



He Glycerin,

REMINISCENCES

HEALEY WILLAN

in a conversation with
Alec Wyton

[The famous Canadian composer in a conversation at his Toronto home with Alec Wyton, reminisces about his training as a choir boy and organist 80 years ago in England. Here is the first of a two-part report of the conversation in which the composer tells how it all began. The transcript of the tape for this was checked with Dr. Willan through the kind help of Margaret Drynan.]

I climbed up the steps of St. Saviour's Choir School, Eastbourne, feeling as if I were going to my execution. I was eight-and-a-half, having been born on October 12, 1880. I went into the choir room to meet the organist, Dr. Walter Hay Sangster. He was a very dignified and handsome man, a dear old

boy. The first thing I had to do was read the words of five or six verses from a psalm he picked at random. Then I had to sing a hymn tune at sight—first the tune, then the tune with one of the verses, which gave me no trouble. I don't know why, but I could always read music.

Next he gave me sort of an ear test, in which I had to sing notes dodged all over the countryside; then scales to determine the compass of my voice. Even though I was so young, he said I had a rather low voice and would probably be among the second trebles. I thought "Well that's all right anyway."

After that came the final test—to sing at sight the first ten or twelve bars of the chorus "But the ransomed of the Lord" in Wesley's "Wilderness." Six months later I became a full choir boy,

which was a bit of a record for the school.

Later I became assistant school librarian, librarian and then assistant librarian at the church itself. Finally later I became doctor's boy, which was *the* great achievement. That meant I had to be at the church well head of whenever Dr. Sangster was to play, find his places, dust the keys, and prepare everything for him so that all he had to do was to sit down and doodle.

When I was about eleven, I was given the job of taking choir practices with kids much older than me. If they made a slip-up, I had to put them right. I used to get a licking from them after most practices. The headmaster must have heard about this, because he appointed me choir monitor—probably saved my life. In an English school, the



Photographs: Don Newlands

monitor represents the headmaster and there would have been a hell of a row if a monitor got beaten up.

WYTON: When did you begin playing services?

WILLAN: When I was eleven. I frequently played for the five o'clock Evensong at St. Saviour's Church.

WYTON: Could you reach the pedals?

WILLAN: I was a lanky kid and could reach them easily. I used to play quite often, alternating with Dr. Sangster and his son, Stephen. Stevie was fond of bringing out a tenor melody on the Open Diapason on the Great. Well, the Open Diapason is damned useful, but it isn't a very good solo stop, as a rule. We always called the Open Diapason on the Great "Stevie's drain pipe."



I remember a dear old verger there named Johnston. He seemed old to me, about 50, and he always wore a bowler. We'd get hold of his hat and swish it underneath one of the choir cupboards in the vestry. He'd spend five or ten minutes finding his hat, cursing us. One day, a dear old lady gave him some money for the choir excursion fund. She said "I do love to hear those little angels sing." Johnston replied "Little angels? Little devils, I call them!" And he was probably right.

When I visited England in 1935, I

thought I'd go 'round to look at the old place again. There was an old white-haired chap in a cassock, sitting in the choir stalls, dusting books. He looked up—it was Johnston. He must have been 90 odd. I breezed up and said "Hello Mr. Johnston, how are you today?" He looked up with a tired old face and couldn't quite place me. I said "Do you remember the days of White and Lawford and Rogers?" He said "Well, are you Willan?" I told him I was and the old boy very nearly wept. I asked him "do you still have the same difficulty finding your hat as you did in the old days?" He looked at me pathetically and said "No, sir, the vicar stopped it because he said I was too old." Johnston looked as if he would have given anything to have someone throw his hat under the cupboard again.

WYTON: How old were you when your voice changed?

WILLAN: My voice broke when I was about fourteen or fifteen, after which I was given an extra year's schooling. When I went to say my final goodbye to Dr. Sangster, he paid me what I have always regarded as one of the outstanding compliments I have ever had. "I shall miss you, Willan," he said, "you never had a great voice, but you never missed a lead." You know what that means to have a boy in the choir who never missed a lead?

WYTON: I certainly do.

WILLAN: I vividly remember one youngster in the choir who sat next to me. His name was Georgie, the laziest little brute I ever knew, lumpy, fat and clumsy. If we were doing a fugue and he got in on the second or third note, he was doing damned well. I got fed up with him, as I really used to sweat at choir practices.

One day we were doing "O Praise the Lord" by Maurice Greene. There is a five-part chorus at the end which starts with "O Praise The Lord All Ye People." In those days we weren't coddled

by having full scores of anthems. We had single lines with just our own part. It meant we had to count our bars carefully. Well, in this chorus, the second trebles had to come in on the sixteenth or seventeenth bar and we had to count the bars on our fingers. I felt sure that Georgie wouldn't get in on the first note, so I got my heel over his foot and counted my bars. When we came to 1-2-3-4, 1-2 "O Praise," I put his foot halfway through the schoolroom floor. He left out a piteous *oooooh!* But he got the first note on time. It was not the right note, and I got 100 lines for it, but it was worth it.

WYTON: This warms the cockles of my heart, because I was a choir boy.

WILLAN: You know *all* the dirty tricks, then.

WYTON: I think the boys were naughtier in your day. That's why you are such a great composer. What was the organ like?

WILLAN: A lovely old four-decker Walker. Sr. William Stevenson Hoyte, who was organist at the famous church of All Saints in London, said it had the finest Swell in England. I later studied with Dr. Hoyte. We had 40-minute lessons and you were expected to be there for the preceding lesson in order to hear what was being done. I was there one day, listening to the student ahead of me. This chap was born with a natural organ technique. He could play 3's against 5's, and 4's against 7's almost by the light of nature. It was really disgusting. He was playing the Bach A minor, the big one; played it very well too. Hoyte was a magnificent old teacher, but inclined to be on the savage side. He scratched his head when it was finished and said "Any fool can play notes. Play it again. I want to hear the music this time."

WYTON: You improvise counterpoint more fluently than any 20 other people I could think of put together.

WILLAN: How do you know? You



haven't heard me improvise.

WYTON: I saw your film "Man of Music" and you improvised a fugue in that.

WILLAN: Yes, I did do that.

WYTON: Did what you learned as a choir boy have anything to do with this? Was it singing polyphonic music or some other thing?

WILLAN: I suppose singing polyphony had a lot to do with it, but I also studied harmony and counterpoint upon my admission to choir school and I was always especially interested in counterpoint. It was interesting to me, the way the parts were interwoven. I got rather bored with the one dimensional hymn tune stuff. Rather ordinary. But as soon as it became complicated, contrapuntal, then I was having a good time. I enjoyed it immensely.

After I left school, I was forced to take it easy for some months because of my health. I got fed up with doing nothing so I wrote a cantus. I forget now exactly what it was, but it embodied all the possible diatonic intervals. I worked it out in strict counterpoint in the five species and in two, three, four, and five parts above and below. I put the cantus in all five parts and worked it out in double counterpoint. I tried to work out every possible combination, and after that exercise which kept me occupied for many a long hour, writing counterpoint lost its terrors for me and I have always enjoyed it.

WYTON: The R.C.C.O. and the A.G.O. have exams for Fellowship and Associateship based on the exams of the Royal College of Organists. Aren't you a Fellow of the R.C.O.?

WILLAN: Yes.

WYTON: When did you get your diplomas?

WILLAN: I got my Associateship at sixteen and my Fellowship at eighteen. I then became F.R.C.O., which means fellow who really can't play the organ.

WYTON: No, you are not.

WILLAN: I am. I don't make any bones about that.

WYTON: Do you remember where you played for your exam?

WILLAN: Hart Street, Bloomsbury.

WYTON: That was before the R.C.O. moved to its present headquarters.

WILLAN: Yes.

WYTON: What were your exam requirements?

WILLAN: Counterpoint, harmony, orchestration, and paperwork.

WYTON: Requirements have changed a lot. Have they changed for the better?

WILLAN: I think they have, because more originality and more compositions are required today. It is less mechanical.

WYTON: How many pieces did you have to play?

WILLAN: For the Fellowship, I had to play three numbers—a Bach chorale prelude, the Prelude and Fugue in E minor (which was difficult and I didn't like it), and the Toccata in A \flat by Hesse. I had fun trying for the Associateship. The first time I tried I was plucked in organ playing.

WYTON: What does that mean?

WILLAN: I didn't pass. I got plucked because the organ pedals were so damned slippery. You had to play one piece of your own choice. I played the Schumann B \flat Fugue. For the octave run at the end, I began on the proper octave, but Lord knows where I finished. I just took a skid all the way down. I could not hold the pedals, they were so slippery, and I got plucked for it.

Six months later, when I tried again, I decided to beat them at their own game. A night or two before the exam, I was at a house that had a billiard room. I suddenly had an idea and put a piece of billiard chalk in my pocket. When I sat outside the exam room two days later, waiting for my number to be called, I got the chalk out and chalked my shoes carefully. Then I went in and played the St. Anne Fugue reasonably well. As I went out, I had qualms, for there were my little white footprints all across the red carpet where I had walked in. Whether the examiners saw them or not, I don't know, but I passed.

[Next month Healey Willan will describe music in London in the early 1900s.]

