

IN PROFILE / EN PERSPECTIVE

New Westminster and District Concert Band

Kerry Turner and John White

According to its constitution, the New Westminster and District Band Society exists “to promote and encourage the playing of band instruments by young persons as a means towards the building of character and development of personal enjoyment and appreciation of music as a mode of entertainment and self-expression.” Since its humble beginnings in 1934, hundreds of young people (and now adults) have progressed through the NWDCB’s development system from Beginner through Advanced Beginner and Intermediate to Senior. The most recent change to the Society’s organizational structure re-established a Jazz Ensemble, which had existed through the 1970s.

The Early Years

The Band Society can trace its roots back to 1928 when Randolph Day, the Boy Scouts’ District Commissioner, and G. C. Dingle, the Assistant Scoutmaster, hired Henry Slatter to direct the New Westminster and District Boy Scouts Band. Membership in the band included boys as young as ten, and a “memo” from 1928 stipulates that “each new member of the Band will be required to take private lessons from either the Bandmaster or some competent teacher until he be considered efficient enough to play with the Band. The Bandmaster’s rate being 50¢ per lesson. Lessons must be taken regularly.”

In 1929, Lieut. Charles J. Cornfield, LRAM and a graduate of Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall in England, was hired to replace Slatter as the Band’s director. The same year, the band secured its own quarters, and two years later was awarded second place at the Vancouver Exhibition’s Junior Band Competition.

In 1932, the scope of the band’s activities was enlarged and a committee of businessmen was formed to oversee the organization’s management. The ensemble, re-named the New Westminster Junior Band (NWJB), won the Junior Championship that year and, because there were now a significant number of older youth involved –though seventy-five percent of the Band’s membership was under eighteen – a second ensemble, called the Royal City Concert Band (RCCB), was formed to compete in senior competitions. During its first year of operation, the RCCB captured Championship titles in the Open and the Orchestra categories. Literature from the band’s concert programs from this period include *Our Director March* by Bigelow, *Florentiner March* by Fucik, and the *Poet and Peasant Overture* by von Suppé.

In the 1930s, competitive musical festivals were an important aspect of the band’s activities, and the NWJB were provincial Junior Champions 1932-34 and won the Class A Championship Shield 1934-36. The RCCB was also successful in competition, winning the Shelley Cup in the Open Class 1935-37.

In 1935, Arthur Delamont, the well-known director of the Kitsilano Boys’ Band (see *Canadian Winds* 5/1, Autumn 2006), was hired as director of the RCCB and served in that role until 1937, when William Dean replaced him as director. As the Second World War began, many members of the band left to join the armed forces and the RCCB slowly died. The NWJB continued to operate but with reduced membership.

A New Beginning

In 1941, Fred Turner became conductor of the NWJB. At that time, Fred was an elementary school teacher in New Westminster, having begun his band experiences at an early age in the National Juvenile Band in Vancouver. His father, a fan of the British band tradition, provided much support and encouragement to Fred the rest of his life. During the war years, the NWJB served as a cadet “house” band for the Army, Air Force, and Navy; the young musicians had uniforms for each branch of the Canadian Forces, and played many parades and special engagements in support of the war effort.

As the band played an increasingly important role in civic and provincial events, its participation in competitive festivals decreased. For example, in 1949 the NWJB was invited by the provincial government to play at the opening of the Hope Princeton Highway, and band members rode in the first bus to travel the route.

There were no girls in the NWJB until 1952. Turner had begun a girls’ band several years earlier and, in 1952, under the sponsorship of the New Westminster Lions Club, the NWJB was opened to both boys and girls.

Remembering the competitive history of the band, Turner began to lay the groundwork for the band to travel to Toronto to participate in the band competitions of the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE). The calibre of the Toronto competitions was high, and he believed it was important for his young players to broaden their musical perspective by hearing fine groups perform and by competing against them.

In 1956, 1960, and 1964, the NWJB travelled to the CNE Band Competitions in Toronto and were crowned Canadian champions in several classes each year. These trips required extensive fund-raising and planning, and, with the help of parents and friends, Turner established a travel tradition that endured for many years. Over the years, the band travelled all the way to the east coast on six different occasions (1956, 1960, 1964, 1967, 1973, and 1981). The NWJB has used every mode of transportation – bus, car, train, airplane, and ship – but the first cross-Canada tour in 1956 was the most unusual.

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That year the group had its own CPR train comprised of four old passenger coaches, a baggage car, and the engine. The group “whistle-stopped” across the country performing at every opportunity. The impromptu concerts were often on station platforms before small crowds, but each concert proved to be fun for the audiences and the band.

In 1966 and '70, the band travelled to New Westminster's sister city in Moriguchi, Japan. The 1966 trip marked the first time that a Canadian youth band had toured Japan under the auspices of the Sister City organization. The Moriguchi Town Band returned the visit two years later, and many long-term friendships resulted from that exchange. When the NWJB was in Moriguchi, band members were billeted in Japanese homes for thirteen of the nineteen days spent there, a wonderful experience for the young people. Each day brought another school or community concert, as well as new experiences and insights into Japanese life, from tea ceremonies to parades down quaint and narrow village roads.

In addition to a busy concert and parade schedule during both Asian trips, the band performed at the 1970 Osaka World Fair and on Japanese national television. The ensemble had travelled to the Seattle World's Fair in 1962 and, as a result, the Band Society felt that the World's Fair in Osaka would be an even greater learning experience for the musicians, so fund-raising commenced anew. The Fair itself was an obvious highlight, with its extensive array of exhibits and pavilions, but even more exciting, the ensemble was the featured performing group at the Fair for three days, playing three concerts each of those days.

Appearances at several other World Fairs were prominent in the band's travels. In 1967, it travelled across Canada again by train, heading to the Maritimes. That tour included a five-day stop at Expo '67 in Montreal, where it performed numerous concerts.

On two occasions, in 1972 and '74, the NWJB toured Canada's far north. For the 1972 trip, the NWJB chartered a Douglas DC-6 from Vancouver and flew to Fort St. John, Whitehorse, Resolute Bay, Cambridge Bay, Hay River, Yellowknife, and Inuvik. In Resolute Bay, local residents came from miles around via dog sleds and snowmobiles to hear the band perform in a former DEW Line hanger.

The band travelled to Europe twice, touring England, Denmark, and Germany in 1978, and England again in 1984. The 1978 trip lasted four weeks and included performances at the Copenhagen World Youth Festival. The band's last international tour was in 1988, when it visited Australia to perform at the Brisbane World Expo.

Throughout the years, the NWJB also toured British Columbia and the United States extensively. Twice, it travelled to Disneyland and there have been numerous shorter trips to parts of British Columbia. Many of the short visits within B.C. provided musical experiences that rivalled those of the band's major tours.

No matter where in the world the NWJB has performed, its performances have engendered tremendous enthusiasm. Many reading this article are aware of the time and energy required to bring such plans to fruition. From the beginning of the New Westminster Band's history, parental involvement has been key to the continuation and success of these wonderful experiences for the young musicians.

In the mid-50s, the Society became a registered charitable organization in British Columbia and since then has been officially called the New Westminster and District Band Society. With the formalization of the Society's activities, an executive body took over many of the tasks that had been the responsibility of the band's director, allowing him to focus more on making music.

Another Era in the Band's History

In 1964, after returning from Eastern Canada with the band, Turner, who had recently been appointed to the position of Music Supervisor for the Vancouver Public School District, retired from the NWDB. His son, Kerry, who for several years had taught the Beginner Band, was appointed director of the Senior Band. Kerry started playing soprano saxophone in the ensemble in 1949, and the NWDB has played a prominent role in his life for many years: as he was growing up, through his time as director, to the present day as the bass clarinetist of the group.

Over the years, many members of Fred Turner's extended family have played in the band, and his musical legacy is still evident in the group's make-up. His three children and eight of his nine grandchildren have played in the Society's bands, and five are still members of the Senior Band. Fred's other son, Tom, also served as director of the Beginner and Intermediate bands at different times.

After his appointment, Kerry Turner continued the busy pace established by his father. The band toured and performed extensively under his direction, always striving to maintain a high level of musicianship and to represent the City of New Westminster and its surrounding area with pride. Kerry was a high-school music teacher in Burnaby and later became Director of Fine Arts Instruction for the Abbotsford School District.

Through the band's 77-year history, it has taken advantage of the opportunities presented by many music festivals. In every festival, the ensemble has performed well, often winning all the classes it entered. In 1971, the band was judged the outstanding band in the Community Band class in the B.C. Provincial Festival, held to commemorate the province's centennial year. As a result, it performed for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, a special honour for the young musicians and their director.

During the band's 1972 tour of northern Canada, it stopped in Whitehorse (YK) where the musicians were hosted by the F. H. Collins Secondary School band and its director, John White. Kerry and John became good friends and John, after moving to

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Vancouver in 1972, travelled across Canada with the group in the summer of 1973 as director of the NWDB Jazz ensemble. In 1974, Kerry turned over leadership of the Senior Band to John for the first time. In 1979, however, John was appointed Fine Arts Co-ordinator for the Kamloops School District, in B.C.'s interior, and direction of the band passed to Lynn Robinson, a former band member and the music teacher at Burnaby South Secondary School.

In 1980, Fred Turner re-assumed musical leadership, but his health became problematic and, in 1985, Kerry Turner returned as director of the Senior Band. In 2003, John White, then Director of Instruction for the Burnaby School District, returned to the organization to co-direct the Senior Band with Kerry. In 2007, John again assumed full directorship of the senior ensemble and continues to lead the group today. During its entire history, the Senior Band has had only five directors - Lieutenant J. Cornfield, Fred Turner, Kerry Turner, Lynn Robinson, and John White.

Into the 1980s, the Society had provided musical experiences for young people from elementary-school age to high-school graduation. The proliferation of good-quality school-band programs in the area resulted in shrinking enrolment in all levels of the Society's bands, so in 1988 the make-up of the band changed significantly when the first adult members joined. Today, the majority of the band's members, at all levels, are adults of all ages.

A Proud History

Community bands across Canada present wonderful opportunities for musicians, young and old, to share in the joy of making music together. More than one-third of the New Westminster and District Senior Band's current membership began playing in the band during their youth. Alumni of the band can also be found in all regions of British Columbia and across Canada.

Significant numbers of band members continue to play, and many have gone on to careers in music and music education, including Arnie Chycoski, former lead trumpet of the Boss Brass; Ray Sikora, trombonist and writer/arranger for the Les Elgart Orchestra; Fred's grandson (and Kerry's son) Brad Turner, a Juno Award-winning jazz musician who has also been named as Canada's outstanding jazz trumpeter and arranger on several occasions; Wes Foster, Brian G'Froerer, and Ray Kirkham, who all became members of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra; Dennis Miller, Principal Tuba player of the Vancouver, Houston, and Montreal Symphony Orchestras (also the tuba player on the famous A & W "Root Bear" commercial); Brian "Hoot" Gibson, composer of the A&W Root Bear commercial, is a well-known composer/arranger and co-founder of Vancouver's Little Mountain Sound; Peter Burris, Victoria Symphony; Peter Gravlin, recently retired from the Saskatoon Symphony; and George Laverock, a CBC producer and now Program Director for MusicFest Vancouver.

At the university level, Prof. Gerald King, who played in the band and directed the Intermediate Band at one point, is currently Head of the School of Music at the University of Victoria; and Michael Purves-Smith recently retired from the music faculty at Sir Wilfred Laurier University. Several members of the 1965 band became members of the RCMP Band. Drummond Hudson was that band's Manager of Operations for many years, and Charlie Hendricks served as the group's Musical Director for several years. Many others, too numerous to mention, have gone on to careers in music and music education.

Over the years, the New Westminster and District Band Society has developed a fine music library for all levels of performance, in addition to a comprehensive inventory of band instruments and percussion equipment. Cataloguing the library to make it accessible digitally has just been completed. The library includes an "archived" section of band music published in the early part of the twentieth century, which allows a glimpse into the makeup and nature of those groups that were the forerunners of the present Band Society.

With an outstanding history serving as its foundation, the band will continue to evolve to meet changing needs and expectations in the communities it serves. In 2009, the band celebrated its 75th anniversary, and is looking forward to the next twenty-five years leading up to its centennial.