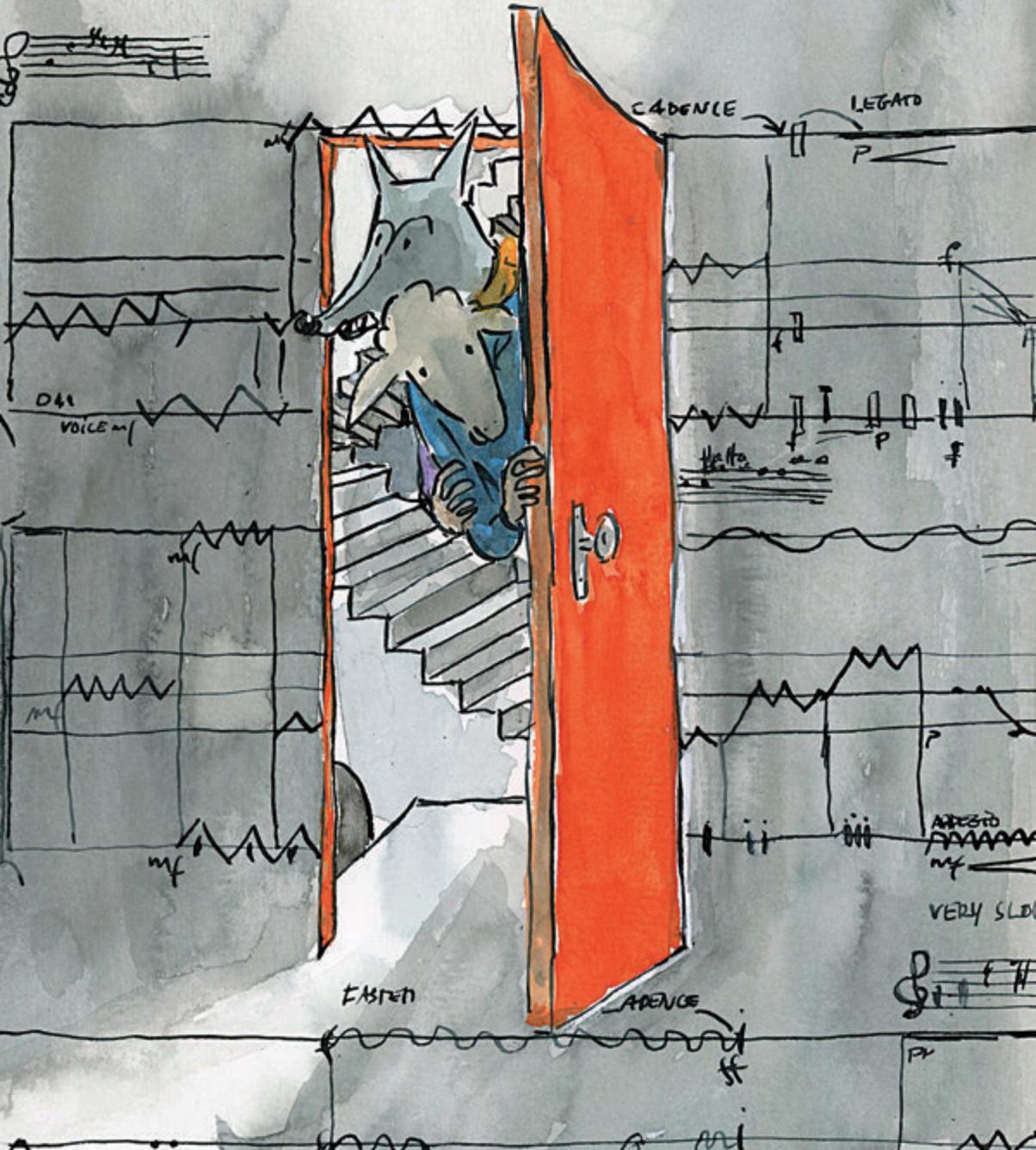


JOHN REA or The composer's secret



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Marie Décary and Élisabeth Eudes-Pascal

Commissioned by the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ) as part of its Homage Series to composer John Rea.

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**I have always considered myself
to be a wolf in sheep's clothing...**

John Rea

Childhood

John Rea was born in Toronto in 1944 into a recently arrived Italian immigrant family where doing music was considered an important thing. While holding down a full-time day job, his father spent his evenings playing the accordion in cabarets. Very early on he encouraged his son by teaching him folk songs, which he then asked him to perform at family gatherings. John was only five years old when his father decided to introduce him to the piano, however the budding musician waited two more years before actually placing his fingers on the instrument: with no piano at home, his debut was made on a paper keyboard.

His first attempts at writing music occurred when he was only seven years old, but his piano teacher, who encouraged him to dedicate himself to learning how to play the instrument did not appreciate them. Paying heed to this advice, Rea set aside any attempts at composition until he was 18 years old. Instead, he spent his childhood and adolescence in an in-depth study of the piano as well as other artistic matters, such as singing, playing the trumpet, drawing, sculpting, and tap-dancing, all with his father's approval.

Leap forward

In 1962, determined to pursue a career in piano performance, John Rea began studying music at Wayne State University in Detroit (USA), where his family had moved. It was here that he met composer Ruth Shaw Wylie, who would introduce her students to musical improvisation, particularly by way of graphic scores. Over the next few years both as pianist and sometimes as percussionist, he participated in a group devoted to directed improvisation—an experience that would lead him back towards composition.

He returned to Toronto to study for his Master's degree in a composition program headed by John Weinzweig, where he discovered the latest works by Xenakis. For John Rea, this came as a real “ear-opener.” In his first major work, a 30-minute ballet entitled *The Days* (1969), he decided to explore the techniques and textures of this master of sound, as well as the styles of Stravinsky and Ives. For the young composer, yearning to synthesize all of his musical knowledge, this was a genuine “leap of faith” ... from which he emerged unscathed: the work soon won an international prize, placing him among the most promising talents of his generation.

Take-off

Rea had barely begun to work on his PhD at Princeton University (USA) when he was asked to take up a post at McGill University in Montreal. This was the start of the composer's teaching career: from 1973 to this day he has held various duties, including professor of composition, music theory, orchestration as well as being Dean of the Faculty of Music (today, the Schulich School of Music).

In tandem with his commitment to education, John Rea has never stopped composing. The Toronto Symphony Orchestra as well as Esprit Orchestra have performed his works. And upon his moving to Montreal, he quickly took part in its rich cultural life. Rea participated in the founding of Les Événements du Neuf—active from 1979 until 1990. He received commissions from the SMCQ and the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, and he became a member of the SMCQ artistic committee as well as joining the editorial committee of the magazine *Circuit, musiques contemporaines*. His works—representing extremely varied genres—have been commissioned by ensembles from all over, and have garnered him prestigious awards.

Today John Rea is considered one of Canada's most renowned composers. He continues to combine teaching and creative activity. His compositions travel across Canada as well as to the United States and Europe, remarkable envoys of his deep interest in the arts and mathematics—in the broadest sense of this term—together with his interest in music from the past and of human complexity. A fascinating universe: abounding with auditory illusions, metamorphoses, and mirror effects.



Do you want to see what goes on in the mind of a composer? Follow me into the imagination of John Rea.

Shush lambkin! I've lived in his thoughts as long as you have. But I KNOW his secret.

