

MUSICIAN IN OUR MIDST - KELLY GALBRAITH

Allan Pulker, [Wholenote](#) May, 2000

By day a producer for CBC Radio Two, the rest of the time a choral conductor and an organist, Kelly Galbraith somehow also finds time to serve on the Ontario Regional Council of the Canadian Music Centre -- all part of a musical life that is personally fulfilling and is making a significant contribution to Toronto and to Canada.

Kelly grew up in Saint John, New Brunswick, where at an early age she learned how to play the accordion from her grandfather. "At the age when most kids are practising their scales on the piano" she commented, "I was learning to play Button Boogie!"

Her grandmother (on the other side of the family) had her own plans for Kelly's musical future, saving dimes to buy her an electric organ, because she was determined that Kelly would become an organist. Grandmother's desires were nudged along by the fact that one of Kelly's classmates had an organ, and when Kelly tried it she found it so much fun that she asked her parents for one. She took to the little electric organ they got her like the proverbial duck to water and by the age of 15 was playing the organ in one of the local churches - without the benefit of formal lessons.

To this day she remains amazed - and grateful - that Dr. Willis Noble, the organ professor at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, accepted her as a student. "He took me right back to the beginning, to the basics of playing the organ." And by all accounts she rose to the challenge. As she recalls it, she took on a nine-hour-a-day practice regime, beginning her day by practising from 5:30 until 8:30, when her classes began. In the afternoon, after her classes were finished, she practised another two to three hours and again in the evening, after which she would do her assignments.

According to Willis Noble, now organist and choirmaster at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, she usually began practising at 4:30 and 5:00 in the morning, and actually wore out the organ that she practised on! He told me he has never had a student with her energy and drive.

"I slept only about five hours a night then" Kelly told me; "I put a picture on the wall of a curly headed stick figure (me) on her way to Toronto. I was determined to succeed and to go to Toronto to study and play."

And go to Toronto she did, in 1984. Here she studied with Douglas Bodle and earned her living as a church organist and choir master. It was in this role that she would hone the skills she had begun to develop at Mount Allison where she had sung in Dr. Noble's women's choir, which he sometimes gave her the opportunity to conduct. One of the biggest challenges of leading a church choir, she found, was that all the members were volunteers. Since auditions were not part of the process of becoming a member, not everyone that she had to work with was an equally competent singer. "But there's always a way to help some one sing better," she says, acknowledging her debt to the discipline church choirs gave her.

She longed, nevertheless, to have her own choir, where she could choose the repertoire and the singers and establish her own direction. In 1989 she got eight women friends together and

established Cantores Celestes Women's Chamber Choir. "I knew where I wanted to take them, it has taken a while but we are getting there."

The choir, which now has thirty-five members, prepares and presents four concerts with four separate thematic programs each season with an average attendance of 500. They donate a part of the ticket sales to charitable causes, and have made two CDs, *Wassail* and *Bright Shining as the Sun* paid for completely by ticket sales. A third CD is planned for next year. She chooses her repertoire very carefully, basing her decisions not only on the music but also the quality and meaning of the text.

Kelly's day job is as a producer at CBC Radio Music, where she is part of the team that produces *Choral Concert* and *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*. She is also responsible for liaison between the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and other public broadcasters around the world. As we sat together in her office at the CBC Broadcast Centre a fellow worker came in with about a dozen tapes from the Winnipeg New Music Festival, which she would forward to the European Broadcast Union for broadcast to about twenty countries in Europe. Another of her projects has been the CBC Choral Competition, the semi-finals of which will be broadcast live from the Glenn Gould Studio on May 16 and 17.

"I love my CBC job" she says. "I am able to hear some of the best choral music there is, I can talk to the people behind it and my colleagues are terrific and very supportive." (Two of them, executive producer, Robert Cooper and *Choral Concert* host, Howard Dyck, are also among the ranks of Canada's elite choral conductors.)

Cantores Celestes has two concerts left this season, the first, "Songs of Hope and Freedom, with guests, Sibongile the Spirit Healers of South Africa, takes place on April 29 at Runnymede United Church, the second, a benefit concert with the Cantabile Women's Choir from Kingston for "Out of the Cold," will be at Yorkminster Park Church on June 3.