

William Ramsay Spence (1859-1946)

Composer, Organist, Choirmaster, Cellist, Teacher

The following draws on the work of Patricia Bernard Williamson, B. Mus., as presented in her thesis 'William Ramsay Spence: A Case Study' (338 pages), submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Canadian Studies; Carleton University, Ottawa, March 1, 1993. Appreciation is also extended to Brent McLaren and Joe Nieforth for their assistance.

When William Ramsay Spence died in 1946, at the age of 87, he had spent more than 75 years in the field of church music, first as a boy chorister and later as an organist, choir director and composer.

He made his career almost entirely in Canada, first in Montreal and then in Perth, but selections from his more than 200 compositions were played in churches across Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, the northeastern United States and Britain.

Spence was born at Montreal on February 27, 1859, one of six children¹ born to Jonathon Charles Spence (1829-1890) and Elizabeth Nixon (1836-1916).

His father was a skilled draftsman, watercolourist and lithographer. In the 1850s he taught landscape and ornamental drawing at the Mechanics' Institute of Montreal before founding one of the first stained glass workshops in Canada in 1856.² His paternal grandfather, also named William (1793-1849), was a sculptor who worked in Liverpool. His mother was an accomplished amateur musician.

Spence grew up in Montreal and was educated at St. John the Evangelist³ parochial school and its choir school. He also studied piano with Romain Octave Pelletier (1843-1927) and cello with Theodore Wichtendahl (1821-1894).



William Ramsay Spence (1859-1946)
(Photo courtesy of the Perth Matheson House)

¹ Robert (b.1854), William R. (b.1859), Merideth Annie (b.1862), Henry John (b.1863), Clara (b.1865), Blanche (b.1871).

² Robert McCauland Ltd. was established in Toronto in the same year.

³ Built in 1878, St. John the Evangelist (aka 'The Red Roof Church') is the last remaining Anglican church in Quebec to maintain the Anglo-Catholic or 'High Church' worship tradition within the Book of Common Prayer.



In 1880 his father's stained-glass studio became 'J. C. Spence & Sons Glass Artworks' when William and his brothers Robert and Henry J. joined the company. For the next 35 years Spence & Son produced stained glass windows for churches (mostly Anglican) across eastern North America. The company also sold a wide range of church accessories. Shortly after his father died in 1890, however, William chose to leave the firm and seek his future in music, although he would occasionally design and execute windows for many years thereafter.

William R. Spence became a teacher of cello and piano and for seven years from 1897 was employed as organist and choir master at Montreal's St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church. Over that time he also produced at least 29 original compositions -- anthems, secular songs and instrumental works for piano and violin.

Spence spent the years 1897-1902 in Boston. Exactly where he worked during those years is undocumented and uncertain, but he seems to have held casual appointments as an organist, choir director, and a string player. Returning to Montreal in 1902 he took up the post of organist at the Church of the Advent⁴ while playing cello in the Montreal Symphony orchestra, the Westmount Instrumental Quartet and other orchestras. Lovell's Montreal Directory for 1907 listed William Spence as an 'organist and music teacher'.



Church of the Advent
(Photo courtesy City of Westmount)



St. John the Evangelist
(Photo courtesy Martine Doyon)

⁴ The Anglican Church of the Advent opened in 1892 and closed in 2004. The building now serves the 'House of Prayer of All Nations' and is the oldest surviving church building in Westmount.

In a 1993 Carleton University thesis, *William Ramsay Spence: A Case Study*, Patricia Williamson writes that “According to people who knew him [at Perth], the years from 1912 to 1914 were spent as court composer to the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria ... having won a contest for the position”.⁵

That account of the years leading up to the First World War is supported by a history of St. James Anglican Church, found in the church archives, that states Spence “came to Perth directly from the office of Court Composer to the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria”.⁶ While Williamson found no other documentary evidence of Spence’s time in Austria, she quotes an interview with Perth historian Peter Code (1935-2010)⁷ who “heard from Spence himself that he had ‘escaped’ from Austria in the run-up to WW1” and that he had come to “Christie Lake, near Perth, in the summer of 1914, on doctor’s orders, to recover his health, which was ‘broken’ after his experience in Austria.”⁸

In her study, Williamson casts some doubt on the account of Spence working at the Roman Catholic royal court of Austria, at least in the role of composer to the emperor.

It is interesting to speculate about what Spence did in Austria, if stories of his sojourn there are indeed true. Unless he were attached to a Church of England chaplaincy at the court, it is unlikely that he went as an organist and composer of church music. However, such employment would not have been entirely out of the question, since there was considerable intermarriage among British, German and Austrian royalty at the time. The other possibility is that he went as a cellist, and since people in Perth knew him as a composer, the story grew that he was a ‘court composer’ to Emperor Franz Joseph.



Emperor Franz Josef (1830-1916)
Ruled 1848-1916

There may, however, be another explanation for the lost years before WW1. Throughout his life, William Spence suffered from severe bouts of depression and during his years at Perth was admitted to Brockville Psychiatric Hospital on several occasions.⁹

*He knew when this was about to happen and would say “I have to go away”. He would stay a few months, undergo electric shock treatment, and return to Perth to take up his life again in a normal way.*¹⁰

⁵ Williamson says that Spence himself spoke of his time in Austria to perthites Dawson Kerr (1894-1994) and Howard Watson (1912-1996) and that Peter Code (1935-2010) heard the same story from others who had known Spence.

⁶ Patricia Williamson thesis 1993.

⁷ Peter Edmund Code, Perth historian and member of the Perth Citizens' Band for over 60 years.

⁸ Although Peter Code lived next door to William R. Spence, the account of escaping Austria and coming to Christie Lake may not have been “heard from Spence Himself” but come to him at second hand as Code would have been only 11 years of age when Spence died in 1946.

⁹ During one of his periods of treatment at the Brockville hospital (date unknown) Spence conducted a dance band in Brockville at a ball attended by many Perth residents.

¹⁰ Patricia Williamson thesis 1993.

Could Spence's "broken health" and the doctor-ordered retreat to Christie Lake have been the culmination of a lengthy depressive episode of hospitalization or unemployment encompassing all or part of the undocumented 1912-1914 period?

Whatever the cause of his broken health and sojourn at Christie Lake, Peter Code's account got the date wrong. Spence's recuperation at the lake coincided with a 1913 working visit to Perth by his brother Henry to install a stained-glass window at St. James The Apostle Church. A St. James parish history published in 1931 recalls that,



St. James the Apostle Church
(Photo courtesy of J. F. Voll)

... in 1913 the Matheson family placed a memorial window¹¹ of stained glass, the work of Mr. J. C. Spence [Henry J. Spence¹²] of Montreal¹³ ... In the same year [the church] secured the services of Mr. W. R. Spence, a brother¹⁴ of the above, as organist and choirmaster of St. James Church.¹⁵

According to this account, while installing the Matheson memorial window in 1913, Henry Spence learned that St. James was seeking an organist and choir director and told his brother of the opportunity. Alternately, William, being at that time unemployed as a musician (apparently for reasons of "broken health"), may have been assisting Henry with the window installation and learned of the available post himself. In any case, he applied for the job and was hired effective May 1, 1914 at an annual salary of \$500.

Well into the early 20th century Church of England (Anglican) organist/choirmasters in Canada were almost always English, and such had been the case at St. James prior to 1914. Spence's talent and reputation as a musician and composer impressed, however, and he became the first Canadian born musician to hold the post at St. James.

¹¹ The Matheson window, 'The Resurrection', memorializes Roderick Matheson (1793-1873), former Lieutenant Glengarry Light Infantry, Perth merchant, militia colonel, Upper Canada Legislative Council Member and Canadian Senator.

¹² By 1913 J. C. (Johnathon Charles) Spence had been dead for 23 years.

¹³ Although the current on-line history of St. James Church says the window was created by Percy Bacon of London, England, <https://www.stjamesperth.ca/history>.

¹⁴ The parish history has mistaken the son for the father.

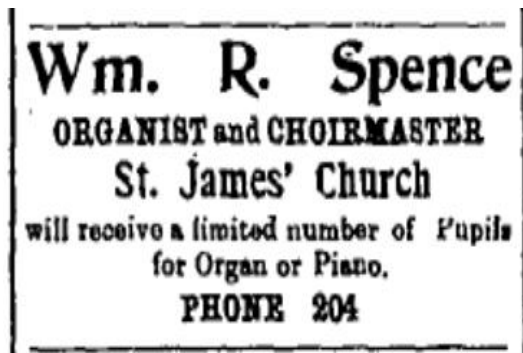
¹⁵ *Perth Courier*, November 13, 1941.

St. James the Apostle Church had been completed in 1861, on the same site as Perth's first Anglican Church built in 1822. It acquired its first organ, an instrument built by S. R. Warren & Son of Toronto¹⁶, in about 1882 although, before that, there may have been a melodeon¹⁷ to accompany hymn singing. In his years at St. James, Spence played a quality pipe organ built by Breckels-Matthew of Toronto. It had been installed in 1907 and updated with an electrified blower in 1911.

His first choir at St. James was a mixed ensemble of about 30 adults plus 10 little boys who sat in the front row with the ladies close behind them to maintain order when necessary.

On May 15th, Spence advertised himself in the *Perth Courier* as a teacher of organ and piano and on June 26th gave his first organ recital.

Six months after taking up his new position at Perth, Spence married Julia Lilian Skey Bengough (1865-1950) on October 19, 1914, at Winchester, Dundas County¹⁸. Julia had been born at Bristol, England, the youngest child¹⁹ of Rev. Samuel Edmund Bengough (1833-1900) and Julia Mary Cox (1837-1902). She emigrated to Canada in 1889, followed by her sister Mary Beatrice in 1902 and settled in Montreal²⁰. At some unknown date her parents joined their daughters in Montreal.



Although Lillian was born in England²¹, lived in Canada from age 24, and told the 1911 census taker that her “commonly spoken” language was English, “the people in Perth commented on Mrs. Spence’s ‘funny, thick accent’.”²² Curiously, that accent seems to have been German. She told stories of growing up in a “European court” and for many years advertised herself in the Montreal city directory as a ‘teacher of violin and German’ while her sister, Mary, advertised as a teacher of ‘German and typewriting’.

Like her husband, Lillian Bengough-Spence was an accomplished musician. At Montreal, she and William Spence had known each other well for many years. They played together in orchestras and chamber groups, and she wrote the lyrics for many of his vocal compositions.²³

¹⁶ The company was founded in Montreal in 1836, moved to Toronto in 1878 and later became Karn-Warren Co.

¹⁷ A small reed organ, with a single keyboard, in which a suction bellows powered by a foot pedal draws air inward through metal reeds, to produce specific musical notes, all without the need for tuning.

¹⁸ Although the October 30, 1914, *Perth Courier* announcement of their wedding said they had been married in Montreal.

¹⁹ Mary B. (b.1859), Arthur H. (7), Julia S. L. (1865)

²⁰ In the 1911 census of Westmount, Montreal, Lillian (46) and Mary (53) Bengough are living with an aunt, Charlotte Bompas (81) who had emigrated from England in 1877.

²¹ Lillian appears, aged five, with her family in the 1871 census of Surrey, England.

²² Patricia Williamson thesis 1993.

²³ Other lyricists credited on Spence’s published work include, Jane Taylor, J. Condor, Aug L. Jansson and William Steadman. Occasionally Spence wrote his own lyrics.

When she arrived at Perth, Lillian set up a violin studio and was soon taking students and playing an active part in local musical society. She began performing as a member of a trio with her husband (cello) and D. A. Ainsworth (piano). Ainsworth, a Scot, who was the organist at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Ainsworth and William Spence also performed together for many years as duo-pianists and accompanists for each other's choirs.

The early decades of the 20th century were an era when amateur music-making was still a popular social activity, and when skilled local talent was often available and anxious to take advantage of direction by professionals. By the 1920s, Lillian Spence was conducting a local string orchestra that usually numbered about a dozen string players, including her husband on cello, and a pianist.

Bengough-Spence was a classicist through-and-through. In a speech, entitled *Music In The Home*, delivered to the Perth Women's Institute in February 1922, she warned that while 'folk music' was an acceptable departure point for teaching children at home,

... Jazz encourages the low life, particularly the rhythms and the accent in the jazz orchestra marked by the drumstick, pounding drum, triangle, cymbal and wooden block alternately. This noise excites the nerves like the howls of the dervishes, or the shouts of the Hornerites^{24,25} ...

When Lillian Bengough-Spence died in 1950 her will included a \$300 bequest to the Perth Citizens' Band "to be expended for amplifiers for the Band Stand and in the purchase of good music, not Jazz ...".

She was an exacting music teacher, described as a "little, short, eccentric woman, with a terrible temper". Dawson Kerr (1894-1994),²⁶ one of her husband's students, recalled that on one occasion,

... 14 or 15 students were practising in crowded conditions in the Spence's living room, preparing for an important performance at the Balderson Theatre. One poor girl was incapable of coming in on time. Shouting in her strangely accented English, Lillian Spence grabbed the student's bow, broke it over a music stand with a resounding crash, and threw the remains in the corner.²⁷

What happened to the girl is not known, but Kerr, who was the pianist that day, never played for Lillian Spence again.

²⁴ A religious sect led by former Methodist preacher Ralph Horner (1853-1921) of Shawville, Quebec, inspired by the 'Holiness Movement' in the United States. From about 1897 Horner attracted several thousand followers in the Renfrew-Montreal-Kingston triangle to the *Holiness Movement Church in Canada*, with himself as bishop.

²⁵ *Perth Courier*, February 03, 1922.

²⁶ Drug store proprietor 1950-1969, 68 Gore Street, East, married Florence Nichol Bulloch (1910-1989).

²⁷ Patricia Williamson thesis 1993.

William Spence, on the other hand, was described by those who knew him as “a *gentle, quiet, conservative man of few words, a true gentleman, with a quiet sense of humor, [who] shunned publicity*”.²⁸ Very tall, with white hair, he was very devout but an active participant in the social life of Perth; a member of the Golf & Country Club, the Perth Curling Club and the Professional Men’s Club, who enjoyed snooker, bridge and poker.

William and Lillian Spence did not confine themselves to classical and church music, they also performed popular music of general appeal with ad hoc local orchestras, and provided accompaniment for choral performances, at amateur entertainments, theatricals and fundraisers staged at the town hall opera house or the Balderson Theatre.

During the years Spence was an active church musician there was an enormous demand for anthems published in the octavo format²⁹ or in choral magazines. His compositions, regarded today as perhaps sentimental and Victorian in style, reached a very large international audience in their day, and Spence was better-known as a composer in the United States and Britain than in Canada.

*A broadcast from Montreal on Wednesday evening included in the program a composition entitled ‘Song Without Words’ which is the work of Mr. W. R. Spence, of Perth, who is noted throughout Canada and the United States for his church music. ‘Song Without Words’ was played by a full orchestra ...*³⁰

*Mr. William R. Spence of Perth, whose musical compositions are well known throughout this country and the United States has just received copy of the Boston Globe containing choir lists of no less than 13 churches in Boston which used his music last week. Mr. Spence was much gratified to count 14 of his anthems as having been sung on Easter Sunday in these churches.*³¹

*Perth people who heard the broadcast by the band of the Grenadier Guards on Friday evening, October 10, enjoyed particularly one item on the program, the march ‘To The Front’, a composition of William R. Spence of Perth.*³²

While Spence was primarily a composer of church music, he also produced other music. *To The Front*, for example, was written for the Perth Citizens’ Band, as were several other titles including *Killarney* (1931), *Tayside* (1931) and *Midnight On The Rideau* (1936). The Citizens’ Band continues to perform these pieces into the 21st century and in 1982 *Midnight On The Rideau* was selected as the official theme song of the Rideau Canal’s 150th Anniversary. A performance of *Moonlight On The Rideau* by the Perth Citizens’ Band can be found at <https://www.rideau-info.com/canal/talkingrideau/talking-moonlight.html> . An example of Spence’s compositions for organ, *Grand Chorus in D*, can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn3JlxsUoqQ>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ A standard, booklet-like format of sheet music, typically used for choral works, that is printed on approximately 7x10.5-inch (17.8 X 26.7 cm) paper.

³⁰ *Perth Courier*, March 17, 1937.

³¹ *Perth Courier*, April 26, 1939.

³² *Perth Courier*, October 16, 1941.

Spence was a gifted, prolific composer, most of whose works were published during his lifetime and one who enjoyed an international reputation. He is mentioned three times in *The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* (1992) as the composer of the choral piece *In Flanders Fields*, of *The Royal St. Lawrence Yacht Club* and of *Moonlight on the Rideau*. *The Canadian Musical Heritage Series, Sacred Choral Music II Vol.9* (1988) contains 33 pieces including Spence's *Pastoral* of 1914.

In the collection of the Perth Matheson House Museum there is a five-volume bound collection of 152 William Spence compositions, assembled by his friend and student, Eric Sabiston (1897-1988)³³. Sabiston arranged his *Collected Works of William R. Spence* in five categories:



The Collected Works of William R. Spence
(Perth Matheson House Museum)

- Vol. I - Christmas & Thanksgiving Anthems
- Vol. II - Easter & General Anthems, Male Quartets
- Vol. III - Secular Quartets, Mixed, Male, Ladies and Ladies Trios
- Vol. IV - Sacred Soles, Sacred Duet, Secular Songs
- Vol. V - Instrumental, Piano, Organ, Violin and Piano

The Sabiston collection might have been considerably larger had it not been for a disastrous fire on May 3, 1932 that badly damaged St. James Church, consuming much of its roof,

damaging its organ and destroying, by fire or water, the music library containing many of Spence's compositions still in manuscript.³⁴

William Spence retired in 1929 at age 70, having worked as a church organist and choirmaster for 40 years, 15 of those years at Perth, while simultaneously pursuing a career as composer and cellist. He continued to compose and perform on the cello for another 15 years in retirement.

He and his wife continued to live in Perth until advancing dementia sent Spence into care at Lanark Lodge. He died in Perth's Great War Memorial Hospital on July 26, 1946, and was buried in the Spence family plot at Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal. Following the loss of her husband, Lillian Spence returned to Montreal where she lived in St. Margaret's Home until her death on March 5, 1950. She was buried beside her husband.

³³ Beginning as an office boy in 1916, Sabiston rose through the ranks of the Perth Shoe Company to serve as company chairman and president 1950-1961.

³⁴ The fire completely destroyed several neighboring homes and outbuildings.

William Ramsay Spence's obituary in the *Perth Courier* remembered him as a “*versatile, melodious writer, chiefly of church music, and an organist and pianist, [who] excelled at improvisation ... and a kind, gentle, God-fearing man*”.³⁵

- **Ron W. Shaw (2025)**

³⁵ *Perth Courier*, August 1, 1946.