

“Haida Ida”:

The Musical World of Ida Halpern*

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Ida Halpern, a refugee from Hitler's 1938 annexation of her native Austria, was the first British Columbian seriously to study the music of the province's coastal Indians. Working largely with the Kwakiutl, she recorded hundreds of songs from Billie Assu of Cape Mudge and Mungo Martin of Fort Rupert, analyzed the complexity of their rhythm, melody, and form, then made the songs and her results public in a series of record albums. In addition, she was a vital presence in the musical community of Vancouver and the region for over four decades and, with her husband, chemist George Halpern, left a philanthropic legacy to a dozen institutions, especially Simon Fraser University with which she had been associated since its foundation.

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Ida Halpern was born Ida Ruhdörfer in Vienna on 17 July 1910, the only child of Heinrich (or Hersch Meilech) Ruhdörfer and his wife Sabine Weinstock. Her father, owner of a factory manufacturing silk ties, lived with his family in an apartment at 10 Stephannistrasse in Leopoldstadt, the city's Jewish quarter on the east bank of the Danube. Her parents were within the humanistic tradition of emancipated Austrian Jewry. Religion at home “was not something pointed out,” part of the “lax viewpoint” of a large, cosmopolitan city. Heinrich “emphasized very much the human and humanistic viewpoints, to be a good human being and integrity and ethics.”¹

The family was, she recalled, wealthy, part of the prosperous Vienna bourgeoisie and comparatively unhurt by economic events after 1914. This

* The authors are indebted to Dr. William Saywell, then president of Simon Fraser University, who was responsible for initiating the work that eventuated in this article. The late George Halpern shared his memories, and David Duke, Dr. Ida Halpern's associate in her later work, assisted in invaluable ways.

¹ Ida Halpern, interviewed by Jane Covernton, 9 March 1973. University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division.

was not quite true. Her parents separated early in her life, with Ida moving with Sabine and her bed-ridden mother to a two-room apartment on the Kettenbrückengasse, just west of Vienna's Ring. Money was short, even with contributions from Heinrich and Sabine's two brothers. Ida saw her father at least every other Sunday, and she went often with him to the theatre, but he played only a small role in her life. Sabine, on the other hand, made every possible sacrifice for her daughter, sending her to private school and to piano teachers she could scarcely afford. Totally self-denying, Sabine was happy in caring for her own mother and in her devotion to Ida. At home she spoiled her daughter, not letting her even do housework.² Ida herself remembered her childhood as being "a little spoiled but it didn't hurt me."³

In 1916, as the Empire was losing its war on three fronts, Ida was enrolled in the state Volksschule. After five years there, the eleven-year-old Ida matriculated to the Mädchen-Reform Realgymnasium, a private high school for girls run by two unmarried sisters. She lived the normal life of a student, participating in gymnastics (Ida was one of the best among her classmates), games on the meadow in the Prater, ice-skating in the Stadtpark, and indulging in the usual pranks of the schoolgirl. Indeed, she so liked pranks that she was, as she later admitted, "naughty" in school and her mother often was called to see Madame la Directrice about her mischief. The gymnasium emphasized the classical languages and German literature. She studied Greek, Latin, and French, the German classics, but also modern literature, including Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal. She interested herself chiefly in German literature, philosophy, and history. In mathematics and Latin, she had difficulties.

Ida continued with her piano, which she had begun to learn at six. She had taken instantly to the instrument, loving it "so much that they could not take me away."⁴ Music thus formed a large part of her life while a student. Sabine had exposed her quite early to opera, and she began to frequent concerts as a teenager. Vienna's rich musical milieu was at her doorstep and standing-room student tickets were affordable even on Ida's limited means.

In 1929, age nineteen, she received her *Matura*, the leaving certificate equivalent to the German *Abitur*. Her *Matura* examination had not gone well. She scored well enough, but she went into the examination, an arduous five-day ordeal ending with an oral, already ill with influenza, and she

² Dr. Else Kraus to authors, 16 September 1989.

³ Halpern, Covernton interview.

⁴ *Ibid.*

ended up at its close in the hospital, her sickness turning into dreaded rheumatic fever. She remained hospitalized for almost a year. She left with a permanently weakened heart, a fact that determined, in part, that she would follow her piano only for her own enjoyment. The instrument placed too strenuous a demand upon her heart for her to pursue it seriously. Music, however, would be the subject of her university study: "that was for me a clear thing that I wanted to study music, musicology."⁵ After release from the hospital, Ida Ruhdörfer entered the Musicological Institute of the University of Vienna in the winter semester of 1929-30.

While much in Vienna had changed after 1914, the city's dedication to music had not. Even the Social Democrats, controlling "Red Vienna" in the post-war years, accepted that. Poor as the city and country now were, Beethoven's 1927 centenary was dedicated as a celebration for the world. Vienna, truncated and poor, retained its two opera houses, its three large orchestras, its two choral societies, and its five concert halls with daily offerings. Ida Ruhdörfer had already entered this musical world unreservedly. Music, the passion of her life, was to be the subject of her university study.

The Musicological Institute into which Ida Ruhdörfer entered had been founded in 1898 when Guido Adler came from Prague as Vienna's first professor of music history. It had quickly become the pivot of Austrian musical research. Adler's retirement in 1927 had brought the promotion of Robert Lach, with the Institute since 1911, as his successor. Lach's scholarly breadth was amazing, spreading over the range of western music from the middle ages to the late-romantic masters, but he wrote also on oriental, primitive, and Mezoamerican music, with an emphasis upon origin and evolutionary problems. A decade younger were Robert Haas, Alfred Orel, and Egon Wellesz, all promoted to associate professors in 1929. Haas and Orel were serious and prolific scholars, both working on a variety of topics, including, in common, Bruchner. Wellesz was in many ways the most important member of the faculty. His speciality lay in the Byzantine ecclesiastical chant, where his deciphering of Middle Byzantine notation in 1918 gave him unique authority. What particularly marked him out from his colleagues at the institute, however, was his participation in the mainstream of contemporary music.

Wellesz had become a private student of Arnold Schoenberg's at nineteen, joining Anton Webern and Alban Berg in a life-long appreciation of Schoenberg's accomplishment. His *Schoenberg* of 1921 was the first book

⁵ Ibid.

on the composer, written as a demonstration of the controversial modernist's greatness and as a defence against the fierce attacks of the Vienna establishment. He was a founder of the International Society of Contemporary Music, a friend of Hofmannsthal and Kokoshka, and an active composer in the modern idiom. In contrast to his university colleagues, who did not go beyond Bruckner and Wolf, Wellesz's heart lay with the modern and the contemporary. As a performed composer he stood out from Orel and Haas, as a modernist he was unique at the institute. "You were not just the learned professor," wrote former student Kurt Pahlen, "you were a musician, belonging to the most progressive groups, were played in theaters and concert halls, producing works that were passionately discussed."⁶ Wellesz's singularity did not ensure his popularity among his colleagues, certainly not with Director Lach.

The youthful Ida, in her years at the university, studied under all four professors. Her courses included the psychology of music, philosophy, opera history, history of modern orchestra, general music history, instrumentation, form, and music aesthetics. Some courses, such as medieval transcription and composition, were compulsory. She liked and respected all members of the institute's faculty, but was particularly captivated by the charm, brilliance, and contemporaneity of Wellesz. "He was the most stimulating lecturer" in the institute, she recalled, and he remained, for her, "the incomparable great musical scholar without whose research and discovery it can rightly be said that musicology would not have advanced to the place where it now stands."⁷ Little wonder that she wished to do her dissertation research under Wellesz, but he advised against it. She should not, he warned, make things difficult for herself in the department by becoming a student of the one member of the institute disliked, even resented, by Lach.⁸ So, while she took Wellesz's courses, her dissertation was supervised by Haas. But she never forgot the greatness of Wellesz. "I had the privilege," she wrote in 1957, on the occasion of his being granted the CBE by Queen Elizabeth, "of studying under this distinguished scholar for about seven years."⁹

As important, Wellesz served as a bridge to the modern. He brought the International Society for Contemporary Music's 1932 festival to Vienna. It opened on 16 June with Webern introducing Robert Gerhard's "Six Catalonian Songs," along with works by Karel Hába and Miroslav Ponc.

⁶ Quoted in Egon and Emmy Wellesz, *Egon Wellesz: Leben und Werk* (Franz Engler, ed.; Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1981), 196.

⁷ Vancouver *Province*, 9 March 1957.

⁸ George Halpern, interview with authors, 1989.

⁹ Vancouver *Province*, 9 March 1956.

Ponc's "Overture to an Ancient Tragedy," she wrote over twenty years later, "stood out in my mind as being quite wild. Half the strings were carefully tuned a quarter of a tone away from the rest, and a large quarter-tone harmonium was placed in the middle of the orchestra. A huge percussion section added to this gave the ear neither resting space nor relaxation."¹⁰ Listening to such new works for eight full days, the young music student became familiar with twelve-tone and other new techniques. But, "after the ears have passed through an educational experience" such as Ponc's "the music of Alban Berg, Krenek or Schoenberg sounds wonderfully pleasant and agreeable! One could cling to the familiar tones themselves, even though the progressions were strange; whereas often the quarter-tones sound to uninitiated ears simply as wrong notes."¹¹ In those exciting days, Ida Ruhdörfer "learned to take almost anything in the way of innovation."¹² She remembered a concert in March 1933 at which Herman Scherchen conducted Webern's "Five Pieces." "In his zeal to help the audience to grasp what at first hearing seemed to be most difficult, Scherchen played this one work three times in succession for us." "Leaving the concert hall — we were humming it!"¹³ At the Staatsopera she heard Ernst Krenek's controversial "Jonny Spielt Auf," an opera portraying, in an astutely dissonant idiom, liberally spiced with jazzified polyrhythms, the adventures of a Black jazz band leader.¹⁴ Stravinsky presented a new work featuring mainly percussion and bass viols, while Respighi brought some songs which sounded almost classical. In these wonderful years, she learned an adage she was to pass on again and again: change old ears for new, "expose yourselves unsparingly to the new music."¹⁵

Vienna, while home to much that was new, remained loyal also to its musical heritage. While Webern directed the Workers' Symphony Concerts, the classics remained favourites among all Viennese. The Staatsopera was under the direction of Clemence Krauss, then, from 1934 to 1938, of Bruno Walter. Franz von Weingartner brought great strength to the Volksoper. Kurt Furtwängler, Arturo Toscanini, and Bruno Walter dominated the Philharmonika. To Ida Ruhdörfer, Toscanini remained the greatest. He was, she swore two decades later, "the unrivaled genius conductor of our time." She remembered him as "an angel in wrath" during temperamental outbursts at the Philharmonika's rehearsals, but no one

¹⁰ Ibid., 31 January 1953.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 5 June 1954.

¹³ Ibid., 31 January 1953.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6 June 1953.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19 June 1954, 12; 11 September 1954.

could equal his enormous powers and “his scholarly, passionate search towards the deepest meaning of music, conveyed to the listener in the ultimate conception.”¹⁶ Vienna in the early 1930s still glittered, still remained the home of music from the baroque to the most modern.

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Music was not Ida Ruhdörfer’s whole life. In 1933, during her third year at the University, she met a young chemist who would make a permanent change to it. Georg Halpern had graduated from the university in 1925 with a doctorate in chemistry. He already knew of her through mutual friends, and she had heard of the chemist, in part because of the diuretic tablets he had developed and which she knew of from the hospital. The acquaintance quickly ripened into a deepening relationship.

Georg Halpern had been born in 1902 at Krackow, where his father, Dr. Simon Halpern, served as a staff surgeon in the Imperial army. He moved to Vienna in 1914, attending gymnasium there before entering the university’s science faculty in 1921. Graduating four years later with a thesis on insulin, he did post-graduate work at the pharmacological institute, then began work with the Oesterreichische Heilmittelstelle, the state pharmaceutical firm. It was here that he developed his “Gelamon” remedy for water retention. He lived with his father, now retired, and family, on the Richtergasse in the Neubau district.

As Ida worked toward her own degree, she saw Georg often. They took walks in the Volksgarten and the Wienerwald and trips up to Grinzing’s pine-garlanded wineroms for the late-summer Heuriger wine, drank coffee at the Café Piccola, their favorite locale on the Mariahilferstrasse, and spent evenings at the opera, where music-student Ida had standing-room tickets that could usually be converted into seats once the baton had dropped.

Times were difficult. Although Georg could do his own work at the Heilmittelstelle, he was without a steady position and thus unable to marry. The defeat of the Social Democrats by the Vaterlandsfront and Heimwehr in February 1934 brought the dissolution of the socialist-tinted Heilmittelstelle and made Georg’s prospect even more dismal.¹⁷ “It is time,” commented his parents, “that he gets something steady and finally marries.”¹⁸ Suddenly, through a friend, he secured a position in Milan

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1951; 24 April 1954; 19 January 1957.

¹⁷ Simon Fraser University Archives, Halpern Papers (hereafter SFU), Halpern parents to Fanny Halpern, n.d. [February 1934].

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1935.

where he was to establish and manage a new factory making pharmaceuticals for the Italian market. The long years without prospect seemed past and Georg and Ida married on 19 November 1936 at the Reform synagogue on the Seitenstellegasse in Leopoldstadt.

The newly-weds went immediately to Milan. Ida had only her dissertation, dealing with music of Robert Schumann in contemporary criticism to complete, and most of that could be done at the university library there. At the same time she became an “attentive wife and good housekeeper,” concerning herself with Georg’s worries and the uncertainties of their new situation.¹⁹

The Milan plant did not go well. For reasons now unclear Georg left it within the year. The couple returned to Vienna, where they lived with his parents while they tried to put together a future. Georg once again worked on his own, now in the large Dr. Wunder laboratories, developing new pharmaceutical and cosmetic preparations, but with little real prospects. He was naturally sensitive, and his unemployment exacerbated that trait, making him depressed and prickly. He had earlier enquired about possibilities in Palestine, and now they turned their eyes on Buenos Aires, where Ida had an uncle. They were learning Spanish when Hitler marched his troops into Vienna.²⁰

Vienna’s Jewish community, already suffering under the anti-Semitism of Kurt von Schauschnigg’s Vaterlandsfront and its right-wing supporters, was now exposed to a furious assault from the Nazis. “Concentrating into a few months the persecution and exclusion from the economy and society that had taken five years in Germany,” the new masters in Vienna were ruthless and unrelenting. Austria’s 180,000 Jews were pushed toward emigration — if they could find a place that would take them.²¹ Wellesz managed to flee to Oxford, Bruno Walter to Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw. The Halperns, already intending to leave, sought a refuge while Ida awaited her doctoral examination. Argentina, Chile, and Australia were their hopes, but securing entry via visa anywhere was very difficult. In the end, after Ida had successfully defended her dissertation, they chose Shanghai, where Georg’s elder sister, Dr. Fanny G. Halpern, taught neurology and psychiatry at the National Medical College.²² Shanghai had the fur-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1936.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1938; n.d. [February 1934], 20 July 1937, 30 December 1937, 28 February 1938.

²¹ Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 168.

²² See Charles Hart Westbrook, “Psychiatry and Mental Health in Shanghai,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 110 (October 1953), 301-06.

ther, inestimable, advantage of being practically the only place in the world which required no visa.²³ They left, via Yugoslavia, at the end of September, sailing from Trieste early in October on the two-month voyage to the international city. As they had no money themselves, HICEM, the amalgamated Jewish refugee organization, paid their fare.

The Halperns, just two among the 17,000 Jewish refugees, mostly from Austria, who came to the city by the end of 1939, were luckier than most. Fanny Halpern was established there, and they could stay as long as necessary at her Avenue Roi Albert apartment in the French concession. Georg sought a position as an industrial chemist. He had already established contact with a Hong Kong firm, but the prospect there was uncertain because of the Japanese occupation of Canton. A pharmaceutical or cosmetic, perhaps both, factory in Shanghai was a possibility, so too was something similar in British India. Ida was able to secure a temporary lectureship in music at the Shanghai university. Their uncertainty, in business and with the state of Asian politics, drove them to search for another refuge. Aside from its dreadful climate, Shanghai was suffering from the Sino-Japanese war, with the city, except the International Settlement, already occupied. Australia, where Ida had a relative, was their first choice, but they could secure no visa. They decided that their best hope lay in Canada, partly because of Fanny's close friendship with Robert D. Murray, a Canadian who managed the Shanghai branch of the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, and his family. The Murrays were about to leave for London via Canada and Fanny would be travelling with them. Murray would try to pave the way for the Halperns' immigration to the Dominion. He promised to put up £1,000, without interest, to enable Georg to establish a Canadian cosmetics firm (and, hopefully, help secure their admission through immigration). Murray, in Vancouver in June 1939, spoke with Hugh Dalton of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and then, accompanied by Dalton, with Frederick W. Taylor — the famous "Cyclone" Taylor — who was district superintendent of immigration. Taylor would make no promises, but Murray advised Halpern to take the risk of coming to Vancouver on tourist visas.²⁴ They booked almost the next boat, departing 24 July on the *Empress of Asia*. Three weeks before leaving they were baptised into the Catholic faith at the Sacred Heart Church and the next day married again in a Catholic

²³ See David Kranzler, "The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945," *Wiener Library Bulletin* 26 (1972-73), 28-37.

²⁴ SFU, R. D. Murray to Georg Halpern, 3 June 1939.

service.²⁵ (Fanny, a practising Catholic, had converted years before while still in Vienna.)²⁶

On their Vancouver arrival, 7 August, the Halperns were immediately detained by immigration and then, after Taylor was reminded of his conversation with Murray and Dalton, released on \$500 bond. They appeared before a board of inquiry on the 9th. It did not go well. Board members were sympathetic, but suspicious about Halpern's claim to the £1,000 from Murray. The result was, in any case, inevitable. The Halperns, not being farmers, did not meet Canadian immigration requirements. They were not, however, without hope. Murray was still in Montreal, scheduled to sail for Britain only on the 19th. George (a spelling now more appropriate) asked him to go to Ottawa and speak personally to F. C. Blair, director of the immigration branch. Murray visited the department on the 16th. Blair was unavailable, but did meet with the deputy, A. L. Joliffe, to whom he gave full assurance about the money at Halpern's disposal. That, apparently, was enough. On 2 September Ottawa sustained the Halperns' appeal.²⁷ By then Canada was at war with Germany and the Halperns were cut off from family and friends who remained in Nazi Vienna.

The Halperns decided to make Vancouver their home. With its mild climate and beautiful scenery, it seemed better than Toronto or Montreal. That was Ida's sentiment. From the moment Ida arrived in the city, she "was lost." "Here we are in the most splendid land," she wrote Fanny, "and thank God daily for it." Neither she nor George could bear the thought of leaving the city or British Columbia, and so they made it their permanent home.²⁸

For the first few weeks in Vancouver they lived in housekeeping rooms in the West End, before renting a house in Kitsilano at 2336 West 12th. George immediately explored business opportunities in pharmaceutical and cosmetics, but, because of the difficulties of location, war, and capital, he got only so far as producing chocolate-coated fish-oil tablets before abandoning independent business to take a research position with the Canadian Fishing Company early in 1941. With equal enterprise. Ida

²⁵ SFU, baptismal and marriage certificates, 4 and 5 July 1939.

²⁶ Her mother, who came to Shanghai in 1941, was baptised in November 1943. SFU.

²⁷ SFU, correspondence, drafts, and certificates. Order in Council PC 3246, 21 October 1939. The Halperns were exceptionally fortunate. Blair, running almost a personal operation, was determined to keep out Jewish refugees. Only a few were admitted to Canada. The sad tale is recounted in Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982).

²⁸ SFU, Ida to Fanny Halpern, 12 June [1941]; Dick Diespecker, in *BC Magazine, Vancouver Province*, 27 December 1982, 8.

began to resurrect her career in music. Scarcely off the boat, she had played the piano for the Vancouver Jewish Congress and its refugee committee.²⁹ She purchased her own piano in February 1940 with \$400 of their own money and \$200 borrowed. That fall she sent out printed announcements of the opening of her music studio on West 12th with lessons in piano, theory, music history, and “preparation for all examinations.” She sought out every opportunity — the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (where her as-yet inadequate command of English counted against her), at the University of British Columbia for summer school (a position she managed to secure only in 1942), at the Vancouver *News-Herald* as music critic (it had no opening), with the provincial department of education for a special certificate to allow her to teach music in high schools (that required normal school training). Her initial successes were voluntary — with a music appreciation group at the University Women’s Club and parent-teacher music groups at Lord Byng and Queen Mary schools. In January 1941, however, Robert Bonner, then an officer in UBC’s Alma Mater Society, arranged a series of noon-hour music appreciation lectures that attracted a good student audience.³⁰ She received \$8 a session. Work gradually increased: abundant private lessons, evening extension classes at UBC, a normal school evening course, German lessons to service personnel, and UBC summer sessions. Soon she designed a correspondence course on the “Fundamentals of Music,” which enjoyed success throughout the province.³¹

By January 1942 they managed to put \$500 down on a three-bedroom house at 3707 West 37th (monthly payments were \$37) where they remained until 1955, when they moved permanently to Wallace Crescent. By the later date George had left Canadian Fishing to start his own business, located on East Hastings, that did very well by producing a patching compound for plywood.

George’s father had died in February 1939 and his mother escaped to Fanny in Shanghai, where she lived until her death in 1951. Fanny survived war and revolution. She died in Vancouver in 1952, only months after arriving from Shanghai. Ida’s parents were not so fortunate. Brought together again in persecution, they almost made the Trieste to Shanghai

²⁹ SFU, Norman C. Levin to I. Halpern, 28 October 1939.

³⁰ British Columbia Archives and Record Service (hereafter BCARS), Bonner to Halpern, 27 December 1940, Halpern to Bonner, 4 January 1941, Bonner to Halpern, 6 January 1941.

³¹ See Gordon P. Sleman, “A History of the Extension and Adult Education Service of the University of British Columbia, 1915-1955,” unpublished thesis, University of British Columbia, 1963.

voyage in 1939. Ida purchased tickets, but they dithered, then the outbreak of war prevented further voyages from the Mediterranean port. She then sought to get them to China, with the aid of American Jewish agencies, via Siberia, but Japan was no longer granting transit visas. That was the end: in 1942 the Ruhdörfers were deported to Minsk, only the details of their fate unknown.³²

Though Vancouver was not Vienna, it did possess its own music scene. The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, re-established in 1930, was led by Allard de Ridder. A year before the Halperns arrived, the CBC Chamber Orchestra, conducted by pianist John Avison, became a permanent feature of Vancouver's musical life. Ira Dilworth was conducting the Vancouver Bach Choir, and the Women's Musical Club presented renowned recitalists. Supporting the community was a group of musical enthusiasts, mostly natives like Ursula Malkin and Mrs. Mary Isabella Rogers, other immigrants. Ida Halpern entered into the community and soon became a major participant, respected for her knowledge, high standards, and determination. Her most significant single contribution to Vancouver music was her role in establishing the Friends of Chamber Music in 1948.

The initial move came from VSO concertmaster Albert Steinberg and the Community Arts Council. At the organizational meeting in March, Halpern was elected president, Steinberg musical director. The initial concerts were performed entirely by local groups, often led by Steinberg himself. A crisis came in 1949 between local and international interests. Steinberg saw the Friends as an agent to support local talent while others, including Halpern, were anxious to hear groups of international calibre as well. When Halpern heard that her friend Alice Ehlers was to receive an honorary degree at Portland and would be bringing her harpsichord for a recital with Eva Heinitz on the viola da gamba, she persuaded the board to engage them and their instruments for November 1949. Steinberg gave the next two concerts and was scheduled for a third that his group could not give because of inadequate rehearsal time for an incomplete Walton score. Halpern learned that the same piece was being offered by the Hungarian Quartet in their repertory and, though their fee was \$100 more than the budget allowed, the Vienna-born husband of the Friends' new secretary, Dorothy Hauschka, covered the gap. From then on the die was cast. The Friends of Chamber Music would give the best the world could offer, "but we intend to continue our encouragement of city artists

³² BCARS, Halpern correspondence with the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigration Aid Society and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, May, June and August 1941, 14 May 1947.

too."³³ Steinberg, viewing the policy of importations as opposed to the entire concept of its formation, resigned from the society.

Halpern served as president of the chamber music society for its first four years, then remained active as chairman of the program committee until 1958 and as honorary president. By then she was involved in almost every aspect of the Vancouver musical scene. That year she became director of Metropolitan Opera auditions for western Canada, a post she held for some eighteen years. She served as president of the Woman's Musical Club, a director of the Vancouver Symphony, vice-chair of the Community Music School of Greater Vancouver (later the Vancouver Academy of Music), and adjudicated dozens of auditions and competitions. In 1952, she had a short-lived musical information program on the Vancouver CBC, entitled *Musical Mailbox*.³⁴ Later that year, Halpern became music critic for the *Vancouver Province*. Occupied with so many community and teaching commitments and ever concerned with her health, Halpern agreed on the condition that she did not have actually to deliver a weekly typescript to the *Province's* downtown office. At first it was sent by messenger, later she dictated the column over the telephone to the newspaper's editors. Sustained until November 1957, when recession-induced cost-cutting ended the column, Halpern's *Province* writing gives a representative view of her musical conceptions and concerns.

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The articles, especially the earliest ones, were dominantly historical. A topic, usually a local performance, would provide the occasion for an excursion into the background of a music form, an instrument, or a composer. When Irwin Hoffman first appeared with the VSO as its resident conductor, the column served both as an introduction to Hoffman and to the function and history of conducting. A Vancouver performance by the National Ballet brought a short exposition on the history of ballet. When Jan de Rimanczy, the VSO's concertmaster, played Sibelius' Violin Concerto on a Stradivarius, Halpern's readers learned of the violinmaker's art. The Christmas season's Messiah prompted columns on the history of oratorios in general and Handel's in particular.³⁵ Such treatments were topical and informative, erudite without being pedantic. Offered almost

³³ Rachel Giese, *Friends of Chamber Music: A History of Twenty-Five Years, 1948-1973* (mimeo., Vancouver, 1973); *Province*, 19 September 1949.

³⁴ Produced by Mario Prizek, it began as "Musical Question Box" playing from 9:15 to 9:30 on Monday evenings.

³⁵ *Vancouver Province*, 1, 15 November, 13, 20 December 1952.

invariably to explain and incite interest in a coming performance rather than as a comment on a past one, the columns were more akin to programme notes than to traditional "criticism." Such was certainly appropriate to a Vancouver daily.

The columns ranged over much of the world, discussing European summer festivals, the Metropolitan's performance of Stravinsky's new "The Rake's Progress" (broadcast on the CBC), the music commissioned for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, the San Francisco opera, and a plea for NBC to keep together its magnificent orchestra after Toscanini's retirement. The emphasis remained, however, always topical and with an eye to what would, even when distant, interest Vancouver readers. Halpern knew that, musically, Vancouverites refused, almost as much as she, to be provincial. The problem, as Halpern and others realized, was sometimes the opposite. Vancouver wanted international music and could often be a little negligent of its own.

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra stood as the city's musical flagship, its service to the community "immeasurable." Halpern was one of Hoffman's most sustained admirers during his twelve years as conductor. The orchestra, in its 1953 concert season, "gave increasing pleasure," she wrote, with a steady improvement shown in the orchestral body." Comparing it to the Portland and Seattle symphonies, all heard within a single week, she praised Seattle's fine string section and Portland's emphasis on winds, but, "on the whole, ours is a better-sounding orchestra." And Vancouver was alone, in 1954, in having a resident conductor. "There is no doubt that an orchestra develops and grows more strongly under the leadership of one man, who can obtain a higher level of sensitivity and technical polish than can a variety of conductors." She had, however, a constructive note of criticism. To draw audiences and to satisfy them, importing famous names as soloists was not enough. "It would be more valuable if we were to spend some of the money now going to renowned stars on more and better-trained musicians." Quality alone, she felt, attracted music lovers, with or without fine soloists. Recorded music had made audiences increasingly critical since discs allowed "you to invite any major orchestra and any famous conductor into your home at any time." The thrill of a live performance of high-calibre music would leave no question in the listeners' minds about whether to buy a recording or a concert ticket.³⁶ This comment is revealing, for no one enjoyed more the presence of great solo talent, whether at the podium or with an instru-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 January, 9 October, 2, 30 January 1954, 31 December 1955.

ment, than did Halpern. She welcomed with praise the guest artists brought to Vancouver.

The visit of the young Glenn Gould to Vancouver provided an opportunity to discuss the twenty-three year old pianist's talent and eccentricities. Gould had just "skyrocketed to international fame," having sent New York critics raving at the sensitivity and extraordinary maturity of his recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations. Halpern already knew his ability, but was pleasantly surprised at the musical growth he had attained when she watched him interviewed on television shortly before his Vancouver performance. The program closed with his playing some of the Goldberg Variations and, Halpern wrote, "when we closed our eyes we were confronted with a rarely heard grandeur and magnificent conception." Closing the eyes was necessary "because this most unusually gifted artist clings to antics and mannerisms in his playing which might well have a detrimental effect on the audience."³⁷

Gould, as a Canadian, merited special attention from a columnist intent upon making her readers recognize and appreciate local and national talent. She lost few opportunities to highlight composers, players, or vocalists who had native roots: Toronto's Healey Willan for his coronation music, the Toronto Royal Conservatory for its advanced musical training, and Vancouver's John Avison for "his superlative work at the piano." She was heartened by the awakening interest in Canadian music. "Only by giving opportunities for Canadian composers to be heard will one be able to distinguish the good composition from the fair, the strong from the weak, and thus contribute to the gradual evolution and development of Canadian music." She spotlighted the Vancouver-born Jean Coulthard, whose first symphony she described as "a work of considerable calibre and maturity. In short it is true music."³⁸

Halpern's greatest hope and confident expectation were that Canadian music would, like that of Finland, Hungary, and England, develop its own national voice. Everything possible should be done, she wrote, "to prepare the ground for a distinctive idiom in music, which will enable future composers to free themselves in time from outside influences, and produce a genuine native art in music." The process could not be forced; like any true art, it had to come "naturally and instinctively." She was pleased with Coulthard's choral setting with two pianos of Earle Birney's poem "Quebec May" and with John Weinzweig's "To the Lands Over Yonder," which used an Inuit folktale as its vocal theme. In an allied

³⁷ *Vancouver Province*, 30 June 1956.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 October, 20 March 1954, 21 May 1955.

art, she foresaw the Royal Winnipeg Ballet creating “a definitely national school of ballet.” The company’s repertoire already included works “which very convincingly express Canadian culture and personality.” Weinzwieg’s “The Red Ear of Corn” and Robert Fleming’s “Shadow on the Prairie” were examples of work “springing from our soil.”³⁹

This theme of national music was a very strong element in Halpern’s musical thought. She was doubtless influenced by German intellectual traditions stemming from Herder and developing in the nineteenth century into a romantic cult of *volkstum*, but the more immediate influence was purely musical. Mussorsky, Borodin, and Glinka in Russia, Sebelius in Finland, Grieg in Norway, Dvorák and Smetna in Czechoslovakia, and, above all, Bartók in Hungary provided inspiration and example for music that bore “the stamp of basic folk music.”⁴⁰

“The feelings and temperament of different races and nationalities” were clearly defined in folklore and “the character of a people most vividly revealed in their folk music.” Bartók was the great exemplar. His early compositions had been sterile works in the manner of Brahms and Strauss. Then his interest was captured by the folk music of his own Hungary and, with his friend Zoltan Kodaly, he went into the countryside to discover the original tunes and forms of his national heritage. His own melodic world became saturated with the style of the native folk song, and its “elemental rhythmic force became part of his composing style.”⁴¹

Halpern found her North American model in Charles Ives, “the father of indigenous American art music.” Ives, drawing inspiration from the land and people of New England, was as important to American music as Dvorák to Czech. He had “transplanted the roots of American folk-music into art works and kept alive the true spirit of this great musical resource.” Canadian composers such as Coulthard, Weinzwieg, and Fleming were working in the right way. “We feel very strongly that good music must stem from such roots, bearing the genuine stamp of basic folk music”; “true music reflecting the native soil must come subconsciously, instinctively.” Oddly, Halpern seldom raised Native Indian music in this connection. On the occasion of the performance of “Tzinquaw,” “the first Indian opera to be produced by our coast Indians,” she did note that Canadians seemed unaware of the doors which Indian music might open: “We do not seem to realize the wealth and beauty of our Indian songs and their possibility.” The example of the richness of Black music’s influence on

³⁹ Ibid., 20 March 1954, 9 February 1957.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4 April 1956.

⁴¹ Ibid., 4 April 1956.

American composition was impressive enough, but Indian music was not fashionable at the moment, perhaps because there were so few opportunities of hearing it.⁴²

Halpern recognized the significance of Black American music and its influence, especially through jazz, on contemporary classical music. Based as it was "on genuine folk music" and therefore endowed with both spontaneity and strength, she regarded jazz as "America's original contribution to the development of modern music." After World War I, European composers had realized how rejuvenating it was to introduce a primitive impulse into the tired, sophisticated world of classical music. "Stravinsky took his sources from pagan Russian, Bártok uncovered new sources of Hungarian folksong, Debussy listened to the exotic sounds of a Javanese Gamelong orchestra." Jazz provided yet another vital impulse, with Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, and many others accepting it as a new inspiration. Stravinsky's "Ragtime" was first performed in 1919 and Darius Milhaud, who called jazz a beneficent clap of thunder to clear the art sky, wrote "Shimmy for Jazz Band" and three "Rag Caprices." George Gershwin, especially in "Rhapsody in Blue" but also in his Piano Concerto in F, had provided triumphant legitimacy for jazz as an element in art music.⁴³

Halpern's appreciation of jazz and folk music was linked to her enthusiasm for contemporary music. She had acquired that, as we know, during her Vienna youth. She used her *Province* column not only to recall her own experience but to urge her readers to recapitulate it by similarly changing "old musical ears for new ones." She often commented on new works — by Stravinsky, Copland, Britten, Vaughan Williams, Poulenc, Menotti, Ernest Block, Godfrey Ridout, Alan Hovhaness, and Canadians such as Coulthard and Weinzweig. While broad in her appreciation of twentieth century music, she was most taken by Stravinsky, the Second Vienna School, and by Debussy and others of the Paris Six. Much of this work, the exciting developments of her own youth, was now accepted and enjoyed. Stravinsky's music, "once considered so 'difficult' and ultra-modern," was fully established. Schoenberg was almost passé among younger composers, Webern now being their starting point. She was aware of Pierre Schaeffer's concrete music, which abolished "all traditional concepts of music," and electronic music, with its intention of creating entirely new sound structures. She did not explore these deeply or urge them upon her audience; in a sense, they were beyond her appreciation, but she did

⁴² Ibid., 10 July 1954, 4 April 1956, 21 March 1953.

⁴³ Ibid., 3 April 1954, 16, 23 April 1955.

not in the least scorn them. "For art is such an ever changing cultural progression that there is no standing still, and those of us who begin to appreciate the music of Alban Berg, Bártok and Schoenberg find that already different schools are under way." The twentieth century was very complex; "we must expect innovations."⁴⁴

* * *

Folk music was part of a continuum between primitive music and art music (a term she preferred to "classical"). Halpern's enduring significance rests upon her collecting and analyzing of the "primitive" music of the Northwest Coast Indians, particularly the Kwakiutl (or Kwagiulth or Kwakwaka'wakw) and the Nootka (or Nuu-chah-nulth). She eventually recorded over 300 songs from the rich cultures of the Kwakiutl, Nootka, Haida, and Coast Salish. Between 1967 and 1987 she published four double albums of their songs.

Halpern's commitment to Native Indian music, she claimed, was already in her mind when she left Shanghai in 1939. When asked by a Canadian immigration official about what she intended to do in Canada, she replied that she meant to preserve and study Indian music. The officer "just laughed and said, well, you will have to do something better than that."⁴⁵ This was probably a retrospective exaggeration. She did hope to study folk music, but in her understandable ignorance of the country, even of where they might settle, she was probably unaware of the potential of Native music. The only contemporary indication is George's letter to T. H. Crerar, the minister responsible for immigration, in which he wrote that Ida "will be activ [*sic*] in the research service of musical culture, she wishes to collect and to write down Canadian folk-music, looking for the sources directly at Canadian farmers."⁴⁶

Such an interest was not unnatural for a musicological graduate from Vienna. *Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* — comparative musicology — had been an important area of Robert Lach's institute. His 1924 handbook on the methods and problems of comparative music had contributed to the study of folk and non-Western music.⁴⁷ As important, he published a

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1952, 15 August 1953, 3 December 1955, 19 June 1954. See also Halpern, "What is Modern Music?" *Pacific Northwest Library Association Quarterly* 11 (1947), 70-75.

⁴⁵ Silver Donald Cameron, "The Collector," *Vancouver Sun*, 6 December 1975; Halpern, Covernton interview.

⁴⁶ SFU, Halpern to Crerar, 15 August 1939.

⁴⁷ *Die vergleichende Musikwissenschaft, ihre Methoden und Probleme*. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Sitzungsberichte 200, Band 5, Abhandlung (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1924). 120 pp.

series of papers on Georgian, Tartar, Bashkir, Circassian, and other Caucasian peoples which he had gathered from Russian prisoners of war, and he promoted the recording archives of the Austrian Academy of Science, which housed collections from India, South America, Africa, New Guinea, Mongolia, and the Caucasus.⁴⁸

Whatever were Halpern's intentions upon her arrival in British Columbia, they went long without realization. Her first recorded venture into ethno- or comparative musicology was not until 1947, almost eight years after her initial expression of intent. "It took six years of intensive contact-making," she later wrote, "before I was successful in convincing the Indians that they should sing for me their old authentic songs."⁴⁹ Songs, as highly prized family prerogatives, were not easily shared with others, even with a keen ethnomusicologist bearing a doctorate from Vienna. The Natives, she wrote, "will not *give* you their songs unless you win their complete confidence during years of personal association, and by means of small tokens of interest and goodwill."⁵⁰ This seems a retrospective justification. Franz Boas, Livingston Farrand, Frances Densmore, Edward Sapir, Marius Barbeau, and Melville Jacobs, among others, had collected songs without long years of personal contact. More likely, she was simply too occupied with her many activities, at UBC extension and in the community, to yet become preoccupied with Native music. Moreover, the Halperns had no car until 1947, when they learned to drive, bought a new Ford, and began earnestly to explore the environs of Vancouver and Vancouver Island.

Halpern made her first collection only in that year, when her appeal to save the old songs met with understanding from Chief Billy Assu, one of the most important older generation Kwakiutl. Assu, the paramount chief of the Lekwiltok Kwakiutl at Cape Mudge, "was the first one to understand the importance of such recordings when I pointed out to him that when he died, the songs would also be dead."⁵¹ Unfortunately it was almost true.

British Columbia's coastal Indians had been in contact with European culture since the late eighteenth century and exposed to intensive forces of acculturation for almost a hundred years. Extremely resilient in many

⁴⁸ Walter Graf, "Die Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft in Österreich seit 1896," *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 15-27.

⁴⁹ Halpern, *Indian Music of the Pacific Northwest Coast: Kwakiutl* (New York: Ethnic Folkways Library, 1981), 12.

⁵⁰ Halpern, "Kwa-Kiutl Music," *International Folk Music Council Journal* 14 (1962), 159.

⁵¹ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 12.

ways, major elements of Native culture had survived, but its bearers were becoming an ever-diminishing number of older people. The erosion of custom seemed ineluctable and apparently irreversible.

Among the most culturally conservative groups on the coast, the Kwakiutl had adapted to the white economy while retaining, even deepening, their Native ceremonial life. By 1947, however, they had suffered from a repression of their ceremonial life at about the same time as changes in the fishing industry brought hardship to its economic basis. The war years brought returned prosperity, but the great days of the traditional potlatch and winter ceremonials were gone. In 1945 a missionary noted that the younger Kwakiutl had lost interest in the dances and songs: "The young men will not memorize the ceremonial chants and harangues as their fathers have."⁵² Visiting Assu's Cape Mudge reserve on Quadra Island, Halpern found that "the younger people were not interested, that "they wanted to be westernized." Assu's own three sons, she wrote, didn't know a single one of their own songs. What, Halpern asked the chief, will happen to your songs if you die. "*They die with me,*" was his fatalistic reply. That, to Halpern, was unacceptable, and she got across to him that she could help him keep the culture alive. "The minute he understood he said, '*You come: I give you hundred songs*'."⁵³

Assu was then in his seventies. A man of humour and sparkling eyes, "great sincerity and unusual pride and poise," he had been part of Kwakiutl culture when it was at its most flourishing. Progressive in many ways, he guided his village into temperance, economic productivity, and education. Halpern, staying as a guest for ten days in the Assu home, was able to record eighty-eight songs which Chief Assu entrusted to her recording discs. She could not stay longer; otherwise "he would have made the hundred." It was, she said, "the most exciting time of my life."⁵⁴ She had made her first ethnomusicological recordings.

Halpern was equally fortunate in her next singer, Mungo Martin, the great Kwakiutl carver from Fort Rupert. In 1950, the University of British Columbia had brought Martin to Vancouver to supervise the restoration and replication of poles for its Totem Park. Martin's participation in the UBC totem pole project continued into 1952 and during much of that

⁵² Anglican Archives of the Diocese of British Columbia, Rev. Christmas to A. D. Greene, [illeg.] April 1945.

⁵³ Cameron, *Weekend Magazine*, 6 December 1975, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Alan Daniels, "Saving the Sacred Songs of the Coast," unidentified clipping, Vancouver City Archives. For Assu, see Harry Assu with Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge: Recollections of a Kwakiutl Indian Chief* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989).



FIGURE 1

Ida Ruhdörfer as a student at the Musicological Institute of the University of Vienna. The photograph is taken from her university *Meldungsbuch*, dated 8 October 1929. (SFU Archives)

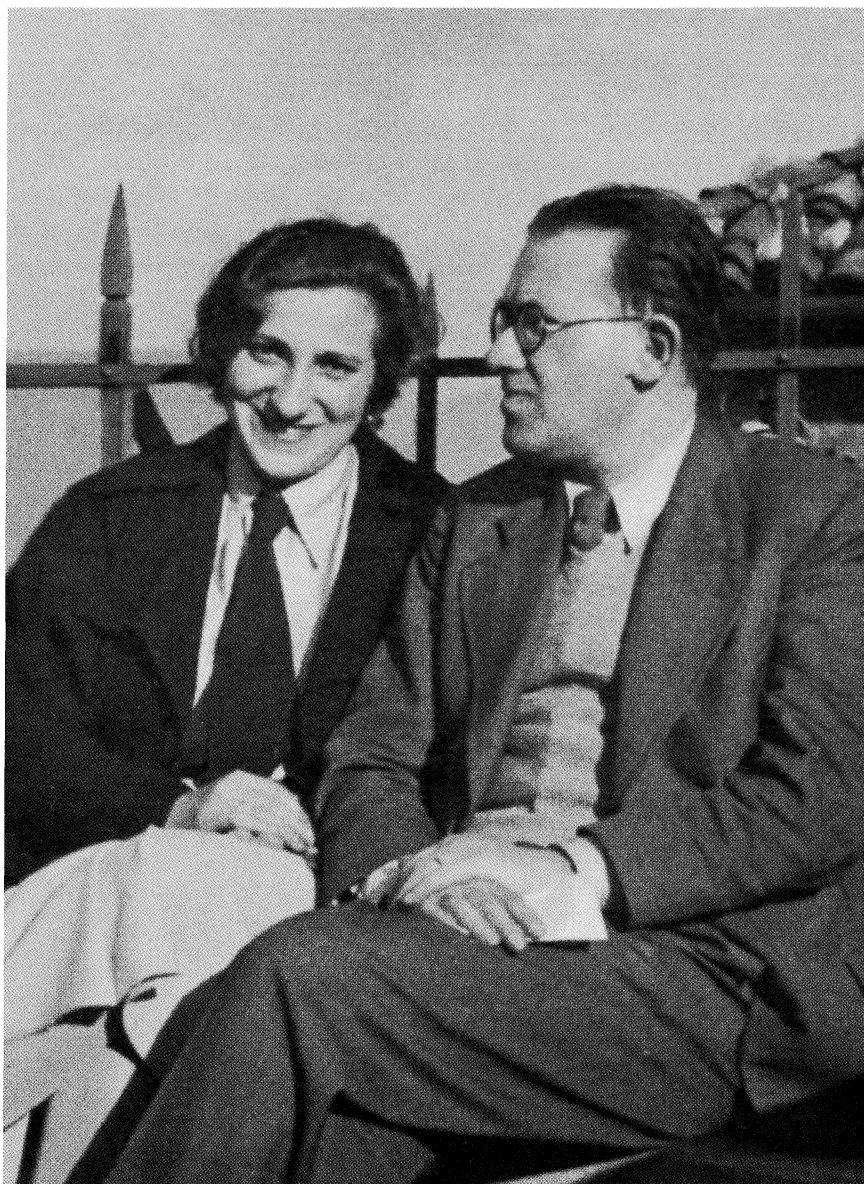


FIGURE 2

Ida and Georg Halpern in Italy, shortly after their marriage 1936-37. (SFU Archives)

time Mungo, with his wife Abayah, came almost weekly to the Halpern home on West 37th, not far from campus.⁵⁵

Born in 1879, Martin had been raised in a Kwakiutl culture that was at its apogee, when traditional ceremonialism, especially the winter dance cycle and the potlatch, flourished. His stepfather, Charlie James (Yakuglas), perhaps the most notable central coast carver of his generation, taught him the craft. When he was a small boy, his song-making uncle had each day put him into a drum four times (four is a special Kwakiutl number), and then he was taught by his uncle to sing. Later he also received instruction from songmaker Tom Omhit.⁵⁶ The Martins were a treasure trove of Kwakiutl tradition, and Halpern was able to record 124 songs on tape. Martin, she recalled, “sung a whole year for me.”⁵⁷

Halpern’s success with Assu and Martin was partly connected with their own perception of the disappearance of Indian culture. She caught the Indians just at the beginning of a rebound, when the old still survived, if sometimes only as memory, and there was a renewed interest in passing it along as a heritage and source of proud identity. “I made them understand,” Halpern recalled, “that they have to be proud of their culture — and that it was a cultural sin that it should disappear.”⁵⁸ Assu and Martin, recognizing the tendency, sought to preserve Kwakiutl culture, not so much as a living continuity among their Kwakiutl people but as a memory culture in anthropological literature, in museums, and on Halpern’s recording discs and tapes. Martin, for instance, was influential in directing to the UBC Museum “many of the Kwakiutl people who were at a point in cultural change where they wished to abandon their places in the potlatch system and had no wish to hold onto the materials of the potlatch which had lost its importance.”⁵⁹ Halpern similarly benefited by securing an equally remarkable collection of songs from a master Kwakiutl singer, his relatives, and his friends.

Halpern’s primary concern was with collecting the songs before they were lost. This salvage imperative was supremely important, an end in itself. Once the songs were collected, however, she could begin to share

⁵⁵ Dorothy Livesay was probably responsible for steering Halpern to Martin. BCARS, Dorothy Macnair to Halpern, 18 June, 17 July 1951. There is a large literature on Martin, but see, especially, Phil Nuytten, *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin* (Vancouver: Panorama Publications, 1982).

⁵⁶ Halpern, “Kwak-Kiutl Music,” 13.

⁵⁷ Cameron, *Weekend Magazine*, 6 December 1975, 2.

⁵⁸ Daniels, “Saving the Sacred Songs of the Coast.”

⁵⁹ Audrey Hawthorn, *Kwakiutl Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), viii.

the legacy with others. Before doing those, however, she had to proceed from mere collecting to musicological analysis of the songs. By 1952 she was in possession of a corpus of material, the over two hundred songs from Assu, Martin, and others, substantial enough to sustain ethnomusicological research. Preoccupation with lecturing, criticism, and the heavy demands of the Vancouver musical community slowed the work. Only in 1962 did she publish the initial results. Her first contribution toward the diffusion was three songs in the "Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music," a massive, fourteen-volume collection edited by Alan Lomax of the Library on Congress's music division. This modest contribution was but a first instalment. She would go on to produce, beginning in 1967, four double albums of her own. These would not, however, be mere discs of Native songs, but scholarly contributions to ethnomusicology.

At the time, some preliminary characteristics of Northwest Coast music had been summarized by Bruno Nettl. Coastal Indians possessed one of the most complex styles in North America, characterized by rhythmic complexity, by undulating and pendulum types of melodic movement with descent dominating over ascent, by recitative-like singing with uncertain pitches and monotonic sections, by a complex relationship between melodic and percussive rhythms, by slow tempo, by a drone type of polyphony, and by the presence of the Rise, that is, a number of sections each higher than the last in pitch.⁶⁰

Halpern largely ignored this previous work, indeed most published ethnography of the coastal peoples. She preferred to work from a clean slate, without preconceptions. "I have not wanted to use any previously published explanations relating to the music and background of the Native Indians," she wrote.⁶¹ Instead, she boldly limited herself and her research largely to the information received from the Indians themselves, not only their songs, but notes made from their conversation. Expressly avoiding citations from secondary authorities, "I present the data as I got it from the chiefs."⁶² Such a research strategy had inherent dangers: Northwest Coast culture was both incredibly complex and among the most intensely studied and interpreted of all North American Native areas. This was especially true of the Kwakiutl. Much of the information might be ques-

⁶⁰ Nettl, *North American Indian Musical Styles* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1954), 8-14, 36.

⁶¹ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 2.

⁶² Halpern, "Nootka Music: Reply to Goodman," *Ethnomusicology* 25 (May 1980), 296; Halpern, "Indians: Pacific Northwest Coast," *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, Helmut Kallman, Gilles Potvin, Kenneth Winters, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 449.



FIGURE 3

Ida and Georg Halpern, with Arthur and Risa Laurié, Viennese emigrés who were also a part of the Vancouver musical scene. J. L. Shadbolt, *The Laurié Parlor*, 20 December 1942, pencil 15 × 19 in. (The Simon Fraser University Collection).



FIGURE 4

Ida Halpern, with her disc recorder, in her Vancouver home. (SFU Archives)

tioned, but to ignore the work of Edward Curtis, Franz Boas, George Hunt, and Helen Codere among the Kwakiutl or Edward Sapir and Philip Drucker among the Nootka verged on foolish bravado. Fortunately, while misconstructions did creep into her descriptions of the ethnological context, the musicological portions — where indeed there was little previous work that could really help her — were free from errors of ignorance. She could profitably have made use of the significant monograph on Nootka music prepared by Helen H. Roberts and Morris Swadesh on the basis of Sapir's recordings and Alex Thomas's comment.⁶³ Yet even her most severe critic grudgingly (if uncharitably) admitted that "Halpern's musical analysis is generally more reliable than her cultural material," carping only at the relative importance of descending melody and two-part music.⁶⁴

Halpern herself described the process of contextual analysis. She had to comprehend the meaning of the song and become familiar with its text and translation, and she had to understand the Native idea of its ownership and rights and its usage, procedure, and function. With this setting understood, the main task remained: to transcribe and analyze the Native musical idiom. This was the real challenge.

Native music has little in common with European music. As early as 1884, A. J. Ellis had demonstrated that non-European tuning systems and scales were built upon entirely different principles from those employed in the West and that none, including the Western scale, were any more "natural" than any other.⁶⁵ This astonishing relativism had only a limited impact upon comparative musicology, dominated as it long was by the search for evolutionary stages among "primitive" people that would shed light on music's culminating phase in western orchestral halls. Halpern realized the difference. "To do justice to Indian music," she wrote, "we must revise our western listening habits and our western sense of harmony, tonality and rhythm."⁶⁶ In all her ethnomusicological work she carried, as a fundamental principle, "the highest respect" for the unique and complex

⁶³ Helen H. Roberts and Morris Swadesh, "Songs of the Nootka Indians of Western Vancouver Island, Based on Phonographic Records, Linguistic and Other Field Notes Made by Edward Sapir," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* n.s. 45, pt. 3 (1955), 199-327.

⁶⁴ Linda J. Goodman, review of "Nootka Music," *Ethnomusicology* 25 (January 1981), 165.

⁶⁵ Ellis, "Tonometrical Observations on Some Existing Non-Harmonic Scales," *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 20 November 1884, 368-85; "On the Musical Scales of Various Nations," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 33 (1885), 485-527, cited in Mantle Hood, "Music, the Unknown," in Hood, et al. *Musicology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), 227.

⁶⁶ Halpern, *Indian Music of the Pacific Northwest Coast: Nootka* (New York: Ethnic Folkways Library, 1974), 4.

musical culture of the Northwest Coast people and an unceasing search "to find the best way of understanding this important music."⁶⁷

Her search for meaning, for the basic principles and rules, for coherence, began slowly. She had to preserve an open mind about the music, and yet she was unavoidably constrained by western notation and conceptualization. As she worked her way through the music, things gradually became clearer. By 1981, particularly with the aid of electronic technology, she felt at last that she had "identified all the characteristics of their Native concepts" and had succeeded in "integrating them into a format that is both logical and understandable to our Western musical traditions."⁶⁸

Her earliest analysis emphasized an understanding of rhythm. Accompaniment was provided by handclapping, drum-beating, beating with sticks or on planks, and by rattles. Kwakiutl music possessed a number of definite rhythmic patterns, but, perplexingly, the rhythm of the melody and the accompaniment were independent of each other. The beat bore no apparent relationship to the singer's vocalization; indeed, the voice never began at the same time as the percussion. "Of all the various enigmas encountered in the study of West Coast Indian music," she wrote, "none has caused more problem than the complex issue of RHYTHM."⁶⁹ By 1961 she felt on the verge of solving the problem. In her paper to the International Folk Music Conference at Laval in August of that year, she suggested that melody and beat represented, at least in Kwakiutl music, "two separate musical events which flow independently in parallel courses." The two required separate analysis before delving into the interrelationship. To analyze the beat itself, she ingeniously fell back on medieval modal notation which used, like poetic scanation, stressed and unstressed beats.⁷⁰ The method worked. The beat fell into prescribed metric patterns, similar to iambus, dactyl, trochee, and anapest. They could best be noted and understood through this simple modal notation, "the most effective way currently at our disposal of reflecting the true nature of the beat." To her great pleasure, later electronic analysis confirmed the correctness of her theory.⁷¹

Apparently simple, yet profoundly complex, beat was "the central musical aspect" of Kwakiutl songs and of "primary importance" to an

⁶⁷ Daniels, "Saving the Sacred Songs of the Coast."

⁶⁸ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁰ "Kwak-Kiutl Music," 159; *Indian Music*, 7.

⁷¹ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 6.

understanding of them.⁷² The independence of percussive beat from the melodic voice remained clear. During his year of work with Halpern, Mungo Martin had emphasized that. An absolute rule forbade the beginning of the singing at the same time as the beginning of the accompanying beat. The singer must begin before or after, never simultaneously: to do so would be considered uneducated, uninformed, and ill-mannered. At first she thought it impossible to establish a relationship between the two.⁷³ Later she found that the beat pattern, while independent of melody, might reinforce the melodic definition, with a section of song completed within, say, five iambic beat patterns. The interrelationship could be very complex, providing for an interplay between independent beat and melody.⁷⁴ The same rules were less true for Nootka songs, where the relationship between the rhythm of the beats and melody appears closer.⁷⁵

Melodic patterns were equally complicated, and Halpern moved in various analytic directions, again having to free herself from the constraints of European conceptualization to get at the fundamentals of coastal music. Her earliest results showed an upward pitch movement and a melodic pattern always built around a predominant note, though with microtonal shadings. The third, major or minor, played a conspicuous role with leaps of a full octave range.⁷⁶ "Tonality seems to exist, but in no direct relation to any specific existing system." Western scales simply did not work.⁷⁷ Further research led to refinements, such as the 1981 classification of Kwakiutl hamatsa songs into three basic melodic types of descending pitch, undulating or pendulum pitch, and an "angular" pitch (varying but with neither up nor down contour).⁷⁸ By that time she had ceased using the terminology of major, minor, or perfect in describing intervals, finding these western scale measurements inappropriate.⁷⁹ Finally, as a further refinement of microtones, in the album of Haida songs, she discussed "foundation tones," not scales.

In one important area, that of electronic analysis, Halpern found collaborators in Vienna and Seattle. The recently developed Sonogram could measure microtonality and record pitch and timbre. "The Sonograph

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Halpern, *Indian Music*, 7.

⁷⁴ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 6-7.

⁷⁵ Halpern, *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 450.

⁷⁶ Halpern, "Kwak-kiutl Music," 159-60.

⁷⁷ Halpern, *Indian Music: Nootka*, 3.

⁷⁸ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

analyzes a sound event, a complex complete tone, into its particles, and graphically design patterns of the tonal sound.” It then produced a print which could be used to discover the nature, composition, and performance technique, of timbre. In Vienna Professors Walter Graf and Franz Födermayr were doing Sonographic and spectral analysis and, at the University of Washington, Dr. Fred Lieberman was following up their work. Using the Seattle facilities, Halpern was able to analyze a number of Kwakiutl songs. Pitch (frequency) was measured to confirm and expand conclusions on rise, vibrato, and microtonal intervals. Sonographic analysis revealed important nuances of voice production and precise placing of the rhythmic beats to vocalization.⁸⁰

Halpern’s work necessarily concentrated on the musical aspects of the songs. She remained a musicologist, noting the incipient tendency to polyphony among the Nootka, and the specific performance properties — glissandi, tremolos, ornamentation, and such characteristics — of individual songs, and made no pretensions to linguistic or folklore expertise in the actual vocalization. She relied on Native informants, such as Kwakwala-speaker Mabel Stanley, for translations and explanations. She used Franz Boas’ method, dating back to the nineteenth century, of orthographic spelling, not the newer, specialized systems developed to cope with the difficult sounds of non-European languages.

Within the vocalization of the songs, however, Halpern pursued one topic with special intent and interest. In 1976 she published an important paper which contradicted assumptions about the well-known phenomenon of “nonsense” or “meaningless” syllables, sometimes called “burden syllables,” in Indian songs.⁸¹ Halpern discerned three meaningful senses in which such syllables occurred in Nootka and Kwakiutl music. Some had specific meaning: the *na na* meaning grizzly bear or the Nootkan *ho* representing an expression of supplication similar to “My Lord” or *anana*, an expression of pain. Others played with sounds similar to specific nouns, such as the Kwakiutl *ha ma* and *ha ma mai*, which simulated the related words for food and hamatsa. A third category of syllables were onomatopoeic: the Kwakiutl *gka gka* imitating the raven’s cry and the *ji hi* the howl of a wolf. These were neither meaningless nor nonsensical. Other syllables were used as choreographic guides: the *hum* as the place where the beak of the Hamatsa mask was being opened and closed.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7-11.

⁸¹ Halpern, “On the Interpretation of ‘Meaningless-Nonsensical Syllables’ in the Music of the Pacific Northwest Indians,” *Ethnomusicology* 20 (May 1976), 253-71.

⁸² Ibid., 254.

Halpern's interest in burden syllables fit into an important area of ethnomusicology. Her explanation had been to an extent anticipated by others. Even in the nineteenth century, Alice Fletcher had discussed seemingly meaningless syllables in Omaha music. Much later, Frances Densmore and Milton Swadesh had found meaning in Chippewyan, Minomineean, and Nootka "nonsense" elements.⁸³ Halpern's conclusions, while not so unprecedented as she thought, did make a contribution to the syllable question. She realized, too, that there remained "a great potential for research," and her most pointed conclusion was terminological: they should no longer be called "meaningless, nonsensical," but, quite simply, "enigmatic."⁸⁴

* * *

By 1981, Halpern had succeeded in isolating twenty-nine style characteristics of Nootka and Kwakiutl music. In her first, 1967, album she had been able to list twenty-three, bringing the list to twenty-five in 1974, and added another four characteristics in her Kwakiutl album. By that time, however, her interest had already shifted to other aspects of musical usage. She became increasingly interested in the totality of compositional form.

This shift of emphasis came in part from additional songs which she had been able to collect between 1977 and 1980 from Tom Willie, a Kwakiutl from Blunden Harbour and Hope Island and one of the few remaining song-making Kwakiutl chiefs. The enriched corpus enabled her to embark on an analysis and classification of Kwakiutl songs types, specifically hamatsa and potlatch genres.

⁸³ Fletcher, with Francis La Fleshe and John C. Fillmore, "A Study of Omaha Indian Music," in Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, *Papers* 1 (1893), 237-87, in Joan T. Mark, *Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 225-26; Densmore, "The Use of Meaningless Syllables in Indian Songs," *American Anthropologist* 54 (January-March 1943), 161. Swadesh's linguistic analysis of Sapir's Nootka songs cited several examples of "nonsense" elements. Sometimes burden syllables were inserted into words, usually with the same vowel as that already in the word, and there were sometimes nonsense words modelled after actual words in the song. These explanations have some similarity to Halpern's examples, but he found other Nootka uses that do not fit as well. The syllables, he wrote, generally form a poetic pattern involving rhythmic repetition and seemed obviously of value in adopting the words to the rhythm of the music. Some songs, however, consisted of burden alone. And syllables might be used to replace words, if a singer did not know them or if he wished to keep them secret. Swadesh in Roberts and Swadesh, *Songs of the Nootka Indians*, 322-23. Somewhat similarly, linguist Dell Hymes, describing the Kwakiutl syllables as a refrain element of fundamental importance, in 1965 had found their explanation in a structural relationship to the text. Hymes, "Some North Pacific Coast Poems: A Problem of Anthropological Philology," in Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 42, 47-48.

⁸⁴ Halpern, *Ethnomusicology*, 270.

Willie's material, when combined with the previously collected songs, enabled her to do an analysis of hamatsa songs as "same-genre" songs sung by several generations of different singers. This led her to explore the "complex constructional principles underlying the compositional process." Thus form became a major concern. Determined by variety, unity, and lawful complexity, it served as the basis of musical craftsmanship, authority, and self-discipline. The songs, she concluded, "show a full awareness and conscientious respect for compositional principles and techniques refined over generations and restated, with creativity and regularity, by generations of songmakers."⁸⁵

This conclusion was, in a sense, the culmination of Halpern's striving since 1947. She had always regarded music as "an excellent barometer of the level of sophistication" of a culture and always respected the uniqueness, importance, and complexity of Northwest Coast music.⁸⁶ Now, she felt, she had demonstrated, sometimes with the scientific precision of the electronic Sonogram, the sophisticated and orderly complexity of Northwest Coast music. It was an homage to the Native mind and, at the same time, the ultimate justification of her own dedication to Native music.

Her aim in collecting and analyzing Indian music was, as she wrote early in her studies, "to preserve the culture of a vanishing race, dignified and freedom-loving, and to facilitate the comparison of their civilization to ours." The research, she wrote, was filled with rewards: "for me it is often full of wonder at the artistic merits of our Indian music." Average listeners might find it baffling at first, but it would not be long before their ears became accustomed to the unfamiliar sounds, and then they would be captured by the peculiar beauty of the music.⁸⁷ She had now made the music widely available through her Folkway albums and had heard the songs used by filmmakers and even composers. As early as 1956, Lister Sinclair's *The World of the Wonderful Dark*, performed at the Vancouver International Festival of the Arts, used Halpern's Native music recordings. Documentary filmmakers, such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Film Board, made use of her recorded songs, and, when the Kwakiutl U'mista Cultural Society of Alert Bay produced its *Potlatch!: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, directed by Dennis Wheeler in 1975, its soundtrack was indebted to her recordings of Assu, Martin, and Hunt. Her work even invaded the schools through a

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3; Halpern, *Indian Music: Nootka*, 2.

⁸⁷ *Vancouver Province*, 21 March 1953.

study unit — booklet, slides, and tape — designed for grade 4 students.⁸⁸ As important as reproduction, composer Alex Pavk, Theo Goldberg, and Imant Raminsh began to embody, like Bártok and Sibelius before them, indigenous themes as inspiration and motifs for their compositions. As the poetry of Susan Musgrave, Marilyn Bowring, and Charles Lillard reached across cultural boundaries, music, through the presence of those significant albums, could touch and entwine the other solitude. This diffusion of Northwest Coast music, as much as her demonstration of its sophistication, brought Halpern great satisfaction.

In these triumphs there was a note of personal vindication. Halpern never forgot the immigration officer who reportedly had laughed at her intentions, never forgot the apathy and incomprehension her concerns invoked among British Columbians, never forgot the difficulty she encountered in securing acceptance of the significance of Indian music. “Nobody took me seriously,” she recalled; “people just made fun of me.” She accepted “Haida Ida” as harmless badinage, but was intent on disproving the allegation that Indians “have no music.”⁸⁹ In validating the lawful complexity, the great sophistication of Northwest Coast music, Ida Halpern was validating her own long mission.

The sophistication which Halpern found in Northwest Coast music had a parallel in the work done by others at the same time. Working in her own way, largely alone, she was part of a general movement toward the recognition of Native culture as a major imaginative phenomenon. Roderick Haig-Brown wrote in 1961, the year Halpern was speaking on Kwakiutl music to the International Folk Music Council’s conference, that the Native peoples of British Columbia may well have “produced more creative development for the human spirit than has been produced in the hundred years of white civilization that have followed upon the time of their greatest flowering.”⁹⁰ Already Claude Lévi-Strauss had written that the art of the province’s coastal peoples possessed “an unmistakable stamp and genius.” Their art, he said, “is not unequal to the greatest, and, in the course of the century and a half of its history that is known to us, it has shown evidence of a superior diversity and has demonstrated apparently inexhaustible talents for renewal.”⁹¹ That art was undergoing a regional

⁸⁸ Joan Buchanan and Sandra Davies, *Music in Our Lives: the Pacific Northwest Coast Indians: Music, Instruments, Legends* ([Vancouver]: Western Education Development Group, 1980).

⁸⁹ Daniels, “Saving the Sacred Songs of the Coast.”

⁹⁰ *The Living Land: An Account of the Natural Resources of British Columbia* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1961), 237.

⁹¹ Original, 1945; reprinted in Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* (trans.: Sylvia Modelski; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 3-4, 8.

rediscovery. Its significance already recognized at exhibitions in New York and San Francisco, the Vancouver Art Gallery's 1967 "Arts of the Raven" exhibition marked "the threshold over which Northwest Coast art had come into full recognition as 'fine art' as well as 'primitive art'."⁹² At the same time that Halpern was discovering the principled complexity of Northwest Coast music, Seattle's Bill Holm was rediscovering the rules of form and style which lay behind the painting and, when comparable, the sculpture of the northern Northwest Coast groups.⁹³ Halpern's continued exploration, culminating in the exegeses for the 1981 Kwakiutl album, was paralleled by the speculative brilliance of Wilson Duff's essays into the meaning underneath the function, form, and style of Northwest Coast art and by Lévi-Strauss's wide-ranging and poetic explication of the Salish Swaihwé and Kwakiutl Xwéxwé and Dzonokwa mask complexes.⁹⁴ Halpern's judgements, that Native formulas were "far more sophisticated and complicated" than the similar craftsmanship of the Minnesingers and Mastersingers of the West and that "myriad examples of original expression" were to be found within the apparently rigid framework, had become mainstream.⁹⁵ The thrust of Halpern's scholarship was no longer peripheral or ivory tower; it had become not just respectable but fashionable.

* * *

There remained, however, a residual element in her assumptions which sat incompatibly with her wonder at the sophisticated complexity of Northwest Coast music. Comparative musicology had long been dominated by the search for evolutionary stages among "primitive" people that would shed light on music's culminative phase in western orchestral halls. Carl Stumpf in Berlin and the Austrians Richard Wallaschek and Halpern's teacher Robert Lach were among those concerned with origins and evolution, and they left their mark on her.⁹⁶ One of the problems confronting an ethnomusicologist, she believed, was to ascertain the historical position of a musical phenomenon and to determine where it belonged "in the evolution of world cultures." She wrote of "stages of development," des-

⁹² Wilson Duff, *Images Stone B. C.: Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), 13.

⁹³ Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965).

⁹⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* and his "The Story of Asdiwal," in Edmond Leach, ed., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (London: Tavistock, 1967).

⁹⁵ BCARS, Halpern, "Retrospect, Present and Future," unpublished paper delivered at Indiana University, 1981.

⁹⁶ She cited these as "the latest research" in her correspondence coursebook, *Music Appreciation* (Vancouver: UBC Extension, n.d.), 2-3.

cribing the Northwest Coast Indians as a people still in the vocal stage which accounted for the downward trend of their scales.⁹⁷ Music, she thought, was an excellent indication of the level of sophistication of their culture.⁹⁸ She wrote of rhythm as the most primitive agent in humankind, shared with the whole of animal creation. Next, representing a “higher development,” came melody, the emotional feeling in music. Melody, the coherent organization of tones, could also be found in primitive races and in the development of the child. Harmony, the third and intellectual musical factor, was a higher stage invoking critical judgement.⁹⁹ Even today, she wrote in the 1940s, races little touched by civilization had “a primitive tribal music that must closely resemble the music of the primitive races of early times.”¹⁰⁰

This was an archaic frame of reference, current in European interwar thought but obsolescent even then. Halpern never quite discarded this simplistic evolutionary framework that was more in keeping with nineteenth-century thought than with anthropological assumptions in her own century.¹⁰¹ The analogy between primitives and children was particularly thin, long discarded in anthropological literature. Fortunately, this evolutionary outlook remained theoretical, disappearing from her own research and analysis. The assumption was simply overwhelmed by the respect she acquired from the Indian music she studied. Her aim was never to demonstrate their primitive, child-like quality, but quite the reverse: to prove their complexity and sophistication.

Her framework of developmental stages, on the other hand, may have contributed to her preoccupation with the Kwakiutl and Nootka and to her long neglect of their southern neighbours, the Coast Salish. The highest cultural development on the coast occurred, she wrote in her first album, among the northern tribes, “gradually descending as one moves south to the Coast Salish.”¹⁰² Field access to the more distant Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian was difficult, but not to the Salish who lived on all sides of Vancouver, some even within it at Musqueam, not far from her home. Only late in her career did Halpern begin to be intrigued by Coast Salish culture, though still considering the Haida, Nootka, and Kwakiutl to be

⁹⁷ Halpern, *Indian Music*, 6; *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 2; *Indian Music: Nootka*, 11.

⁹⁸ Halpern, *Indian Music: Kwakiutl*, 2.

⁹⁹ *Vancouver Province*, 2 November 1957, 32; 9 November 1957, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Halpern, *Music Appreciation*, 2-3.

¹⁰¹ Goodman, *Ethnomusicology*, 25 (January 1981), 165.

¹⁰² Halpern, *Indian Music*, 1.

“more highly developed tribes.”¹⁰³ In 1974 she began collecting Coast Salish songs from the Squamish elder, Louis Maranda. By 1980 her research on Squamish and Snohomish, a western Washington Salish group, was well along, though she died before being able to complete it.

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By the time of her death on 7 February 1987, at the age of seventy-six, Halpern could be proud of her achievements, especially in ethnomusicology.¹⁰⁴ The hundreds of songs she had collected, by then deposited at the province’s archives, and those available on the Folkway discs with their scholarly notes, were, she knew, a lasting legacy. She had been honoured with degrees from Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria and with the Order of Canada.

Her scholarship had been done largely on her own, with only occasional grants from the provincial government or others. She had no regular university affiliation. She laboured in other unconventional ways too. Working alone in a field new to her, she never commanded the collegial network that might have deepened the ethnological and linguistic aspects of her work. Naturally combative and unaccustomed to intellectual debate, she took unnecessary offence at an unkind review and demanded space for an intemperate, unwise, and over-long rebuttal while threatening the unfortunate journal editor with a lawsuit.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the insecurity of her independent position contributed to her tendency to exaggeration — of her role in introducing musical study at UBC, of the priority of her Northwest Coast song collecting, of the singularity of her work on nonsense syllables, even of her childhood circumstances. Such traits are forgivable and easily overlooked. Her recordings and her scholarly work on Kwakiutl and Nootka music, on the other hand, are the foundation for much of our knowledge and certainly our appreciation of Northwest Coast music.

¹⁰³ See Halpern, review of Pamela Amoss, *Coast Salish Spirit Dancing: The Survival of an Ancestral Religion in Ethnomusicology* 24 (1980), 287-89.

¹⁰⁴ George Halpern died in November 1989.

¹⁰⁵ BCARS, Halpern correspondence with Timothy Rice, 1981-82, Peter W. Butler to Rice, 9 June 1981. See Goodman, *Ethnomusicology* 25 (January 1981), 162-65; Halpern, “Nootka Music: Reply to Goodman,” *ibid.* 25 (May 1981), 294-97.