

## **PROVIDING EQUAL ACCESS TO MUSIC MATERIALS: A CELEBRATION OF THE CANADIAN NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND'S MUSIC LIBRARY**

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### **ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY**

1996 is a significant year, marking the 90th anniversary of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind's Library for the Blind. What is particularly noteworthy is that the Library itself actually pre-dates the Institute. Founded in 1906 by Edgar Bertram Freel Robinson, a blind university graduate, and a number of his blind colleagues, the Canadian Free Library for the Blind made its first home in Markham, Ontario. From this library eventually grew the Canadian National Institute for the Blind -- officially designated so in 1918, when its headquarters were established in Toronto.

The humble beginnings of the CNIB's unique Music Library can be traced back to 1939 when Colonel E. A. Baker, then Managing Director of the CNIB, established a research committee to consider the needs of blind musicians and piano tuners across Canada. The committee's findings resulted in the creation of a CNIB Music Department. Previous to this event, there had only been a small music section within the Library Department of the Institute.

In 1942, Colonel Baker appointed Dr. Ernest Whitfield, a blind concert violinist who had emigrated from England, to the position of Secretary of this newly formed Music Committee. He was given two tasks: (1) to establish the standards for a piano tuner's certificate; and (2) to create interest across Canada in the efforts and achievements of blind music teachers and musicians.

When Dr. Whitfield returned to England in 1946 he was succeeded by Mrs. Edith Dymond Simpson, another violinist. The Music Committee was established permanently as the National Advisory Committee on Music to the CNIB, and Mrs. Simpson was appointed National Music Consultant as well as Secretary on a part-time basis. During her twenty-one years of service with the CNIB, Mrs. Simpson worked closely with blind piano tuners and began extensive correspondence with visually impaired musicians across Canada. She also helped to organize conferences for blind musicians and piano tuners. As a result of her membership with the American

Workers for the Blind, and with the Ontario Registered Music Teachers' Association (ORMTA), Mrs. Simpson was able to speak on behalf of blind musicians across Canada, and to keep them informed of current music trends.

After Mrs. Simpson's retirement in 1967, William Vaisey succeeded her as National Music Consultant and Secretary of the National Advisory Committee on Music. Mr. Vaisey brought with him a wealth of experience from the music field. As a performing musician, he had worked as a rehearsal pianist in Milan and Rome for a number of opera houses, and for the National Ballet and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet here in Canada. He performed solo and ensemble work, provided accompaniment for other musicians, taught piano and theory at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, adjudicated practical examinations, and acted as a vocal trainer. Mr. Vaisey also served on a vast number of professional music teachers' association boards. He was president of the Toronto branch of ORMTA, as well as vice-president and president of its provincial association. He held two positions with the Canadian Federation of Music Teachers' Association (CFMTA), and he was president as well as chairman of the Canadian Composer's Department. Mr. Vaisey's appointment as a music therapist, working in Toronto with children who have disabilities, helped to influence his decision to assume the position of National Music Consultant and Secretary of the Advisory Committee on Music. In this position, he continued to provide a leadership role in the planning, development, and maintenance, of counselling, training, career planning, and other music services for blind and visually impaired musicians. Mr. Vaisey retained this position until he retired in 1988.

During William Vaisey's term in office, the Music Department was incorporated into the National Library Division. A Music Librarian was hired to further organize and develop the collection according to professional library standards. In 1983, the Music Department was renamed the Music Library, and on April 18th of that year, Lotfi Mansouri, then General Director of the Canadian Opera Company, officially opened the new CNIB Music Library.

## **GROWTH OF THE COLLECTION**

Throughout these years, the collection gradually expanded as many significant acquisitions were made, and the reputation of the Music Library grew accordingly.

### **\* Financial Resources**

In addition to the general budget allocation from the CNIB, other financial resources have assisted in developing the Music Collection. The Ella Beacock Memorial Fund is one such resource, specifically providing the CNIB Music Library with braille music scores. Ella Beacock was a well-respected and successful piano and theory teacher in Toronto for many years. Upon her death, the fund was established by her husband Rea Beacock, in memory of his wife.

Direct donations of music materials have also played a significant role in the overall growth and development of the Music Collection. Some of these include George Patrick's collection of braille piano scores, as well as Dr. John Vandertuin's selection of braille organ music. Dr. Anne Burrows has also recently donated a substantial number of braille piano scores to the Music Library.

### **\* Montreal-Toronto Merger**

During the early 1980s, the National Music Department of the CNIB witnessed the greatest changes with respect to the expansion of its Music Collection. In 1982, the large braille music collection from CNIB Montreal was moved and integrated with the existing music resources housed in Toronto. The decision more than doubled the size of the Music Collection at that time.

### **\* National Braille Music Transcription Service**

It is important to note that the Montreal collection had originally been part of an independent Braille Music Transcription Service for blind musicians in Quebec, which was taken over by the Quebec Branch of the CNIB in 1943. In 1949 the Quebec Braille Music Society, composed of professional blind musicians, felt that this service should be extended to all of Canada. As a result, in 1955, the transcription service became the National Braille Music Transcription Service of the CNIB, with its office remaining at CNIB headquarters in Montreal. However, when the braille music collection moved from Montreal to Toronto in 1982, the transcription service moved with it. In this way, the CNIB National Braille Music

Transcription Service played a major role in the development of the specialized music collection which exists today.

## **THE CURRENT COLLECTION**

### **\* Holdings**

At present, the CNIB Music Library for the Blind in Toronto houses one of the largest collections of braille music in the world, second only to the Library of Congress. The collection consists of approximately 18,000 music scores and literature texts. Although the majority of items in the collection are braille music scores, and braille books about music, the collection also includes a growing number of self-instruction courses on cassette for learning piano, organ, guitar, and voice. Furthermore, the library houses a variety of histories, biographies, and theory books, available in braille and on cassette. Although the library's main strength is its collection of classical music scores, acquisitions will continue to be sought from the worlds of jazz, folk, pop, and rock music, to strengthen these areas within the larger collection.

### **\* Clientele**

The Music Library presently serves a clientele of approximately 500 blind Canadians and provides services, such as inter-library loans, to others around the world -- including performers, composers, teachers, students, piano tuners, and music lovers -- all of whom rely on music as their primary source of employment or enjoyment.

### **\* Transcription Service**

To this day, the CNIB continues to train volunteers to produce hand-transcribed scores, which would otherwise remain inaccessible to blind musicians. Although the work of a braille music transcriber is a challenging and rewarding experience, there are, unfortunately, too few transcribers in Canada to meet the increasing needs of blind musicians. At present, the CNIB in Toronto has only two braille music transcribers: Florence Preston and Shirley Otterman. Quite thankfully, two more (Karen Auckenthaler and Jill Cooter) are about to join the ranks as they near the completion of their Braille Music Transcription Course, offered by the CNIB.

Such individuals deserve great praise for the time and effort they have so generously dedicated to the craft. Braille music transcription is a skill requiring years of study. To begin with, a transcriber must have the

ability to play the piano at least at the Grade VIII level (Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto), and have a knowledge of music theory at the Grade II level. He or she must then take the CNIB's one-year Literary Braille Course, followed by the extensive two-year Braille Music Transcription Course.

Since it is next to impossible for musicians who are blind to acquire a large personal library of music materials, as few sources for braille music exist, the CNIB Music Library's transcription service provides an invaluable resource to blind musicians across Canada. To this end, new recruits are *always* welcome.

### THE BRAILLE MUSIC NOTATION SYSTEM

Though a blind person is not by definition either more or less talented in music than a sighted person, his or her condition causes greater reliance upon the hearing faculty, which, in response, may grow more acute or more perceptive than that of a similarly talented person with sight. For a blind person, music has traditionally been considered an ideal activity, whether pastime or profession, performance or trade. Popular music and folk music, which can be assimilated by ear, are perhaps the genres most easily mastered by blind musicians. However, braille music notation, which is used for reading and memorizing, has made it easier for the blind to enter into the concert field -- though orchestral playing, which demands constant sight-reading, remains impractical.

While a sighted musician can absorb many pieces of musical information from a single glance at a page of music, the blind musician requires every detail from that print page to be transcribed into braille music notation. The music must then be memorized, note by note, bar by bar, before the technical and musical problems of a composition can even begin to be studied.

When Louis Braille invented his system of reading and writing in 1829, using a matrix of six dots, his primary purpose was to promote literacy among blind people. Genius that he was, he soon discovered that his code could be adapted to the requirements of music notation. A blind music teacher and organist himself, Louis Braille developed the braille music code from 1829-1834. Quite simply, braille music is a special braille code or language based on the same

cell of six dots used in literary braille. In music braille the dots are combined to represent symbols of music notation instead of letters, parts of words, or whole words. Since there are only 63 permutations of six dots, it follows that many symbols must carry more than one meaning, according to their literary or musical context.

In addition to understanding the signs of braille music, a blind musician must also be familiar with the different formats used to present braille music on the page. Piano music, for example, is written in two parts -- right hand and left hand -- that correspond roughly to the treble and bass staves of print music. The two parts can be arranged in a variety of formats: the right hand and left hand parts may either be written in separate paragraphs of music, or in parallel lines, similar to print, with each measure vertically aligned.

### THE STUDY OF BRAILLE MUSIC NOTATION

The CNIB Music Library has remained active in the promotion of the use and study of braille music notation. Today, blind children are being mainstreamed into the public school system where special instruction in braille music notation may not be available. As a result, specific programs are needed to instruct young blind students and sighted teachers on a regular basis. One excellent resource that exists is Dr. Anne Burrows' *Music Through Braille*. An accomplished Canadian musician, teacher, critic, and composer, and blind herself since birth, Anne Burrows has taken on the challenge of developing a program designed to teach visually impaired children the fluent use of braille music notation so that they may read and take part in school music activities. In addition, it is hoped that they will become proficient enough to study on equal terms with their peers. Soon to be available in both braille and print formats, *Music Through Braille* has the potential to become an established course for training blind students and sighted teachers in braille music notation. Other valuable courses of instruction include: Bettye Krollick's *How to Read Braille Music*, and Joan Partridge's *Braille Music for Beginners*, which is particularly useful for pianists.

Through the support of projects such as *Music Through Braille*, the CNIB Music Library is making every effort to help keep braille music alive.

## PROMOTING A GREATER AWARENESS OF THE COLLECTION

The Music Library is also undertaking a variety of projects to promote a greater awareness of its collection.

### \* Online Cataloguing Project

In the past, catalogues of our braille music scores were compiled on a regular basis. Their purpose was to provide access to the CNIB Music Library's unique holdings and, in doing so, assist blind music clients in the selection of music items. As a means of further enhancing accessibility to the collection, the Library has recently begun an eighteen-month project to convert its manual card catalogue to a computerized database on our new automated library system, GEAC Advance. As the new Music Librarian, this is my big project for 1996/97 -- I am cataloguing the entire Music Collection online! Up until now, direct access to the Collection has been available only manually through the card catalogue, where items are organized by subject and then arranged alphabetically by composer's name *only*. Such a set-up poses quite a number of limitations to the searcher. The ongoing conversion will eliminate such limitations and, in doing so, greatly increase the collection's accessibility. Once connected to the system, clients will be able to access our holdings remotely from anywhere in Canada.

### \* Mouthpiece

Returning to the original celebration theme of this article, 1995 marked the 25th anniversary of the CNIB's music periodical *Mouthpiece*, which was started by William Vaisey in 1970. To this day, the music periodical has remained a digest of what is happening in the music world. Its aim is to provide blind musicians with information which they may not have access to otherwise. More specifically, *Mouthpiece* offers a diverse selection of news and views from a Canadian perspective. Articles are reprinted from a wide variety of music journals. Reports from the CNIB also help to keep clients abreast of current developments within the Music Library. *Mouthpiece* is published three times a year in audio format.

Although today's challenges are somewhat different from those which existed fifty years ago, the CNIB Music Library is confident of its ability to meet these challenges with resourcefulness and imagination as the new millennium approaches. In its ongoing crusade for equal access to information for the blind and visually impaired, the CNIB Music Library has played and will continue to play an instrumental role in bringing the opportunity to experience the joy of music-making to an even wider audience.

