

Arts & Entertainment

Forsyth trombones music dept.

interview by Wendy Crispin

Students in the Department of Music at the University of Alberta don't always take the pride in their Department that they should. Since the Department is small, students have a sense of living in the shadow of the big Eastern and U.S. music schools, whose graduates they compete with for jobs. In fact, our music department boasts musicians and scholars of international reputation, representing an enviable human resource.

Dr. Malcolm Forsyth, a full professor in the Department, has been at the U of A for over two decades. He currently teaches courses in aural skills, conducting and orchestration, and conducts the U of A Orchestral Winds. He has also taught trombone, composition, theory and 20th century music history.

As well as teaching, Forsyth has performed and conducted extensively — he was principal trombone in the ESO from 1973 to 1979, and his conducting engagements have included the ESO, the Calgary Philharmonic, and the Alberta Ballet.

Recently Forsyth has devoted himself mainly to composition, and he is among

"Basic musicianship has been scandalously neglected..."

Canada's most successful composers. His pieces have been performed by the Canadian Brass, Maureen Forrester, and the Edmonton and Cape Town symphony orchestras, to name but a few. He is presently writing a piece for chamber orchestra, to be premiered at the Guelph Spring Festival in May, under the baton of Simon Streatfield.

Forsyth is a man of strong convictions about many aspects of the music world. In the past, he has spoken out on subjects ranging from personal artistic integrity to the defective programming policy of orchestras.

In a recent interview, he spoke about the state of musical training in our schools and universities. He says: "Basic musicianship has been just scandalously neglected since the Second World War, not just here but in practically every school in the country. What could people have been thinking of, to let it degenerate to the extent that it has... this has always been a

major concern of mine." Forsyth, as a student in his native country of South Africa, "because they're a bit behind in some ways, sort of in a 30's time warp, I got the kind of old-school music education that could be had before the Second World War." That means a solid grounding in all aspects of music: theory, history, composition, performance, and so on. He credits his success to the flexibility that is afforded by this type of background: "I could do all these things because I was a musician, not just a performer or writer or whatever... I know that a lot of my opportunities as a composer came because as a conductor and a player, I knew how to write things down [properly]."

Today, needless complexity of musical scores discourages performances of much new music. Forsyth blames this on two things: first, what he calls "the cult of obfuscation, a kind of psychological-academic malaise that seemed to infect everything [in the arts] after WWII: the notion that if it's easy it can't be worthwhile, if it's understandable, accessible it must be *kitsch*, and second, the pressure in North American schools to 'specialize' very early. When you're composing, if you haven't got that background, you have to reinvent the wheel every time you write a piece... people have this feeling that they have to wing themselves away from performing as soon as possible, otherwise they can't call themselves real composers... when they haven't even learned the ropes yet... Now I don't mean dilettantism; on the contrary... an all-around musician is *not* a dilettante; it's a very important distinction to make, because a lot of people are of the opinion that if you do more than one thing, then you're a dilettante."

Difficulties like these are daunting to many aspiring musicians. But it is just these concerns that make flexibility crucial for the classical musician today, and which Forsyth aims to address with his reforms in basic musicianship programs in the Department of Music. As he sees it, "If you're only a performer, that's all you can do, and if some conductor decides he doesn't like your sound, or the color of your eyes, or you break your teeth... what are you going to do?"

"There are thousands of things for you to do as a musician in society if you can only pick them up and do them, because you're a good musician, and our program has been geared toward producing people who are capable in this way... we aren't going to fill Carnegie hall with soloists, we aren't that kind of school," says Forsyth, but points out the many strong points about the music program, including theory, composition and ethnomusicology, a very varied and unusual selection of concert offerings (about 200 each year), and the



Kevin Law

Dr. Malcolm Forsyth of the U of A Department of Music emphasizes diversity to give his students an edge.

development of "a very good standard in basic musicianship."

Plainly, when it is represented by musicians of such uncommon dedication and integrity as Dr. Forsyth, the Department of Music at the U of A has a great deal to offer.

Although music students in Canada also take a wide range of music subjects, the end result is often more like thorough confusion than thorough grounding. Forsyth believes the problem is lack of time; the rush to specialize. "The shortness of courses puts an enormous emphasis on the teaching process, but not the learning process... everything is bite-sized, there's no challenge, no time to figure out just exactly what it is you're supposed to be learning."

One indication of his own success as a teacher is the professional success of his trombone students, many of whom have secured hard-to-obtain positions in symphony orchestras — in spite of stiff American competition. Forsyth believes that his emphasis of musicianship over "merely

correct technique" has given his students the edge they need to compete with "assembly-line-produced players."

Though he has composed for a great variety of ensembles, Forsyth's real 'voice' has been the symphony orchestra. It is a well-publicized fact that Canada's orchestras are in real trouble (recall the Vancouver SO's near demise). Does he think the downfall of the orchestra is inevitable?

"The orchestra nowadays is caught between a rock and a hard place," says Forsyth, "the only way they can survive is to play popular music, and if they do that they're not being an orchestra, that's not what they're supposed to do... Orchestras in Canada are in a mess, financially they can't make it so they play more and more 'pops.' I think it's hopeless... It's very sad, but everything has to change... the symphony orchestra came into existence 250 years ago, and it proliferated into something that was as much of a social phenomena, an extension of today's social system... it's just dying because society is what it is."

This seems a hard judgement, but it is not one Forsyth passes easily, or without regret: "I love the symphony orchestra, I've spent all these years learning how to write for it, I understand it very, very intimately; but, you know, the artist always has to go beyond."

The dollars-and-cents side of music making affects the University as well. The Encounters faculty concert series (which Forsyth coordinates) has been undermined by friction with the musician's union. Forsyth sees the problem in this way: "The union exists to see that musicians are not exploited unfairly. The University's basic premise is something else; to spread knowledge, experience, to provide a forum for experimentation, creative work... these are incompatible."

Life's a beach and then you die

Beaches

Famous Players Westmount

review by Alexandra Parr

Beaches is Touchstone Pictures' latest vehicle for the considerable talents of Bette Midler. However, at least until the end, it is also a funny, touching and very enjoyable movie. Although Barbara Hershey plays the part of WASP-ish Hillary Whitney almost to perfection, she cannot help but be overshadowed by the performance of Midler as entertainer C.C. Bloom; a character created for her. One could be excused for thinking that *Beaches* is really "The Bette Midler Story."

The movie begins on the Atlantic City boardwalk with Hillary and C.C. meeting and becoming instant friends, at age 11. The differences between the two girls are sharply outlined: C.C., a brazen red-haired show-biz expert, already smokes and swears at her overbearing mother. (The girl who plays this part not only looks *exactly* like a young Bette, but can really sing.) Hillary is prim and proper and oh-so-well-bred. Oh, for the days when you could meet someone totally opposite to yourself and build a promising friendship in a single afternoon!

The girls correspond for several years only through letters, and not until Hillary graduates from Stanford Law School and "escapes" her stuffy, snobby San Francisco life and shows up at C.C.'s New York

doorstep are they reunited — with surprising success. Call me a cynic but it seems unlikely that ten years of letters would be enough to bond the women like it does. However, it makes a nice fantasy, and the two become room-mates, pursuing struggling careers. C.C.'s talents are slowly becoming recognized; success is realized when she meets John Pearce (John Heard) and performs the lead in a very psychedelic musical for his Falcon Theatre. After that, as C.C.'s career is launched, her friendship with Hillary dampens. Both fall in love with John, and although beautiful Hillary