

Douglas Start

UNB's choirmaster and past bandmaster

by Elizabeth Smith

One of the great university traditions has been broken at UNB but few people seem to notice. The school band, a prominent feature at sports events and academic functions at most universities, is defunct at UNB.

A couple of years ago part of the fun at football games was to guess which tune the band was trying to play. Later on in the year they had remarkably improved and kept the excitement up during breaks in basketball games. Douglas Start, who was director of the band for many years, remembers with discomfort the performances at football games.

"Most of the members of the band didn't want to play at ball games and they would show their feelings by not showing up. I don't blame them. They just said to themselves, 'I can't play properly so why should I turn out and make a fool of myself'. But out of twenty-eight to thirty members, perhaps nine would show up. I was loath to stand in front of this combination and call it the UNB band. Sometimes it was so bad that they could stay if they wanted, but I was leaving and taking the music with me.

"One year the athletic department decided they really wanted a marching band. Some of our players could hardly blow standing up, let alone marching. I said unless we could do this respectfully we wouldn't do it. Saturday morning I called a marching band practice to which we got five stalwarts!"

the death of the band

Things gradually picked up during the fall and by basketball season most of the band was turning out and enjoying their performances in the gym. The death of the band came not because of lack of interest, there was always between thirty and thirty-five members, but through lack of enthusiasm. Practices rarely drew more than nine players. Mr. Start would prepare the music for what he thought would be present but a completely different group would arrive and last minute changes would have to be made in the music. It finally became obvious that conflicting schedules meant that there was no time agreeable to them all, and the band was dissolved.

As Director of Music, Mr. Start now has three small groups which play for their own enjoyment. On Sunday afternoons a string orchestra consisting of faculty members, townsfolk and students meets. There are five or six violins, one viola and one cello in this group. He also instructs a small brass group and a small reed group.



photo by De Freitas

Douglas Start is a British ex-military man who has been teaching instrumental music at UNB for ten years, as well as conducting the campus choir.

Mr. Start puts most emphasis on the choir which this year consists of about three dozen townspeople, faculty, faculty wives and students. In previous years, the choir has suffered from lack of male voices, but there are four or five tenors and six bass this year. The choir meets at Memorial Hall every Monday night from 8:30 to 10:30. They have a large repertoire with a wide variety of music, from madrigals to folk songs, covering all tastes and all periods.

Although the choir sing together just for their own enjoyment, they put on two public concerts a year, one in the fall and the other in the spring. These performances are accompanied by a pianist and the string orchestra.

Douglas Start also teaches anyone who is eager to learn brass or reed instruments. He says that he very often gets graduate students who have a lot of enthusiasm at the beginning of the year, but drop out when they find that playing an instrument takes much more time consuming practice than they realized. Mr. Start stresses that in teaching any of the instrumentalists, he always has to keep in mind that their interest in extra-curricular and primarily pleasure. They are not trying to reach great heights as musicians. Interest and ability with instruments has fallen off in the last few years, and Mr. Start thinks the provincial school system is mainly responsible.

"The Programme of Equal Opportunity cancelled all the instrumental music in the schools. The average person coming here with an interest in music has only one or two years experience. He knows his limitations, but has only a certain amount of time to devote to practice. People expect a university band to be one stage better than the high school, but this doesn't necessarily follow. I try to find music that sounds good but is fairly easy to play".

There is at present no credit course in music given on this campus. Mr. Start believes that a music program falling under the proposed Fine Arts Department would be beneficial for students having an interest in music.

"When I first came to UNB in 1961 I realized that music was simply extra-curricular. I accepted this thinking but I thought attitudes would change and hopefully music would take a larger part in campus life. If a Fine Arts Department came into being, courses in music history or music appreciation might come into being. A theoretical course in music would give a little broader, rounder education, making use of the facilities we already have.



photo by De Freitas

Although the response for music instruction is quite large at the beginning of the year it drops off as students realize the time demand, says Mr. Start.

"This kind of course would not be in conflict with the Conservatories at Mount A or Acadia."

A course in music would probably stimulate interest in music and encourage budding musicians to spend more time in practice. This might lead to the formation of a university band willing to get together and practice regularly.

the Royal Military School of Music

Douglas Start studied music at Neville Hall, the Royal Military School of Music. In this course, as a junior a student spent one year studying instruments. In the intermediate stage for senior non-commissioned officers, a little more theory was taught in addition to instruments, for an eighteen month period. For the final three or four years as a senior only fifteen or twenty students from the four or five hundred applicants are accepted. Once accepted there is a six month probationary period of further testing before the course for student conductors and student bandmasters begins.

After graduation Mr. Start served with the Cameron Highlanders in Scotland. He returned to Neville Hall to act as an instructor in instrumental and theory for a class of intermediate students. After two years he rejoined the Highlanders and had posts in Egypt, Germany, Austria and Britain before coming to Canada in 1955.

Originally Mr. Start and his family went to Halifax where Mr. Start worked in the formation of the Canadian Black Watch band. In 1958 he was posted to Gagetown, and when the position of Director of Music became available at UNB, Douglas Start submitted an application.

The Starts had decided they would like to stay in Canada for many reasons including, "At that time society in Britain was much more structured than here. There was much more freedom and opportunity for a young man in Canada. Then too, we were moving around a lot and I wanted my son to get some steady schooling."

Douglas Start has been at UNB for ten years and though the university has grown tremendously, the position of Music Director has changed very little. Mr. Start has the plans to enlarge the facilities for the study of music in keeping with a progressive university, but lacks administration support and finances. Perhaps the administration will soon wake up to the needs of the university in the field of fine arts.



photo by De Freitas

Mr. Start thinks a Fine Arts Department at UNB would incorporate a theoretical music class, thus establishing a firm basis for music on campus.