

Canadian music topic of series

by Bruce Cookson

"I'm not a musicologist or a crusader, I just want to open the gates. Even little nations have composers that everyone knows, and so does Canada and they're worth knowing, most of them..."

Dr. Alfred Strombergs is talking about his recent study of 19th and 20th century Canadian music, currently highlighted in a lecture-concert series in Convocation Hall.

Unlike folk music, which is already well-documented, the *genre* "was really virgin territory," says Strombergs, who began his search for Canadian art and popular song two years ago during a sabbatical. Looking for teaching material, he travelled to eastern Canada, where he talked with former colleagues at the University of Toronto. They suggested sources, and Strombergs began his six-month search through Canadian archives and libraries.

The National Archives in Ottawa was his primary source of material, but Strombergs also made use of the CBC's central library as well as publishing companies and university libraries across the country. As he sifted through the voluminous collections, his search for teaching material turned into the first serious attempt at analysing and collecting early art and popular song.

Although the research was time-consuming, his patience was rewarded with enough material for a lecture-concert series. "Much of it is not of high grade or value, sheet music of the ordinary kind, but you could never be sure by just dismissing all of it as so many others have done."

There was good music to be

found among the ordinary material, says Strombergs, and he cites as examples the music of 19th century composers such as Calixa Lavalee (composer of "O Canada"), Alexis Constant and Charles A.E. Harriss. Strombergs also discovered "Rush to the Klondike," written by John Diefenbaker's father. Aside from its author, the most interesting feature of the song was its copyright — registered with the Department of Agriculture in 1897.

Many early composers were immigrants influenced by European tastes whose music was "very derivative" and "sentimentally sweet," Strombergs says. As the mid-19th century approached, however, composers began to identify more closely with Canada and as a result, "Canadian content really appears first in the 1840 s."

These early song-writers were to be found mainly in Montreal, Toronto, Kingston and Hamilton. They supported themselves as church organists, band-masters, piano teachers and as practising musicians. Strombergs says the songs they wrote could be divided into three main categories; lyric love poetry, patriotic songs and songs of religious sentiment.

The composers who worked with lyric love poetry at first set their music to the work of English and German poets but as the 19th century passed, they turned to Canadians such as Bliss Carmen, Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott. Patriotic songs were written in English and French, but where the former sang of "inspirational and glory to the empire," the latter sang "more about their countryside, environ-



A vocalist is accompanied by pianist Dr. Strombergs.

photo Russ Sampson

ment and community."

One of the major differences between the 19th and 20th century composing has been the dichotomy of art and popular songs, says Strombergs. During the 19th century, art songs could also be entertaining but one of the characteristics of 20th century music is the "clear separation" between art and entertainment. Strombergs says that the influence of music halls, easier access to music publishers, and

the introduction of radios and phonographs are the culprits. They have "cheapened the public taste."

Strombergs also says, "We don't participate as much as people in the early 20th century. Sheet music was much more important then because live music was much more important. It had to fulfill the many functions now performed by the media. "Getting a song on the

piano was today's equivalent of getting a record or tape."

Strombergs says for the moment, his research into forgotten Canadian composers will be set aside. However, some spring lecture-concerts about modern and post World War I Canadian music are possible.

His second lecture-concert will be held Thursday in Convocation Hall at 8:00 p.m. Admission is free.

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