

(Johnny Cowell has been designated by Town Council as Tillsonburg's Favourite Son, and for good reason. Born and raised in this community, Cowell carved out an international reputation as a music composer, with more than 200 songs to his credit. ". Many of his songs have been recorded by prominent musicians and singers, as well as by himself; he has produced and been involved in numerous recordings – popular and classical – featuring the trumpet skills Cowell first developed while growing up in Tillsonburg in the 1930s.

With one foot firmly in popular music, Cowell had the other foot in classical music as trumpeter (1952 – 1991) for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, (Principal trumpeter for the Toronto Symphony Pops) for whom he has composed a number of selections.

Part One of this three part series on Johnny Cowell appeared in the Tillsonburg News on February 9, 2009)

Johnny Cowell's Memoirs, as told to Matthew Scholtz

Although I became a soloist with the Toronto Symphony Band in 1941, my real ambition was to join the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, but I had to wait until I turned 16.

That's when Sir Ernest MacMillan, director of the Symphony, invited me to join on an occasional basis in 1942. It turned out that I would play with the symphony often because I was often asked to fill in for trumpeter Bert Jones, who suffered from ill health.

I really liked Sir Ernest. He treated me almost like a grandson and he was instrumental (pardon the pun!) in having me appointed as principal trumpet of the University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra (even though I wasn't a student).

I also gained an awful lot of valuable experience by playing with most of the military and concert bands in Toronto.

Just 6 months shy of my 18th birthday, the Royal Canadian Navy Band asked me if I would consider becoming the cornet soloist of the Royal Canadian Navy Band.

But before I could accept the proposal, I needed a letter from my Dad granting his permission because I couldn't join the Navy until I turned 18.

That letter my Dad wrote, and I was soon stationed at the Naden Naval Base in Victoria, B.C. as soloist with the R.C.N. Band.

The Victoria Symphony appointed me as principal trumpet, the Navy dance band brought me on board and a local Dixieland band signed me up for weekend dances.

So, it seemed as if the only time I didn't have a trumpet or a cornet in my hand, was when I was sleeping.

Still, the combination of classical and pop music became an experience that honed my musical skills considerably and stood me in good stead in years to come.

In August 1945, with the collapse of Japan, World War II came to an end, and so did my musical career – almost.

Victoria was certainly in a mood to celebrate and one of the best ways to do that was with music.

On the morning of Victory over Japan Day, the band played in a march through downtown Victoria, followed by a concert at noon, and then another parade in the afternoon. Then it was one concert after another, culminating in a lively street dance into the early hours of the morning.

But the next morning, I would pay dearly for that excess.

When I attempted to practice that morning, I was dismayed to find that I couldn't play a single recognizable note.

A visit to a Vancouver specialist brought a devastating diagnosis: I had severely damaged the muscles in my lip, deadening the nerves.

At the age of 19, I was told that I would never be able to play trumpet again.

I received my discharge from the Navy and glumly returned to Toronto, utterly depressed about my future.

While a door had closed, it was now time to open a window.

From the age of 8, I had dabbled in musical composition. I couldn't play a trumpet, but I could still write music.

Growing up in Tillsonburg, I wanted desperately to learn the trumpet and since there was no one locally who could teach me, I had to teach myself.

When I returned to Toronto after my discharge, I couldn't play the trumpet, so I decided instead to turn to composing. And once again, I would have to teach myself.

I bought a copy of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, studied it and learned how to transpose the various instruments.

Then I wrote a three-movement suite for symphony orchestra and submitted it to the Royal Conservatory of Music.

On the strength of that composition, the Royal Conservatory of Music granted me a scholarship. I would now be able to study not only composition, but piano as well.

I soon realized that I would never be anything more than a competent pianist, making me more determined to put a trumpet to my lips once again.

The struggle was long – eight years – but the happy day came when I was able to play again.

And just in time, because a trumpet opening had suddenly become available with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Following an audition, I got the job in 1952 and once again I was under the baton of my old friend, Sir Ernest MacMillan.

To supplement my income, I played in area dance bands.

One night, I went on a dance band job at the Royal York hotel.

The female vocalist that fateful night was a knockout: jet black hair, beautiful face and a terrific figure.

How could a guy like me get such a beautiful girl, a runner-up to the Miss Canada contest, interested in a guy like me?

Well, years ago, back in Tillsonburg, my dad tried to impress my Mother-to-be by fancy ice skating. I couldn't skate very well, but I could write music, so I wrote songs for my vocalist friend. One evening, she came to my house, where she sang my songs accompanied by me on the piano.

Joan, I think, was impressed enough to consider me seriously enough to join me in marriage in 1953.

One of the most satisfying concerts in my career as a trumpet soloist came when I was asked to substitute for American superstar trumpeter Doc Severinsen (long term band leader for late night host Johnny Carson). When it was announced to the audience at a Hamilton Philharmonic concert that Doc would be replaced by Johnny Cowell, a groan went up from the audience. I really had no idea how the audience would react. So, I was

relieved and pleased when the Philharmonic's manager called a week later to let me know that no one asked for a ticket refund.

Throughout my long career with the TSO, I have played under the baton of six conductors, all of whom I got along with very well.

Many of them asked me to compose music for special occasions. Just as we were making the transition from our old home at Massey Hall to the new Roy Thomson Hall, conductor Andrew Davis asked me for a special composition to commemorate the move.

To me, the premiere of "A Farewell Tribute to The Grand Old Lady of Shuter Street" will always be a special memory.

In 1969, Conductor Seiji Ozawa, without doubt the greatest orchestral conductor I ever worked with, honoured me by asking me to write a piece that the TSO could use as an encore. After that, my composition of "Roller Coaster" became the standard way for the TSO to finish many of our concerts.

When Ozawa took the New York Philharmonic on a European tour, he took "Roller Coaster" with him to end their concerts.

(Although Ozawa and I became good friends, he never quite got his Japanese tongue around my name. To him, I was always Johnny Cower.)

At first, I didn't think much of Roy Thompson Hall, preferring the acoustics of Massey Hall, but eventually, they got the bugs out of Thompson, making it more pleasurable performing there.

Along the way, I was fortunate to be associated with wonderful guest conductors such as Erich Kunzel and the incomparable Arthur Fielder, the famous conductor of the Boston Pops.

A precious memory came on the day Fielder guest conducted a special four trumpet opening of Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.

Fiedler asked us all to stand and play the opening. We played it, and he said, "No, I don't like that. Maybe we should just have three guys." So, the three of us started and again, he stopped us, saying, "Nope, I don't like that. Two guys play it." So I played it jazz-style, and the other fellow played it straight, but it still didn't have the right feel to it. Finally, he turned to me and said, "How would you like to play it as a solo?" I started out but he quickly stopped conducting, looked at me, and asked, "Tell me, do you give lessons?"

All good things come to an end, and the end of my career with the TSO officially came to a close at a special farewell concert on July 18, 1991. I was featured as a trumpet soloist, composer, pianist and arranger. In the audience, I was pleased to see my good trumpeter friend from Tillsonburg, the late Bill Popham and his wife.

I had reached the Symphony's mandatory retirement age of 65, so it was time to leave the Roy Thomson Hall stage for the last time – with a blast end, not a whimper.

Looking back on my years with the TSO, I would have to say that the happiest and most fulfilling times were spent playing as principal trumpet with the Toronto Symphony Pops Orchestra a subsection of the TSO.

But that wasn't the end of my trumpet playing.

For almost ten years (1992-2001), I became the featured soloist with the Hannaford Street Silver Band, considered one of the finest brass bands in North America. At the same time, I played principal trumpet with the Toronto Philharmonia (1992-2004)

My long career in classical music has indeed been a very satisfying one.

But it all began years ago in Tillsonburg, when an uncle put a beat-up trumpet in my hands and I blew my first tentative notes.

That would be the start of millions of notes to come. Not all of them perfect, but fortunately for me, most of them were.

TO BE CONTINUED