

# Remembering Toronto's Upstart Startup

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*“When the history of music education in Canada is written, I’m sure that York will figure prominently in the move to make music more accessible to a wider range of social classes and musical taste-cultures.”*

— Robert Witmer, *Music at York: The Founding Generation, 1970-2000*.

## I

A half-century ago, on the windswept plains of Upper Downsview, a new music department suddenly appeared and came to life under the auspices of York University. It quickly gained a reputation as a game-changer, not always a favourable thing to have in academic circles. I was briefly involved in setting the new department’s initial direction, and am unexpectedly still alive and unrepentant.

Though long since retired from the fray, I had previously been responsible for editing a book of faculty interviews called *Music at York: The Founding Generation, 1970-2000*, published by York University in 2003. So I was fair game for the enterprising editors of this special issue of *MUSICultures*. They eventually tracked me down in my pandemic hideout, encouraged me to revisit my recollections of those first formative years at York, and invited me to contribute some sort of memoir to include in the present collaborative publication.

A lot of reflecting and scribbling ensued as I struggled to remember how things actually felt back then. Because writing coherently about subjects as complex as music education doesn’t get any easier with age, it was understood that this time, no lengthy collective chronicle would be expected.

The few glimpses of York’s upstart debut provided here will perhaps provoke a smile of recognition in readers who have not forgotten the sixties.

Today the details of setting up shop at York decades ago are harder to recall, and unlikely to be of much interest; but the ethical and pragmatic issues we faced then seem just as relevant now. Even before the pandemic struck, the continuing viability of common assumptions about liberal education and the arts was being seriously questioned. In that context, my musings here should be read as attempting to set the stage for public consultations — of a kind busy professionals can seldom find time for — to consider a wide range of future provisions for learning and teaching music. It's a conversation I would urge all readers, whatever their interest, to join.

## II

It is true that music, in some form or other, has had a far longer history as an academic discipline than any of the other fine or performing arts. Only recently however, and notably in North America, has the modern publicly funded multiversity, with its dizzying abundance of specialized undergraduate and graduate degree programs, been so widely embraced as the prime locus for educating and credentialing future generations of musicians.

Given the persistent tendency of many academics to value the printed word over any other kind of knowledge, and the widespread uncertainty about where Music stands on the continuum between “serious work” and “entertainment”, any standard one-size-fits-all method for teaching it in a school setting is hard to imagine. Fortunately, no two pathways to a life with music need be the same. The trick for instructors is, of course, to make the best use of the limited time each student is able to commit, without letting the essays, tests, and tutorials get in the way.

My first contact with music as an academic discipline came seventy-odd years ago, as a first-year college student. My college's Music Department contained a handful of experts in the kind of music found in ancient manuscripts and incunabula from Western Europe, as well as a few composers whose works were only occasionally performed, and one or two theorists. As was still usual in those days, all of its professors were certifiably male and white. Moreover, offering any course that smacked of “professional training” (i.e., live music-making) was expressly forbidden by Department rules. (That too was the norm then; art departments in some liberal arts colleges had their own museums but offered no studio art classes to engage restless young hands and minds.)

It happened my college had a strong tradition of extracurricular student-led music-making, which quickly drew me in. Yet I soon noticed

how few of my musically adept fellow students were choosing music as their major. Eventually I graduated with honours in a different field — and without taking a single music course!

Nor was that the first time I had to choose between the demands of two divergent educational paths. My formal schoolwork was prescribed by others, and keeping up with assignments left little time for fun. Our high school chorus did attempt a major work from the classical concert repertoire each year, with student soloists. Other than that, my musical pursuits were mainly outside of school, less formal and largely self-motivated. In my case, they were organized around private music lessons, where progress was harder to measure and up to me to achieve at some unpredictable future point, or perhaps not at all.

Growing up in a major cultural centre, I was of course aware of the many concerts and shows on offer there, but only rarely attended any. (Horowitz recitals were already sold out when announced!) Sometimes it was hard to ignore the extra burden of pursuing two different kinds of education at the same time. Moreover, each kind could all too easily get in the other's way, producing stressful emotional problems. (For typical middle-class parents, managing the logistics and the expenses of their musically "gifted" offspring's two-track life can be pretty daunting too.)

The fact remains, becoming a reasonably competent musician is not something that can be achieved simply by taking courses and passing exams. It is a lifelong, cumulative, often erratic and unpredictable process, in which opportune encounters with live music and working musicians can prove crucial. If only getting a musical education were as simple as the proverbial Manhattanite's answer when asked by a tourist how to get to Carnegie Hall — "Practice, practice, practice!"

Many now see music as just one more way of being human. To make and love music for whatever reason seemed to us a natural part of growing up, and can become a lifelong source of emotional release, self-expression, cultural participation, and pleasure. It is also reputed to be good exercise for the brain.

On the other hand, for some its main appeal is as a road to commercial success. To be publicly recognized as a musical artist is an exceptional achievement that normally requires years of education and training, and/or extremely intensive exposure at an early age. (The extent to which natural aptitude also affects the outcome seems obvious but is not yet well enough understood.)

The young people whose education I used to worry about were mainly to be found somewhere "in between" these two viewpoints. Most of them

discovered their interest in music too late to tolerate or benefit from such a focused upbringing. Yet even prodigies nowadays may take a few years off to pursue an ordinary undergraduate degree (for example, Yo-Yo Ma and Loren Maazel). So when it comes to education, the old boundaries are already blurring — and not just in university Music Departments!

Many North Americans, I suspect, also assume that a university must be the ideal place for young people to learn more about their world and the things that interest them most. So why not music too?

When our oldest colleges were founded, literate professions such as law, medicine, and the ministry were the only kinds of gainful employment for which further schooling after high school was necessary, and the range of studies that required attendance was correspondingly quite narrow. With the creation of the land-grant colleges in mid-19th century America, built on expropriated Indigenous lands and offering “any person instruction in any subject,” a new model of post-secondary education began to emerge. Today, it seems anyone who is not still in school until their mid-twenties is regarded as all but underprivileged.

Enormous investments of public and private wealth, real estate, manpower, fantasy, and hope have gone into building our post-secondary education system, and an aura of expectation, envy, and entitlement surrounds the current cohort of students who are its conspicuous beneficiaries while their youthful years last. Nowadays, a dedicated few may still choose to spend those years slaving away in libraries or labs, but others are encouraged to earn their degrees while practicing to be budding athletes, artists, tycoons, politicians, or corporate trainees.

When it comes to squeezing a serious bout of music study into the same overloaded four-year slot occupied by the iconic North American birthright of a college education, timing becomes an issue that cannot be ignored. There are just too many variables already in play, like residence location, family income, and good old accessibility, to allow a single educational timetable to prevail for all. More choices, more different pathways, surely need to be encouraged to grow. If a small country like Latvia can still support a nationwide network of local free music schools, enabling almost any child anywhere to reach a basic level of proficiency and some to go on to more advanced training, could not a Canadian city or province do something similar? Scandinavian “people’s colleges” have pioneered a whole different way of managing the entire educational career, one that seems to fit better both with the natural pattern of human mental development and with productivity on the job, as astute critics of higher education have been quick to point out. Why not, for example, support a range of humanistic and socially concerned seminars

for young adults when they are already working in their twenties — a time when one may be readier for the kind of learning that broadens, deepens, and civilizes — while doing more in the primary and secondary years to prepare bodies and brains for serious work in the arts?

### III

These days, the word *music* is used to refer to so many different things:

- A Practice. A Performance. A Document. A Sound. A Commodity. A Culture.
- A carefully selected but potentially enormous accumulation of created examples (pieces, compositions, works) that can only now survive and be shared thanks to recently invented recording and distribution technologies.
- A way of exploiting the physical and neurological capabilities of the human body, and the sonic properties of objects in the natural world, in order to communicate with other members of our species — a process which is taught and practiced in some manner by every known human society.
- A major art-form and an addictive product that compels active participation; it is widely supported socially, and in some cases can take over an entire life.

Many children seem to acquire their music naturally, just as they learn other quite complicated things before starting school. However, we can all awaken our inner musician without signing up for a York degree, in five main ways:

1. by *making* music ourselves — playing, singing, composing, listening;
2. by *observing* — watching and listening as music is being made by others;
3. by *exploring* — experimenting with available instruments or body-sounds;
4. by *collecting* our own favorite examples, artists, and experiences for rehearsing, study, sharing, or as souvenirs;
5. by *training* ourselves to increase our normal physical and mental capabilities. (“Is not a musician a kind of circus performer?” as my famous teacher Nadia Boulanger insisted.)

What we ultimately learn to do and how well it is absorbed may depend on:

- Which particular examples of music we have *access* to.
  - Each hearing of every piece teaches us how to listen to more like it.
  - The act of making music readies us to make more of a similar kind.
- Our *teachers*.
  - Many are often fixated on reproducing how *they* were taught, or
  - sharing the particular discoveries that made things work for them.
- Our own skill as self-trainers.
  - Effective *practicing* is a special form of introspection that often needs outside help to develop.

Besides, there are so many different intriguing sub-genres, equipment fetishes, and taste clubs through which music can capture our interest. They all seem to work equally well as entry points, and any one of them can keep us absorbed for a lifetime. But the main teacher is always *the music itself*.

#### IV

The urge to circumscribe, delimit, and otherwise define a particular zone, area, or repertoire of music in order to own or identify with it more exclusively has, I suppose, always been with us. Yet every so often, it seems, the need will arise to broaden the prevailing view of what is worth listening to by including more of what was up to then ignored, neglected, or dismissed as eccentric or bizarre.

The late sixties was such a moment for many young Torontonians, I believe. The growing interest in world musics probably helped to awaken this need. So did increasing access to various kinds and methods of organized music education. (Will we perhaps find ourselves soon at another such juncture, as we strive to recover from loss and isolation and reconnect with one another in the months ahead?)

Readers who visited Expo 67 in Montreal will likely remember what it meant to see Canada play host to the nations of the world. Canada's artistry and ingenuity were on display alongside those of other advanced countries, further evidence that the public arts and other urbane pleasures could now be

celebrated here without reticence or shame. It was okay to be more open and welcoming toward outsiders if we could also compete with them in thoroughly modern ways, while continuing to affirm and promote our own heritage and national identity. Toronto too caught some of this more confident spirit, just as it had begun to attract a whole new population of war-wary young Americans and ambitious immigrants from every corner of the world.

The first two decades after World War II had seen significant efforts, sponsored by Canada's provincial governments, to respond to increasing demand for post-secondary education in ways that would serve the needs of a rapidly evolving, more service-oriented economy. A period of unprecedented expansion for Canadian universities soon followed. Since Canadian-trained applicants were in short supply, there was an influx of academic talent from the US, Britain, and other Commonwealth countries to fill the many new university positions opening up. With its new flag, its celebrity Prime Minister, and its worldwide reputation as a haven for those seeking peace and freedom, a newly energized Canada was coming into its own.

For those who worked in the arts, it was a time to think big and aim high. The sixties' more unbuttoned attitudes had begun to penetrate the nation's bastions of high culture. Buzzwords like "multicultural" and "interdisciplinary" were in the air. Opportunities were expanding for local performers and creators, world-class showcases for performing and visual arts were being planned, and new instructional approaches were itching to be tried.

An ambitious proposal to build a major facility for instruction in the fine and performing arts on the York University campus was officially approved in the spring of 1967. By that time, the idea that a metropolitan university was the ideal place to educate Canada's future artists must have been taken for granted by many of its planners. No doubt it seemed to make sense. In such a big, stretched out, underpopulated country, cultivating the arts calls for some of the urban togetherness that had been making cities and universities so attractive to move to. As citizens of a democracy, art students need to learn as much as possible about the issues facing their country and their world. As artists, they must also understand and keep in touch with an educated public that is aware of and can appreciate their work.

Besides, aren't all the arts related? Students would get fresh ideas from talking with other kinds of artists and seeing or hearing their work. New forms of "interdisciplinary" art would emerge spontaneously as they learn to collaborate. And the arts would finally take their rightful place in the great assemblage and repository of all knowledge that modern universities have become, a place that has long been denied them in both the German and

the British academic systems on which Canadian higher education was first modeled.

As York's new campus took shape in the '60s and '70s, however, reality set in. First to be built was a cluster of neo-Oxbridge residential Colleges designed to house a range of student activities along with offices for non-resident Faculty Fellows, places where social sharing and academic diversity would be fostered on a more manageable human scale. But as construction continued, it became clear that each academic field would eventually be given its own separate on-campus palazzo to fill with offices, classrooms, and labs as it desired, thereby sending a contradictory message about togetherness and collegiality. Unfortunately, navigating from your own class to any other department's territory would seldom be easy, especially in winter. (At one point, music students carrying their instruments had to visit 20 different campus locations to get their work done.) A central campus core eventually took shape to mitigate the separateness somewhat. But thirty years went by before Music finally had enough space under one roof to call its own.

The University of Toronto's Faculty of Music, meanwhile, following the lead of big American state universities like Michigan and Illinois, continued to offer a growing range of graduate and undergraduate specializations, still focused on the revered heritage of European concert works and opera — though they soon twigged to the possibility that jazz and non-Western musics might also be worthy of their serious attention. (See Professor Kippen's revealing account of their history, in this issue.) The Royal Conservatory had not yet fully asserted its ambition to become the province's non-academic training ground for musicians of all ages, but its well-oiled machinery of adjudications, competitions, and graded written exams for amateur or student musicians was yet another entrenched presence to be reckoned with on the local scene. Was there really room for one more unruly player on this already crowded field?

It soon became known that York's fledgling Music enterprise was attempting to be "different." Although some prospective hires who were Canadian sensibly preferred to await job offers from established US schools, we soon managed to assemble enough qualified faculty members to put our unconventional program on display. Not every onlooker welcomed what York Music appeared to be doing as a refreshing new approach. Some dismissed our operation as superficial, merely trendy, hopelessly eclectic, or excessively permissive.

Yet students were intrigued by what they found, the word spread, and we weathered the untimely onslaught of early seventies budget cuts well enough to confirm our right to survive.



## V

By the seventies, York University, though itself barely a decade old, was already a force to reckon with. York was already known for its different approaches to undergraduate studies — first, by offering Ontario's only bilingual degree program at its Glendon campus, and then, by adopting a substantial General Education requirement for all incoming students. The latter entailed mounting a collection of team-taught survey courses in Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Logic, all designed to introduce whole areas of knowledge a student might otherwise never have encountered before choosing a single subject to major in. (While teaching at York, I was later able to launch three GenEd Humanities courses of my own: *Games of Order*, *Form in the Arts*, and *Computer Culture*, all of them strongly hands-on.)

Conspicuous by its absence, however, was any attempt to develop a similar range of optional or required GenEd courses in the Fine Arts intended to awaken interest in one or more of the artistic traditions and practices taught by York's Fine Arts Faculty, but aimed at ordinary undergraduates. The founding Dean of Fine Arts had good reasons to insist, in those early years, on defending his faculty's special "pre-professional" status. Yet tension between the liberal arts model of undergraduate study, on one side, and the drive to maintain a semblance of serious professional standards, on the other, never really disappeared.

In 2015, York's Fine Arts Faculty was relabeled as its School of the Arts, Media, Performance and Design. The university's emphasis on General Education has by now significantly eroded, as departments claimed more and more of their majors' time for their own courses. Meanwhile, large lecture courses in popular music, developed by the Music Department and open to all, are regularly oversubscribed. But exposure to top-quality instruction in at least one of the major arts has yet to be accepted as a necessary part of every York undergraduate's educational experience.

## VI

To assist at the birth of a brand-new Music Department was a rare privilege — but also a challenge, of a kind that many working professionals in the arts are reluctant to accept. The focus shifts away from, "How will my career benefit?" or "How can I use this job to keep doing what I love to do?" Instead, one must imagine and design a shared space, shared tasks, and a shared future, in which nameless others will hopefully find what they need to thrive. (In a sense, that's what any teacher or artist is also doing, every day when they walk into their classroom or their studio.)

My job as inaugural Chair was setting the mission, recruiting the best available people to implement it, and acquiring the borrowed space and essential equipment for a working academic entity that did not yet exist. Ever the optimist, I saw this as a unique opportunity to apply everything I had absorbed so far. Of course, I would have to adapt to the conditions of this particular institution, at this moment, in this specific place. But with the outline of a strategic plan in hand to lay the groundwork, I hoped I could then sit back and watch things unfold.

Perhaps someone else might have enjoyed basking in an illusory sense of power. But for me, presiding over so little was more like a Robinson Crusoe experience. My time as Chair did however provide two valuable things: an ideal vantage-point from which to survey the Canadian educational scene, and an object lesson in managing institutional change.

To be sure, our physical situation at the outset was bleak. We began with one lone office in the Psychology Building, one typewriter, one devoted secretary, one trusty Australian junior instructor, but... no dedicated teaching space, no audio equipment, no purpose-built performance space, no musical instrument collection. Every hire and every purchase we were allowed to make — while reeling from the latest round of budget cuts — was scrutinized to insure maximum bang for the buck. A sizeable amount of heavy lifting had to be done remotely, during the previous summer, to get the Music Department's inaugural offering of two courses up and running by September.

I soon realized how little control I had as a newly minted middle manager — though there was often no one else to blame if things didn't work well. But having to build everything at once and so fast did have its advantages. Happily, I could draw on an enormous amount of good will and some crucial practical help from York colleagues, administrators, and expert staff in other fields who were no strangers to the stresses and strains of starting from scratch.

I approached that first start-up year with a growing sense that the modern multidiscipline of music was destined to become a necessary implement for the opening of young minds. My own youthful idealism shows through in a note-to-self written at the time:

Let music be heard and imagined, made and shared, in all its diversity, drawing on its mainly oral as well as more elaborately literate traditions, and hopefully without much regard for inherited notions of relative prestige and supremacy, or too many worries about ownership or misappropriation. Music has often been enlisted to serve various extraneous causes and agendas. Because it cannot talk back, it is easily reduced to a slogan or a weapon, when all it asks from us is to be enjoyed, danced to, and stolen, to

make more music with. It deserves to be liberated, desegregated, and respected for itself alone. Not just for the nice noises it makes, but for how it engages our brains and bodies and emotions as an indispensable, universally human mode of sonically mediated thinking and acting in the world, enabling us to communicate in ways language can sometimes partner with but never replace.

## VII

Predictably, once I was on the job such lofty hopes gave way to more practical considerations. At so early a stage, York was obliged to think small. Besides, we believed our students would find rehearsing in smaller ensembles more challenging and worthwhile than the usual big bands or choruses. And soon enough, further criteria emerged for selecting our initial stock-in-trade, our starting repertory of music-making and learning opportunities.

Given our situation, it made sense to choose from those activities that:

- were not being conspicuously cultivated by our competitors;
- were perhaps more diverse and inclusive than usual, recognizing the increasing appeal of both oral and written, improvised and literate, elite and popular, historical and experimental idioms and traditions;
- offered some scope for creative exploration, and some hands-on exposure to current electroacoustic and digital techniques;
- while not requiring advanced performing prowess, would challenge and nourish essential musical skills.

Eventually we settled on four specialties I thought we could safely start out with. “Something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue,” they happened also to be personal favourites:

- Early Music wind and string ensembles;
- live electronic composition and free improvisation workshops;
- South Indian rhythm and vocal training;
- small and medium-sized jazz combos and harmonic theory.

As one founding faculty member, Steve Otto, saw it when looking back thirty years later,

What made York unique was the way we built into the ground floor all these contemporary practices and disciplines — ethnomusicology, contemporary improvisation, Early Music performance, live electronics, allowing jazz in — and all the other things we started with that were only secondary or extras at most other places, if they existed at all. (In Beckwith 2003: 105).

Latin doesn't scare me, but *curriculum* is not a word I enjoy using. (It was Steve's passion!) To me it evokes the image of a closed, preconstructed one-way oval racecourse intended for dogs or horses — one designed to facilitate competitive ranking by comparing the time each animal takes to cover a standard distance from their common starting line. In current usage, a curriculum is a prescription, indicating precisely which courses, in which order, all students must complete in order to win the right to call themselves educated. (University administrators love such terms, but I wonder how much they have to do with what is actually learned!)

What eventually took shape in the early years at York was in any case not so much a curriculum as a shared attitude — perhaps just a working philosophy of sorts. Here is how that consensus was outlined by our third chairman, Alan Lessem, at a meeting of the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1977:

The principal aim of the program, as conceived and implemented by its first Chairman, was (as it appears to me) to foster a close knit of scholarly, creative and practical work in music, each moving in step with the other and thus ensuring that narrow and over-hasty specialization (all too typical of old-established schools elsewhere) be avoided.

Related to this first aim was the determination to broaden and deepen understanding by emphasizing intensive and exploratory *listening*, and by implanting in students a sense of music's place in various world cultures and also in the history of ideas.

The cultivation of *musicianship* was to be contingent upon participation in some practical activity, i.e. *performing*. York's undergraduate performance program would have no intention to train most students toward professional careers in solo performance, but would instead encourage, as a component of general musicianship training, the cultivation of performing and interpretive skills in *small ensembles*, an ideal medium for that purpose.

Furthermore, in accordance with our more 'liberal' (= liberating) attitude vis-a-vis musical studies in general, ensemble *repertoire* would extend beyond the 'standard repertory' to include the musical traditions of other world cultures as well as more remote historical periods in the West (Medieval and Renaissance).

Finally, York would offer a home to today's many areas of musical innovation, and encourage an open and forward-looking approach to musical creativity and the resources of new media. (In Beckwith 2003: 69; emphasis added)

From the outset, we suspected our students might prefer to learn in a less competitive, more exploratory environment; but we believed this preference could be supported while still maintaining a healthy concern for achieving a serviceable technique. What Professor Lessem called "Musicianship" was originally just our fancy word for "chops." To some extent, it's a simple matter of playing well enough to be marketable and useful to others here and now. But the term also implies an ability to derive more expression from a page of music than the written symbols actually convey. Thus, students develop a habit of discovering meanings that are unreachable through words alone, and a way of working that engages not only technical facility, but imagination and insight too. These are "music lessons" they can also apply wherever they may decide to focus their careers.

## VIII

When I was growing up, children were told that "Great Music" was the only music worth talking about. It had been produced, at the behest of wealthy and powerful patrons, by a succession of individual geniuses, almost exclusively dead white Europeans, whose life stories lent meaning and purpose to their creations. Just as the view of history as mainly a matter of names and dates, kings and battles, has since given way to greater interest in ordinary people, their everyday lives, their rituals and traditions, so the general public's access to music — not only its repertoire but also its scope and meaning — has been expanding too.

The same 19th century that witnessed the careers of well-known Romantic and post-Romantic composers was also, of course, the heyday of aggressive worldwide imperialism. As the following 20th century dawned, the empire builders' rapacious excesses provoked a predictable backlash. The intellectual elites of industrialized countries in Europe and the Americas began looking for more humane ways to cope with the unsettling reality of all those "primitive,

savage, backward, unspoiled” peoples they had conquered and subjugated, and whose material resources they had only recently discovered and exploited.

A number of promising methods and disciplines, among them ethnography and cultural anthropology, were gradually enlisted by connoisseurs and collectors hoping to preserve “les arts primitifs.” Music too was sometimes included, and various means were used to capture live performances in remote areas of the world. (In today’s political perspective, one would have to question whether this was not just another form of imperialist appropriation.) The scientific aura of these pioneering ventures probably helped them attract support, making possible many well-intentioned efforts to preserve, display, validate, popularize, and legitimize both the surviving artifacts and the cultures that produced them. (My doctoral dissertation touched on the role of one such scholarly organization active in the early 1900s, Moscow’s Musico-Ethnographic Commission, and its important influence on Russian and Soviet composers, performers, theorists, educators, and cultural policy for many years thereafter.)

At around the same time, spurred by a revolution in transportation by rail and steamship that made travel to distant places so much faster and more accessible, the idea took hold that music can and should become a vehicle for escape from the merely local, lifting us out of our comfort zone and transcending the limits of everyday experience, a means of travel to far-off places and long-lost eras that can connect us with all sorts of primeval cultures and exotic settings. Notable major symphonic or operatic works incorporating or inspired by this belief were produced around the turn of the 20th century, and even well before, by many composers including Wagner, Mahler, Skryabin, and Debussy.

The notion that music is a kind of magic carpet that can transport us effortlessly to mingle with previously hostile outsiders, share fantastic visions, and even commune with other species, is still alive as part of our inheritance from Romanticism, and has taken on new importance today among those who see music as a powerful tool for what is sometimes called “transcultural education.” Hardly surprising that cultural tourism is also becoming ever more popular as a way to unwind and refresh vacationing adults!

## IX

My doctoral studies had already begun before switching my field to ethnomusicology was an option. But I was aware of its invigorating effect on the university music scene ever since attending annual meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) in Berkeley (1960) and New Orleans (1966). The

talks and the demonstrations were often stimulating, though I could barely follow the arguments of the founding grandfather of musicology in America, the legendary Charles Seeger, who had become the beloved meta-theoretician of the SEM. (He later was a generous mentor on warmly remembered visits to his Connecticut summer retreat.)

For a time in the sixties, Seeger and others, at UCLA and elsewhere, insisted that the newer discipline of ethnomusicology must remain separate from both historical musicology, on one hand, and just plain music, on the other. (A program designed for undergraduates, as ours was at the beginning, could wisely, I think, elect to bypass such issues, which to us smacked of premature specialization. Our students had little enough time as it was to build their minimum foundation of both musical and general knowledge.) For the most part, the two scholarly communities, SEM and the American Musicological Society, which often convened together, generously welcomed and influenced one another, while their graduate students benefited from easier access to topics from the here-and-now, or from outside the limited frame of their own cultural experience, that were formerly off-limits.

Increasing opportunities for overseas travel were also a welcome stimulant for research. Although courses in “world music” here at home were still few and far between, focal points of interest in cultivating unusual traditions and exotic musical idioms were already sprouting on college campuses and in urban centres across North America, often led or sparked by returned ethnomusicology graduates. But I suspect it was sheer fascination with the sound itself, rather than any extrinsic social or geopolitical motivation, that accounted for this music’s addictive appeal to successive generations of listeners and participants.

Some examples? In the summer of 1963, I was introduced to the delights of traditional Georgian choral polyphony on a research trip to Tbilisi. Once returned, I eagerly spread the word to Noah Greenberg, who was preparing to tour the Soviet Union with the New York Pro Musica Antiqua. He too was captivated by the Georgian singing he heard there, and before long had turned even the aging Stravinsky into an outspoken fan. With the collapse of the Soviet Union came independence for Georgia, the number of returning enthusiasts and Georgian emigrants in our midst grew, and live engagement with the music itself spread. Today, local choirs specializing in the distinctive “mountain barbershop” repertoire of Georgia’s unaccompanied male-voice ensembles have become a valued ornament of the choral scene in Toronto and other world cities far from the high Caucasian homeland.

Another summer, I was allowed to play *kenong* and *ketuk* — a pair of small gongs suited to the abilities of a young child; one learns by listening and watching, there is nothing written, no teaching or conducting — in one of UCLA

ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's traveling Javanese gamelan workshops. That as a rank beginner, I could nonetheless both take in and take part in the many-layered tintinnabulations of an Indonesian gong-chime ensemble turned me overnight into an enthusiast for the approach Hood had successfully pioneered in California, which emphasized the value of direct bodily involvement in performing whichever traditional music was being studied. The evidence was clear. Learning hands-on, under expert guidance, to play the intricate ensemble music of an unfamiliar culture had proven to be a truly life-changing experience.

But that was the sixties, and this is now. The question is whether in post-pandemic Ontario our attitudes and tastes, school boards and academic budgets, will allow a full-throttle program of cross-cultural musicmaking to happen in our schools and on our campuses, where such ventures once seemed destined to flourish. Fortunately, wonderful print and video materials and recordings are now readily available that support efforts to globalize and decolonialize how the arts are taught in schools — among them the remarkable Smithsonian Folkways series to which Prof. Robert Witmer of York was a major contributor. But could it be that music's power to heal social conflict and overcome entrenched prejudice just by pushing the "PLAY" button has been exaggerated? Certainly, it's hard to believe any such desirable effects can be achieved without enlisting considerable live human support.

(See Julia Byl's article in this issue for more about the Folkways series. Ed.).

If students do have opportunities to engage with music from other cultures, are the benefits transferable? Can we guarantee, for instance, that such students will be more open to accepting people from those cultures as fully human? How nice if that were true! But if we pay careful attention to which music from which other culture we choose, perhaps at least one valuable outcome can be achieved.

We might call it "The Shock of the Strange." It all depends on what one is used to. The more extensive the differences in what we then encounter, the stronger the shock may be. Also, the likelier its desired effect, which is to suddenly see your own culture as a stranger might, and what's strange as if it had always been familiar — each a complete self-sufficient *system*, yet only one among comparable alternatives. From there on, the possibilities for personal growth such a discovery might open up could be many.

## X

In any case, there remains the job of finding the right people to make such miracles happen. The path to success in cross-cultural ventures of this kind is well known to be risky and seldom without problems on either side:



- Do you go to where the particular music you've chosen is cultivated, find some likely native practitioners, bring them to Canada, put them on display doing what they do at home, then hope that somehow all this will rub off on your local students? If so, what happens to the people you imported? They could well end up treated as illegal immigrants or racialized hired help, without academic status or benefits.
- Or will you be lucky enough to locate a former native musician who is not a trained teacher but is already living and working nearby, and willing to bring their instruments to campus and give demonstrations to your students on a part-time basis?
- Or are you perhaps content with hiring a culture tourist, someone who could talk about and even demonstrate what they learned while traveling abroad, or while working on an ethnomusicology degree?

When envisioning a home for studies in Indian music as part of the start-up plan for York, each of the above possibilities was considered and tried. In the end, we found a solution that exceeded all expectations. After coming across his profile in *Newsweek*, I was able to reach a phenomenal young American musician who would become a hero of the growing world music movement. Jon Higgins was a graduate of Wesleyan University's pioneering Music Department, where he was trained in Indian music by a family of visiting South Indian artist-teachers. Before inviting him to join the York Music faculty sight unseen — at the time he was touring India and amazing seasoned connoisseurs there with his miraculous (for a non-Indian) vocal and linguistic prowess — I had consulted Pandit Ravi Shankar, Professor Bob Brown at Wesleyan, and finally Charles Seeger himself, who explained how rare it was for anyone like Higgins to achieve full bi-musicality as a performer.

When Jon appeared onstage in the garb of a classical Carnatic vocalist to perform a program of elaborate traditional *kritis* set to sacred poems in an ancient Dravidian language, one felt one was in the presence of a living master of this venerable Indian art. Offstage however, or when lending his New England baritone to favourite songs by Ives, Fauré, or Bach, he was quite another person, an equally impressive but distinctly down-to-earth young communicator in action, two completely separate artists who somehow could make use effortlessly of the same physical body, albeit with very different effect, while maintaining the integrity of each. (Of course, the artist and the man were the same in both situations, and his superb musicianship in both was

a testimony to the incalculable versatility of music itself.)

Jon agreed to join us in the fall of 1971, and he hoped to bring with him a full South Indian performing ensemble, but eventually had to settle for only a single additional musician to handle the essential rhythmic component. Fortunately, he was able to persuade Trichy Sankaran, a brilliant young concert percussion virtuoso who had also earned a university degree in economics, to leave Chennai and accompany him to (and at) York, where both men taught and performed for seven memorable, musically enriching years. After a stint as Associate Dean of Fine Arts, Higgins eventually left York to become founding Dean of the Arts at Wesleyan before his tragically early death in 1984.

Sankaran eventually took over leadership of Indian music studies at York, while continuing his own international performing career as percussion soloist and accompanist. Once adapted to the Canadian teaching situation, he became an integral contributor both to undergraduate musicianship courses and to graduate studies in ethnomusicology, while authoring several textbooks on traditional Indian methods of rhythmic training. A diligent and valued academic colleague, Professor Sankaran's unique communicative skill, both in the classroom and on the concert stage, earned him frequent praise as "a cultural treasure." Regarded as the model of a pure classical Carnatic virtuoso, *sangita kalanidhi*, his regular appearances in India and around the world have assured him the highest professional recognition. In addition, he has found or created numerous opportunities to connect and collaborate with leading artists from various Asian, Western, and other non-Western traditions. Over the years, Trichy Sankaran has proven to be just as potently poly-musical as Higgins was, though in different ways.

## XI

When selecting the first contingent of faculty for York's new Music Department, it was clear just filling slots or covering areas wasn't good enough. We needed people who themselves embodied and exemplified the breadth and connectedness of the art we would be inviting our students to share. Happily, there was a wide circle of colleagues and friends in Canada, the UK, and the US to whom I could turn for advice. I also expected every potential candidate would:

- have more than one kind of musical expertise to contribute to the mix;
- have a performing specialty to show and possibly teach;

- relate comfortably to areas of knowledge beyond their own;
- be aware of and curious about unfamiliar musical practices and traditions;
- have active research interests;
- be qualified for fulltime appointment and tenurable.

A good example of what we were looking for was the first senior appointee to the York Music Department, Peggie Sampson, formerly the featured viola da gamba soloist of the Manitoba Consort. She set to work immediately, joining us in seeking out and assembling the special instruments and other material resources needed for Early Music ensembles (all eventually sold or given away when a new chairman took over). By the mid-'70s, the majority of York's music students were actively involved in performance, either in Gary Crighton's Renaissance Wind Band, or playing viol consort music with Peggie, or singing in an Early Music choir. At one point, eight or nine of them declared their interest in becoming "viola da gamba majors." Professor Sampson brought needed stability and balance to our founding faculty cohort of thirty-somethings. Her keen intelligence, professionalism, congeniality, and mature perspective were much appreciated by all of us.

At first, it took a good deal of purposeful digging (and inevitably a few false starts) to find the right people and persuade them to join our upstart venture. Soon enough the chair changed occupants, some of our stars moved on or retired but others arrived, and things gradually became more predictable, more like music departments elsewhere.

Since I was there from the beginning, I've often had to shoulder the blame for whatever people found distasteful or threatening about the York program. In retrospect, however, it seems obvious that its apparent uniqueness, if any, was due rather to the fact that our founding faculty all landed there at around the same time, not long after absorbing what was already going on at some of America's most musically ambitious universities, and ready to share that with a generation of young Canadians who were eager to catch up and not threatened by an endless bloody war.

Readers can judge for themselves how well we succeeded in creating a diverse collegium at liftoff by consulting the tabular overview below. (Curiously enough, three of the luminaries who joined us as colleagues years later through no effort of mine — Professors Diamond, Mott, and Tenney — had also been on my initial target list.) It's truly amazing how much positive energy and dedication was mobilized for the long haul ahead by that first faculty contingent, and those who came afterward. I still take pride in having lit the fuse.

| NAME              | BEFORE JOINING                       | PERFORMS                                  | MAIN INTERESTS                                  | AREA FOCUS                                  | RAISED IN          | DURING OR AFTER YORK                     |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|--------------------|--|
| Sterling Beckwith | SUNY Buffalo, Cornell, Juilliard     | Vocal soloist, Choral conductor           | Musicology, Education, Computer-aided composing | Russian & Soviet culture, Musicianship      | New York           | Founding Chair of Music (York U)         |
| Garry Crighton    | U Toronto, Toronto Consort           | Bassoon, Trombone                         | Historical wind instruments, Renaissance Band   | Europe                                      | Ontario            | U Münster (Germany)                      |
| John Gittins      | U Chicago, Brandeis U, UBC           | Piano                                     | Jazz theory                                     | Bebop                                       |                    | Social Sciences Division (York U)        |
| Jon Higgins       | Wesleyan U                           | Carnatic solo singer, Baritone recitalist | Music of India, Voice, Musicianship             | South India                                 | Massachusetts      | Dean of Arts, Wesleyan U                 |
| Alan Lessem       | U Illinois, Cambridge U, U Cape Town | Cello, piano                              | 20th century music & culture                    | Europe                                      | South Africa       | Associate Dean of Fine Arts (York U)     |
| David Lidov       | Columbia U                           | Piano                                     | Theory, Composition                             | Semiotics of music                          | New York           | Associate Dean of Fine Arts (York U)     |
| James McKay       | U Chicago, U Toronto                 | Bassoon, Winds, Orch. conductor           | Performance, Early Music                        | Acoustics                                   | Ontario            | Performance Head, Western U              |
| David Mercer      | U Toronto                            | Recorders, Winds                          | Early Music, Musicology                         | Europe, Australia                           | Melbourne          | U Tasmania                               |
| Steven Otto       | U Washington, Wesleyan U             | Koto, Kolintang                           | Ethnomusicology, Sonic Healing                  | Philippines, Japan, Greece, Cdn. immigrants | Oregon             |  |
| David Rosenboom   | U Illinois, NYU                      | Violin, Piano                             | Composition, live electronic music              | Biofeedback, Interdisciplinary performance  | Illinois           | Dean of Music, CalArts 1990-2020         |
| Peggie Sampson    | U Manitoba, Edinburgh                | Viols, Cello                              | Early Music, Musicianship                       | Europe                                      | Scotland, UK       | Wilfrid Laurier U                        |
| Trichy Sankaran   | U Madras                             | Carnatic concert percussionist            | Music of India, Rhythm theory, Composition      | World Drums (cross-cultural)                | Tamil Nadu (India) | Sangita Kalanidhi, Chennai Music Academy |
| Casey Sokol       | CalArts, SUNY Buffalo                | Piano, S. Indian drums                    | Free improvisation, Musicianship                | Avant-garde, Carnatic music                 | New York           |  |
| Robert Witmer     | U Illinois, Vancouver Symphony       | Jazz Bass                                 | Ethnomusicology, Jazz Studies                   | Cdn. Indigenous, Afro-American, Caribbean   | Ontario            |  |

Table 1. York University Music Department — Original Faculty Members (1968-1972).

## XII

The current global pandemic must have taught us how much we need music in our lives, in how many ways it has become part of what we know and who we are. No doubt our successors too will feel impelled to keep in tune with their times, while exploring new ways to teach and practice their art. Their work may well prove more challenging, in the ominously uncertain years ahead, than what we faced when starting from scratch at York. Permit me to salute them by echoing the reassuring call of York University's original Latin motto, *Tentanda Via*. Yes, the road ahead still does deserve to be tried, and trod! 🍁

## References

- Beckwith, Sterling. 1969. A. D. Kaastal'skii (1856-1926) and the Quest for a Native Russian Choral Style. PhD dissertation, Cornell University.
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