

by **Anthony Reimer**
Involved with U of C Bands in 10 years out of the last 20

M.U.S.-icology 101

Lecture No. 7
Topic: *Bands & Ensembles*

It's a typical summer afternoon in California (or at least for San Luis Obispo). The sky is clear; the temperature warm but not uncomfortable. In short, a perfect day for a dip in the pool.

I'm not a swimmer, so after I practice my conducting in the pool, I step into the whirlpool for some hydrotherapy. I am joined by two graduating members of the U of C Wind Ensemble. The ensemble has finished its performances at the WASBE Conference here and are enjoying a bit of the California sun before returning home. Some friendly discussion ensues.

Of course, the most recent performances are on their mind, but more interesting are their reflections on their time with the ensemble. Particularly striking is the comment, "we've come so far since the first Wind Ensemble CD."

In much the same way that my Mussenger column has spoken to the history of M.U.S., I found myself in much the same position in the hot tub with regards to the U of C Wind Ensemble. Whether they knew it or not when they stepped into that whirlpool, I was a member of the very first Wind Ensemble in the Fall of 1982. I understood far better than they realised how far the wind bands on campus had come.

I came to the U of C in 1980, just as the U of C Concert Band was about to undergo an important change in its direction. Capt. F.M. (Ray) McLeod was the Director of Bands here, as well as for the Calgary Concert Band. He understood the military tradition well, and also was familiar with the role of band as "concert music for the masses." He produced bands in the way that he knew best.

Capt. McLeod retired two years after my arrival, opening a spot on the faculty for Dr. Vondis Miller. Dr. Miller's outlook on wind bands was far more "symphonic" than his predecessor. He took as his model the Wind Ensembles of Frederick Fennell and like-minded others in the Universities and Colleges in North America.

So in retrospect, it was no surprise that he formed our first Wind Ensemble within a year of his arrival. The Department had fewer than 100 students at the time, so this non-credit ensemble was made up entirely of members from the newly-christened Symphonic Band.

The myriad of composers and works that Dr. Miller brought to campus — to Calgary, for that matter — expanded the vision of people who would be the next generation of band directors in this city. Although it may seem strange now, prior to Dr. Miller's arrival, no one was playing works like *Lincolnshire Posy* or the Persichetti *Symphony for Band*, and certainly not anything contemporary like Schuman's *George Washington Bridge* or Benson's *The Solitary Dancer*. Sure, some band members didn't like certain pieces, and we weren't always up to all the challenges of the music, but that wasn't the point. Growth was the point.

Vondis went on to start the Summer Conducting Programme (a first of its kind) and served as President of WASBE, the organisation that brought my new hot tub discussion group to California.

Although I do not go into any of this kind of detail with them, I tell them that there were a lot of stepping stones along the way for the Wind Ensemble, many of which they may not be aware of. Without the work of Vondis Miller, the Wind Ensemble would not have had the chance to develop to this level yet, if it existed at all. In fact, you would not have two faculty members directing wind bands, you would likely have just one.

Even within the frame of reference of those players, the direct relationship between events could be seen. The 1999 Wind Ensemble was made up almost entirely of players who were in the Symphonic Band in either 1996, when they went to the CBDNA Conference in Reno, or in 1998, when they started their first recording project (the end results of which will be available in the next couple months). For long-time Wind Ensemble members, the experience gained through multiple recording projects, performances at conferences like MusicFest Canada, and school concerts helped produce what was their finest achievement to date.

Other links could also be drawn, but the point was made. We are all the sum of our experiences. Ensembles like this are also a sum of their history and what is passed down through the generations. You need to respect that history — be humbled by it — for without it, your accomplishments would not be possible. I guess that's why I volunteered to write this regular column over two years ago: to make sure some things are passed down.

The first six M.U.S.-icology 101 articles are still available on the web at <http://www.jazzace.ca/mus/>

The whirlpool in question (left, under slotted canopy) and the pool in question on the week in question

