

The Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra's 25th Anniversary

Steffan Brunette

On a Sunday afternoon in late September, at St. Michael's College School in Toronto, a new season of the Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra is starting. About fifty musicians from high schools, colleges, and universities across Greater Toronto are warming up.

When the conductor, Colin Clarke, begins to speak, he mixes humour with a sense of responsibility: "You are part of a family of musicians, and together we will do amazing things." Remembering a time from his own youth, when a section leader from the Toronto Youth Symphony Orchestra welcomed him with a simple handshake, Clarke then asks the musicians seated in front of him to extend a hand and welcome each other.

When *Canadian Winds* last featured TYWO, in 2008, the story began with a young Colin Clarke in 1991 wanting to create a local wind ensemble that would fill the gap left when the Honour Band program in Brampton was discontinued. By 1994, it had evolved into the Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra. Initially reluctant to take on the directorship of the ensemble but unable to find a likely replacement, Clarke remained on the podium.

Most of those connected to TYWO would now agree: the program would not exist without him, and the impressive growth of his initiative is attributable to his vision and energy. The original ensemble numbered fewer than two dozen players. Today, there are four separate ensembles under the TYWO umbrella, involving almost 200 musicians of all ages and abilities.

About twenty minutes away from St. Michael's, at York Mills Collegiate Institute, the conductor Dan Horner is gathering the musicians of the Symphonic Winds, which serves as a "feeder" ensemble for the Wind Orchestra. Whereas the latter focuses on advanced repertoire (i.e., Grade 5 and beyond), the Symphonic Winds works at the level of a strong high-school senior band.

Later in the week, the Concert Winds will gather. This ensemble is for younger students, usually between the ages of 10 and 14, and it performs repertoire in the range of Grades 1½-2. Conductor Ben Promane, who took over from Chris Hunsburger in 2014, sets these students on a course that might ultimately lead them to the Wind Orchestra.

This stratification of ensembles helps musicians at all stages grow in an environment where the challenges are manageable, where support is available from the podium and the neighbouring players, and where opportunities for one are often shared by all.

"We often co-ordinate mixed-band performance opportunities, allowing the students to work with more than one conductor," explained Promane. "It is a great experience for the Concert Winds to play with the more experienced ensembles, and the students enjoy these occasions to perform as a massed band." For the final concert of the 2015-16 season, for instance, all three ensembles joined the Canadian Brass onstage at the Toronto Centre for the Arts.

The original purpose of TYWO grew out of Clarke's desire to offer musical opportunities for young musicians. "TYWO strives to achieve all of those elements that I craved from an extra-curricular music program, and then some," he says. This has led to collaborations with internationally renowned guest artists, such as the Canadian Brass, the percussion quartet TorQ, the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets, and the *a capella* vocal group, Cadence. The students have also had opportunities to work with acclaimed wind-ensemble composers, including John Mackey, Eric Whitacre, and Frank Ticheli, and leading wind conductors, including the Eastman Wind Ensemble's Donald Hunsberger.

Each group is given its own special opportunities: for example, the Symphonic Winds played in Montreal last year. "This helped galvanize that ensemble and boost its own sense of pride, separate from that of the Wind Orchestra," says Clarke.

All musicians must audition, and those try-outs are adjudicated by professional musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Conservatory. Although some auditionees are ready to move into the next level of ensemble, some choose to remain in a less-advanced group if they have a strong sense of belonging in that ensemble.

On the other hand, moving upwards sometimes comes unexpectedly. Jonathan Wong, a second-year student at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music who had specified the Symphonic Winds when he auditioned, remembers being asked to help out at a rehearsal of the Wind Orchestra. "When I arrived, I quietly sat myself with the second clarinets and waited. Colin arrived, welcomed me, and promptly asked me to move up a row. In my first rehearsal with TYWO, I found myself sight-reading first clarinet parts to several challenging works."

Those who have played with TYWO can attest that Colin Clarke rarely reads or rehearses pieces under tempo. Wong continues, "I will never forget Colin's encouragement at that first rehearsal. I survived to the end of it uninjured, more or less, and Colin decided that I wasn't returning to the Symphonic Winds."

Clarke's ability to inspire everyone's best effort is well known. Sophie Abbott joined the Wind Orchestra last September as an oboist and English hornist. Though only a Grade 10 student, she was assigned challenging solos. Her mother, Leslie Liptay, explains Clarke's approach: "He readily offers praise and recognition for solo work. Given the high calibre of the Orchestra, Colin rarely has to remind anyone to be better prepared... Since Sophie joined TYWO, she has needed no reminders to practice."

At the December concert, Sophie performed the English horn solo in Alfred Reed's *Russian Christmas Music*. When the final peals of brass and chimes had finished, and the baton was lowered, various instrumentalists were directed to stand and be applauded

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for their solo contributions. Liptay continues: “The look of pride and accomplishment on her face before a packed house was a moment I will not soon forget.”

Clarke remembers a trumpeter having difficulty with a solo passage in a rehearsal: “We ran it several times, but he couldn’t make it happen. He got flustered and apologized, in front of everyone, confessing that he was ‘really nervous.’” Whereupon other members of the ensemble spoke up, offering encouragement. After starting again at the same spot, the music soon came to another stop, this time because the room had erupted with applause and cheers after he played it perfectly. Says Colin, “The musicians took care of their own. As my mom used to say, it made my heart smile.”

Jonathan Wong, whose membership in the Symphonic Winds and the Wind Orchestra has taken him to Montreal, Chicago, Carnegie Hall, and even Shanghai, says, “It was the more ‘ordinary’ bits and experiences that made TYWO such a wonderful experience: the fantastic repertoire, the frequent jokes and laughs in rehearsal, the culture of acknowledgement and appreciation that has been the norm year after year.”

Colin Sandquist, a clarinetist who worked his way up from the Concert Winds to the Symphonic Winds and, finally, to the Wind Orchestra, commented: “[Clarke] understands that nothing is perfect the first time, and as long as he sees something being improved upon, then you’re set.”

For Sandquist, involvement with the TYWO organization was critical to his own personal growth: “I had struggled with communication and anxiety, something I hoped to conquer with my playing abilities.” Steady guidance from section leaders in the various ensembles meant that, by 2011, he found himself the first member of the Wind Orchestra to step onto the stage of Carnegie Hall for the ensemble’s 20th anniversary concert. Anxiety long forgotten, he even noodled some notes before reaching his chair, making him the first of the group to ‘perform’ on the famous stage.

The first Canadian youth wind ensemble to play at Carnegie Hall, TYWO has now performed there three times. Their initial program, in 2006, included *Celebrations* by John Zdechlik, *Noisy Wheels of Joy* by Eric Whitacre, *Year of the Dragon* by Philip Sparke, and *Pantomime* by the late Quebec composer, Pierre Mercure. They returned in 2011 to mark their 20th season, performing Colin Clarke’s arrangement of Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*, John Philip Sousa’s *White Rose March*, and *Toronto Fanfare*, a commissioned work by TYWO alumnus, Rob Teehan.

Carnegie Hall was also part of TYWO’s 25th anniversary celebrations in 2016. After opening that concert with Jonathan Newman’s *Blow It Up, Start Again*, the program continued with several musical dances, including Arturo Marquez’s *Danzon No. 2*, Alfred Reed’s *El Camino Real*, and the “Waltz No. 2” from Shostakovich’s *Jazz Suite*. A movement from Howard Cable’s *Ontario Pictures* was also played, in tribute to the Canadian composer, who died in March 2016.

The initial trip to New York and Carnegie Hall in 2006 came as a result of Clarke’s desire to take the Wind Orchestra on tour. That

trip and other Clarke dreams become reality through the practical work of the TYWO board of directors, led by the executive director, Beryl Macleod. Her background in business helps her find ways to bring the dreams to fruition. “I am in regular consultation with the Artistic Director, the Treasurer, and our Personnel Managers, serving as a ‘go-between’ to help balance the artistic vision with administrative reality.”

In 2007, that vision included assembling the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, student choirs from Northlea Elementary School, Agincourt, Woburn, and Sir John A. MacDonald Collegiates, and professional soloists Leslie Fagan, Darryl Edwards, and Kevin McMillan, for a performance of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*. Macleod remarks, “TYWO holds the record for having the greatest number of people on the Main Stage of the Toronto Centre for the Arts.”

A discussion with the composer Johan de Meij at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago in 2007 led to a 2012 performance, at the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga, of de Meij’s *Symphony No. 1: “The Lord of the Rings,”* with de Meij conducting. In collaboration with the Toronto Youth Ballet Ensemble, the University of Toronto, Silhouettes Dance Company, Brampton Dance Studio, and the Swansea School of Dance, the symphonic music was enhanced by a video backdrop, ballet dancers, and fire dancers.

From his home in New York, de Meij offered this recollection of the event: “With no less than three performances all in one day, the orchestra showed its flexibility and the ability to concentrate the full hundred percent for each performance. TYWO has become one of the finest ensembles of its kind in Canada, a strong advocate for contemporary repertoire for wind orchestra.”

Through de Meij, another door was opened. The composer contacted the Shanghai International Spring Music Festival, where he had previously adjudicated, and recommended they invite TYWO for their 2014 festival. There TYWO performed Colin Clarke’s arrangements of Alexander Muir’s *The Maple Leaf Forever* and Franz Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, as well as



Figure 1. Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra in concert, Toronto, 2017.

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Howard Cable's *The Banks of Newfoundland*. Prior to its departure on that trip, the Wind Orchestra spent an afternoon being guided through those settings of Newfoundland folk songs by Cable.

The size of the Wind Orchestra varies from year to year. Currently at 47 members, it has at times had upwards of 75, though Clarke prefers a medium-sized ensemble. One consideration is the level of playing shown at the auditions. About 150 musicians apply annually to one of the three TYWO ensembles, and the panel tries to find a place for everyone. Clarke prefers four or five flautists in the Wind Orchestra, but one year there were eight potential players, and he was pressed to accept them all. According to Clarke, it ended up being "one of the strongest flute sections we've ever had."

In the Symphonic Winds, the focus is different, and the ensemble is routinely much larger. The skill level can be wide, but the ideal participant is someone who can play about Grade 4-level band literature. Beyond striving for performing excellence, ensemble members are taught the importance of punctuality, good attendance, and a collaborative attitude.

Horner says, "The main thing I focus on in rehearsal is being aware of the ensemble around them, and making good musical decisions based on that. Students are often too passive in bands, and don't understand the level of individual attention required to make music come alive. Understanding collaboration within a band setting is a critical goal I have set for the group."

With musicians who are willing to take on the challenge of difficult or unusual repertoire, Clarke enjoys exploring all corners of the wind-band literature. There is an educational component to his choices, for musicians and audiences alike: "I try to pick music I think will not only challenge and educate my musicians, but excite our audiences, too. I also take into consideration the fact that many players who join the ensemble are already very familiar with the canon of contemporary music."

The fact that TYWO musicians are well-versed in the current wind repertoire was illustrated to Clarke during the Shanghai tour. During some downtime, a few musicians asked about repertoire for the following season. Clarke recalls: "Somewhat smugly, I assumed they wouldn't know the titles I had in mind. I began listing what I considered to be somewhat obscure titles, but with each work there were not only nods of recognition but, in several cases, roars of enthusiasm."

The group around him at that time were mostly high-school students, unlikely to be playing Adam Gorb's *Yiddish Dances* or Roberto Sierra's *Sinfonia No. 3* in their own school ensembles. But it brought home to him the musicians' wide knowledge of the wind repertoire, recordings of which can be found alongside pop and hip-hop on their smart phones. "Since when do sixteen-year-olds cheer aloud for the *Armenian Dances*?" asked Clarke. "I was surrounded by band geeks, and I loved it."

When selecting music for the Concert Winds, Ben Promane is more restricted by the technical abilities of the younger students. For this entry-level ensemble, he begins each fall with several pieces in a variety of styles at the Grades 1½-2 levels, to gauge

their abilities. By October, the list is reduced to three or four titles, including something slow and lyrical, something with a challenging time signature, something slightly above their ability as a "growth" piece, and something "fun." The band's performance of James Brown's "I Feel Good!" at the season's first concert in December brought down the house.

Dan Horner, director of the Symphonic Winds, finds the rehearsal process very different from his daily work at Bayview Secondary School. The three-hour rehearsals require a different level of pacing, and the approach to any given concert may allow only for three to five rehearsals. Since one purpose of the Symphonic Winds is to prepare players for promotion to the Wind Orchestra, there is always an adjustment at the beginning of the season, as the strongest players from the previous season move on and new members arrive. "I do not sit in on the auditions, so I don't know what our collective capabilities are at that point," says Horner. "Aside from individual abilities, section strengths also don't fully appear until after the first concert."

Horner's formula for the first concert is an opener followed by a lyrical selection, then either a novelty number, a march, or a "scherzo-esque" piece, and, to close, the most challenging piece on the programme. The Symphonic Winds start their repertoire in the range of Grades 2-4, progressing through the season until they finish with repertoire at Grades 4-5 levels.

But Horner isn't focused solely on the music's technical difficulty: "I've always had an appreciation for good music as opposed to difficult music. I know there are a lot of band directors who define their programs by the grade level at which their groups can play. I think they are missing the point." Easier pieces allow for a deeper exploration of musicianship: "A lower-level piece is more about *how* they are playing it. They need to make music with it."

The TYWO organization has strong contacts with the school districts around the Greater Toronto Area. While not a classroom teacher himself, Clarke regularly interacts with school groups in his work as a clinician and adjudicator. "I share the same awesome responsibility as my colleagues who work tirelessly in their music programs: to enhance the lives of young people through music education."

To this end, TYWO reaches out to engage school ensembles by collaborating with them in bringing visiting musicians into the classrooms. And school groups are welcomed to the Toronto Centre for the Arts every spring for a special one-hour performance by the Wind Orchestra and their guest artists.

Students from elementary grades through high school are treated to a polished performance, with introductions to each piece provided by Clarke in his usual, easy-going style. While this concert serves as a dress rehearsal for TYWO's season-ending public concert that evening, the music performed serves the dual roles mentioned above: exciting the audience while developing the musicians.

In the 2015 student concert, the percussion quartet TorQ joined the Wind Orchestra's percussion section in Samuel Hazo's *Sevens*. When the feature moment for the percussionists arrived, they "milked" it for all it was worth. In 2016, the vocal group

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Cadence harmonized beautifully on Clarke's arrangement of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." Being open to all types of music is one way that TYWO performances inspire young musicians from across the GTA.

After twenty-five years, what's next for Colin Clarke and TYWO? The creation of the Metropolitan Winds in the past couple of years – the fourth ensemble now operating under the TYWO "umbrella" – is another example of the organization's organic growth, and represents an advance into the world of adult, amateur community bands. The idea grew out of TYWO alumni suggestions for an ensemble that would allow them to maintain their playing skills, even if many of them were now following career paths outside of music.

"Catering to adult amateur musicians certainly wasn't part of my thinking 25 years ago, nor was it included in the board's mission statement," said Clarke. "This is a happy problem to have – seeing the success of our program reflected in this manner – and we're now working to widen the terms of our policies and purpose to include this natural evolution of the Wind Orchestra program."

Renee Willmon, a Wind Orchestra flutist (2003-2008), took a break from her Ph.D. studies in anthropology at the University of Western Ontario to join the 2016 New York tour, for her second performance at Carnegie Hall. "While I enjoy playing in other groups, especially orchestras with string players, the level of musicianship [in TYWO] and the sheer amount of laughter doesn't quite compare."

Although her doctoral studies and a starring role in *To Catch a Killer* on the OWN network fills Willmon's schedule, music has been part of her life since she was a teenager, and she remains a part of the TYWO organization by playing in the Metropolitan Winds. Says Willmon, "As a musician in [Colin's] ensembles, you never feel like he is bored or going through the motions, and I think that energy and attention to detail are what motivates his musicians to give their all."

Clarke is looking ahead to pulling together a group of current and former members from throughout the TYWO family to help set new goals for an organization that has already achieved a great deal. "I have my own crazy, over-the-top ideas on where to go next, but I'm anxious to hear what others have to suggest. I'm not sure what the future holds for TYWO, but it will be exciting!"



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Uxbridge Community Concert Band since 1992. He also can be found directing pit bands for local musicals, including a spring 2017 production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. He has been developing his skills in composition by writing original works for school groups to perform, most recently a four-movement folksong suite to reflect the diverse cultures at Middlefield CI.

