



The Edmonton Youth Orchestra with Music Director John Barnum, 1975.

A Unique Performance Experience

Keith Bissell humbly stated of the Edmonton Junior Symphony Orchestra's early concerts, "Although by today's standards our level of performance was not high, it was, at least, a creditable beginning."³⁸ What Keith Bissell started and Edgar Williams, Ranald Shean and George Naylor cultivated reached a very creditable standard by the 1970s, so much so that the EYO was invited to represent Canada at international festivals. In the years since, the Senior and Intermediate Orchestras have been joined on stage by amateur and professional special guests. Audiences have enjoyed their expansive sounds at events ranging from the Festival of Trees to a special celebration for Edmonton's Italian community. Friends, family and the general public, as well as a few

big names, including former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, have heard the young musicians play.

The experience of being in the orchestra during a performance is unique. As alumnus Neil R. Hughes said, "It was thrilling to be in the middle of the sound, instead of on the edge of it, as the audience inevitably is even in the most acoustically perfect halls." Sometimes just as thrilling is the audience response. The EYO performed *Threnody* twice with Music Director Ted Kardash, with full houses at both the (smaller) Convocation Hall and the 2,727-seat Jubilee Auditorium. Ted added dancers to the second

performance to include a dimension of movement, which composer R. Murray Shafer was apparently not a fan of (he considered his work to be a complete piece), but it resonated with the audience. "With the last notes sounding, there was absolute silence in the hall," trumpet player Tom Dust recalled of the Convocation Hall performance in 1971. Diana Ruth Nuttall, who played cello, sang in the choir and had a speaking role in the concerts, said, "The performance of *Threnody* for Nagasaki and the power of the music on the audience will stay with me forever."

Having multiple family members in the orchestra can make performances particularly special. For a performance of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony*, Cheryl Berkowitz played cello, her brother Brian played bassoon and a second piano part while their older brother Jonathan played piano. Cheryl said, "Our parents and grandmother beamed throughout the performance!" The Nelsen siblings – flute player Lisa, bassoon player Suzanne and horn player Jeff – had the unique experience of being joined on stage by their opera-singer parents, soprano Diane Nelsen and baritone Ron Nelsen.

While the EYO has pulled off many outstanding concerts, things don't always go precisely as planned. Recent alumnus Theodore Chow said performances of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* presented a few challenges. "We could never quite get the synthesizer to make a good organ sound in Banff, and in the Winspear, unfortunately our organist couldn't have a

dress rehearsal with us and came in (with a huge loud chord) in the wrong place."

Patricia Morris, who played cello with the EYO in the 1970s, said, "One night, the power went out as we were playing our concert on the Jubilee Auditorium stage and we kept playing for several bars even though we couldn't see our music. . . . I remember the conductor turning to the audience and commenting how much we clearly loved the piece of music we played."

Performing with a large group of musicians can provide a degree of protection from stage fright, but many do feel the anticipation building up before a big concert. Trumpet player Dawn Hage said, "I felt nervous, but also free to let go and take risks because we were youth and still learning. As a result, they were some of the most exhilarating performances of my career."

Mistakes are harder to conceal for those in the spotlight, and the solo parts are inevitably the ones that induce the most anxiety. Neil Miskey was the concertmaster for a performance of *The Planets* at Convocation Hall. During the intermission, he was given a special award that took him by surprise. "And then we went on to play the second half. And I got to my solo, and I completely flubbed it." Bassoonist Tasha Ausman said, "I knew immediately if I'd made a mistake. Michael does the sort of wince from the podium if you've missed an entrance, but also has a great way of being like, 'that was amazing' if your entrance was gorgeous and beautiful."



Left: Siblings in the EYO, left to right: Lisa and Suzanne Nelsen. Photo courtesy of Lisa Nelsen. Right: Ranald Shean conducts the Edmonton Junior Symphony Orchestra, May 1958. Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta, WS 1065 / 1 and WS 1065 / 2.