

CANADIAN COMPOSERS PORTRAITS

PHIL NIMMONS DOCUMENTARY

Produced and Prepared by Eitan Cornfield

PHIL NIMMONS: I've never been a nostalgic person. I don't want to play Glenn Miller tunes. You know, I've heard them all. I don't want -- a lot of people like that, and they want to bring back the dance band. I'm not like that.

EITAN CORNFIELD: Phil Nimmons is many things. He's a composer, an arranger, a band leader, clarinetist and teacher; but at the heart of it all, he's a jazz musician, and jazz is the music of surprise. For Phil Nimmons, the excitement is always for what might be. He might have been a doctor, but long before Nimmons graduated from pre-med studies, music had taken over his life.

The young man whose childhood dream was to become a doctor went instead to Juilliard on a clarinet scholarship. He would go on to become one of Canada's pioneer composers, and one of the handful of musicians who had solidly established the country's status in the world of jazz. Today, at the age of eighty-one, he's still as active as ever, composing, teaching and adjudicating, still agitating on behalf of his passions, and above all, still playing.

If you ask him which of all of these activities gives him the most pleasure, he'll answer that it's playing free, making it up as you go. Here he is, doing just that, with the young Juno award-winning pianist David Braid, for an audience gathered in a church in the town of Dundas, Ontario.

PHIL NIMMONS: We would just show up, and the only rehearsal that we have is -- and I say this somewhat facetiously, is we have, either on the phone or something -- and we discuss what we're going to wear, because then we just show up and we play. I find it very exciting at my age to be doing this with this young man, and -- but I -- and, as you know, I'm inclined to talk a lot, and so, I talk to the people, and I want to nourish that communication, that contact with my audience, and if I can do it verbally, and bring them all into my living room, so to speak, we're going to have a much better time.

PHIL NIMMONS (to audience): I really hope you're having as much fun as I am.

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: If not more.

PHIL NIMMONS (to audience): You know, it's great to be doing this, and still breathing, you know. David doesn't know quite what to make of me. He studied with me four years at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Music, and he still hasn't figured me out, you know. I've managed to keep the wool over his eyes, all these times, you know, in spite of his talent. It's really, man, such a joy, you know. You won't know about this unless you get to be eighty-one, and have a young punk playing the clarinet who's only twenty-nine, okay, and I want you to write me a letter in the land of two and four, okay? So, should we play one more?

DAVID BRAID: Sure, yes.

PHIL NIMMONS: Are you ready?

DAVID BRAID: Ready as ever.

PHIL NIMMONS (to audience): How many of you out there know what we're doing? [laughter]

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: We're not saying..

EITAN CORNFIELD: Phil Nimmons says he tries to invite his listeners into his living room. I took advantage of that hospitality over a few hot, early summer days, in his home north of Toronto. He talked of a remarkably productive life in music, a life that begins on the 3rd of June, 1923, in the town of Kamloops in the interior of British Columbia.

PHIL NIMMONS: I grew up on Battle Street, and I left Kamloops when I was seven years old. At that time, it was not as big like it is now. You know, of course, you just walked two or three blocks and you were up in these – the sage brush of Little Mountain. We were always interested in music. My dad was a dentist, but he also played the violin, and had played the violin in the pit orchestras before the soundtrack came through for the movies.

My buddy and I – I think it was Irving Galloway, and his dad was the pharmacist in Kamloops, and we were both about the same age, and this fellow across the street was going fishing the next morning in old Model T Ford of some kind, and he got up at 6:00 a.m. and started to drive off, and my chum Irving and myself had put roofing tacks – four – around each tire, two in the front and two in the back. If he had wanted to get out of there, he would have had to shove the car sideways, and of course, they all went flat, so he didn't go fishing; but my dad, I can remember, took me down to the chief of police outside the police station, and he said, "I'm going in to talk to the chief," and he left me sitting in the car.

Then, he came out. He said: "I've worked something out with him." I don't know what that was, but I sat there for about fifteen or twenty minutes. They were probably in there having a drink of rye, you know, but I was scared to death; but he lost everything in 1930, and I think back, and I think, God, imagine losing everything, and then leaving, and going to Vancouver, and starting all over again.

We moved into a house on 1st Avenue out towards Alma which is out towards the university area, and all I remember is that we had a lot of cornmeal pancakes, and a lot of eggs, and sausages, and I realized later on that it was during – like people didn't have a lot of money after that, and so my dad was being paid with eggs and parts of pigs and parts of cattle and vegetables and everything, rather than money, and because he would do the dentistry, and they would give him food.

I used to tell this lie, when I get interviewed, such as you're doing right now. For many years, I used to say that I wound up playing the clarinet because my dad said – I said I want to play the trumpet -- and this is the story I would tell – and he said, "all right, you save up thirty bucks and I'll match it", and so I sold Liberty magazines for five cents apiece for I don't know how long, and managed to save up the thirty dollars, and my dad matched it, and he went out, and he couldn't find a trumpet, and he came home with a clarinet. That's why – that's what I said, you know, I told everybody.

My mother finally said to me, when she heard a broadcast I guess at one point, she said: "Phil, you always wanted to play the clarinet." The only thing you really heard in those days was a radio. I would just have to maybe turn on to a broadcast and heard "The Camel Caravan" with Benny Goodman playing, you know, and said, oh, I'm going there.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Camel cigarettes presents Benny Goodman's Swing School, the Tuesday evening rally of everybody everywhere who gets a lift from the new pulsating music of youth: swing. Tonight, the king of swing presents the world's greatest swing band.

PHIL NIMMONS: Benny Goodman was a big influence on me, and so was Artie Shaw, to a certain extent, but I related more to Benny Goodman's sound than I did Artie Shaw's, and that's an interesting thing I think about because when you play an instrument, you dig it, and you dig the sound, and you kind of relate to it, you know. It becomes an extension of your character and your being, so I've always dug playing the clarinet, so maybe my mother was right.

I'm used to listening to Count Basie records which were the 78's, the Bluebirds, and I would lift all the hits, thematic material from these recordings, and we played those in unison, and thought we had died and gone to heaven. It was the greatest thing that ever happened, you know. By this time, when you're talking – I'm in my very early teens when I started to play, and I certainly, from the beginning I – the writing for Benny Goodman's band by people like Fletcher Henderson and Jimmy Lunsford's band and Mundy I think was another, but they were -- I related to that kind of music at that time, and of course then eventually Duke Ellington just kind of snuck up over the horizon, and that has been very profound – right from the beginning, for me.

ANNOUNCER: The time, right about 9:45 out here on the coast; the place, Studio C at CBC Vancouver; the scene, right about here.

PHIL NIMMONS: I guess I've graduated from Lord Bing, and I may be in my first year of university, and I'm playing on the CBC at this time, in a small quintet that has an accordion in it, because at that time, Art Van Damme in Chicago had kind of set the sound with the clarinet.

ANNOUNCER: These original stylings are by Ray Norris and the famed quintet with the *Songs of Eleanor*.

PHIL NIMMONS: The radio show was called "Serenade in Rhythm", and Ray Norris was the leader and he was the guitar player.

ANNOUNCER: This first quickie which incidentally was dedicated to me, refers to *Jack's Bag*.

PHIL NIMMONS: But, I was interested in composition at the time, and I don't know why, but my mother said I would sit at the piano and just play and play, things like that, so I was interested, and I was getting the chance to hear what I was writing. Like, I wrote several – all kinds of arrangements and compositions for the Ray Norris Quintet.

ANNOUNCER: That was a quintet especially written by Phil Nimmons, and entitled *Jack's Bag*, and which . . .

PHIL NIMMONS: I had these contacts now at CBC in Vancouver. I wound up playing in the CBC Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, God knows how or why. I can't remember, see, but the conductor of that was John Avison, and we became very close friends, and also I became very close friends with Lawrence Wilson, who was a trumpet player and a composer and an arranger, and I had learned how to copy from Lawrence, and so I became his copyist, and we did shows in Vancouver.

I would go over to Lawrence's house, and he would write the score, and I would be sitting there, copying the parts out, and I'm only maybe sixteen years old at this time, but it was a very good influence, because I'm quite picky now when I teach. I want all the

clef signs down every page, and I want all – you know, no computer. “I want you to do this”, you know, so they were profound influences on – both -- on me, because they would take me out after a radio broadcast, and maybe we would go back to either of their houses, and I would listen to classical music, and they would talk to me about it, you know, so it just opened that door at the same time.

I had not been trained, at all, you know, but yet I was writing all these things for various orchestras, and like without really knowing what I was doing in those days. I don't know who I had talked to really about Juilliard, but I knew I had to have letters of references or pull – you had to have some contact to get into the school.

Finally, you made the contact, and I got a telegram from Juilliard saying to report at 9:30 on such and such a date, and I left from Ottawa in the evening, and got into Grand Central Station at about eight o'clock or 7:00 a.m. in the morning, shaved down at Grand Central Station, went up to Juilliard for my 9:30 appointment, and which at that time was at 122nd and Broadway, and up near Riverside Church and Grant's Tomb; and I got up there, and walked in, and I said – and they said: “Composition? You have no formal training in theory and harmony, and we can't take you,” and I'm like – I'm like from Vancouver. I had never been away from home before.

I had no place to stay or anything, and I don't know whether they took pity on me, but they said, “Well, you play the clarinet? Play the clarinet,” so they gave me a little bit of a clarinet test, and they accepted me on clarinet. So, it was just one of the starts of the best things that ever happened to me musically. I was totally immersed, and I played in every ensemble that I could, and enjoyed it thoroughly, and I had a great teacher by the name of Arthur Christmann, and he just opened up a lot of doors for me on the clarinet because I was self-taught basically until I got there.

The other thing that was just so great too was that you could walk along 52nd Street and at that time, none of the names were names, so to speak, but they were playing. There was a club where the Lionel Hampton Band played, and it was very small, and the band was set up, and the trumpet players were standing in kind of an alcove at the back. Their heads were almost touching the ceiling, and every – I can remember every member in the orchestra had a set of bongos attached to their stand, and they played *Flying Home* which was a big hit in that day, and then the Illinois Jacquet solo, and Lionel Hampton – there were two drummers, of course, in the band, and Lionel Hampton came out into the - - where we were all sitting, drinking and eating, and he started with his drumsticks, playing on the tables, and anything he could hit, you know. He broke almost every glass that was in the place.

I never graduated. I had lady trouble. She was a young lady from Halifax, and she was a pianist. It was a romance, you know, that – and when the romances don't work out, you're smitten, so I just left, you know, in my last year, I guess before – so I never wrote my final exams. I dug Canada in some way in a sense. It seemed more like home I guess, but I wound up coming to Toronto, and studying at the Royal Conservatory for three years.

When I came to Toronto which I did after three years in Juilliard, I had still wanted to study composition. I studied mainly with Arnold Walter, which was okay. I mean, I don't want to minimize that, but two people had a really profound effect on me. One was Dr. Richard Johnston who was at that time fresh out of Eastman, and we went through the whole Bach *Riemenschneider Chorales*. We went through that book, and he would mark

everything. He really was a happening for me. He just opened up the whole horizon through that process of studying, and I've since talked to other people who have gone and studied somewhere, and they've found they hit with some body, and it just – the doors just fly open, and I found that that happened through Bach.

The first friend or first fellow that I ever met was Harry Freedman, and we just related, and we've been friends ever -- deep friends ever since, and he wound up being my best man, and I wound up being his best man, and I evidently – well, Noreen and I – my wife introduced Mary to Harry. That's another story, too, but Harry was there; Lois Marshall, Harry Somers, John Beckwith, Victor Feldbrill and Glenn Gould. My wife Noreen studied with Alberto Guerrero. She was a concert pianist; so Glenn was there; Clermont Pépin from Montreal. We were very close friends during his time there. I used to call him "Peep".

We were quite a bunch of people, you know. We – all the girls lived at the girls' residence which was on Orde Street, and then there was a cafeteria, and we were a bunch of us just sitting there, and I don't know what – but it was some weekend. It was a holiday, and there was about six of us sitting there, and just saying, "What are we going to do for the weekend? We're not going away or anything." Well, we would go up and play golf at the golf course in Hogg's Hollow. This would be, I guess, 1948, thereabouts, somewhere in there, and we would go – "okay, everybody meet the next morning."

The only two people that showed up were Noreen and I, so – it just naturally flowed. When we got married – I come from the old school: I would work, and "you stay home and look after the kids", and I – I stayed down in the basement and wrote, and she had – she had a big job. There's no two ways about it, and she put up with – I was – I really drank quite heavily for a number of years, and stopped, and fell off for a little bit. In retrospect, I think I might have been able to participate more, but you can't – I've been asked the question: would you do it the same way, you know, now, knowing – well, that's a silly question. I mean, how – that can never happen, in a sense.

So this was quite a lady that I married. She's very much the power behind the throne. After I met Noreen, probably all my music was written for her, but it all came together I guess with the piece of music that I thought described two sides of Noreen's character: her great sense of humour and her great intellect in terms of reflecting upon life. When she forgot about herself, she could be – she could really dance up a storm, and that's when we would go into the tempo, and it's -- and I would tell the people, "You've got to play that hard. You've got to play it like Duke," you know.

The way it ends is probably – that's the way it felt right to do. Little did I know that she would die before I did. I'm not a mystic, but I think somebody somewhere is pulling little strings, you know. I had no plan to write it that way, but it seems to fit the thought that I have just mentioned, the way it ends with Gary Williamson just playing and then there's that chord with the trombones just at the end. You know, it's like the chapter is closed.

ANNOUNCER: *Proud Passage.*

PHIL NIMMONS: When I came to Toronto, I studied, but I wound up starting to write music for J. Frank Willis.

ANNOUNCER: Ladies and gentlemen, CBC Wednesday night presents a new play by Joseph Schull, set on the rugged coast of Cape Breton Island, the last of the far-flung Hebrides. The original musical score was written and orchestrated by Phillip

Nimmons, and is conducted by Samuel Herschenhorn. The production is directed by J. Frank Willis -- *Proud Passage*.

PHIL NIMMONS: We did nothing but sea stories, it seemed, because he was from Halifax, and he used to seem like he went to seventh heaven when he would get talking about Peggy's Cove or the Bluenose, all about the east coast; but what – the biggest thing I feel, in retrospect, is that I – I heard everything I wrote.

VARIOUS ANNOUNCERS: This evening on Stage 52, the CBC presents *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen, a radio adaptation by John Bethune, with original music composed by Phillip Nimmons and conducted by Samuel Herschenhorn; production and direction by Essa W. Young -- and the theatre audience will bring back one artist as a winner next week – which brings us right up to the Canadian composers spot.

This is where we present the premiere performance of a new Canadian composition specially commissioned by us. As you know, these compositions are judged at the end of each series by a special board headed by Jeffery Waddington the well-known conductor. On the basis of interest and originality, they select one work for a second performance and a double fee. Tonight, we're to hear the work of Phillip Nimmons of Vancouver. Lamonte?

LAMONTE (ANNOUNCER): Phil Nimmons is twenty-eight years old, and though his home is in Vancouver, his study and work have taken him far afield. In the midst of his studies for a medical career, he switched to music, and went to the Juilliard School of Music in New York as a scholarship student. After two years of clarinet study there, he moved to Toronto for further study at the Royal Conservatory.

At the present time, he is a busy member of Toronto's musical fraternity, as a member of various orchestras, and as a composer of dramatic scores for CBC programs. It's interesting to note that while today much of his work is in the medium of serious music, he spent a considerable time as clarinetist and arranger for the well-known Ray Norris Quintet. His composition tonight is a whimsical study of the life and loves of a marionette. Here then is John Adaskin and the Opportunity Knocks Orchestra, and *Marionette*.

PHIL NIMMONS: For me personally, the CBC has been a teacher and educator for me, and I got paid at the same time, you know. I think the expertise I developed as an orchestrator resulted from my work with the CBC. It also nourished my spirituality as a jazz musician right from the beginning in Vancouver, but it also nourished, I guess, again, just me at the present moment, broadening my musical appreciation in a sense, because I became associated with not only jazz musicians, but other studio musicians, and – of both classical and jazz, and also vocal music and things like that; so those were all influences on all of us.

Nimmons'N' Nine was formed to give us the opportunity to play what we wanted to play. We weren't thinking of it as a commercial entity, to start. That was not the idea, at all. It was strictly a rehearsal group. It's hard to get a symphony orchestra to be a rehearsal group, but you can do that with smaller ensembles. We did put a concert on eventually in the museum theatre. I'm trying to think – it was around 1955 or '56, I guess, just because we felt – and we did it all on our own, charged \$1.50 to see. It just kind of happened, in a sense, you know. Like, we didn't pick ten guys. It just happened to be those ten guys.

By this time, I had met Oscar Peterson, and that was the start of a long friendship. Oscar had heard the group in rehearsals, also Gunther Schuler. I don't know if you know Gunther – had been up here, and had heard the group, as well. By this time, Oscar was recording for Verve and Norman Granz, and through Oscar's initiative and help and instigation, we wound up doing a couple of albums for Verve.

It's not necessarily a disturbing thing, but it really bugs you, you know. Like, year after – well, all the wonderful things that took place in that, and the fact that somebody like Oscar and Gunther Schuler thought this was great stuff, you know, and yet, when it gets thrown out into the market world, I guess it's a little discouraging to think that it hasn't done – I also did some things for RCA Victor, as you know, and the best selling album for RCA Victor was *Mary Poppins Swings*. It would be nice to have a broader – but I'm – listen, gee. I've received a lot of accolades. I can't complain in that regard, you know, with the awards that I've been getting, and the only unfortunate part of it is, is that Noreen is not here -- or otherwise none of that would have happened; but I've been very lucky.

It has always been an inclination on my part to write extended forms; even some of the singular compositions that I've done for the band and for Nimmons'N' Nine, the small group, would run into the seven or eight-minute mark themselves, alone, some even going up to as much as ten. I wrote a thing in memory of Frank Rosolino, *Ros*, and it's sixteen minutes long, and then the tribute to Duke which was not necessarily a suite, but it – the tempos roughly stayed the same, and it's called *EEE-Suave*, and it's fourteen minutes long.

When I write, I don't have a plan. It's like I'm blowing a solo. As long as the thing is happening, et cetera, and I'm pleased with it, I just – I keep writing and it seems to unfold that way. Fortunately, in the solo, sometimes you can play too long, and fortunately, with a lot of the writing I've done, it hasn't been too long. It seems to stand up. I think about that side of it, because I'm very much a believer in form in music. It's probably one of the strongest elements, and gives everything sort of – not necessarily its shape, but its conviction and its communicative – degree of communications with people. As long as it has got good form, it has impact; but for me to write that way, it seems strange, so again, I feel very lucky that I'm able to have a handle on that.

Transformations, I guess, because of its length, I could say that it's the Gustav Mahler of the jazz world, so to speak. It's about 45 minutes long. It's based on four pitches, B, C, A, D: Before Christ and Anno Domini. I had decided that this was going to be strictly based on music, that the inspiration would be music, even though – and so, those four pitches became the source of everything. I wasn't necessarily thinking in pictures or emotions, like whatever they generated for me, in the four movements. Once that seemed to emerge, then there had to be some pacing as you went through the four movements.

I also tried to have a variety of styles, and of course, you must remember I was coming out of – at that time, the tremendous rock influence that we all went through that almost – well, in a lot of ways, wiped out the economic base for a lot of musicians who – it did me – to start with, you know. I – this is a bunch of stuff – you know, and like I – but eventually I learned there are only two kinds of music, good and bad, and I'm trying to get rid of the bad, you know, regardless of style. Duke Ellington, when somebody asked him about his favourite song, he said, "the next one". I kind of feel that, to a

certain extent. Like, every maybe event in my life has been leading to this next one, so to speak.

I had decided that I would book a tour, through the Canada Council -- the touring office, and also the Canada Council, and that was when we went down to the Atlantic provinces which was a little after 1970, somewhere in there. I said to the Canada Council -- the touring office -- as sort of the carrot to stimulate them giving me a grant -- I said: "I'll write a piece of music about this tour, as well", which I did, and that's when *The Atlantic Suite* had its birth, so to speak.

The overall premise for *The Atlantic Suite* was the word "east", and I had four -- E-A-S-T, and I thought -- Solfege which I never studied -- and so I was racking my brain; like I was taking pitches like E and A, so I have that, and "T" could be "ta" which was the leading tone, and then, I thought "so" was, rather than do, re, mi, fa -- is it -- so actually I spelled out "EAFD", because the first moment is in E, and the next one is in A, and the next one is in F, and the next one was in D. From that came this whole suite of four movements.

I'm the kind of composer and also arranger, to a sense -- but composing is like improvising for me, so that I don't have a -- I don't say this is what I'm going to do, and come up with it. I try to find a thematic material, and then it grows, so the *Islands* movement just -- it just happened in a sense, and it wound up being a clarinet solo because it just seemed right at the time.

Plateaus was the first kind of major classical work. It was going to be about the plateaux that existed between the coast range and the Rockies, and it was going to be about Kamloops, the rolling sage brush hills, and hops, and the thunder and lightning going from Paul to Peter which is the two mountains north of Kamloops. I had written I guess what you could consider the very, very, very embryonic beginnings of classical music in Vancouver. They were piano pieces which were all in the same key, the epitome of self-indulgence, and went on for ages, you know, but the creative juice was just too monstrous to turn down, so to speak.

The *Trumpet Concerto* was commissioned by Dan Warren who was a former student. He had applied to the Ontario Arts Council, and through them and the Laidlaw Foundation, the work was commissioned, and it was first performed I guess by the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony with Raffi Armenian as conductor, and it was quite something to hear this, and of course Dan had hoped that it would have some jazz sort of feelings to it a little bit, and which it did have, sort of a bebop line that was almost impossible to play.

I've always kind of backed off putting a name on my music. I just write what I write, and stylistically it comes out that way, for me. The fact that I've been asked to write classical music, you know, and write jazz, and write for choir and things like this, I have been just so lucky. I think somebody is pulling strings somewhere, and I have I guess that spiritually I have the utmost respect for the human being in the sense that -- in terms of the miracle of procreation, and it has only heightened my disdain for people who don't realize that, you know.

I'll never forget one thing that Pierre Trudeau, when he was the prime minister, said on some speech somewhere: "We'll never get anywhere until we respect the dignity of mankind," you know, and that kind of hit a tone with me, and I -- I have the good fortune -- again, getting back to that word "lucky", Eitan, that -- of going to the Gaza Strip

and to France and Germany and to England and to India and to Africa, and you see all these people. They're all different, but we all eat. We all do what results from eating. We all laugh. We all cry. We like sweets, and, you know, we have so many things in common, and why all this poverty, is a great concern to me, within myself, and especially I guess because I just think I can't do anything about it really, you know. In some ways it seems so huge and immense, so I do think about those things.

My optimism is fed on the fact that we keep procreating young people that dig what you and I dug as teenagers; and I won't be around, and I don't know who said it, but every generation has to solve the preceding one's leftovers, so to speak, you know, so it's an interesting thing, that I'm not really qualified to say that. I just have opinions. Who can tell? It's as simple as that. I mean, I feel something in the music that brings those words out, I guess. I feel that there's a mystery to that, in a sense, and maybe we'll – and it's – it's probably that question. It's better if it's never answered, because then we still have the excitement of the future.

- transcribed by Mara Zibens