

PARIS – YANGANA – PARIS (1984, 1989)

Diego Luzuriaga (b. 1955)

PARIS – YANGANA – PARIS was originally composed in 1984 for the wonderful Brazilian flutist Beatriz Magalhães Castro and then revised in 1989 for Robert Aitken, for whom Diego also composed a number of other pieces. He was a popular composer in his home town of Yangana, where his music reflected the typical folkloristic elements of Ecuador like the sounds of nature, ghosts in the night, and the repetitive rhythms of the telegraph. In recognition of his talents, his town offered him a grant to study in Europe. Imagine his surprise to discover the direction music had taken in Paris. This piece is a response to that surprise.

Kuroda-bushi (2004) for alto flute

Toshio Hosokawa (b. 1955)

Kuroda-bushi is an ancient samurai drinking song with a long and colourful history, which Toshio Hosokawa arranged for Aitken's 65th birthday when he retired from teaching as Professor für Flöte at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg, Germany, where Hosokawa himself had studied.

Kalaïs (1976)

Porkell Sigurbjörnsson (1938-2013)

Since the days of the Sagas, the Icelanders have been famous for their storytelling. Porkell Sigurbjörnsson, a close friend of Robert Aitken, was no exception. Kalaïs was the son of Borealis, the North Wind, depicted in ancient Nordic imagery as a lutenist that attracted fish and serpents to Iceland. But everyone who knows anything about mythology knows that the best instrument to attract creatures from the sea is not a stringed instrument but the flute.

Plainsong (1977)

Robert Aitken (b. 1939)

In 1977, Pierre Boulez launched the famous research centre IRCAM (Institut de Recherche Contemporaine de l'acoustique/musique) with a one-week festival in the old conservatory on rue Madrid in Paris. The series was titled "le soliste contemporaine" to showcase what it meant to be a soloist at that time. Boulez picked important musicians on a variety of instruments and each performer—Holliger, Globokar, Aitken, and others—had their own performing space and played a great variety of challenging pieces. The audience moved freely from room to room. Boulez encouraged the performers to compose new pieces for the event. *Plainsong* was Aitken's offering, based on Renaissance polyphony and his discovery that it was possible to play two notes on the flute at the same time.

Flute Day is supported by Long & McQuade and the Music Undergraduate Gift Fund

BIOGRAPHY

Over the past seven decades, Canadian flutist, composer, conductor, and educator **Robert Aitken** has forged a remarkable international career. Born in Nova Scotia in 1939, he spent his youth immersed in fishing, golf, and music, joining the Kentville Fire Department Band as its youngest member and only flutist at age eleven. After his family moved to Toronto in 1954, he quickly advanced, entering the University of Toronto's Artist Diploma program. Before completing it—and on the recommendation of his teacher, Toronto Symphony principal flutist Nicholas Fiore—Aitken became principal flute of the Vancouver Symphony at nineteen, the youngest in its history. Alongside orchestral duties, he studied counterpoint and composition with Barbara Pentland at the University of British Columbia.

Realizing he needed deeper education in music, he returned to Toronto to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in musicology and composition with John Weinzweig and was the first student in electronic music with Myron Schaefer. At the same time, he taught flute at the university, freelanced widely, and performed with the CBC Symphony under noted conductors including Karl Böhm, Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and Heitor Villa-Lobos. The orchestra's dissolution in 1964 prompted Aitken to follow R. Murray Schafer's advice to apply for a Canada Council grant to study European flute techniques. In a year with Jean-Pierre Rampal, Severino Gazzelloni, André Jaunet, and Hubert Barwähser, he brought his performance to an even higher level. Returning to Canada with principal flute offers in Montreal and Toronto, he chose the Toronto Symphony, playing under Seiji Ozawa and Karl Ančerl until 1970. He then made a bold step for a flutist at that time, to pursue a solo career.

Recognition soon followed. He won prizes at the Concours international de flûte de Paris (1971) and the Concours international de flûte pour la musique contemporaine (1972). Canadian honours accumulated: the Canada Music Citation (1969), the Wm. Harold Moon Award (1982), the Canadian Music Medal (1982), the Roy Thomson Hall Award (1995), and the Jean A. Chalmers National Music Award (1996). He was appointed to the Order of Canada in 1994 and named Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France) in 1996. In 2009 he received the Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts, Canada's largest arts award.

Aitken's stature as performer, teacher, and advocate for contemporary music earned further recognition. In 2003 he received the National Flute Association's Lifetime Achievement Award. During his 16-year tenure as professor of flute at the famous Staatliche Hochschule für Musik Freiburg, he was awarded the status of Beampter by the German government, rare for non-citizens.

His achievements span: four centuries of repertoire, a substantial catalogue of compositions, major contributions as artistic director, and influence on generations of students and young professionals. His pure tone, expansive colour palette, and refined phrasing led early critics to praise him for his "control of a virtuoso and the sensitivity of a poet." Aitken developed a distinctive interpretive approach rooted in respect for the composer's intentions, seeking original manuscripts, consulting with composers, and delving deeply into the language of music.

Although receiving a solid foundation in flute playing from Nicholas Fiore, Aitken's most transformative mentorship came from the legendary French flutist Marcel Moyse, whom he first encountered at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont. Aitken studied with Moyse over nine years, considering him his most important teacher. At Marlboro he collaborated with such famous musicians as Pablo Casals, Rudolf Serkin, Leon Fleisher, Blanche Honegger-Moyse, and Richard Goode. Moyse predicted a brilliant future for Aitken, recognizing his sensitivity, intelligence, and determination.

For more than sixty years, Aitken maintained a demanding international performing and teaching career, visiting countries across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East and even making 28 trips to Iceland. He curated four major festivals in Slovenia devoted to Xenakis and Brahms, Varèse, Carter, and Takemitsu. He performed as soloist with every major Canadian orchestra, premiering works by Canadian and international composers including Schafer, Beckwith, Tremblay, Koprowski, Reynolds, Cage, Kagel, Globokar, Holliger, Current, Ho, and Aitken himself.

Aitken's collaborations are a significant part of his legacy. He toured internationally with harpist Erica Goodman; performed virtuosic repertoire with guitarists Leona Boyd, Sylvie Proulx, Leo Brouwer, and Reinbert Evers; and founded the Lyric Arts Trio with pianist Marion Ross and soprano Mary Morrison, commissioning and performing new works across Canada, Europe, and Japan. He also performed with the Orford String Quartet and pianists such as Anton Kuerti, Richard Goode, and Glenn Gould. He participated in the 1993 Prades Festival and recorded extensively.

More than 100 composers have dedicated works to him, among them John Cage, George Crumb, Elliott Carter, Toru Takemitsu, Gilles Tremblay, Henry Brant, and R. Murray Schafer. In 1977, Pierre Boulez invited him to perform at IRCAM's opening concerts.

Aitken's 70+ recordings cover repertoire from J.S. Bach to major contemporary composers. His baroque recordings with Greta Kraus were early landmarks of the period-instrument revival. His BIS discs of Romantic and early Classical flute music remain best-sellers, as do his Marquis Classics recordings with Goodman. His Naxos recordings include Stamitz concertos, French chamber works, and New Music Concerts releases featuring Takemitsu, Crumb, Carter, and Lutosławski.

As a composer, Aitken is known for adventurous use of timbre and electroacoustics. Influenced by East Asian musical traditions, he creates works noted for clarity, originality, and technical imagination. His orchestral Berceuse and his suite for flute orchestra exemplify his integration of special flute effects with refined structure. All his works are published by major international houses including Universal Edition, Salabert, Éditions Transatlantiques, Ricordi, and Peer Music.

His contributions as curator and conductor began with Ten Centuries Concerts. He then founded the Music Today series at the Shaw Festival (1970–72). In 1971 he co-founded New Music Concerts with Norma Beecroft, serving as artistic director for 50 years. He brought leading composers to Toronto—Berio, Boulez, Holliger, Lachenmann, John Adams, John Cage, and Kagel, commissioned more than 150 works, and directed over 750 world and Canadian premieres. Composers valued his high performance standards, which helped position Toronto as a global centre for new chamber music.

Aitken has been a dedicated teacher throughout his career. He supported the National Youth Orchestra as soloist for its inaugural concert in 1960 and later as coach, taught at the University of Toronto (1960–75), and at Freiburg, Germany (1988–2004). He preferred intensive summer masterclasses, notably at Shawnigan Summer School of the Arts, the Victoria International Festival, and later at his own "Music at Shawnigan" (1981–90). He was a leading faculty member of flute and chamber music at the Banff Centre and led the composition faculty at the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance (2016–22). Many of his students now hold major orchestral positions.

In 2022, New Music Concerts honoured him with an 80th-birthday tribute, *Music for Bob*, featuring works composed for him by Cage, Crumb, Carter, Reynolds, Beecroft, and others. He had by then published *Robert Aitken: Just a Glimpse – Stories from 1979*, documenting a single year in a career that saw him cross the Atlantic more than 360 times and perform over 60 concerts annually.

Now 86, Aitken remains active, accepting invitations for concerts, masterclasses, and composition commissions. Recently he chaired the Moyse International Flute Competition jury (2023), performed at Flute Festival Freiburg, Germany, and offered standing-ovation concerts and masterclasses in Toronto and Madrid (2025). He is completing a book on his experience with his mentor Marcel Moyse and is preparing a full biography and a book on his own approach to the flute and teaching.

Robert Aitken stands among Canada's most distinguished artists, a musician whose influence spans continents and generations.

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