

## MALCOLM FORSYTH, ARTIST IN TWO CLIMATES by Alister Stott C 1989

When Malcolm Forsyth decided to emigrate from his native South Africa to Canada in 1968 it was after spending seven years as co-principal trombone in the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra, and his intention was to establish an academic career while pursuing his goals as a composer. Thus did Canada become his new home, so to remain for the ensuing decades.

Studying music had been for him a somewhat delayed course to steer after abandoning in late teens a childhood ambition to become a painter, when the beckoning call of orchestral music began to be heard. At the age of twenty-two he entered the University of Cape Town Faculty of Music and came into contact with teachers such as Arnold van Wyk, Erik Chisholm, Stefans Grové and Stanley Glasser. Barely two years after commencing trombone studies under Hans Grin he won a position in the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra and was soon performing under such visiting conductors as Constantin Silvestri, Matyás Seiber, George Weldon, Edgar Cosma and Igor Stravinsky. An orchestral career seemed likely, in spite of a newly awakened but vital interest in conducting, in which he studied under Georg Tintner and David Tidboald. Composition classes too, were an integral part of his bachelor's degree, yet it seemed only by chance that this discipline proved ultimately to be the one which would take precedence in his life, for it was not until his fourth year as an undergraduate, when his orchestral overture *Erewhon* was performed by the CTSO under Tidboald, that serious thought was given to such a possibility. This small triumph led to an invitation, which set him to writing *Jubilee Overture* for the fiftieth anniversary of the orchestra the following year, 1964, when this piece was presented by them under Arthur Fiedler. The die was cast: composition would henceforth be the lodestar in his life.

Survival in Canada required attention to other sources of income however, and after a brief period in Toronto, the move to Edmonton was undertaken, to join the faculty of the University of Alberta. This was immediately followed by a contract as bass trombonist with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. His eleven-year association with the ESO included eight as principal trombone. At the university, Forsyth taught theory, orchestration, composition and twentieth century history in addition to the trombone. His reputation as performer and teacher soon spread, and many successful professional trombonists in Canada and elsewhere have him to thank for their training.

His first major performance as composer in Canada was not until 1970, when *Sketches from Natal*, a "home thoughts from abroad" work for chamber orchestra was commissioned and broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. This is perhaps his first mature piece, and certainly the first to attempt to exploit the rhythms of his native country's music, a feature which, combined with strict training he received in the European tradition, has exerted the most powerful influence on his unique sound ever since. However, it was not without great effort and even anguish that this style was forged, for it was the time when the strongest currency in new music was surrealist thought on the one hand and total freedom, chance music, anti-music, on the other. His works of the next decade were, as a result, fiercely expressionist and intensely serious, as he battled to acquire control of not only his

métier but also his message. Rejection of the radical and iconoclastic vogues was total and committed, but of surrealism and neo-romantic atonality less so: this was a struggle of conscience for a composer with the greatest love for the traditional orchestral repertoire and the strongest desire to make a musical statement which was personal, craftsman like and above all, passionate. His first two symphonies, two concerti grossi, and the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, which occupied him during the 'seventies, all demonstrate these aspects of his growth. At its premiere in Edmonton in 1979, the Piano Concerto was performed by Forsyth's U of A colleague Helmut Brauss, and the effect was enormous; one critic raved, ".... It brought down the house as few new works can.... it makes an immediate impact as have few concertos since Prokofiev and Bartók.... an explosive, lava-strewn work...."

One other feature of the endless moods portrayed in much of his music is at least as important as those already mentioned, and that is his humour and talent for witty parody. The titles of many of the works make this quite apparent, with their alliterations and sarcasm. Generally, though, this was restricted to his works for brass and woodwind ensembles; only rarely does it peek through in the larger works. The two concerti grossi written for the Canadian Brass with orchestra, *Sagittarius* (1975), and *Quinquetid* (1976), are good examples.

A year spent in London, 1979-80, studying conducting under George Hurst and writing, proved a turning point and the works since then show a greater assurance, a more determined rejection of what he calls "the childish fads of the avant-garde". It was at this time that the great British cellist William Pleeth heard recordings of several works and wrote, "I would place Malcolm Forsyth among the finer composers of recent years. His music -- unlike much that is written today -- flows directly from his thoughts with the absence of both the superficial and the self-conscious...."

Back in Edmonton, with several new works completed, Forsyth began to experience a growth of public awareness of all he had done, as a trickle of interest grew to a more steady flow. Performances in Europe, the United States, Australia, Japan and even the USSR and China began to surface. In full spate at last, Forsyth produced more works in the 'eighties than all his previous work together: a new symphony, three orchestral suites, two concertos, a substantial solo piano piece, and a new departure: several works featuring the voice. Then there were further chamber orchestra pieces and much other chamber music besides, including the remarkable 1980-81 *Six Episodes after Keats*, for piano trio, in which a deep sense of personal crisis is explored musically. This work can be seen as the catalyst of change in the same way that *Sketches from Natal* had been ten years earlier.

Three extended works from this period deserve special mention, as they epitomise this composer's new found individuality: *African Ode (Symphony no.3)*, *Atayoskewin (Suite for Orchestra)*, and *Sun Songs*, for voice and orchestra. The first-mentioned underwent three revisions before emerging in the form played by the Edmonton Symphony for its future recording on the CBC SM 5000 series. It evokes something of the depth of spiritual feeling Forsyth has for his native land, its timeless beauty, its stark contrasts and the wonderful rhythmic vitality of its dance and song. *Atayoskewin*, by contrast, is his first attempt to portray his feeling for his new found home in Canada. The lonely, icy North is powerfully evoked in what was hailed as "a masterpiece" at its premiere with the ESO under Uri Mayer in 1984, and it earned the award of the first JUNO for "Best Classical Composition" in 1987. This and *Sun Songs* are perhaps the works which brought him recognition as one of Canada's leading composers. Written for the Canadian mezzo-soprano Judith Forst, *Sun Songs* consists of settings of poems by Doris Lessing and are truly his own-- passionate, vibrant, colourful and orchestrated with true virtuosity. The soaring voice of Forst combined with Forsyth's vivid scoring has produced something of true greatness.

Recent additions to his list of works bring the total number of titles close to ninety, and include commissions for such artists as singers Maureen Forrester and Rosemarie Landry, the Montreal Symphony with trumpeter James Thompson, oboist Lawrence Cherney and trombonist Alain Trudel. Performers of his works include the Amadeus Ensemble, the Moscow Philharmonic Wind Quintet, the New York Wind Quintet, the Chicago Sinfonietta and many others. Since 1986 his works have received close to one hundred performances annually, an impressive achievement which led to Malcolm Forsyth's citation in 1989 as "Canadian Composer of the Year".