

All Canadian, all the time!

By Julia Armstrong

Admittedly, when it comes to hymns, most of us think of the centuries-old cornerstones of our hymn books, tunes that were sung by our forefathers. But did you know there's a wealth of Canadian hymns, some with fascinating stories? Take, for example, "What a friend we have in Jesus." The text was written by Joseph Scriven, an Irish immigrant who settled at Rice Lake, near Peterborough, Ontario. He left his native Ireland at 25, after his fiancée drowned the night before their wedding. He never intended the poem to be published; it was originally enclosed in a letter he sent to comfort his ill mother in far-off Ireland. In Canada, Scriven eventually fell in love again but lost his second intended bride to pneumonia. There's a monument to Scriven in Port Hope, upon which is inscribed the words of his hymn. The tune by Canadian James Edmund Jones is perhaps less well known than the American one by Converse, but well worth the re-acquaintance. Unbelievably, Scriven himself died of drowning, in Rice Lake.

Grace Church on-the-Hill, Toronto, was the setting for such stories and songs of praise during **Fanfare of Canadian Hymns**, a concert presented October 26 by Pax Christi Chorale under the direction of Stephanie Martin. Guest host Howard Dyck, well known in choral circles as the former host of CBC Radio's "Choral Concert," greeted the audience by expressing his pleasure at collaborating with Pax Christi Chorale, Toronto's 90-voice Mennonite Choir. Mr. Dyck is himself a Mennonite. "I grew up in a small community in southern Manitoba, and I've sung hymns for as long as I can remember," he told the audience. "Mennonites sing hymns as well as anyone I know, and better than most." Of course, four-part hymn singing was the norm among Mennonite communities like the ones he and Artistic Director Stephanie Martin grew up in. "Unison singing was for a lesser species!" joked Dyck.

Other hymnodists featured on the program included Hugh Bancroft, whose "There's a voice in the wilderness crying" is the official song of Shawnigan Lake School in British Columbia, as

well as James Hopkirk, Barrie Cabena, Graham George, Walter MacNutt, and, of course, Healey Willan. Willan, the "dean of Canadian composers," wrote and arranged many hymn tunes. The audience was invited to join in singing his "Eternal, unchanging, we sing to thy praise" (St. Basil). Later, the Christ Church Deer Park Junior Choir, conducted by Bruce Kirkpatrick Hill (also Pax Christi Chorale's accompanist), presented Willan's arrangement of "The Huron Carol." Written in 1643 by Jesuit priest Jean de Brébeuf, "The Huron Carol is the oldest example of a Canadian hymn," said Dyck. Originally in the language of the Huron, it was eventually translated to French, then English. "The tune likely derives from a French-Canadian melody that had its roots in 17th-century France."

Did you know that Sir Arthur Sullivan, the famous tunesmith of the operetta duo Gilbert and Sullivan, wrote a hymn for us? "He was impressed with the Canadian hymn text 'God bless our wide dominion' by the Marquis of Lorne," said Dyck. The Marquis, Canada's Governor-General at the time, was married to Queen Victoria's daughter. "No doubt he was scoring points with his mother-in-law," said Dyck.

When you think of some of the most-loved hymns of all time, Sir Hubert Parry's "Jerusalem" is among them. But not many people realize that the famous British musician is also the composer of a hymn well known on the eastern shores of our country, "Ode to Newfoundland." When Parry penned the tune to Cavendish Boyle's poem, it was immediately adopted as Newfoundland's national anthem. "That status was lost when the province joined Confederation, but in 1980 it was restored as the province's song," said Dyck.

Also on the program were tunes and texts by composers of Mennonite heritage, including Leonard Enns, Harris Loewen, Jean Janzen and Artistic Director Stephanie Martin. The program finished with the choir and audience joining in what Howard Dyck described as an "all-Canadian hymn," with both text and music by Charles Venn Pilcher. A native of England, Pilcher moved to Toronto to teach Greek and Old Testament studies at Wycliffe College. He was also an accomplished bass clarinetist and played with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for 10 years. He died in

1961 in Australia, where he had served as Bishop of Sydney for 20 years. Husband-and-wife team Stephanie Martin and Bruce Kirkpatrick Hill composed a new descant for the final verse of Pilcher's glorious hymn "King of Love."

IN PRAISE OF HYMN SINGING

"What appeals to me most about hymns is the perfect marriage of music and words; neither melody nor poetry is complete without the other. I never tire of singing good old Hyfrydol; the words 'lost in wonder, love and praise' are transporting. Another timeless favourite is Down Ampney, and again it's the words that strike me: '...o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.'

"October marked the anniversary of the Springhill mining disaster in Nova Scotia. I was so moved by the story I heard on CBC Radio of those miners trapped in utter darkness waiting to be rescued. How did they keep themselves sane? They sang hymns — a whole repertoire of inspiring music they knew off by heart. Music has this magical shortcut to our long-term memory. We all know it's easier to memorize something if it's set to music. Think about it — what comforting words would you want to be able to summon up from your long-term memory?

Stephanie Martin, Artistic Director, Pax Christi Chorale; Assistant Professor of Music, York University; Director of Music, Church of St. Mary Magdalene