YORK'S SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE FOUND IN MUSIC COURSES

Editor's Note — Dr. Sterling Beckwith was the founding director of the program in music, a part of York University's Faculty of Fine Arts in Downsview, Ontario. He is a singer, conductor and scholar and for these reasons, and because he is more familiar than anyone else with the objectives of the music program, The Music Scene *thought it a change to allow Dr. Beckwith to describe York's music program in his own words. His doctorate was awarded by Cornell University but he has also studied in Europe and the Soviet Union.*

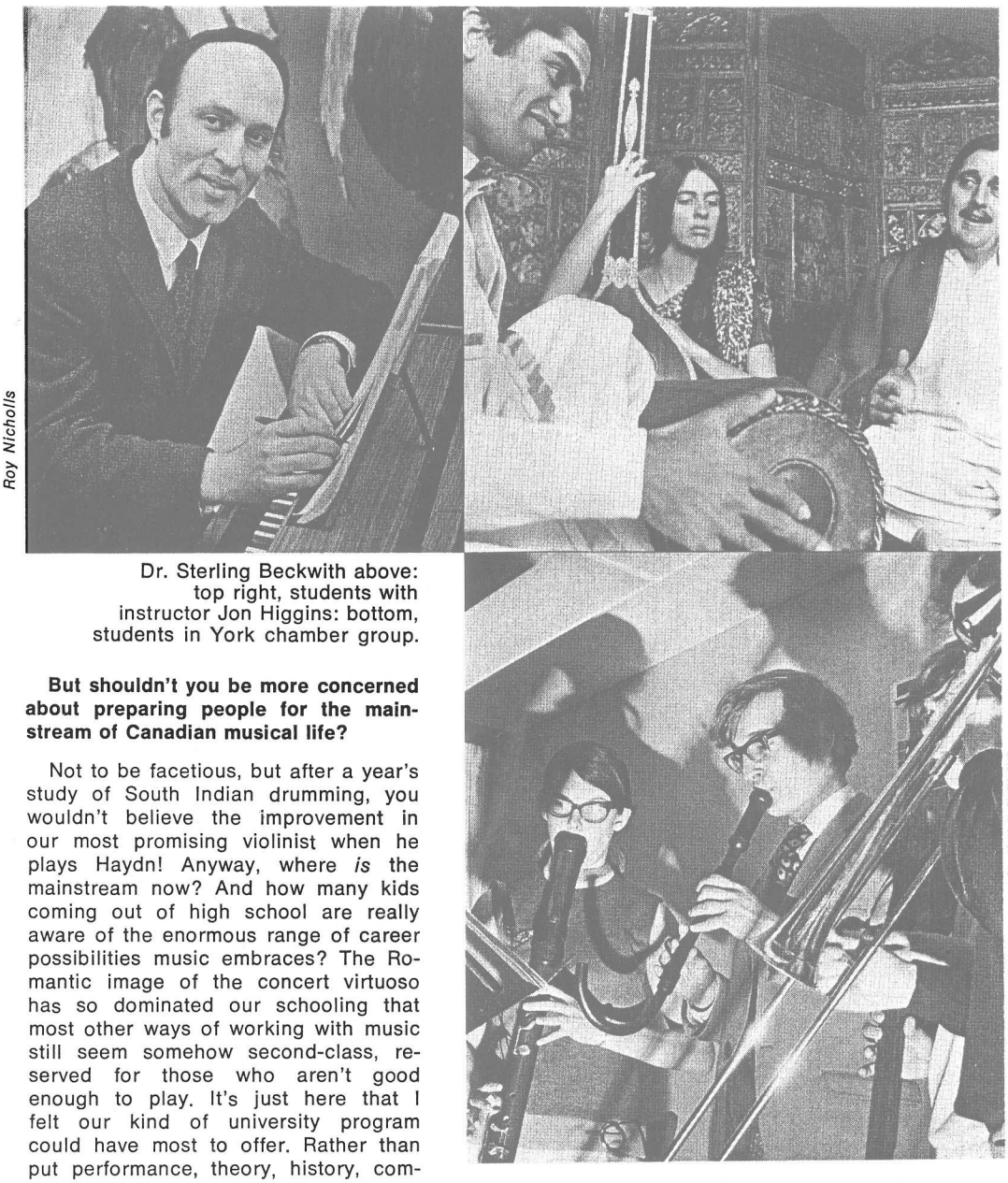
How does one start a new university music program?

I suppose schools and teachers are conservative by nature. But because York is a new institution, in a big urban area already served by well-established music faculties, there was an opportunity, if not an obligation, to bring some fresh resources to bear on old problems. I started with a hard look at existing programs, and some hunches about our potential students. York seemed serious about teaching and open to innovation — so why shouldn't music share in the spirit of adventure and discovery that universities are supposed to encourage?

Do you really think the old system is all that bad?

For many students, it still seems to work very well indeed. But even some of Canada's oldest and best departments are now re-appraising their goals and methods. For one thing, the *kind* of music taught has been pretty heavily slanted toward the Western concert repertoire.

Today, records and travel are making us all aware of many other "musics" from every corner of the globe — not to mention the fantastic impact of pop and commercialized folk styles. As a result, our own musicians are discovering how much they can learn from other musical traditions; and in some cases, oral methods of training — like those of the jazzman or the Indian classical artist — are proving even more effective than the old schoolbook approaches to harmony or rhythm. So by next year — it's only our third — York will include courses in the music of India, jazz, East Asia, and the music of the Americas, as well as a Cook's-tour survey of music cultures and styles the world over.



Roy Nicholls

Dr. Sterling Beckwith above: top right, students with instructor Jon Higgins: bottom, students in York chamber group.

But shouldn't you be more concerned about preparing people for the mainstream of Canadian musical life?

Not to be facetious, but after a year's study of South Indian drumming, you wouldn't believe the improvement in our most promising violinist when he plays Haydn! Anyway, where *is* the mainstream now? And how many kids coming out of high school are really aware of the enormous range of career possibilities music embraces? The Romantic image of the concert virtuoso has so dominated our schooling that most other ways of working with music still seem somehow second-class, reserved for those who aren't good enough to play. It's just here that I felt our kind of university program could have most to offer. Rather than put performance, theory, history, composing, and all the other modes of knowing and doing music into separate boxes for separate breeds of student, I wanted to let them see how all can interrelate, and how to combine their interests in various ways with other arts and disciplines, just as many of the most creative people in the field are increasingly doing.

Doesn't this risk producing merely a bunch of dilettanes, without any real command of anything?

That's not just *our* problem. Everyone has to choose constantly what he wants most to learn or teach, and quantity isn't always what counts. Real learning has to do with perspectives, with a sense of involvement, with self-expression and self-discovery. Nobody's found the sure-fire recipe for that kind of education yet. Since time's so limited, we must look for music that is not only interesting in itself, but can open doors and generate a need for more knowledge, music that contains its own kind of discipline. After all, structure and discipline are the very things that attracted most of us to music in the first place. I try to show a student how many roads there are, and help him find one that suits him. Somewhere along each road, even before he leaves us, he'll find someone who cares enough to become a hard taskmaster; but the

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challenge will be his only if he has chosen it himself.

Isn't this asking a lot of your students — and of your teachers too?

No doubt, particularly since our music program is only part of the whole scene at York, over which we haven't much control. Fortunately, the program itself is still small and fairly selective; that's the only way it could work.

Just how well *is* it working?

With only two seasons behind us, it would be foolish to say we've done more than begin. The best students are already skeptical about the value of formal schooling when they come; and anyone who has ever taught university music knows how little time there is to make up for years and years of non-learning. Still, there have been some beautiful moments when it all suddenly comes together. Take the occasion this Spring, for instance, when Ted Topping, a third-year student with a flair for stage production, decided to organize a single event that would display the whole range of the program — to ourselves, and anyone else who cared to listen. The result was far more than the usual end-of-year concert: every cranny and corner of Burton Auditorium was heard from in swift succession, as group after group gave a sample of its year's work. Festive Philippine gong music opened the proceedings. Then followed some Lully for string ensemble, some Gounod for woodwinds, a demonstration by the sitar class, consort songs by Gibbons and Tomkins, a collective composition for percussion by first-year students, an improvisation by one of the jazz workshop groups, and a Monteverdi solo madrigal with viols and harpsichord — all this before intermission! A choral group began the second half with a Bach chorale, a rousing spiritual, and a new chance piece blending electronic and vocal noises. Then a trio for classical guitars, a Hindemith trombone sonata, a harpsichord solo, rounds and dances sung and played by the Renaissance Band, and an antiphonal canzona from opposite ends of the hall. After a multi-media happening involving a huge plastic bag full of popcorn, the back wall opened to reveal our electronic studio's biggest synthesizer bathed in shifting, colored lights, with a student composer at the keyboards ready to perform his latest live-electronic ensemble piece. And as the evening evolved, the same student face that one had seen first in the chamber orchestra might reappear later singing in a choral group, playing jazz guitar or blowing a krummhorn. The effect was a bit dizzying, even for those of us who had coached one of the ensembles. Visitors were impressed to see such a sharing of vision and excitement at so early a stage in our growth. "Real music" was alive among us after all, and its chances of flourishing at York looked particularly good that night.