

Malcolm Forsyth's *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* to premiere

Tales of love, trauma and donges

by John Charles

When Malcolm Forsyth's dramatic song *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* is premiered this Sunday it will be another step in the public career of an unusual Canadian composer

Forsyth, regarded by many as one of the nation's most talented and imaginative composers, wrote this work in 1979, and it's been sitting on the shelf ever since.

"I wrote it for contralto Maureen Forrester, at the instigation of Nick Pulos (the Edmonton Symphony violist)," Forsyth said, in his Music Department office. "She was quite enthusiastic, but CBC — who wanted to broadcast it — said they couldn't afford her fee, although they didn't even ask her about it!"

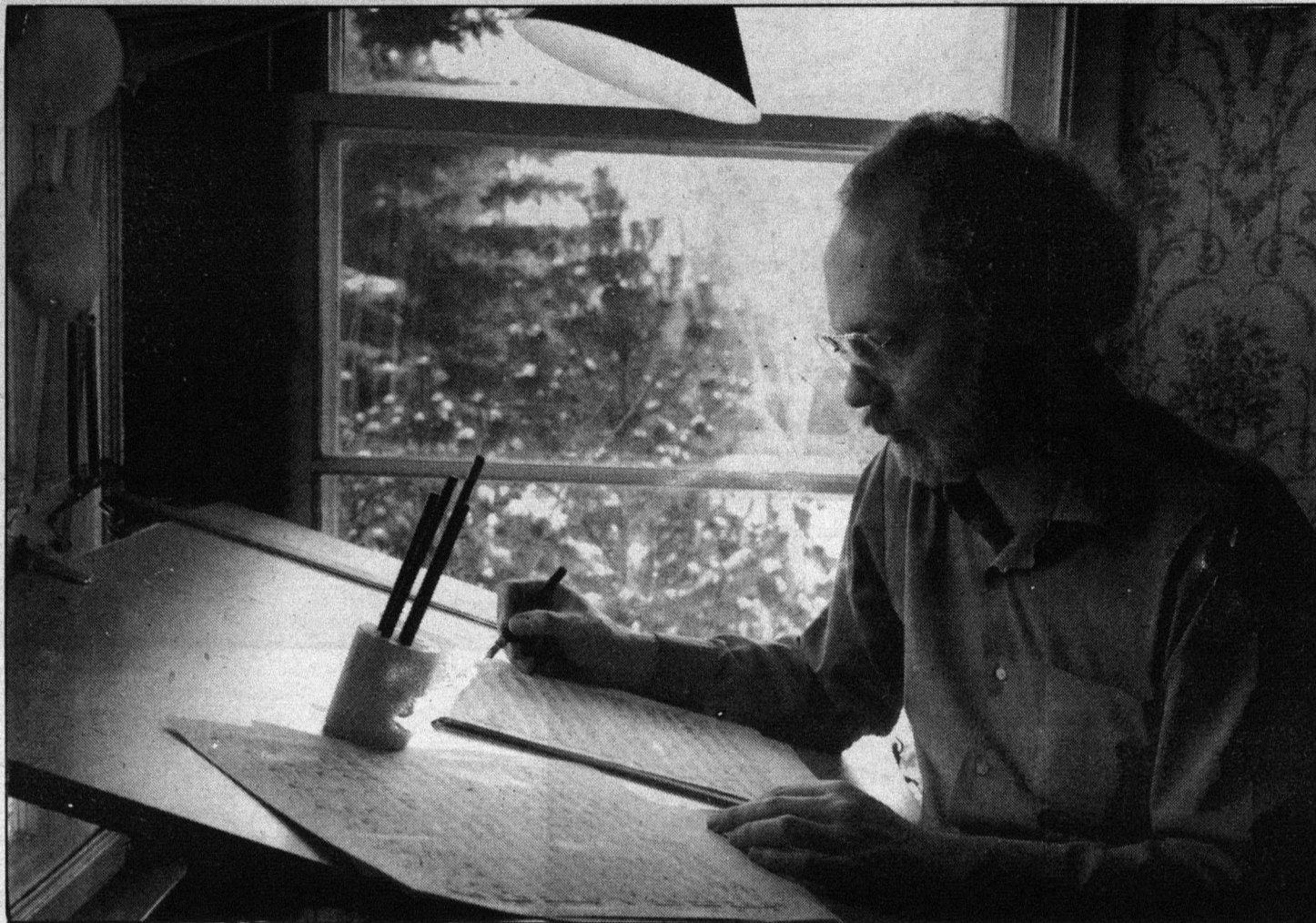
The 12-minute song will be performed by baritone Harold Wiens, violist Michael Bowie, and pianist Robert Stangeland at the fourth and final Encounters concert, Sunday evening at Convocation Hall.

It's a good example of the way Forsyth tailors his commissioned works for specific artists, in contrast to some deeply personal works he's composed as research to explore new sounds and structures, or to exorcise ghosts and traumas in works which he doesn't expect to have performed.

"Maureen has a terrific sense of humour," Forsyth pointed out, "and no inhibitions about making funny noises. The singer has to recite in a baby voice at times and, at one point, there's a chorus of creatures called Jumblies, for which I tried to create a weird, non-music sort of sound."

The poem, by Victorian poet Edward Lear, is a tragi-comic story of a dong (a mythic island creature) who loses his lady love and runs about trying to find her. Forsyth says the erotic analogy, which will amuse the audience, was absolutely unintended by Lear, who wrote it as nonsense verse for children.

"I've spoofed it quite a bit," the bearded musician said, "but there's a tragic element to the story too, and I've given the viola a long solo that contains serious development."



"I meant to go to the States, but I got sidetracked", composer Malcolm Forsyth.

Forsyth was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 50 years ago, and began composing while a student at University of Cape Town. Today he regards all his music up to 1968 as student work, though some of those works are played frequently.

His *Jubilee Overture* (1963) has been con-

ducted by ESO conductor Uri Mayer all across Canada; and is a crowd-pleaser. But Forsyth, while grateful, says: "I'd prefer to be known by different works. I was getting to know Janacek (the Czech composer) and his *Sinfonietta* at the time, and was at the beginning of my career as a professional trombonist, listening to all the brass music I could find - and you can tell." 1968 was a watershed year because Forsyth moved from Cape Town to Canada. It also marked the beginning of his mature creative phase, as embodied in the first movement of his *Symphony No. 1* (1968-72).

"It was written out of culture shock - out of the trauma of moving, not having a job," Forsyth not knowing when I'd get a job," Forsyth stated.

"I moved because there was no future for me since I was English by birth, and the government was over the moon in nationalism. You had to be an Afrikaner (white, of Dutch origin) to get anywhere. And I needed to get into North America where so much was happening."

Why not move to England?

Forsyth smiled. "I have a strange love-hate relationship with England," he said. "I'd abandoned all hope of convincing people there of anything. I meant to go to the States, but I got sidetracked."

Forsyth wound up in Edmonton, teaching at the U of A, and regards the move as entirely fortunate.

"If I'd settled in a big city - Montreal or

Toronto - I wouldn't have been able to form my own style. The peer pressure would have been too great, considering that I was uncertain and lacking confidence. Here I could develop in isolation."

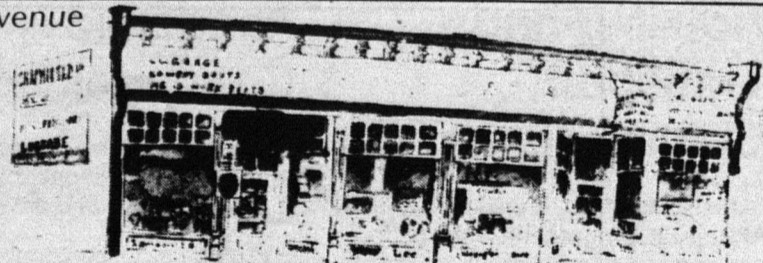
Forsyth recently spoke with a composer colleague from Montreal, who proudly mentioned there are 14 composers in Outremont, his district of the city. Forsyth shook his head in amazement.

If a new, more powerful voice was unleashed in the opening pages of the *First Symphony*, his first complete mature work was *Sketches from Natal* (1970), commissioned by CBC, and played by the Edmonton Symphony and other orchestras. Since 1980, all Forsyth's music has been commissioned: he doesn't have time to write other works, though he has a sabbatical coming up at end of term during which he'll do some personal composing.

Along with the dramatic and "lava-strewn" torrent of sound conveyed in his *Piano Concerto* (1975) is a new, ethereal stillness which has made his recent works both hypnotic and impressively accessible. *Atayoskewin* (1984), a suite for orchestra, received a remarkable ovation from the Edmonton Symphony audience when it was premiered two years ago.

"This alteration of profound agitation against calm - these polarities are nothing new," Forsyth modestly says, and yet the sounds he creates are reminiscent of no other composer.

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