

Nancy Telfer, Jon Washburn, and Larry Nickel have each forged unique paths to become distinguished figures in the world of choral music. Each interviewee received the same seven questions with the option to answer only the questions that interested them. Together, their replies provide a fascinating glimpse into the individual paths they have taken, along with their sometimes disparate personal perspectives about composers and choral music today. This is part one in a two-part interview series. Part two will feature interviews with Canadian composers: Matthew Emery, Sarah Quartel, Kelly-Marie Murphy, Laura Hawley, and Tracy Wong.

**D. Geoffrey Bell**  
www.dgeoffreybell.com

# INTERVIEW WITH 3 CANADIAN CHORAL COMPOSERS

**BY D. GEOFFREY BELL**



**LARRY NICKEL** is an associate composer of the Canadian Music Centre, a choral clinician, festival adjudicator, teacher, singer, music minister, and conductor. He was a high school performing arts teacher for twenty-five years and directed over fifty stage productions, including Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Nickel has been a low bass singer with some of the finest choirs in Vancouver. He is a prolific composer with hundreds of works for choir. He was the co-founder of the West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir (directed by Tony Funk), which recorded thirteen CDs over fifteen years. The choir raised over a million dollars through CD sales, and the proceeds were donated to MCC Supportive Care Services, a charity for mentally disadvantaged people.



**NANCY TELFER** is a Canadian composer who received her formal education at the University of Western Ontario, where she concentrated on music education, composition, piano, and voice. After teaching public school for several years, she worked full time as a composer. Since 1979 she has composed more than 500 works for soloists, chamber ensembles, orchestras, bands, and choirs. Telfer has also written a number of articles and method books to guide choral conductors in their professional development.



**JON WASHBURN** is the founder and conductor emeritus of the Vancouver Chamber Choir. Well known internationally for his mastery of choral technique and interpretation, Washburn travels widely as a guest conductor, lecturer, clinician, and master teacher. As a conductor of the Baroque repertory, he has led over 300 performances of more than eighty large works. He has taught at the secondary, college, and university levels, including time as artist-in-residence at Simon Fraser University. He was also artistic director of the Phoenix Bach Choir, an American professional ensemble, for six years in the 1990s.

**1) Each person follows a unique musical path. Sometimes there are mentors or musical programs that make a significant, positive contribution along the way. Tell us about key moments in your own musical journey.**

**NICKEL:** Four-part choral singing used to be ubiquitous with the Mennonite Church. I sang alto with Mom at church and first soprano in the church children's choir, directed by Holda Fast (who also used to sing in the Vancouver Chamber Choir). Table grace, family reunions, and driving to the Okanagan for vacation were always accompanied with singing. I took piano lessons from age five to nine. Then Mom and Dad became missionaries to India and there was a long period of choral music drought. I was dedicated to sports until I ripped out my knee cartilage while running through a monsoon downpour. Bob Granner came from the States to our school and was a choir enthusiast—a true inspiration to me. I renewed piano lessons and sang at every opportunity. I started “inventing” music on an accordion for puppet shows! Returning to Canada in 1970, after graduating from high school, I formed a folk-rock band and worked in a recording studio as a performer and arranger while starting studies at UBC. Professor Cortland Hultberg asked me to join the chamber singers, and it was shocking to realize how much I needed to learn!

**TELFER:** When I was a student at Western University (Canada), the performing library contained over 1,000 choral pieces from all time periods, chosen by very fine conductors to use with the choral ensembles there. Gradually I studied each piece on my own, asking myself two questions: 1. Why is this a great piece of music? (e.g., a piece by Brahms might have beautiful climaxes); 2. How did that composer do that? (e.g., how long he made each build-up, how he created the height of each climax). Gathering insight and skills from the greatest composers was an enjoyable and exciting way to learn the craft of musicality. And it helped me to understand what composing was really about.

I learned from Ken Bray that music can look good on the page but not sound great in reality. He helped

me learn how to look at a score in a way to imagine realistically how that score would sound. For example, when the altos have the melody, do they have enough space around their part to let them cut through the other voices?

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—Larry Nickel”

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It is important for composers to think like performers. Before I started composing, I already had many connections because I started out as a choral teacher and conductor. In my early twenties, I was asked to sit on a national committee of choral conductors because the work I was doing as a children's choir conductor and my knowledge of good quality repertoire was already well known. Today I would recommend that a young conductor or composer who has already proven himself/herself be added to committees and boards at the state and national levels. Everyone wins from the exchange of fresh ideas and long-time experience.

**WASHBURN:** In a way, I want to answer that I've been influenced by everyone I've ever worked with, even the poor musicians and the boring ones, and certainly all the students I've had and the singers in my choirs. I've often said that one's choir is—de facto—one's main conducting teacher.

I'm always surprised when I ask young grads how many truly great teachers they have had in their studies. Many say none, which always saddens me. How can one evaluate one's own efforts if you've never experienced great, inspired teaching? I was lucky. In eight or nine years at four universities, I had three great teachers: an English teacher, a theory teacher,



and a voice teacher. The English teacher, a displaced Southerner with a charming drawl, was leading us through Contemporary American Literature, with an emphasis on analysis and explication. It was here that I learned about TS Eliot's objective correlative and other tools for thinking about art. I wrote a paper comparing the literary methods of two poet-composers who wrote their own libretti: Wagner and Menotti. I remember him applauding my "brilliant" premise and then giving me a C+ for not carrying it out more effectively.

The theory teacher was the American composer Ben Johnston who, by good fortune, I drew for the regular second-year course at the University of Illinois. He was such a perceptive analyst. He'd find the crucial point in, say, a Chopin prelude and say, "Chopin chooses B<sup>b</sup> at this point, so the piece ends like this... [plays] ... but if he'd chosen B<sup>b</sup>, the next chord would have to be [this] and the piece would have to end like this... [plays]." I remember once he assigned the analysis of a Haydn sonata and started pointing out various ideas we would need to explore. He finished up forty minutes later with the astonishing (to me) statement: "And so, if your analysis doesn't tell you the meaning of the music, then it is an incomplete analysis, or a bad one!" That was a truly profound insight for me.

My real mentor was my voice teacher Bruce Govich, whom I encountered at that early stage of adulthood when I was developing my ground principles of life and work. His greatest gift was to open his voice studio to me; he was a brilliant voice teacher who approached every student individually. Every lesson was unique and full of revelations for the student of pedagogy.

## **2) Music education plays such an important role in the development of young minds. How have you contributed to music education over the years?**

**NICKEL:** I started teaching at Lethbridge Collegiate Institute in Alberta while living and working on the farm of my father-in-law. I soon realized that much of my university education was of little help with students from the farming community. I needed to

invent approaches that would relate to their abilities and wrote arrangements that would give teenagers a measure of confident performance. From there my young family moved to Abbotsford, where I became chairman of the performing arts program, teaching choir, jazz band, symphonic wind ensemble, handbells, drama, and acting for twenty-five years. At one point, I was directing seven choirs, including a very fine church choir. Our Christmas choir was a volunteer choir of 400 singers in a school of 800 students! I left high school teaching in 2003 quite exhausted.

**TELFER:** When I first started composing music in the late 1970s, I realized that, at that time, many choral conductors had no idea how to determine whether a piece of music in a contemporary style was any good, so I gave workshops on how to choose music. Soon after that, I gave workshops on rehearsal techniques for contemporary choral music because many conductors wanted to have their choirs performing new styles (e.g., aleatoric music) but did not know how to rehearse that music. Meanwhile, a number of conductors across the country were approaching me individually, asking me if I would write sight-singing materials because they were not getting results with the sight-singing materials available at that time. Over the years, I gradually wrote materials on other topics as the need became obvious: singing high pitches, singing in tune, improving performances.

**WASHBURN:** My original training was as a teacher, and I got a high school job in the Chicago suburbs right out of university, which was unusual for that time. I taught only a year before heading back to graduate studies, but it was an invaluable experience, considering how many future music teachers I've taught since. Later, I taught part time at Vancouver Community College for thirteen years, covering choirs, conducting, music history, vocal musicianship, vocal chamber music, bass, and even tablature at one time or another.

But most of my educational contributions have been made through the extensive educational outreach programs of the Vancouver Chamber Choir for conductors (National Conductors' Symposium), composers (Interplay Composers' Workshops; Young Composers'

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Competition), college and university singers (Focus! Professional Development Program), elementary and secondary school students (Onsite Schools Program), and various other workshops and residencies on tour and at home. At the Vancouver Chamber Choir, I also felt I was often teaching future teachers in our regular daily work, for many of those 140 singers have moved on to become conductors and teachers themselves.

### **3) Young, aspiring composers sometimes falter as they work to develop their skills and establish their reputation. What challenges did you face when you started composing?**

**NICKEL:** The challenge for many young composers is that they have no support system: no one to relate to; no one to evaluate what they are doing. I remember writing music while wondering if my efforts would ever find a voice. My first choral compositions were really pathetic, yet a director at the college was kind enough to include some of my music in his choir repertoire. I think most composers will agree that hearing a choir perform your own music is both devastating and exhilarating and (more significantly) great motivation to keep working at the craft.

I entered the International Baccalaureate program in India when I was thirteen years old. We didn't have a piano at home, so I "made up" my first music on an accordion. I didn't think much of it at the time, but my mom and dad were avid singers, and we sang as a family before every meal. Didn't all families do that? It had a huge impact, in retrospect.

**WASHBURN:** When I was a high school kid, composing didn't seem important to me. I'd written some pop songs and some joke pieces (like that famous "Unstarted Symphony" with its pages of final cadence). But the discovery of jazz as I graduated from guitar to bass fired my creative energies. It was a while before I realized that improvising a bass line was composing of a sort... inventing right on the spot. I vividly remember a session sometime after the release of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, when we were experimenting with modal things. I complained that playing for twenty minutes on just one chord was kind of stultifying for the bass

player. The vibes player retorted with one of those life-changers: "Man, you're s'posed to be thinking about your LINE!" He was right... It changed everything!

University was intimidating. There were "real" composers around. I did take a choral arranging course at Illinois one semester. We did some exercises and then one real piece, where I think I put it all together for the first time, though it wasn't what you would call auspicious. My instructor (Joe Flummerfelt) seemed to like it, though, saying it had a structure, some direction, an effective climax, and a pleasing overall aspect. But I tucked those comments away for a later date and continued avoiding any serious approach to composing, except for a few little pieces for my church choir.

Some years later, I had one of those chance conversations that can make such a difference. It was with a working musician, a pianist-bassist-composer-teacher type. We were standing out in front of the music building on a chilly Vancouver day. It was about two or three years after I'd started my professional choir, and we were beginning to build a good reputation. Out of the blue, he asked, "Do you compose?"


"Not really," I replied.

"Why not?"

"I guess I'm just not the composer type. I've never had a natural fluency like some guys I know." Him: "Well, you're missing the point. You don't need to compose because you're good at it. You need to compose because you're not... It doesn't matter whether the result is great or not... Think how much about the inner life of music you'll learn by doing it. It'd help you to understand the composers whose music you conduct all the time by approaching it the same way they did... the composer's angle instead of the performer's."

I wonder if he ever knew how radically he turned my attitude around. After that, composing just seemed like a natural part of my work, no matter whether the pieces were good (a few) or bad (many). My confidence really developed.

After that, the main problem was finding time. The answer to that seemed to be having deadlines, so I created them by announcing new pieces in the VCC's season's brochures. Then I HAD to find the time



somehow, so I did because I needed to have the copies ready before the rehearsals started. I think I was often helped, too, by the fact that most of my pieces were written for my own choir and written to task. I think of Bach, composing for the kids he was teaching Latin to—pieces to be sung next Sunday! My situation was similar. I wasn't usually inspired by the Muse. I was filling particular spots in particular programs. Once you know how the piece is supposed to function within the structure of the program, you have some real clues as to the piece's mood and shape. Another plus was that I, the composer, had a great relationship with a conductor who would program lots of my music—that too, would be me.

**4) Composing music can be a very solitary profession unless you are actively collaborating with other musicians. Finding performers and publishers who are willing to take a risk can be a challenge too. What are some other challenges that face composers today?**

**NICKEL:** Most composers who wait beside their phones for a commission will become depressed, grow cobwebs, and eventually rigor mortis. Being assertive is key to success.

"I've written this composition with your choir in mind. Could you give it a try?" This is daring, risky, and somewhat arrogant, right? After all, what makes you think that a group of people will take the time and effort to try and realize something that came from your feeble mind? Do you have anything significant to say? What makes you think that an audience will pay money and then sit quietly while your music is being presented? In my observation, successful composers develop social skills, are well connected with friends and society, and are daring and forthright. I realize that there are Van Goghs in the music world but, sadly, most are lost to obscurity.

I should say that the Internet and social media have made all the difference in recent years. In my view, a smart composer will think over what needs to be said and how to say it in a compelling way, considering the proclivities and abilities of the commissioning choir and the "ears" of the intended audience. If you want

to hear music that is here today and gone tomorrow, attend concerts by New Music societies where the audience is largely composed of other composers who are also trying to reinvent the medium. Publishers usually have a good idea of what is marketable. One of my publishers said, "We won't publish anything unless we are convinced that the piece will sell at least 5,000 copies." Conversely, some publishers take a risk with music that has little lucrative potential. Good music never grows old, and we've seen "sleepers" awake with a touch of serendipity.

**WASHBURN:** Yes, finding performances and publishers are perennial—perhaps eternal—problems for composers of all ages. Also, the challenge of earning enough to support oneself while leaving sufficient time to pursue creative work is another.

How do composers network? I've never been to a composer's convention... Are there such things? Choral composers are certainly welcomed at our grand choral conferences, but the focus on composition is usually secondary to the problems and activities of performers. These gatherings are expensive to attend, but they do offer composers the opportunity to meet their customers. Which brings us to commissions. Many conductors want the impossible: unique, innovative, impressive works, which are short, sweet, easy to sing and hear, inexpensive, and instantly available. But it seems that composers need longer-based relationships with conductors and employers, with arrangements that allow for development through time. Universities offer such opportunities for a few modern composers, but they still seem to end up composing in their spare time.

**5) Throughout your career, you have developed considerable knowledge and skills, establishing a solid reputation for your choral music. If you gave a seminar to aspiring young composers, what key points would you emphasize?**

**NICKEL:** A key point to young composers: try to ensure that your music has something worthwhile to convey. This can be an issue, considering that young composers are still developing convictions and a phi-

losophy of life. However, music that struggles with issues, without answers, can also be very attractive. In fact, most listeners don't want to be told how to think. It's wise to find a meaningful poem in the public domain instead of writing one's own lyrics. Try to ensure that the music makes a strong marriage with the text.

I try to ensure that my most approachable choral music (high school or community choir level of difficulty) is quality choral writing with intuitive voice leading, conveying something worth singing about. I keep thinking about and striving for Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus," one of the most exquisite motets ever written, which is performed by grade ten (sophomore) choirs and also the finest choirs on earth. Fine choral music doesn't need to be formidable. Seemingly complex music can be easy to learn/perform, and seemingly simple music can be difficult to learn/perform depending on the voice leading skills of the composer.

**TELFER:** Choral composers need to understand the characteristics of each of the choral voices (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Just as a tuba player would never be given a flute part to play, a bass singer should not have to sing a soprano-style line. Each choral part should be composed appropriately to make use of the positive features of that type of voice allowing those singers to sing musically and to develop good tone quality. In other words, music can be challenging, but it should not work against the singers. If you compose at a keyboard, a choral line should not sound like a keyboard line just because that works well for your fingers.

Composers need to learn the differences between the voices of children and adults. For example, children's voices work very differently than adult voices because they are more flexible and able to sing a series of leaps more easily than adults. Children usually find polyphony easier than harmony because they do not get lost when singing their own melody, even if the other singers have a different melody at the same time, but adults with limited experience can get lost within the competing sounds of polyphony.

No matter how great a piece of music may be in other respects, if the singers do not have good cues for entries, the rehearsals and performance will be less than satisfying. Poor cues build animosity between a

composer and a choir.

For many composers, children's music is more difficult to compose than adult music because the composer has more restrictions and because each part is more exposed. I started writing SATB music first and then, over a period of a couple of years, I gradually wrote with fewer and fewer parts as my skills improved.

If a composer is composing for a specific choir, it is the composer's responsibility to write something suitable for that choir. You may compose a great piece, but if it is too short or too long or the text is inappropriate or it is completed too late for enough rehearsal time, things will not end well. Before starting, get to know the conductor and the choir and be sympathetic to their situation.

Bonus tip for young composers: Publishers receive lots of great submissions. Make sure that your music is completely edited with immaculate attention to detail before you submit it to a publisher or they may not give it more than a glance. Submit several pieces at the same time to the publisher so that they can get a better idea of whether they will want to invest in you as a composer.

**WASHBURN:** I would be tempted to organize the seminar as a series of one-on-one interviews instead of the usual group discussion. I'm not convinced that commonplace discussion of "shared" problems leads to many effective solutions. The key concepts I would promote are basic but essential: build a library, read widely, explore multi-faceted experiences, and learn languages.

### **6) What essential elements should conductors look for when selecting new repertoire?**

**NICKEL:** I currently sing with the Vancouver Cantata Singers, and almost every one of the forty singers has a degree in music. The director is earnest to find music that will stretch and challenge us. Yet, I can see that much of our music goes over the heads of our audience, possibly ostracizing some. It's a tricky balance with most choirs—prudent choir directors work the intended audience into their repertoire equation and strive to find a balance for singers, listeners, and

board members!

I should interject that there are at least 325,000 choirs in North America, and most of them are community choirs. Singing at any level is an extremely worthwhile enterprise, enhancing the quality of life in many ways.

**TELFER:** Begin by visually checking the basics like range, tessitura (each vocal part should have most of the pitches at the most comfortable part of the vocal range), and entry cues. Then a conductor should read each vocal line separately to make sure that every part is musically written and appropriate for that voicing and difficult vowels are avoided on high pitches. (This

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—Nancy Telfer ”

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may sound time consuming, but verifying the integrity of these details saves a lot of rehearsal time, and singers learn to respect and expect high standards in music.) A quick overview of the piece you are considering will reveal the balance of repetition and new ideas within a piece; this balance affects how good the music is and how easily your choir will learn the piece. At this point the conductor will have noticed enough other details to decide how the singers might benefit from learning this piece (e.g., new skills, improvement of musicality or tone, a break from the other styles during rehearsal). Needless to say, each piece should be appropriate for your audience.

**WASHBURN:** First, I think about all the stakeholders beyond myself for whom I'm choosing the repertoire: my singers and players who have to perform it, my organization's Board of Directors who have to fundraise

for it, our administrators who have to promote/sell it, the prospective audiences who have to connect with it, donors and cultural mover/shakers who have to support it, the city-provincial and national agencies who have to subsidize it, the composers who hope to be included in it. And the aspiring conductors who hope there will still be a choral culture existing by the time they are ready to take over my job.

Secondly, there are qualitative matters. These are very individual from conductor to conductor and from program to program (or maybe year to year).

- Is there a text? Is it good? Significant? Appropriate? Languages?
- Does it show mood? Inspiration? Entertainment value?
- Does the structure show balance? Direction?
- Does the musical language show colour? Vitality?
- Is it “singable”? Are the ranges appropriate?
- Is the notation readable? Does the composer have good craftsmanship?

Thirdly, it can be helpful to have a philosophy about repertoire and about programming, which is actually a separate matter.

## **7) What topic, musical or otherwise, is of special significance to you right now?**

**NICKEL:** Topics that give me consternation are the concerns of misappropriation [of words and music from other cultures]. Someone recently suggested that Cypress needs to start a “rainbow” series of titles [to address the current issues of gender/sexuality in choral music]. So, finding direction these days is challenging—especially for a baby-boomer like me. I honestly desire to be open to new ideas and trends, to be relevant.

**TELFER:** Each generation has something new to say, and I feel that it is so important for musicians to support young composers so that we can all hear what they have to say in their music. No matter how much good music exists in the world, we will always need to be renewed by fresh ideas and different types of ex-

periences found in the music of younger people and composers coming from diverse backgrounds.

**WASHBURN:** Right now, fresh into retirement, I'm engrossed in the history, statistics, and archives of the Vancouver Chamber Choir's first forty-eight years. Now that I have fewer pressing deadlines, I'm finding I have more time to just listen to music. I'm exploring the many facets of YouTube as never before. There are so many useful examples of famous conductors that could potentially be valuable to conducting students (and teachers), but often they are unreliable because of persistent time lags between audio and video tracks. This dismays me. I wonder if anyone can explain it and propose a remedy?

Lastly, I'm looking for interesting short-term projects, particularly where I can continue to share my conducting insights with future generations of young conductors.

**8) Music is often considered to be an “international language” that transcends borders. Apart from Canadian folk songs and songs about Canada, do you consider music written by Canadians to have a “Canadian identity”?**

**NICKEL:** This is a tough one, eh? Canada, like the USA, is inhabited by immigrants from every nation on earth. My grandparents fled Russia during the Bolshevik revolution and were given a homestead in Saskatchewan. People arriving at the airport in Vancouver might wonder what country in which they've landed! Canada, ergo, is a moocher of folk songs from other countries. We freely admit it. Many publications of folk song arrangements can be traced to places overseas. We have many writers—guitar strummers without music degrees—who tell our stories. Cypress has many choral settings that explore our Canadian heritage.

**TELFER:** When music composed by Canadian composers first started to become more common at Canadian concerts in the 70s and 80s, the audiences were not aware which pieces were by Canadians. However, it was obvious that audiences had a very strong reac-

tion to each Canadian piece; they instantly related to the music, understood it, and reacted positively. The spaciousness of our country, the high skies, the openness of sound, the great diversity of colours within the Canadian landscape were all in the music. And there was also a polite enthusiasm, a yearning for the good life, and a sense of adventuring into musical frontiers. As Canadian music has evolved since then, these characteristics have now become more complex, as has our society and the world itself, but Canadian composers today continue forward with this exploration of sound that speaks of who we are as a people.

**WASHBURN:** The strict answer to the question “What is Canadian identity in music?” is perhaps too straight-forward to be interesting. Any music written by a Canadian is ipso facto Canadian music, no matter what it sounds like or whether we like it. Now, we are a nation of immigrants (like me) and we accept immigrant composers as Canadian, too, from the moment they make that commitment of saying “this is home.” (This is not related to official ceremonies, but to heart-level acceptance of things like toques, snow, and poutine [in Vancouver I'm tempted to make it umbrellas, rain and sushi!]) We even include Canadians who move south of the border and become US citizens—once a Canuck, always a Canuck. The styles and characters of various composers around the country are just as diverse as those found in the States. Despite having only a tenth of the population of the US, we have a lively composing scene in Canada, particularly in the choral area. There is much camaraderie between the two North American partners, which we hope will extend to Mexico, too, as economic ties strengthen and choral activity continues to grow in all three countries. 