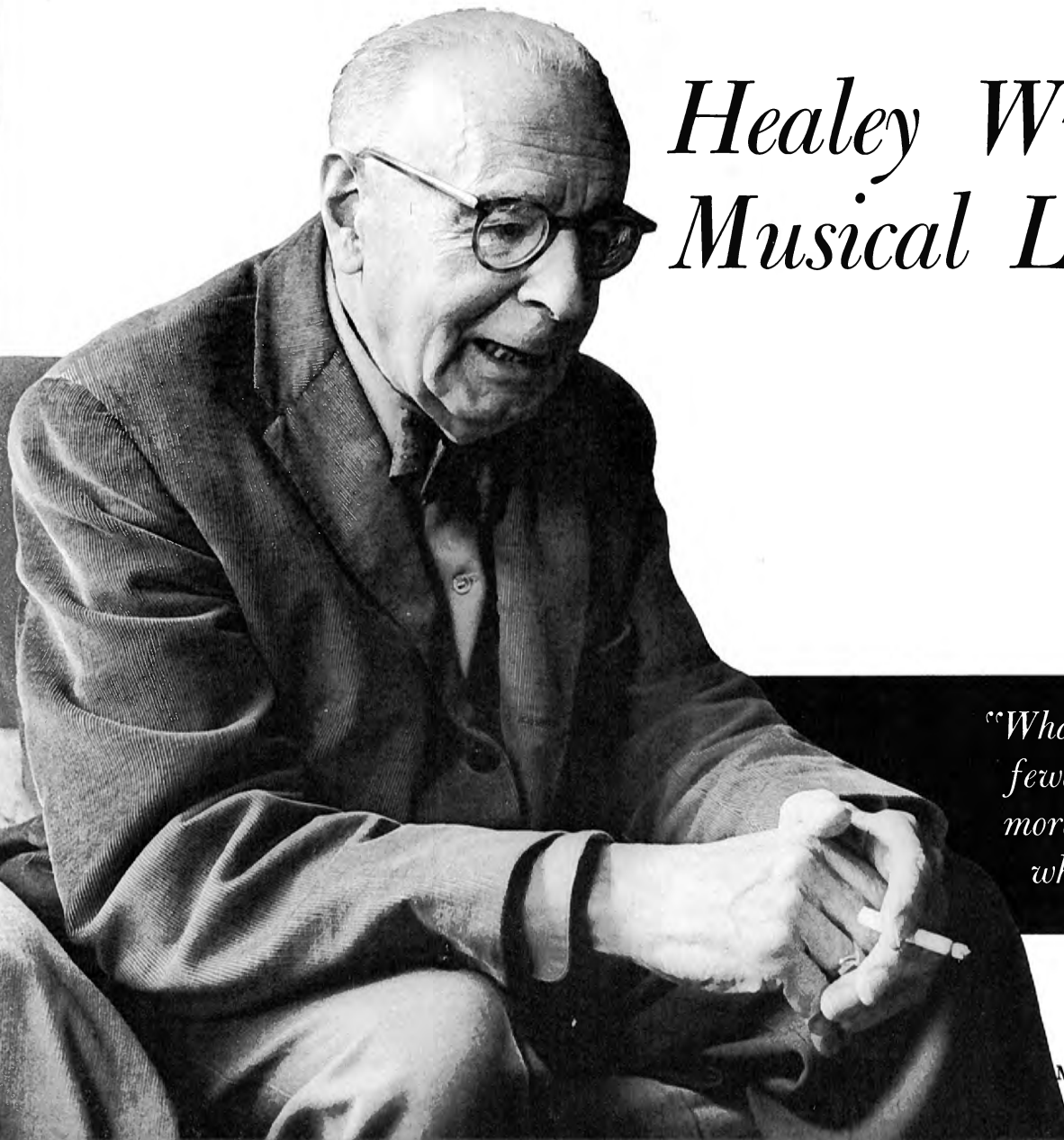


*Last month, Healey Willan, the dean of Canadian music, told A.G.O. President Alec Wyton about the training of a Victorian choir boy and organist. This is the second part of an exclusive interview, which reveals the artist as a*

*young man in pre-World War I musical London, highlighted with stories about greats like Tchaikovsky, Elgar and Nikisch.*

*Healey Willan was confined to a hospital in Toronto after a serious eye*

*operation shortly after the printing of the first half of the interview. It was with the assistance of Margaret Drynan that the completion of this article was made possible. Her visits to Dr. Willan during his illness were invaluable.*



## *Healey Willan's Musical London*

*"What we need now is  
fewer organists and  
more musicians  
who play the organ."*

WYTON: What was musical London like in 1899? What concerts did you hear?

WILLAN: I used to go to the Philharmonic. Cowen was the conductor, but later they introduced guest conductors. Some would do three concerts, another one or two, and so on during the season. They were very good.

WYTON: Who were some of the guest conductors? Did Tchaikovsky do any conducting?

WILLAN: Yes, he was one of the guest conductors at the time. He came over to London and conducted his Fourth Symphony which was received with great excitement. As a conductor of his own works, he lacked that indefinable *plus* which conductors like Nikisch had. Tchaikovsky is damned fine music when it is de-sentimentalized, and Arthur Nikisch was a man who could conduct it without sentimentalizing it. He was the greatest of the lot.

About 1917, they had an orchestral festival in London with the Queens Hall Symphony, the Philharmonic and one other orchestra. There was a big concert by one of the name conductors every day for a week and it was really exciting. Nikisch had two, including the final concert. He played the Tchaikovsky Fifth, which was one of his favourites, at the final concert and gave a superb performance. He really put it over that night. You know those four big chords of E, at the end, *wom, wom, wom, WOM!* You expect a great burst of applause after that, but that night there was only *silence*. Can you imagine that? A very exciting work played through, ending with a crash—and then *silence*. Then the whole damned orchestra started yelling and of course, the whole place went *mad*. My friend and I were sitting in the gallery, all we could afford in those days; and suddenly my pal, in sheer excitement, took a flying leap at a brass railing with a curtain on it and brought the whole thing down. There he was on the floor with a curtain wrapped around him, swearing like hell. It was a great night!

It is a thing you don't come across these days.

WYTON: Things are much more specialized now. Aren't to-day's performances a bit clinical?

WILLAN: Yes, I think so. There seems to be so much less delight in it, because I think the sense of beauty has diminished. I don't think people like beautiful things as much as they used to.

WYTON: Is what they have now—just a technical respect?

WILLAN: Well, more or less technical. It isn't altogether a very fine technique either. Some of this modern junk is hopeless. I'm old-fashioned and I like a good tune.

WYTON: What else was happening in London at that time?

WILLAN: Well, there were very fine recitals by the Joachim string quartet; and concerts by the Meiningen Orchestra from Germany. They had about sixty members and used to play all the lesser symphonies, like the Beethoven Fourth and Seventh and the Schubert *Unfinished*, that sort of thing, you know. Then, of course, there were the Proms.

WYTON: With Sir Henry Wood?

WILLAN: Yes. He was a great man. He made London musical. He started the Proms at Queen's Hall in 1895, I think it was, with a season of 8-10 weeks every summer and performances every night. Every week he had one rehearsal for strings, one for winds and one for full orchestra, and that was all. He was a very *marvellous* conductor. He told me once that he had conducted 12 symphonies in 13 days and that takes doing. He based his style on that of Nikisch.

Howard Jones, the famous pianist, once told me of his experience when he was engaged to play the Beethoven *Emperor* at the Proms. Wood asked him to attend a rehearsal at a certain time and he turned up, expecting to play with the full orchestra. However, there was just Wood there and a piano. Wood turned to certain places in the

concerto and asked Jones to play them for him in his style, and that was it. That night at the performance, Jones said that Wood didn't miss a trick.

WYTON: He must have been a wonderful man. It's amazing to think that the Proms are still going on.

WILLAN: Yes, only at Albert Hall, since Queen's Hall was destroyed during the war.

WYTON: How about organists?

WILLAN: There were some very good organ recitals given every week at St. Margaret's, Westminster, by Edwin H. Lemare.

WYTON: Tell us about how you met Nikisch.

WILLAN: You *are* diving into my murky past. When I was organist at St. John's, Holland Road, I had two old cronies, Harold Brooke and Jack Littleton, his cousin. One day, I was at a rehearsal at Queen's Hall with Jack, listening to Nikisch conducting. I had been made an Associate of the Royal Philharmonic Society, as a sort of wedding present, by Francesco Berger, who was then secretary of the Philmornic and my wife's teacher at the R.A.M. That enabled me to go to all rehearsals and I never missed Nikisch if I could possibly help it.

Toward the end of the rehearsal, Jack said, "Do you know Nikisch?" When I said I didn't, he asked me if I would like to meet him. "We know him quite well, he is staying with us," Jack said, and of course I jumped at the opportunity. At the end of the rehearsal, my friend went up to Nikisch and said, "I would like to introduce a great friend of mine." Nikisch leaned forward and looked at me then said, "My boy, why my boy, you love music, you love music—I love you. We will lunch." So the three of us went to lunch. We were talking away full steam when half-way through Nikisch asked Jack, "What is the name of your friend?" It was a memorable occasion. Nikisch's personality was something you could never forget, a most amazing thing. It grip-

(continued on page 52)



Photographs: Don Newlands

## HEALEY WILLAN

(continued from page 33)

ped you and was so electrifying.

He used to come on the platform to conduct with a handkerchief dangling in his hand and looking absolutely tired out before he began. The audience loved him and the moment he came on; applause and very often cheers rang out. He would turn around and bow and then he would become a sort of human dynamo let loose on the orchestra. Something happened. You can't describe it, but there it was—a remarkable experience.

WYTON: Was he completely relaxed or was he excited?

WILLAN: I think he absorbed or became charged with the tremendous enthusiasm and affection of the audience and then something happened. That is the only way in which I can describe it.

One morning I heard him rehearsing Schumann's Second Symphony. You know that lovely tune the 'cellos have in the last movement. He stopped them and said, "No, gentlemen, that is not quite what I want to hear. You are playing it on your 'cellos—you must sing it." Well they sang it and it was a most beautiful thing. It wasn't just something coming out of a group of

'cellos. It became beautiful music.

WYTON: I wonder if the present conductors are quite the same.

WILLAN: I would put Nikisch ahead of the whole lot, miles ahead; never has been anyone quite like him. At present, Sir John Barbirolli and Sir Adrian Boult, who was a pupil of Nikisch, are both very fine.

WYTON: Tell us about the musician who could extemporize in the style of every known composer.

WILLAN: Oh, you mean Henry Geehl, a marvellous pianist. One night in Hampstead, he was asked to extemporize on *Goodbye Dolly, I Must Leave You*. He played it in the style of Bach and made a fugue on it, then in the style of Brahms, Beethoven, and finally someone said, "Do Elgar." He hadn't played three bars before there was a tap on the front door and there was Elgar, who lived not very far up the road. He came in and sat on the bottom step of the stairway beside two of us while Geehl, unaware, let loose on his improvisation of Elgar. It was brilliantly clever and he finished by linking up the theme with *Land of Hope and Glory*. It was a marvellous show and Elgar turned to us and said, "I wish I could do that." When we went into the room, Geehl jumped up and said,

"Sir Edward, I must apologize." Elgar replied, "My dear chap, you filled me with envy." Elgar was a dear chap and had such a generous, kind mind.

WYTON: Did you know Sir Hugh Allen?

WILLAN: Yes.

WYTON: He was still a professor at Oxford when I was up as an undergraduate, in fact he died the year I came down.

WILLAN: Yes, I remember: he was killed by a motorbike on the High at Oxford.

WYTON: He told me once that one of the sadnesses of growing old is that you don't hear things like the Brahms Requiem for the first time again. There is something about this first time enthusiasm which he had. Today we marvel at technique and we compare this one with another. We don't just let ourselves go in the joy of it.

WILLAN: People are afraid to let things rip any more.

WYTON: Speaking of Elgar, you must have played his organ sonata. Do you think it is a good work?

WILLAN: Yes, to a certain extent. The music is good, but it doesn't altogether fit the organ.

WYTON: Did you know George D. Cunningham? I worshipped at his

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shrine, and he used to say that the Elgar Sonata reminded him of an organ transcription of a violin sonata. He used to thin it out.

WILLAN: That's quite right. I heard Cunningham play several times. He was jolly good. I always admired his sensitivity. But actually organists are at such a disadvantage because of the very instrument itself. There is absolutely no personal contact with the sound you make.

WYTON: Isn't this why people favour tracker organs? They feel they get a personal contact with the tracker action.

WILLAN: I suppose they do, more or less.

WYTON: But you can't control the volume of the sound except for the swell pedal. It is a mechanical instrument.

WILLAN: Oh, it is, and too many organists' minds are mechanically fixed. I mean, such things as phrasing and dynamics depend on how many knobs you yank out or how wide you open the box. What we need now is fewer organists and more musicians who play the organ.

WYTON: Do you have any advice for today's students?

WILLAN: The important thing is to learn to play the piano well so that you

already have a facility in playing before you tackle the techniques of organ playing. Today there is an increasing tendency to go straight into things without sufficient groundwork. There is a lack of discipline in people's lives and I think that applies to the arts too. How can you teach free counterpoint when you don't know strict counterpoint? You can't break the laws unless you know what they are in the first place. You can't write a letter to a friend until you know how to spell.

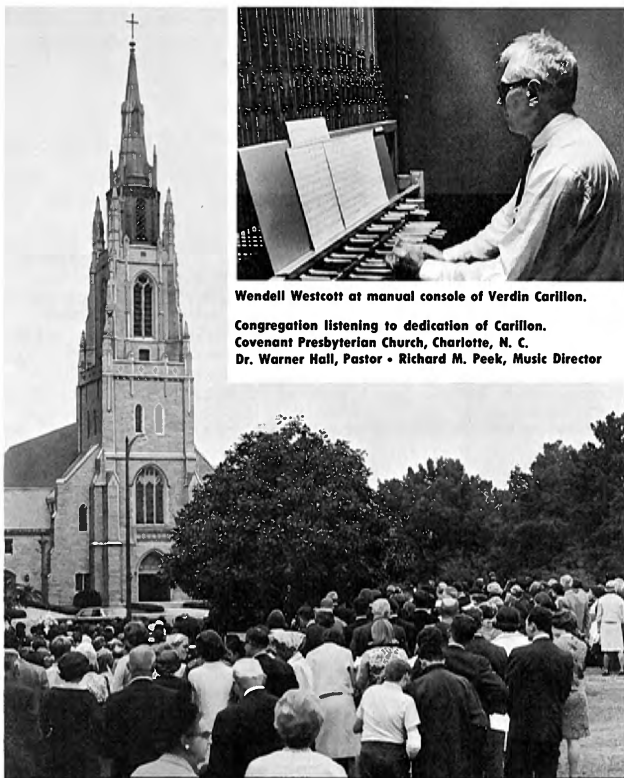
The teaching side of music tends to be on the superficial side today. Students are taught harmony in class and there are so many notes written down mechanically, but how often does a student go to the piano and play it. The ear is the ultimate criteria. It must be. I think so much modern music is ugly, monotonous and formless—but then I admit frankly, I am old fashioned.

WYTON: Learning techniques is like working for degrees and diplomas: you can always forget about them after you get them, but it isn't a bad idea to have them. You can study technique, strict counterpoint and then forget it as though you never studied.

WILLAN: Yes, but you *must* learn before you forget. You can't forget anything you never learned.

*Healey Willan left London to become head of the theory department at the Toronto Conservatory of Music in 1913. He was organist at St. Paul's, Bloor St., in Toronto for eight years, then went to St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church in 1921 and this year is beginning his forty-sixth year as choir-master and organist there. He was examiner, lecturer professor, and University organist at the University of Toronto until 1950—"when the laws of the Medes and Persians declared that I was too old to work," he says. Actually, since he retired he has worked harder than ever, and continued as University organist until 1961. He was musical director at Hart House Theatre for seven years and wrote the incidental music for fourteen plays. He has written two symphonies, a piano concerto, organ and choral music and last year his opera, Deirdre was staged professionally in Toronto.*

*He holds a Mus.D. from the University of Toronto, the Lambeth Mus.D. from the Archbishop of Canterbury, an LLD from Queen's University and a D.Litt. from the University of Manitoba and McMaster University. He has recently been invested as Companion of the Order of Canada by the Governor General of Canada.*



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