

It's hard to play "Hymn Toons" well!

By Gordon Laird

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I am blowing my clarinet in its lowest register, creating beautiful, deep tones. The number we are playing is "Abide with Me" and the row of 14 clarinets are in unison and employing "staggered breathing". The effect is spell-binding on us, and perhaps on the audience as well. We make an effect like the deep sounds emitted from the 32 foot pipes on a big church organ.

Mr. Arthur Delamont, the leader of the Kitsilano Boys Band, was born in Hereford, England. He retained some of his early accent, so when he called Hymns "Hymn Toons" that may have been the reason. Mr. D. had an upbringing within the Salvation Army, and was sensitive to Church music. The 50 piece band often played in Churches. I remember one evening service at Crosby United Church in Kitsilano, the whole band jammed onto the small stage area for the evening service. I am sure we played "Abide with Me".

Mr. D.'s often repeated phrase was: "Any band can play marches. Only a good band that can play a "Hymn Toon" well.

We learned "staggered breathing" very early in our experience with the band. That means not breathing at the end of phrases as expected, but to find another, unique place to breathe. It also meant that we had to listen to our colleagues on the clarinet stands very carefully, so as to choose a place to breathe different from theirs.

"Abide With Me", the way we played it, started out with the band in harmony together: the trumpets, the trombones, the deep brass, the clarinets in a higher octave, and the saxophones, all harmonizing while carefully listening to all the other sections.

When we began the second verse, the clarinets played the melody, in unison, in their deep chalumeau register. Halfway through the verse a very young member of the trumpet section stood up and very quietly played a beautiful solo for 4 bars. This trumpeter was carefully selected by Mr. D. for his purity, almost virginal-sounding tone, and he played his part simply, quietly and effectively. On

the fourth bar the whole band swelled up to a very loud harmonious volume for 2 bars, and then ended the piece, in harmony and quietly. Jimmy Pattison played the solo in our band.

This piece has affected me, and all the other members of the band ever since. I love low tones anyway. It feels like I have had a good back rub when I am immersed in low tones, from trombones and euphoniums, stringed basses, and, of course, clarinets playing in the chalumeau register.

I don't think any of the boys, including me, were particularly religious. But we had been introduced to "Soul Music". It was not the words to "Abide with Me" which appealed to us. We did not know the words!

The music, the melody gave us a sense of "Deep Harmony", which was the name of another piece we played in similar style.

Playing in Mr. D's band brought such a variety of rich experiences to the "Kits Boys" that we each owe him a life-long tribute. This is my Tribute to Mr. D!