

# Canadian Winds • Vents canadiens

REVUE DE L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES HARMONIES  
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## Cover Photo / Photo de la page couverture

The New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia at the Alberta Legislature, 17 October, 2005.  
Photo courtesy of Rachel J Photography.

La Nouvelle Sinfonia à Vents d'Edmonton à la Législature d'Alberta,  
le 17 octobre 2005. La photo une gracieuseté de Rachel J Photography.

# New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia

Roberta Baril

“Performing the best in wind band literature” has been the mission statement of the New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia since its inception almost forty years ago. And while it was always the intention of this community-based group to promote the wind band as a serious art medium through the performance of challenging repertoire, it is perhaps its role as a weaver in the fabric of the music community that has proven to be its largest contribution.

The New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia, known as the NEWS to its supporters and friends, has developed an enviable reputation as a musical organization with high standards that provides enjoyable concerts, a valuable collegial experience for its musicians, and an inspiration to music students. It has also become one of Edmonton’s most important community resources in the field of music education, and a strong Canadian ambassador through its trips abroad. Edmonton’s music community has played an important role in creating the direction that the NEWS has followed, and the ensemble has contributed much to its community in return.

## An Idea

The NEWS began its life as an idea that emerged from a conversation between two high-school music teachers. Dennis Prime,<sup>1</sup> then the band director at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park, and Donald Harris, a teacher at Jasper Place Composite High School in Edmonton, were chatting one day, lamenting that there were too few local opportunities to perform the most challenging wind-band literature.

Dennis had recently completed his Master’s degree under the direction of Robert Reynolds at the University of Wisconsin, along with classmates Allan McMurray (emeritus director of bands, University of Colorado-Boulder) and Craig Kirchoff (current director of bands, University of Minnesota). This experience had fostered a love for the excellent repertoire to which he had been exposed, and a desire to give Edmonton students a similar experience.

This thought led Prime and Harris to approach George Naylor, chair of the music department at Grant MacEwan Community College, with a project proposal: they wanted to form an ensemble comprised of the best wind players in the area, including professional musicians, music teachers, and advanced students. The college was open to the idea because, at the time, the concept of a central institution in Edmonton where students could receive lessons and play in an ensemble there was new.

In the fall of 1976, MacEwan instituted a program called the “Saturday Music School.” Its purpose was to offer a select group of high-school students, chosen by audition, the opportunity to study privately with faculty members and to participate in an advanced wind or jazz band. The wind ensemble, to be conducted by Dennis Prime, promised to provide “a broad survey of

music history, emphasizing the development of wind and brass instruments and their literature, with particular attention given to an understanding of the theoretical and stylistic elements of each period.”<sup>2</sup>

It was called the Grant MacEwan Community College Wind Ensemble, and was made up of the Saturday School students and their instrumental teachers, as well as interested professional musicians. Donald Harris, who became the program’s administrator, described its philosophy in this way:

The wind ensemble was formed on the basis that there was a need for the development of a performing wind ensemble of high caliber that would allow the growing number of performing educators and non-music-majoring high-school graduates to explore wind literature of a high standard. The wind ensemble had, as a goal, the growth of awareness in the general public of the viability of an ensemble dedicated to the performance of a variety of excellent literature for winds, and the education of both music students and music educators in the versatility and importance of such an ensemble.<sup>3</sup>

## Change and Growth

In September 1977, Dennis Prime left on sabbatical to begin doctoral studies with Eugene Corporon, so Marvin Eckroth, who was then teaching at Jasper Place High School with Harris, assumed leadership of the ensemble for its second year. The group began to garner attention in the music community, and performances during that season included the Canadian Band Directors’ Association convention in Calgary, among others.

Each concert featured literature for wind band, as well as works for brass or woodwind ensembles, and for soloists from within the group. At the end of the second year, the Saturday School program ended and, due to the proposed rebuilding of the Grant MacEwan arts campus, the ensemble had to look for a new home.

In the fall of 1978, Malcolm Forsyth, then the principal trombonist with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra (ESO) and a faculty member at the University of Alberta, took over as the ensemble’s conductor and renamed it the Edmonton Wind Sinfonia (EWS). That year, rehearsals were held in high-school band rooms around Edmonton, and the ensemble began to penetrate further into Edmonton’s music community, presenting educational concerts in conjunction with the public-school Board of Education and the University of Alberta’s music department.

In 1979, Prime returned to Edmonton to set up a performing arts high school at Alberta College, and he eventually became director of the Music Conservatory. He re-assumed the leadership of the EWS, and the ensemble began a fifteen-year partnership with Alberta College in which the institution supplied rehearsal space, performing parts, and, at times, even instruments. The ensemble incorporated as a society in 1978 but let this status lapse when it became associated with Alberta College. When it reapplied for incorporation in 1996 and was informed by Alberta Gaming that the name “Edmonton Wind Sinfonia” had already been used, the ensemble renamed itself the New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia.

In 1999, Prime left to pursue other interests, and leadership of the ensemble passed to Raymond Baril.<sup>4</sup> Baril had recently earned his Master’s in Conducting from Northwestern University in Illinois, under the tutelage of John Paynter, and he was a strong

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advocate of the wind band and of community-based music. The group entered the new millennium with Baril at the helm, and remains under his direction to this day.

### Evolution of the Membership

The EWS/NEWS has played an integral role in the culture of its community, and has counted among its members many prominent Edmontonians, from both the general public and the music sector. Its focus on music of an advanced level of difficulty and of high aesthetic value appealed to serious musicians whose participation, in turn, allowed the ensemble to program that kind of repertoire.

In addition to its connection with advanced high-school students, the EWS also enjoyed a unique relationship with the ESO in its early days. Many of the musicians in the young orchestra were seeking ways to reach out to the community and connect with potential private students; playing in the EWS afforded them one such opportunity. The inaugural group of 1976 was comprised of fifteen university students, eighteen teachers and professional musicians, and thirteen high-school students.

As music programs in the public-school system grew stronger, and as the ESO's season expanded, EWS membership gravitated more towards music educators and other non-ESO musicians. Currently the NEWS has eighteen school-band directors, five university students, eighteen professionals in careers other than music, four university professors, and eight professional musicians, most of whom have teaching studios. Four of the current members have been with the ensemble since the beginning.

### The Best in Wind Repertoire

Not being associated with any particular institution, the NEWS has been able to determine its own direction. While the search for repertoire in many post-secondary institutions often veers towards the serious and edgy, community bands have traditionally sought out music with a wider appeal. Fordyce Pier, former chair of the Department of Music at the University of Alberta and a longtime trumpeter with the NEWS, sees the ensemble as having successfully walked the fine line between the two approaches. It plays music that challenges the musicians but is not difficult for audiences to appreciate.<sup>5</sup>

From its early days, the NEWS programmed music that had not yet been performed in Edmonton: for example, it gave the Canadian premieres of Michael Colgrass' *Arctic Dreams* and *Winds of Nagual*, as well as Joseph Schwantner's...*and the mountains rising nowhere*. The ensemble has also frequently broken into chamber groups to perform, thus expanding the range of repertoire it can play, such as the Strauss and Mozart *Serenades* and Strauss' *Symphony for Winds* ("The Happy Workshop").

One memorable performance took place in Dennis Prime's home, where the ensemble performed the *Good Soldier Schweik Suite* by Robert Kurka. The concert was presented beside the indoor pool for a guest audience from France, and the musicians' uniform that evening consisted of tuxedo jackets on the top and shorts and sandals below! Their pursuit of musical excellence has never detracted from their ability to have fun.

Raymond Baril, the conductor of the NEWS for the past fifteen seasons, is passionate in his pursuit of repertoire that represents both the history of the wind band and the directions it is taking in the twenty-first century. Recent additions to the wind-band repertoire, such as *Timepiece* by Cindy McTee, *SLALOM* by Carter Pann, Phillip Sparke's *Dance Movements*, and John Corigliano's *Gazebo Dances*, are among the works he has programmed.

More traditional repertoire performed by the NEWS includes Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*, the Holst Suites, and the Symphonies by Morton Gould, Vittorio Giannini, and Vincent Persichetti. Edmonton audiences have also been treated to the antics of Eric Whitacre's *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas* (complete with costumes), the grandeur of John Williams' *Star Wars Trilogy* (as arranged for band by Donald Hunsberger), and the show tunes of John Kranz's *Broadway Curtain Time*. Music by Edmonton composers has also showcased, including the premieres of works by Roger Deegan, Allan Gilliland, and Malcolm Forsyth.

In addition to featuring local artists, including ESO musicians and some of the NEWS' own members, as soloists from time to time, the ensemble has also shared the stage with internationally known musicians, including the flutist James Walker, the saxophonist Fred Hemke, the tuba virtuoso Harvey Phillips, the Canadian trombonist Alain Trudel, the saxophonist Jean-Michelle Goury, and the clarinetist James Campbell.

The NEWS has produced two CDs to date: *Among Friends* in 2005, and *O Music* in 2011. The latter disc was devoted completely to music by the Edmonton composer, Allan Gilliland. It received two nominations for the Western Canada Music Awards, and his trumpet feature, *Kalla*, won in the category of Best Classical Composition.

### A Dedication to Music Education

"One of the most revealing facts about community music activities is that they have often paralleled school music activities. This is not surprising because so many community music participants have been products of school music programs, and many community music directors have been school music directors."<sup>6</sup> As we have seen, ties between the education world and the music community played an integral role in the formation of the NEWS and, since that time, the ensemble has made it a priority to give back to its community.

The ensemble has always prided itself on its connection to Alberta music teachers and their students; to that end, it has consistently participated in events that promote music education. As part of an educational initiative in the late 1980s, the NEWS worked with the Alberta Band Association to record each of the works on the ABA's festival syllabus list so that directors could access recorded examples. (Before the Internet, a cassette tape of repertoire examples was golden!) In its Alberta College days, the ensemble also hosted a yearly concerto competition for high-school students, with EWS players acting as adjudicators. Winning students were featured in concert accompanied by the full wind ensemble.

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The NEWS has performed throughout Alberta at events such as Music Conference Alberta, the Cantando Festival, the Alberta International Band Festival, and the 2000 International Society of Music Educators (ISME) conference. It has performed on several occasions in joint concerts with the Northern Alberta Junior Honour Band, providing the opportunity for these young students to play alongside professional musicians on the stage of the beautiful Francis Winspear Centre for Music.

Another mandate of the NEWS has been to perform at school concerts throughout the Edmonton area so that parents and students alike can witness adults making music. The Sinfonia has also connected strongly with the post-secondary education community: in the fall of 2010, for example, in partnership with the University of Alberta, the NEWS performed John Corigliano's *Circus Maximus* with the composer in attendance.

And perhaps one of the most important educational connections has come in the form of mentorship. Given that the group brings together music-education students, new teachers, and veteran educators, it provides a perfect opportunity for the sharing of ideas and resources. Break-time during rehearsals is filled with lively conversations!

### World NEWS

The NEWS has always prided itself on its ability to balance the goal of musical excellence with a desire for social connection to the members of its "extended family." Among the most significant contributions to this camaraderie is the ensemble's extensive international travel. As with other parts of the ensemble's history, this began with a personal connection.

Malcolm Forsyth was on sabbatical in the south of France when he met the band conductor, Jean-Luc Wastable, who was in need of a trombonist for his community band. After finding an instrument to play, Malcolm joined the band. In 1996, this connection led to an invitation for the EWS to participate in the "Festival des Anches d'Or" in Cogolin, France.

The EWS and its conductor, Dennis Prime, accepted. Band members were billeted with fellow musicians throughout the Provence region, and they shared performances in concert halls and village squares. The tour was such a success that the ensemble returned to France in 2000, under the direction of Raymond Baril.

In 2004, NEWS went to Italy to participate in the Florence Youth Festival, hosted by the Accademia San Felice. An invitation to perform at the ISME conference in Bologna, Italy, drew the NEWS back to Europe in 2008. Here the ensemble's members met fellow musicians and educators from around the world. Often on these tours, the group found itself in interesting situations, such as the day they played in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, competing for audience attention with a rock band playing nearby in anticipation of Bastille Day!<sup>7</sup>

Three years later, the Sinfonia travelled to Spain and experienced the musical customs of yet another country. In one performance, in the village of Pals in the Catalan region, the ensemble ended its concert with a rousing "Ole!" Since bullfights are of Spanish rather than Catalan origin, the gesture was unfortunately not well received. This tour also coincided with the passing of Malcolm Forsyth, which was particularly poignant since the news reached them in Cassis, where Forsyth had first made the French connections that started the NEWS on its European travels.

In 2013, the Sinfonia was invited to perform at the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE) conference in Valencia, Spain. Unfortunately, that conference was cancelled, but the NEWS was offered an alternate performance at the Jungfrau Music Festival in Switzerland. Here the ensemble shared the stage with some of the world's most renowned university wind bands, and was proud to present an all-Canadian program with music by Howard Cable, Malcolm Forsyth, Allan Bell, Godfrey Ridout, and Allan Gilliland, among others.

Throughout their touring experiences of the past eighteen years, the ensemble's members have enjoyed showing the world what Canada has to offer, and experiencing the strong bond the international language of music can provide. Bob Cockell, a NEWS oboist for nearly thirty years, shares this story from the first tour in 1996:

We found ourselves beside a monument on a hillside outside the village of La Motte-en-Provence. The monument commemorates the landing of Canadian forces in 1944 as they engaged the Germans and freed the village of La Motte, the first village in Provence to gain its freedom. So, when we went there, we were welcomed with open arms by these people; they could not do enough for us. We played a little concert outside on the square, after which the mayor hosted this big dinner for us. People were hugging us, thanking us – these total strangers, now friends. Suddenly I realized that we were not just a visiting band, we were ambassadors. And that really hit home in subsequent tours when we travelled across Europe and heard repeatedly, "Ah, here are the Canadians;" the pride we felt by being identified as such was an experience like no other.<sup>8</sup>

### A Bright Future

John Paynter, the founder of the Northshore Concert Band in Chicago, once said that it is "through the history of what we've done that we know where we're going."<sup>9</sup> Considering the rich history of the New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia, replete with musical excellence, a strong belief in music education, the promotion of Canadian talent, and the building of a lifelong network of relationships and camaraderie, NEWS members are confident they will continue to play an important role in the future of wind bands in Canada.

At the time of writing, the New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia had just received word that it has been invited to perform at the 2015 World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE) conference in San Jose, California. With this "news," the future looks bright from here!

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Currently Director of the Cantando Music Festivals.
- 2 Taken from the original brochure for the Grant MacEwan College "Saturday School."
- 3 Provided by Donald Harris for NEWS' 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert, 2001.
- 4 Currently Head of Winds and Brass at MacEwan University.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Michael L. Mark, "Music Education History as Prologue to the Future Practitioners and Researchers," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 16, no. 2 (Jan. 1995), 112.
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- 8 Personal communication with Bob Cockell, July 15, 2014
- 9 John P. Paynter, "On Generating Local Support," *The Instrumentalist* 36 (May 1982), 3.



**Roberta Baril** has taught in school band programs in Edmonton for the past 33 years, and is currently the music director and Department Head of Fine Arts and International Languages at W.P. Wagner High School in Edmonton. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Music Education from the University of Alberta, where her Master's thesis focused on the mentoring of beginning music teachers. She has received a number of honours, including a provincial Excellence in

Teaching Award, the Elkhorn Award for Director of the Year in the province of Alberta, and the David Peterkin Memorial Award for outstanding contributions in band.

Roberta has spoken at many conferences and is known for her work in the areas of music advocacy, recruitment and retention, and mentorship. She remains active as a tubist, currently performing with the New Edmonton Wind Sinfonia, under the direction of her husband, Raymond Baril. She has been a guest conductor and clinician on numerous occasions, and was an associate conductor with the Cosmopolitan Music Society. She has also served on the boards of directors of the Alberta Band Association and the Coalition for Music Education in Canada.

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