

ENTERTAINMENT

Classical music lives on campus

Interview by Mike Evans

I spent an hour recently with Professor Alfred Fisher, Associate Chairman of the Department of Music and head of the composition division within the department. Across his desk were scattered the various parts of a new work commissioned for the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra by the CBC, entitled *Warrior*. Professor Fisher has the fiery temperament sometimes associated with creative individuals, and after apparently meeting his challenge (he asked: "Just exactly what are you doing here, uh, what's your name?"), we settled down to an enjoyable and elucidating interview.

GATEWAY: First, what can you tell me about the composition program within the Music Department here at the U of A?

FISHER: We offer undergraduate and graduate programs in music composition. For the undergraduate program, the first year is spent meeting the requirements of a liberal arts degree plus additional courses in music. The bulk of the remaining years are spent studying music history, theory, analysis, composition, the playing of an instrument and Arts and Sciences electives.

GATEWAY: What kind of employment opportunities can graduates of the program expect?

FISHER: Many of our graduates go on to teach, some enter into the advertising world, and a few attempt to survive just on the strength of their composing.

GATEWAY: How do you interact with the local professional community?

FISHER: We deal more with it than any other department on campus. Several members of the ESO teach for us and some of our students play for them as well as with other chamber music groups in Edmonton.

This department has a national, and to a lesser but still notable degree, international

reputation in the musci community as well as fulfilling our obligation to this university.

I'm especially grateful to the ESO. They are especially sensitive to the needs and developments of contemporary serious music, largely due to the influence of Uri Mayer. He deserves a lot of support for taking such a courageous stance with respect to the rest of Canada where, it seems, contemporary music is mostly despised.

GATEWAY: For the most part, when musically uneducated people like myself think of modern orchestral music, we think of how Stravinsky differs from the big three of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, in his use of discordant harmonies, etc. Can you comment on how modern composition differs from the more familiar?

FISHER: That's a good question, but I think it's important to note that even in the case of Stravinsky the public is lagging behind. If you ask the man in the street what he knows of Stravinsky he might mention the three ballets: *Rite of Spring*, *Firebird Suite* and *Petrouchka*. But all three of these works were completed before 1913. Stravinsky died, when, 1971?

I sometimes feel like... You know *Gulliver's Travels*, when he's in the land of the Brobdingnagians, the giants? I feel like I'm sitting on a huge tit. Clutching with disgust the breast of a huge philistine. Sitting on a huge distended nipple. I'm expected to sit on its bosom? (Snort).

The attitude to contemporary music fostered primarily by the mass media is one of blind ignorance - not even the faintest glimmerings of a primitive awareness. And that is difficult for those of us with a serious commitment to serious music.

GATEWAY: How do you account for that?

FISHER: There's been a breakdown in edu-



Photo Bill St. John

Campus performances give the rare opportunity of hearing original compositions. Above: Joachim Segger plays piece composed by U of A's Manus Sasonkin at Con. Hall recital last Nov. 22.

cation. We no longer produce people capable of critical independent thought and reflection. And the educational institutions are now wholly responsible though they must shoulder some of the blame. The condition has been aggravated by the mass media.

The mass media are also responsible for the dislocation of serious music from the contemporary sphere. There have been similar dislocations in history, one in 1600 and another in 1750, so this is not new, but we have not re-integrated with the rest of society as successfully as the other arts, we've lost the bulk of our audience. The advent of radio, television and the long-playing record have prevented contact between serious composers and the public.

GATEWAY: How do you respond to the new music being written in the pop circle?

FISHER: In pop music there is no new music. It's all atrophied old music. I open *the Journal*, rarely actually, but let's suppose some Thursday, and I'm confronted with this stupid, inane, vulgar thing called "Pulse." I don't, however, see anything "new." There is no recognition of the place of art in life or in education in the media.

GATEWAY: How does contemporary orchestral composition reflect the movements in the visual arts, like cubism, surrealism and expressionism, or in theatre, like Theatre of the Absurd or Theatre of Cruelty?

FISHER: Well, composers were subject to the same influences, namely the World Wars, advent of mechanization, individual alienation, that caused those innovations. Particularly in centers like Paris there was a kind of

mutual inspiration between men like Debussy, Satie and Ravel and the visual artists. And I myself consider all of my own music dramatic...i.e. inseparable from literature and the experience of literature.

Music, by its very nature, like any other art form, must be confessional. Like other arts, it tells us about ourselves. There must be a reason for slaving over these silly dots and lines. It takes too much energy, too much effort to be sufficiently trained to be able to develop an individual voice.

GATEWAY: Before we finish, I wanted to ask how you feel about jazz as a twentieth century phenomenon that differs from classical music. Comments?

FISHER: Well, firstly, in any form of popular music, and jazz is popular music, the focus is on presentation not content. Real musicality, multi-dimensionality is, I think, restricted to classical music. But that does not lessen the respect I have for jazz and jazz musicians. The same technical mastery is required for jazz as for classical music and I appreciate that and am open to developments in jazz. It's just not what I do.

GATEWAY: Incidentally, why *Warrior*?

FISHER: I don't like to talk about my titles. They usually come last and sometimes not at all. Listen to it first, then we can talk about it.

Presentations from the Music Department which will include works of contemporary composers are January 20, February 3, March 17, 19 and 24. All performances are in Convocation Hall at 8:00 pm and tickets are available from the Music Department main office, 3-82.

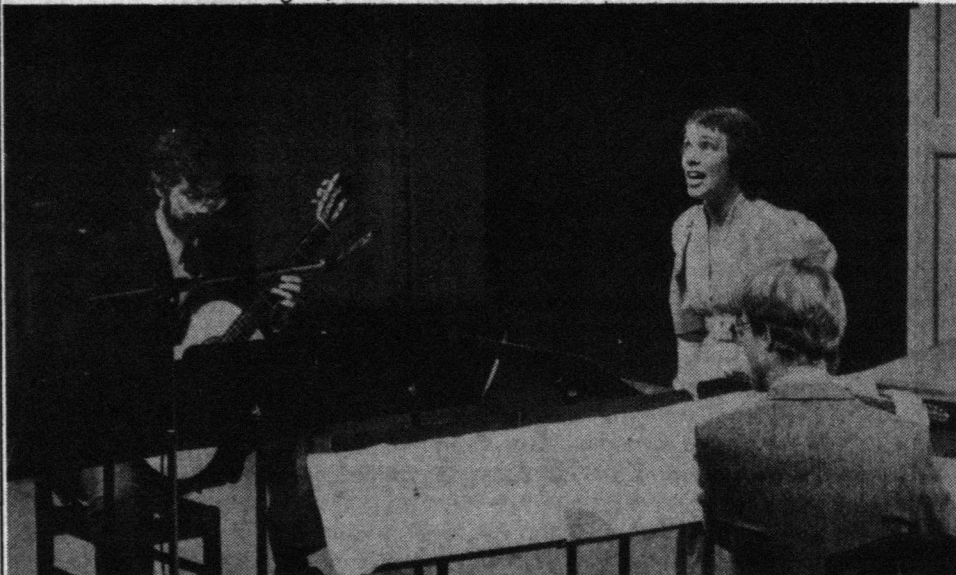


Photo Bill St. John

Elsie Hepburn is accompanied by John Armstrong on guitar and Steve Creighton on flute in John Armstrong's *Songy for Lyr*.

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by Don Teplyske

Finally! A winner of our sacred album prizes. Grant Winton answered a remarkable five of the eight questions asked last week. Grant can pick his albums up at the Gateway office, Rm. 282 SUB. This week, another feature is added to our little quiz. Hockey questions will be a semi-regular subject. Answer any or all of this week's questions, drop off your answers at the Gateway and you may win an incredible prize.

MUSIC

1. What band originally appeared under the name The Alan Price Combo?
2. On what record label did the Go-Go's debut single originally appear?
3. Who produced Ike and Tina Turner's classic album *River Deep, Mountain High*?

HOCKEY

4. During the Alberta Oilers first

season, who was their leading scorer?

5. Only two Buffalo Sabres have played over 1000 games with the team. Who are they?
6. Though always associated with the New York Islanders, Billy Smith did not enter the NHL with that team. What team did he originally play for?

TELEVISION

7. What was the name of the middle son on *My Three Sons*?
8. *Time Tunnel* starred Gidget's cute boyfriend. What is his name?
9. What was the name of the robot on *Lost in Space*?

Last Week's Answers

1. Anne Murray
2. "I Got YOu Babe"
3. Kirsty MacColl
4. *The Fantastic Voyage*
5. Alan Ladd
6. Tina Turner
7. Graham Kerr
8. Devo

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