



A conversation with Bernard Helfter

with Brendan McLean

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Long-time central region director, **Bernard Helfter** recently began his final retirement from a lifetime of school band instruction. Born and raised in South Dakota, Bernard has been teaching band in south central Manitoba since 1976. Before his first retirement in 1993, he started and built a band program in several small schools in the Tiger Hills area. He has been directing bands at the Elm Creek and Miami schools since 1993. For 30 years he has conducted the Prairie Red Coats, a community band which includes members from several southern Manitoba communities. He also directed the German choir of Winnipeg for 22 years, and is a former member of the Rupertsland Brass Band.

Where were you schooled?

I received my bachelor's degree from St. John's University in Minnesota, and master's degree from Northern State University in South Dakota. I began doctoral work in educational psychology at the University of South Dakota.

Who have been your influences over the years?

My high school band director, Richard Baeder, taught me a lot about music and expression in music. Frank Herring, my university band director, was a great French horn teacher and a very practical guy. I learned a lot watching him rehearse bands. Harvey Moen, who was my master's degree advisor, imparted to me the importance of a practical outlook on life.

What is your primary instrument?

Tuba. I also play euphonium, French horn, and sing.



Which kind of music do you enjoy listening to the most?

Military marches. Some of my favourites are *Graf Zeppelin* by Carl Teike and *Chicago Tribune* by W. Paris Chambers.

What are some memorable experiences from your music career?

Several years ago I took the Tiger Hills marching band to the Moose Jaw Festival. Tim McKittrick, one of our tuba players, won the top prize in his category in the brass solo competition. This surprised everyone at the festival because no one could find "Tiger Hills" on a map.

I used to practice tuba several hours per day. As a student I developed a hole in my lung due to incorrect breathing. It became very painful and I was hospitalized. After it healed I resumed playing, but while in university I developed another hole in my lung. Much to my dismay, the doctor told me that this was the end of my wind instrument playing career. I started to study the double bass and violin instead. In my second year of university, Arnold Jacobs was doing a clinic in town. When I explained my situation to him he asked to see me after the clinic. He proceeded to give me a two and a half hour lesson on breathing and told me that I had been breathing all wrong. Jacobs encouraged me to ask my doctor if I could have another trial period on tuba. I went back to the tuba and my lung problems never returned.

What is the value of music education?

Music is a part of human existence. People who don't appreciate music often haven't experienced it. For many who listen only to music in the media, it is just a form of entertainment, and they don't really listen to it in depth. Band is the best medium for teaching music in schools because a band is capable of playing all kinds of music. Military bands are a good model of how a student band can function — in addition to playing military marches and ceremonial music they normally have a variety of functions such as singing, and playing concert, jazz, and popular music.

What advice would you give young band directors?

Young directors need to have a lot more confidence in their abilities. They should keep in mind that their university teachers have their own approach to the place of music in society, and the ideals presented to them in class may not work in the real world. For example, the average small-town guy on the street may not care about band. However, if you show him a good sounding band playing something familiar, he will be happy. Young directors need to get community members and parents on board to build a program. They should perform a larger portion of familiar literature (even if it is of lesser quality than they might prefer) to build support for a program.

What are your plans for retirement?

Two places that I would love to visit are Pearl Harbor and Siberia. I also plan to spend more time playing the tuba and gardening.