

My Conducting Career - Part III

by Gordon Laird

Saturday morning I had an early lunch and left for South Burnaby United Church in order to be very early for the Conducting Workshop. (April 28, 2001). I made a list of what to take with me which included my clarinet and sax, my black music stand and a water bottle. I didn't know what to expect. It was possible that some of the participants were so keen as to be practicing beforehand. I had never played with this group before.

I arrived at the Church at 12:00 noon for a 1:30 start. There was almost nobody there, so I checked with the Minister, the Rev. Ian Macdonald, who was on the telephone. We knew each other very well, as he was the Minister who presided at the funeral for Dr. David Lochhead. I was warmly greeted, but he looked very puzzled when I asked about the Conducting Workshop. He knew nothing about it! I was visualizing it being in the fine sanctuary, but that was to be occupied with 2 or 3 weddings!

I didn't have the official invitation with me, to prove we were supposed to be at this church, so began phoning home to ask Marilyn to look it up. But by then someone had informed Ian that the workshop was booked for the Church Hall building across the way. So we went and checked it out, and then conferred with the booking schedule and, indeed, there was the booking, in the name of the contact person I had been in e-mail contact with. So it was just a matter of waiting!

In the next half-hour a woman with a violin case showed up and tried to get into the Church hall. I was able to keep her from going home in frustration. Then a fellow drove up with a carful of Tympanies. Again, I was able to inform him it was the right place.

About ½ hour before start time a woman arrived at the front door of the hall with a key and we now could all bring in our instruments and begin to set up the chairs into an orchestral semi-circle. A woman brought in some music and put it on the table, and also began unloading refreshments, and

taking money for this event. I paid my fee and also joined The West Coast Amateur Musicians' Society for a nominal fee.

I assembled my clarinet and sax and noted that there were two other players who had both clarinet and sax. They had "A" clarinets as well, which is something I have never owned. In addition there was one other clarinet player. We never did find all the music we needed. The saxophone part for the first suite never showed up.

Clyde Mitchell introduced himself and began talking in a very personable and interesting way about a handful of batons he had with him. He was obviously comfortable with people, especially with musicians, and he did his best to set us at ease and to demystify the subject of conducting. I liked him very much.

We were in a small church hall. It was just us, there was no audience. There might have been 30 musicians, predominantly strings, together with percussion and some winds. There was a fine flute section, and good oboes. There seemed to be no trumpets, very few brass players. From time to time we clarinets were playing trumpet music.

Clyde Mitchell until recently was the assistant conductor of the Vancouver Symphony, under the direction of Maestro Sergiu Comissiona. When Maestro Bramwell Tovey recently became the new conductor of the Vancouver Symphony, Clyde was let go in favour of Maestra Tania Miller, the first time a woman has had this position in Vancouver.

Clyde now is active in the community music circles and has founded his own orchestra, called Sinfonia.

Clyde conduct us through all the movements of "L'ARLÉSIENNE": the four movements of suite 1 and then the four movements of suite 2.

The orchestra sounded fairly good, and I am beginning to really enjoy this selection of music, which has been a big part of my life for two weeks! A woman plays the wonderful saxophone solo in the Intermezzo of Suite 2. Excellent. I was envious!

This took us until 3:00 p.m. at which time we broke for coffee, juice, fruit and cookies. The next portion was to be devoted to a list of volunteer conductors, including myself!

The first volunteer was the concert-master, the lead violinist. Clyde began working with him, correcting him with humour about the way he used his hands as if he were attacking the front row, getting him to stand up straighter. With a lot of interruptions our first volunteer conducted most of one movement. About 15 minutes.

Then followed a young man, a violinist, very shy, but with obvious talent. Clyde would move right in on the volunteer conductor, standing behind them if need be, and whisper in their ear. Whatever it took for us to have the confidence to begin leading the orchestra. We gave the young man a round of applause.

He was followed by a woman in her early twenties, who is a fine flutist, and who had just played a great solo. She knew nothing about conducting, and had to be shown that 3/4 time is conducted down, right and up! This workshop was that basic. There was no prerequisite! She began to do quite well, and we gave her a round of applause.

It was my turn. I had been reviewing my choice of conducting the Carillon section of the first suite, as I saw he was wanting to move onto the second suite, although would have let me do whatever I wanted. So I chose the Intermezzo section of suite 2, which had that fine saxophone solo. I motioned to the woman who had played it before, for her to play it again. (She had passed the music to me)

I found it easy to introduce myself and the selection we were playing, in a loud enough voice for everyone to hear. Ministerial training helped in this area!

The Intermezzo begins with a theme in triple forte, 4/4 time. Clyde reminded me that the proper sequence for 4/4 is downbeat, left, across to the right, and upbeat. After a few bars he stopped me and reminded me

that I was bouncing as I conducted! I responded, "Yes, I am right into this!" I then moderated my style.

The volume drops to double piano for the saxophone solo, which my new friend did very well. After a few more stops and advice I brought them through to a three note conclusion, and then did a strong cutoff movement. He caught me on that and said not to conclude so harshly, but to think of the word Pizza!

(It has no T at the end. It is pizz aaaaa.)

So I tried again, and also mouthed the word "pizzaa".

I got my round of applause!

We carried on with another 4-6 volunteers. With one, who was bouncing his knees, Clyde knelt behind him and hung onto his legs. It was amazing, because he had brought this to a very human level, and any expected stuffiness was completely missing. Wonderful!

I took my place at the clarinet/saxophone stand and resumed playing. The rest of the volunteers had their turn: all ages from 20 to 80, and both sexes. The last volunteer conductor was the woman who had done the most work in setting up this workshop. She also conducted a piece that had a fine saxophone solo in it, and this time the woman saxophonist passed it to me. I had my opportunity to soar on the simple but effective solo.

Then it was all over.

I had a word with Clyde and asked him what I could do next to continue my learning. He recommended playing different instruments, getting into small combos, doing a lot of reading, buying records. I am doing all of those things, except playing more instruments. I have recently learned the flute, but he wanted me to learn trumpet and strings! I asked him about courses, and he suggested that he often teaches a course in conducting at our local college.

In summary: I did not fall down. I did not cry! I was not deflected from my desire to conduct. I had been encouraged. I was not alone!

Thanks for being with me in this.

I have some more stories to write:

2001 I started the Brock House Summer Band, which I conducted

2002 I was asked to be the Conductor of the Brock House Big Band, and agreed when asked by the former Conductor

2008 I resigned after conducting this band for 5 ½ years