

## Steeped in music

LINDA ROGERS

Nick Fairbank's heart belongs to Cassie.



PHOTO: ANGELA FAIRBANK

Nick Fairbank

On a recent summer evening I met Nick Fairbank—composer, choir leader and pianist—to discuss his life in music over a scotch (maybe two) at Spinnakers. The eldest of four siblings, Nick went to Shawnigan Lake School when it was most famous for its Olympic medal-winning rowers. There he was encouraged to play the pipe organ in the school chapel by his music teacher. That, as we shall see, began an addiction.

He started his music education early. After being caught sneaking out of bed to hear his parents play chamber music with friends, he was offered piano lessons. The love of classical music stayed with him even though he has dabbled in other genres and played instruments as diverse as guitar, penny whistle, banjo, harpsichord, clavichord, ukulele and oh, I hate to say it of such a personable man, accordion.

Despite his love of music, when he began to study at the University of British Columbia 30-plus years ago, he thought he might be a doctor like his father, or a marine biologist.

But there was always that keyboard itch.

There have been some diversions. Once, fearing that music would not support family life as he knew it, Nick returned to university and studied education. He has taught French and kinesiology. No doubt his understanding of the body in motion helps justify his conducting: it's great upper body exercise. I've read that conductors are among the longest-living members of our species.

Health would be important for this superhuman who teaches at the conservatory, directs liturgical music, sings, examines for the Toronto

Conservatory, adjudicates music festivals, composes, conducts the Viva Youth and Via Choralis Chamber choirs, and is the father of twin teenage girls.

Nick's heart should be safe because he loves his work. His joy is reflected in ecstatic reviews that pay attention to the elegance and wit in his graceful composition.

And the musician has recently fallen in love—with a pipe organ named Cassie, as it turns out. This past summer the 100-year-old organ, a Casavant Opus 400, had her re-debut at the Victoria Conservatory of Music after a dozen years of silence caused by renovations when the conservatory took over the heritage church. The lucky organist chosen to make her sing at the premiere of her refurbishment was Fairbank, who teaches organ at the Conservatory in addition to all the other hats he wears.

Like any woman who has been kept quiet for 13 years, Cassie roared into her second life with a repertoire that reflected Fairbank's eclectic musical interests and the stretch potential of the instrument. The very emotional afternoon, the high moment in the Pipes Around the Pacific Festival, finished with a hundredth birthday cake and bubbly.

Fairbank is beyond excited by his three concerts planned for the beautifully resonant Alix Goolden Hall this year—the first of which is Sunday October 3, a concert featuring Mendelssohn, Schuman, jazz and ragtime. A November 13 concert will feature the Victoria Civic Orchestra, and next spring there will be a full-on three-choir roof-raiser with the University of Victoria Chamber Choir, Vox Humana and the Conservatory Choir. That should get a lot of hearts pumping.

"I've noticed from your organ recitals and choral performances that you are a bit of a musical glutton," I observe. "Is there anything you *don't* like?"

It is always an interesting question. I remember Jan Cherniavsky, "the poet of the piano" and a Mozart specialist, spitting in my face when he insisted that listening to recorded music is like eating canned food. And Harmon Lewis, the keyboard half of the Karr-Lewis musical partnership decrying *anything* with a pounding beat. Before he died, the CBC's much-loved David Grierson confided, and made me promise not to tell, he couldn't abide barbershop quartets.

"Well?" I repeat, putting my hand over his glass. "Fess up." But I will probably have to wait until hell freezes over for the answer. He does admit, however, that he has played rock.

He also admits to some favourite composers—his list currently includes Stravinsky, Poulenc, and the modal synesthetics of Olivier Messiaen. A true Aristotelian, Fairbank has himself been building a reputation as a composer. I put him in the same school as Canadian composer Marjan Mozetic, whose idiom is fresh although rooted in melody. "I am a lyrical writer," Fairbank says, "although I have experimented with dissonant music." Responding to the character of the situation, he writes to fit, whether it is a choir, orchestra, piano, organ or soloist. There is an organic feeling to his composition, which is conversational in its resonances.

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PHOTO: MONDAY MAGAZINE

Nick with Cassie

When he contacted me about writing lyrics for his Viva children's choir, he stipulated, "nothing about animals." The "no animal" admonition was like waving a red flag in front of me. I wrote lyrics about train rodents and called the song "Rat Milk," words Nick passed on to a promising student. The kids seemed to like it. They sang it with a lovely balance of compassion and humour.

In every instance, I have been thrilled with Mr Fairbank's transformation of idea and word into the most appropriate and, I think, beautiful music. "Songlines of Praise," our piece about Terry Fox, was sung for the thirtieth anniversary of Fox's heroic run.

What do you like best?" I ask Nick, who replies that he loves it all, his wonderful, many-faceted life in music, which is bringing him international recognition. "And your legacy?"

He replies that he hopes to be appreciated for the students who go on to capture the sound of their times, for the music he has written, and for the hundreds of choristers who will take the music into their worlds, feeling and being better for the experience.

I notice a lot of organ music is in the key of E flat. Music written for many voices in a major key has to raise the endorphin levels of everyone who hears it. No one is calling Nick Fairbank Dr Feelgood, but I am getting the vibe.

Spinnaker's is about to close for the night. One last question: "What mountain is left to climb for the organ lover who once toured Germany in a car held together with duct tape and touched the keys on every extant German organ played by Bach?"

"If I could play the magnificent pipe organ in Wannamaker's department store in Philadelphia I would die happy," he says. I have yet to meet an organist who doesn't have that experience as the ultimate desideratum. The road to Philadelphia is still open.

*Nick Fairbank will be performing the Rheinberger Concerto no. 1 in F at the Alix Goolden Hall, Sunday, October 3, 2:30 pm and on Saturday, November 13, 2 pm, with the Victoria Civic Orchestra. See [www.vcm.bc.ca](http://www.vcm.bc.ca) for details. Viva Youth Choirs are accepting registrations now at [www.vivachoirs.ca](http://www.vivachoirs.ca).*



Linda Rogers loves the cross-pollination that happens in the Victoria Arts Community. Look for the Romp Festival performance of *Present Tense* next month.