Returning to Ottawa, she studied journalism and worked as a contract editor before settling into a job at the National Gallery of Canada where she edited art catalogues and created their magazine, *Vernissage*. She said this was a good choice because it used the other side of her brain, the rational, analytical side. After twenty years, she was able to retire and write fulltime. She is also currently the vice-president of the League of Canadian Poets.

I asked her what other mature female poets she enjoys reading, including those from around the world, as well as those from Canada.

"I read mainly Canadian writers, especially Bronwen Wallace, Mary Dalton, Elizabeth Brewster,

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Betsy Struthers, Ronnie Brown, Margaret Atwood, P.K. Page, as well as many many others. For writers other than Canadian, I read Mary Oliver, Emily Dickinson, Chinese and Japanese female poet and the Hungarians. I especially enjoy the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova. I also enjoy the lyrics of many of our Canadian songwriters, like Joni Mitchell and Laura Smith.”

I then asked her: “What, in their approaches to poetry, inspires you?”

She replied: “I like concise writing, where every word counts. Vivid writing uses images and details, rather than large abstract concepts. For example: Laura Smith has a song about a crossword puzzle, which talks about love in a humorous manner. I really enjoy her approach!”

On that note, we ended the interview, and I took a few photos.

Susan McMaster is one of the very few ‘poemusicians’ or ‘musipoets’ I have met. She also told me about Penn Kemp, currently the Poet Laureate of London, Ontario, whose sound poetry has earned her a worldwide reputation. Kemp has become known in recent years, for her intermedia “sound operas”, which involve actors, dancers, and singers, along with theatrical elements like lighting and sets (see www.mytown.ca/pennkemp and <http://www.poetrymap.ca/profile.php?PoetID=42>).

I would like to know of and interact with more such collaborative poets, whether male or female. I invite you to inform me, if you know of others.

I also invite our readers to send me suggestions of musicians, poets, and multi-media mature women

creators and performers about whom you believe many more of us should know. ■

Diana Schmolka

Links

For more information on Susan McMaster go to: www.web.ncf.ca/smcmaster.

This website provides biographical information, a complete list of publications, recordings, and collaborative projects, reviews and sources for her books, and current readings and performances. You will also find there pages where you may read her poetry, hear her wordmusic, and watch a YouTube video about her. Finally, here you can find links to her media coverage at the League of Canadian Poets, the Writers’ Union of Canada, the University of Toronto Library, the Library and Archives Canada, Black Moss Press, Penumbra Press, Scrivener Press, and Wikipedia.

Bibliography

Uncommon Prayer, Pub. Quarry Press, 1997. “The Old Woman’s Chair” is from this collection of several poems on aging, as well as her ironic ‘psalms’.

The Hummingbird Murders, Pub. Quarry Press, 1992. {As the Toronto Star said of this work: ‘Delving into science and the psyche, McMaster strips away the wrapping from human relationships.’ }

The Gargoyle’s Left Ear, Sugar Beat CD, Pub Quarry Press, {Music/Poetry which strips presumptions clean.}



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Geode (CD), Pub. Geode Music and Poetry, Ottawa, Canada

Until the Light Bends (CD), Pub. Pendas Poets Series, Pendas Productions, First Draft (CD), 1981-2007.

Pass this way again, Pub. Underwhich Editions, 1983. (excerpt of a work is illustrated in Jan. -Feb. issue of WOTMAG).

North South, Pub. Underwhich Editions, 1987. {Works for various ensembles, including one for double 'choir'.}

La Vibora (Scores series), Pub. WordMusic/FIRST DRAFT. {The back cover presents a list of additional publications, one of which is expressly entitled : "The Spoken Voice as Musical Instrument", by McClure and McMaster, (\$2.00 Can.)}

Branching Out Preview issue: **Canadian Magazine for Women**, preview issue, 1973.

Branching Out first anniversary issue , November/December 1974.

Paper Affair : Poems Selected and New, Pub. Black Moss Press, 2010. {Some of McMaster's deepest explorations are revealed in this collection.}

Learning to Ride , Pub. Quarry Press, 1994. {In this collection, McMaster confronts the saddle and leaps well beyond its confines}

Crossing Arcs: Alzheimer's, my mother, and me. Pub. Black Moss Press, 2009. When you read this book, you'll laugh, but you will also cry.

The Scream-First Draft, the Third Annual Group Show, Pub. ouroboros, Ottawa, 1984

Dangerous Graces: Women's Poetry Onstage from Fire Works, Pub. Balmuir Poetry Series, Ottawa 1987. This is the script of the poetry in performance show presented by the Great Canadian Theatre Company in 1987. Seventeen poets speak about life, love, work, children, aging and memory.

Until the Light Bends (book), Penda Poets Series, Pendas Productions.

Waging Peace: Poetry and Political Action, editor: Susan McMaster. Penumbra Press, Ottawa, 2002.

Pith and Wry: Canadian Poetry, Pub. Scrivener Press, Sudbury, 2010. Poetry by Canadian poets.



Susan's book signing of "The Gargoyle's Left Ear" at the Glebe Meat Market in Ottawa.

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The Life & Times of Diane Schmolka



Insider's Profile: Diane Schmolka

The Lady in the Fedora

Diane Schmolka... just saying the name makes me smile. I first met Diane when she approached me about publishing her poetry in WOTmag. We decided to meet one day for lunch at Diane's favorite Hungarian restaurant. It soon became mine.

Diane is a unique individual in every sense of the word. When you first meet her, she seems reserved and somewhat shy. I guess I bring out the repressed goofiness in her, because we are soon laughing, drinking wine and kissing the owner - a smallish dapper man - very sweet, but not known, apparently for his flamboyant personality - who suddenly goes pink with delight and looks like he doesn't want us to leave! In fact, he offers us free dessert and coffee if we will stay a little longer. By now the place is cleared of anyone but us. We stay, we schmooze, we eat, we schmooze!

And so I start to learn more about Diane and her poetry writing, her officiant status which allows her to marry people (pp 66-67), among other activities, her musicality - after a few short meetings with her, she can be known to burst into impromptu opera arias, in a crowded restaurant. She stops the show! She also teaches music: voice and piano, and is just an all-around, real character. Sort of a blend of Auntie Mame, mixed slightly with tinges of Carol Channing and the great diva herself, Joan Sutherland.

Diane has the biggest heart. Her generosity of spirit is known amongst her friends and family and she can always be counted on to pick people up for meetings when they can't get there! Even this simple task is fraught with "Diane-ness"!

One day she picks me up to go to a meeting and as we are driving, she suddenly screams in a voice so piercing it makes me, literally, jump out of my seat in terror! I didn't realize that another driver hadn't let her turn when we were stopped in an intersection! Sudden bursts of anger over seemingly small issues have left me wary of driving with her, but she has assured me she hasn't had many accidents and I'm

assuming that's because either the other drivers had taken evasive action on the playing field, or Diane is one very lucky lady!

Her knowledge about the world of art and art history are pretty astounding, really. All you have to do is mention anything from rap to AfroCelt music which you have just found, and she will almost always know exactly what you are talking about. The same is true regarding poetry and noted—and some fairly obscure — poets and writers of other genres. What she doesn't know, she will find out by in-depth research techniques and she is connected with a wide range of esoteric and arcane online publications in a wide variety of subjects ranging from politics, to feminism, to medical research, to name just a few!

The facing page includes some wonderful snapshots of Diana, starting back in her childhood days in Montreal. It was when she first started to wear her father's Fedora, and to this day is noted for her trademark topper!

I often have laugh at the fact that someone else has even worse computer woes than I do! Between me, who doesn't answer the phone directly and only picks up messages every 15 minutes to an hour, so I can get some work done during the day, and Diane's email problems, I often just break down and call her to see what's going on in her life.

One thing is for sure, if you want a true and loyal friend who's always ready to fight side by side with you and stick it to the "system", who is always up for a good time and who'll even be there during the bad times, Diane is that person!

She is a true WOT, worthy of this title, as she always lands on top, no matter what the battle she's had to fight! ■

Cheers to Diane!

Bonni Evans