



VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL Alumni News

BULLETIN

WINTER 2010 / 11



Kamloops Junior Symphony, 1939, Mr McMurdo, Conductor. Thirteen-year-old Dorothy is at left, second row, first chair.

MRS EVANS TAKES THE BATON

by Denis Johnston (VHS '67)

On August 26, 2010, four of her former students led Dorothy Evans up the steps of Vic High, through the main hall, and into the auditorium. There, representing many other former students, they unveiled a plaque celebrating one of the most storied teaching careers in the history of the school.

Though she arrived unannounced in 1950 and retired only 13 years later, Mrs Evans remains one of Vic High's most influential teachers. In her time there she created an expanding series of widely revered orchestral programs whose graduates embraced her gift of music and spread it around the world. Her programs were truly extraordinary, and their influence endures today.

Born in Kamloops in 1925, Dorothy Hopgood began her life in music almost by accident. A man named Archie McMurdo, a recent immigrant from Scotland in a farm-worker program, had found some extra work in a local music store. He could play the violin and was offering

lessons. Dorothy's mother jumped at the chance and, at age six, Dorothy started playing.

While Dorothy was one of his first students, McMurdo soon accumulated others, and started a youth orchestra with them. Eventually they were playing concerts not only in Kamloops, but also in the annual Okanagan Music Festival and later in the Vancouver Music Festival. Each young musician would pay 10 cents toward the hall rental for each rehearsal, and the local Canadian Legion sponsored the orchestra on its trips.

When war broke out in 1939, McMurdo left Kamloops to join the Allied war effort. One of his students stepped up to lead the orchestra, while another one – Dorothy – took over his private music-teaching practice. As time went on, though she had up to 13 violin students, she realized she needed more lessons herself, but there were no other string teachers in Kamloops. Fortunately, Dorothy's father was a conductor for the CPR and was able to obtain train passes, which allowed Dorothy to resume taking lessons. For two winters she travelled regularly to Vancouver to study with Gregori Garbovitsky, a



Trail-Tadanac School Orchestra, c. 1947, Mr Potter, Conductor. Dorothy taught the junior students and played violin (on the conductor's left, second row, first chair). This photo was taken in Nanaimo during a province-wide tour.

prominent teacher and conductor there. Aiming at a teaching career but also determined to continue her music studies, Dorothy received special permission from the Ministry of Education to attend the Vancouver Normal School rather than the Provincial one in Victoria, so that she could continue her studies with Garbovitsky and play in his Vancouver Youth Orchestra.

After just one year of Normal School, Dorothy was eligible to teach at the elementary level; however, fate stepped in to make better use of her talents. The new district superintendent in Trail, J.F.K. English, was formerly Dorothy's high-school principal in Kamloops. He must have known what an exceptional young woman this was, for he placed her in a Junior-Senior High School, to teach the younger classes in a dynamic new strings program there. The Trail-Tadanac school orchestra, led by Mr Rex Potter, not only travelled to music festivals, but also toured the province to show what high standards could be achieved by school music programs. (This was the same school in which Tommy Mayne first taught high school, but he had already left to join the staff at Vic High; later he and Dorothy would work together on several operettas in the Vic High auditorium.)

Dorothy spent two years in Trail, and remembers it having a very strong community of musicians, notably because of the many Italian immigrants who had

brought their love of music to their new country. After two years, however, she was required to upgrade her credentials in order to continue teaching at the high school level. Already familiar with the Vancouver music scene, she enrolled in the brand-new Music Department at UBC.

On graduating in 1950, she was quickly hired by the new superintendent in Victoria to begin a strings program in District 61. Once again, this was J.F.K. English: by then he knew what Dorothy Hopgood could potentially do for music in the schools.

At age 25, Dorothy climbed the steps at Vic High to start an orchestra program there. She arrived to find an instrument stock of just three violins and one cello. Only two weeks into her new job, she issued an appeal through the *Victoria Daily Times*. "It doesn't have to be a Stradivarius," said the *Times*. "Any old fiddle will do." Dorothy explained that her first priority was getting the learners' classes organized. "Once we get them interested and the instruments, things will begin to roll." The appeal brought in several instruments, and by spring the



Dorothy Hopgood, BA, 1950



Dorothy with her first Vic High music students, ready to travel to the Vancouver Music Festival, Spring 1951

orchestra numbered 17, including 8 string players; the next year it grew to 29, including 19 string players.

It was immediately obvious to Dorothy that, to continue growing the program, she needed to develop string players in Vic High's feeder schools. "You can't hand a violin to a Grade 9 student and expect him or her to play it." So she went to Mr English to plead her case, and she was allowed to add a program at Central Junior High, later another one at Oak Bay Junior. Yet Dorothy still felt she wasn't reaching potential musicians early enough. Once again, she went to the District Superintendent, and soon she added feeder elementary schools to her roster, with new programs at Sir James Douglas, Margaret Jenkins and George Jay. Eventually she was teaching in nine schools, with early morning, lunchtime and after-school practices virtually every day.

As her District-wide responsibilities grew, Dorothy needed to find a way to get around faster. By this time her Vic High classes were held in the Fairey Tech building, and the shop teachers helped her buy a little Austin and taught her how to drive. This enabled her to



Dorothy with beginning students at Sir James Douglas Elementary, c.1958. At left is Trudi Conrad, who was to have a long career as a professional violinist

add even more schools. And concerts of course – every principal likes concerts! One year Dorothy counted 42 concerts that she had conducted, in addition to performances twice per month in Vic High's celebrated daily assemblies. In her first few years in Victoria she played violin and viola in the Victoria Symphony as well.

For the 1953-54 school year, Dorothy took a leave-of-absence to give herself a sabbatical. She planned to spend the summer in France, then find a teaching position in England when the new term began. The plan collapsed, however, when she was hospitalized with double pneumonia; by the time she recovered it was too late to find any work in the schools. However, fate stepped in once again when an aunt who was visiting in-laws in Europe invited her to come to Switzerland. Dorothy arrived just in time for the town's New Year's Eve party. "I played the fiddle all night," she chuckles, "and the next day I knew everyone in town."

This was a lucky stroke that turned her year around. She remained in Switzerland until spring, staying in a pension and giving English lessons, then spent two months in Italy and attended summer music festivals all over Europe. "I heard all kinds of different music, I saw street musicians for the first time," she remembers. "Everywhere I looked there were new ideas I could try out with my students." She also learned that there was very little orchestra teaching in English or continental schools: Victoria and Vic High were definitely in the forefront of teaching instrumental music to a broad population of young people. She landed back in Victoria just in time for the new school year – and brimming with new ideas.



Dorothy conducting in the Vic High music room in the "new wing" opened in 1956



Dorothy conducting, 1962

Dorothy's extraordinary teaching success led to the creation of perhaps her signature achievement: the Greater Victoria Schools Symphony Orchestra (GVSSO). Because school boundaries were "closed" at that time, many of her junior high string students were headed for high schools other than Vic High. Her students adored Mrs Evans (she was married in 1956) and wanted to continue playing under her inspirational leadership. In response, Dorothy began after-school rehearsals at Vic High with the most capable young musicians from all her programs. From these sessions emerged the GVSSO. Although it was nominally district-wide, there was never any doubt that its home was Vic High, where all its rehearsals and many of its concerts took place.

This youth orchestra's reputation for musical excellence was established very quickly and soon spread, thanks to enthusiastic coverage in the local papers. The GVSSO was a fixture at annual school music conferences held each May in different parts of the province. It shared the stage with the Victoria Symphony, playing on several occasions before the main program or during intermission. It was a perennial participant in competitive music festivals, not only in Victoria, but also in Vancouver and Washington State. All this travel was made possible by a very active parents'

committee formed in 1957.

In a competition in Bellingham in 1960, playing selections from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* and Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, the GVSSO received the highest marks among 20 youth orchestras from Canada and the U.S. In 1962, when Dorothy learned that Calgary also had an excellent youth orchestra, she organized a road trip to take part in the Alberta Musical Competition Festival there; and despite a 16-hour delay due to train derailments, again the GVSSO received the highest marks. Their written adjudication concludes, "the many difficulties with which the work bristles were well overcome. It was a real pleasure to hear such sincere and excellent work."

Not content with teaching music all day all over Greater Victoria, Mrs Evans held ensemble practices on weekends at her home. In 1958, when her husband Ted built their new home north of Elk Lake, with a beautiful view of Mount Baker and San Juan Island, he created a large practice room on the lower floor. Through these ensemble practices and performances, says Dorothy, the students learned to listen to each other more acutely. Orchestra parties were also held there, with Ted playing host, caterer and instrument repairman. A commercial fisherman, Ted was popular with the students at least partly because of delicious seafood he provided, and was known to call the hungry students "a bunch of seagulls." Meanwhile, Dorothy upgraded her conducting skills with summer courses at the University of Washington. There was one more sabbatical year too, in 1960-61, when the Evanses had their son Bruce.

In the Greater Victoria Music Festival of 1963, her Greater Victoria Schools string ensemble set an unprecedented standard: a mark of 100% for its performance of Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Scheherazade*. The adjudicator said he was "aghast" that student musicians would even attempt such a difficult piece, let alone perform it to such a high standard. In fact, adjudicators often expressed surprise that, tackling some of classical music's most challenging scores, Dorothy's students



Newlyweds Ted and Dorothy Evans, 1956



Vic High Orchestra, c. 1961

played the same original orchestrations that professional orchestras do. She would actually borrow them from the Victoria Symphony's private library.

A hundred per cent! This remarkable achievement, combined with changes in her personal life, led Mrs Evans to decide to retire. She was 38 years old. She felt that the programs she had built were now strong enough to continue under other leadership. However, an outside observer might say that orchestra programs in Victoria schools have never again reached the standards of the GVSSO or the breadth of participation they experienced in Mrs Evans' 11 years of teaching at Vic High.

There was to be one more performance, however. In 2001, as part of the VHS 125 celebration, a group of

GVSSO alumni organized an afternoon reunion concert. About thirty musicians (no longer teenagers!) performed to a large and appreciative audience in the Vic High Auditorium, conducted of course by Mrs Evans. Guest conductor was Timothy Vernon (VHS '63), Conductor Laureate of Orchestra London, Artistic Director of Pacific Opera Victoria, and one of Canada's most distinguished symphony conductors. He said he'd always wanted to conduct the GVSSO, even when he was in high school!

It will come as no surprise that Mrs Evans has been almost as busy in her long retirement as she was in her teaching career. For many years she continued to give private lessons in music theory, and conducted both the junior orchestra of the Victoria Conservatory of Music



GVSSO reunion concert at Vic High, May 2001

Alumni News

and the Saanich Peninsula Night School Orchestra (now the Civic Orchestra). For 13 years, with her friends Rita (Nevard) Wallis (VHS '40) on cello and Margery Vaughan on piano, she played in the Dorimar Trio which performed popular music at weddings, banquets and art shows and also created all their own arrangements. Today, in her mid-80s, Dorothy is primarily a fiddle player in a trio called A Taste of Fiddling, with Rita now on piano and Ray Barron on bass/accordion.

Dorothy was not known as a fiddler when she was a serious classical musician: in those days fiddling was frowned on in that world. In fact, however, she played a bit of fiddle as a child, and picked it up again when she and Ted would spend part of each winter in Arizona. Her fiddle-playing actually dates back to the mid-1930s, to a chance encounter with a stranger she met in the Cariboo.

For several summers, Dorothy spent part of her holidays with relatives who had a ranch near 70 Mile House. One day, while she was waiting to be picked up by her uncle, a passing hobo noticed her violin case and asked if she knew how to play.



Dorothy in Kamloops, c. 1930

“Yes,” replied Dorothy, loftily.

“Can you play ‘The Old Crooked Stovepipe?’”

Somewhat flustered, Dorothy had to admit that she’d never even heard of it. With that, the man opened her case, took out the violin, and played the lively fiddle tune right then and there – and played it very well! (An early lesson in humility, she says.) When he’d

finished, he handed

back the instrument and continued on his way. When Dorothy returned to Kamloops, she begged her mother to order the sheet music for “The Old Crooked Stovepipe.” When it finally arrived, she practised it as hard as she’d ever practised anything. The next summer, as soon as she arrived in 70 Mile House for her annual visit, she began hunting for the hobo to show him that she could play fiddle too. But she never did find him.

Too bad. He would have learned what many others have learned since – just what happens when you offer a challenge to Dorothy Hopgood Evans!

WHAT DOROTHY’S STUDENTS SAY

[As part of the research for this bulletin, former GVSSO flautist Lesley (Fraser) Wolfe-Milner (VHS '62) distributed a short questionnaire to other GVSSO grads soliciting feedback about Mrs Evans. More than 20 people replied with heartfelt testimonials to this outstanding teacher, all citing the valuable training – musical and otherwise – that she gave them. The collected feedback will be presented to Mrs Evans to keep, and another copy will be deposited with the Vic High Archives. On the next page are a few selections; if you'd like to see more, please email Lesley at lesley44@telus.net.]



Dorothy in the Cariboo, c. 1935



DOROTHY EVANS (HOPGOOD)
STAFF 1950-1963 CONDUCTOR
VICTORIA SCHOOLS ORCHESTRA



Vic High Alumni Association



Dorothy Evans with VHSAA Chair Keith McCallion, August 2010

A certain Miss Hopgood walked into my Grade 6 music class one day and announced that she would probably be the only person who would ever encourage us to bite our nails because they needed to be short to play the violin. That did it. I had to play the violin. It was the first (and best) life decision I ever made.

– Roni (Milton) Wagner, violin and concertmistress, VHS '63

I remember lunch hours spent in the orchestra room, learning music theory, harmony and music history so I could take the Toronto Conservatory exams. These extra lessons were given on her lunch hour and at no cost to me or to the other students who benefited from these lessons. (Years later, she taught music theory to my daughter.)

– Pat (McIvor) Robertson, viola, VHS '60

I remember standing at the railing of the ferry as we left to go to Port Angeles to play a concert. I think I was in the fifth grade and I remember telling her, "I am going to be a music teacher just like you." I wasn't "just like her" but I did become a music teacher.... I remember her as quiet and fair, yet she demanded and expected our very best which we all gave. She had high expectations for us, and I have brought that to my teaching.

– Lynne (McConnell) Jessup Michael, violin, VHS '62

The most memorable incident for me is the day she told our Central Junior High School class: "Your instruments are your passports" – a prophecy which, for me, was truly fulfilled. Some years ago, before I passed her visionary statement on to my own orchestra students, I counted the number of countries I had played in: 27 was the total. However, the opportunity to travel was only part of the picture. She knew we would discover how enriched our lives could be through the many social contacts we would make as musical ambassadors. With her philosophy came the opportunity to learn the importance of professionalism and respect for others: values equally as necessary for our development as our playing ability.

– Trudi (Conrad) Prelypchan, violin, VHS '66

Of course her musicianship is stellar but she also instilled other non-musical disciplines in our teenage brains – things I still rely on and draw from today. Her mission to be the best that she could be with such confidence has stayed with me and I'm sure all her former students feel the same way.

– David Foster, bassoon, multiple Grammy-award-winning musician, composer and producer