

Obituaries

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 FAX: 416-585-5611
 OBIT@GLOBEANDMAIL.CC
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DOROTHY BROMBY SMYTHE, 82 » PERFORMER

She entertained Toronto and the troops, carting her organ from stage to stage

Born to a talented family, she became a musical fixture in a growing city and beyond

BY NOREEN SHANAHAN TORONTO

As a classical organist, Dorothy Bromby's performances were like a soundtrack for a maturing city in the 20th century. From her early days in cinemas, performing during intermission, to troop shows during the Second World War and rounding up prize-winning animals at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, her music bellowed in the eclectic corners of Toronto's entertainment industry for more than five decades.

Ms. Bromby was the first female conductor at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, and at age 20, probably the youngest. She performed, produced and directed shows at the Winter Fair, the Royal Horse Show, the National Home Show, Ontario Place and Yorkdale Mall. With great dedication and care, she carted her Lowery Organ from stage to stage.

She also inspired others to succeed. David Rogers, one of Canada's leading musical theatre talents and former star of the Toronto production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, said Ms. Bromby taught him how to be a professional.

"[She said] that it was a business that had to be taken seriously. She always commanded respect."

Dorothy Bromby was born into a musical and entertaining family. When her father, Harold, was still in his teens, he was personal trumpeter to the Duke of Atholl in Aberdeen, Scotland. Later, in Canada, he served as bandmaster for the 116th Battalion during the First World War. When Dorothy was a child, it was not unusual for her to find veterans camped out on the living room floor, especially during the annual Warriors' Day Parade. She also had an uncle who played the xylophone, drums and zither at the Canadian National Exhibition grandstand for afternoon circus performances.

Dorothy's first public performance was as an elementary student in Toronto's west end. In those days, children were expected to quietly line up in front of the "girl" or "boy" entrance. Once her piano skills became known, she was expected to be at the keys twice a day to herd them through the proper doors. Her uncle, Walter, even wrote a special piece of music for her called the *Western Avenue School March*. By the time she was in high school, the organ was her favourite instrument. In 1941, she took a job playing at cinemas



Dorothy Bromby, here in a Lowery Organ ad, played in an eclectic set of surroundings. COURTESY OF FAMILY

across Toronto, including the Odeon Carlton, the Humber and the Danforth Music Hall.

Around the same time, she started performing for the troops at Ontario military installations, including Camp Borden, Barryfield and Musko's "Little Norway" base.

"She was the youngest member of the musicians' union," said sister Bernice Boyd, "and our parents had to make sure the colonel in charge at each camp would look after her."

She often teamed up with Scottish comedian Billy Meek, who went on to a regular role on *Pig & Whistle*, the iconic Canadian television variety show. In addition to troop shows, Ms. Bromby volunteered to play for wounded servicemen who were convalescing in Toronto.

In her teens, Ms. Bromby summered in the Toronto Islands. (Her mother, Lily, had lived there when she first came to Canada from Belfast in the early 1920s.) The cottage lacked a piano until one day when her parents were bicycling at the Eastern Gap harbour entrance and spied a table grand in the sand. They borrowed a Toronto Transit Commission freight wagon and, with friends, pulled it home.

"Our parents restored it as best they could," her sister said. "And this was when Dot did all her rehearsing. When

we had parties, the piano was closed and used as a buffet table."

During the war, Ms. Bromby did shows at the Royal York and King Edward hotels, performing with four other women in a group they called The Dorothy Bromby Singers. She wrote the music and played accompaniment on the organ, pressing the 40 stops to emit different sounds, including trumpets, strings and drums.

In 1946, she was hired as the musical conductor for *Stop and Go*, a variety revue at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre that featured artists from wartime entertainment troupes: the Accordionettes, the Modernettes, Lay Kenny's Teenagers, the Rhythmites and the Leslie Bell Singers.

John Karastamatis, the theatre's current director of communications, noted how rare it was for women of this era to be allowed to conduct.

"Working in the home and 'slave labour' were pretty well the only jobs for women at that time," he said.

Ms. Bromby married fellow Ward's Islander Jim Smythe in 1948. While overseas during the war, Mr. Smythe had fallen in love with a picture of her snapped by a mutual friend. He insisted on meeting her as soon as he was back in Toronto. Her reputation as a musician had also charmed him

seemed as though she had found her niche and refused to abandon it. From this point on, she was surrounded by bouquets of flowers. Her dedication to the job was such that she once performed with a broken wrist. "They built a stand for her arm at the theatre," said her son, "and the furriers covered her cast with a mink muff that matched the mink stole she wore."

After a few years at the flower show, Ms. Bromby went on to work with the ring committee in the horse arena. Her talent as both performer and director were particularly noted, especially on the closing ceremonies.

Mr. Rogers recalls the early days of his career, following Ms. Bromby in circles around the ring. "I remember her with her music in a binder, leading the troops with her singers and dancers behind. We'd follow her through the horses and cows [stalls], she in her fancy gown with her hair higher than anyone else's."

The ceremony consisted of a parade in the centre ring, showcasing Ms. Bromby on the organ. (She also wrote the script.) There were award-winning horses festooned with flowers, colourful bushels of fruits and vegetables, sheep, cows, geese, chickens — for 26 years, she left nothing out.

"She brought the show business pizzazz," daughter Sandy Rutherford said. "They asked her to come back, even up to two or three years ago... because it now lacks that extra flavour."

When the ring was full, the lights would go down — gradually, so as not to spook the animals — and the president of the fair would enter the gate. He'd circle the ring once or twice, sitting with his wife in a three-horse buggy, officially close the event, and exit to great applause.

During her retirement, Ms. Bromby enjoyed spending time at the family's cottage in Haliburton, Ont., and turning her musician's hands over to gourmet cooking.

DOROTHY BROMBY SMYTHE
 Dorothy Bromby Smythe was born Dec. 4, 1925, in Toronto. She died in Toronto on Dec. 24, 2007, from cancer. She was 82. She is survived by husband, Jim, daughters Sandy Rutherford and Pat Buie and son, Rob Bromby. She is also survived by her sister, Bernice Boyd, and eight grandchildren.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

I REMEMBER
 » OSCAR PETERSON



REUTERS

Carol Anné Wien of Toronto remembers Oscar Peterson, whose obituary appeared Dec. 2.

In February, 1967, Oscar Peterson gave a four-day jazz workshop to musicians in Kitchener, Ont. It snowed. A friend and I, neither of us musically inclined, drove up each day from Toronto, hardly able to believe our luck, and there was Mr. Peterson, sitting two metres from us at a Yamaha grand in a non-script classroom. There were just eight of us — clearly, the program had not been much advertised.

For four days, we sat in bliss. Mr. Peterson explained his approach to jazz, gave us a succinct history, tuned up our ears and then, on the last day, brought in Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen to illustrate how a trio worked. She gorged on sound, with new understanding pinned to small moments. He gave a vibrant and deeply knowledgeable workshop never wavering for an instant of the pitiful attendance.

There were two things I will remember.

Using *If I Were A Bell, I'd Be Ringing*, he laid out how to develop a jazz solo, beginning with statement of the melody, embellishing it, adding a development that plays alongside the melody, developing that further and closing by coming back to the melody. Classic dramatic structure. I also demonstrated how much play for an audience unused to jazz, how far to take them, and when to pull back. "There are three ways to play the beat," he said — "Straight ahead, right down the middle, Ahead of it, pulling forward. Or just behind it, but you have to be careful with that on."

What was most unforgettable was his astonishing generosity of give so prodigiously to so few.

Blaine Gaouette of Kitchener, Ont., also writes about Mr. Peterson.

In the mid-1940s, the hep-to-the-jive crowd in Timmins, Ont., got some absolutely cool news: Oscar Peterson, the teenage "boogie woogie king of Canada," was coming to our town to lay on his magic on behalf of a native wartime savings-bond drive.

Since Oscar wasn't yet in recording, few of us had heard him play, but radio and the printed word spoke of the teenage phenomenon whose star was rising rapidly.