

"Nish" Rumboldt: Newfoundland's beloved Pied Piper of Song

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Introduction:

This paper deals with the life and work of Ignatius "Nish" Rumboldt, a formidable force in the development of the choral art in Newfoundland and Labrador. Data has been gathered through the examination of journal and newspaper articles, and a series of personal interviews, including comments made by Dr. Rumboldt himself.

I examine his involvement in the establishment of many community choirs across Newfoundland, a choral network that spanned the entire province, from Labrador to the Avalon Peninsula. Most importantly, the paper focuses on the phenomenal success that Dr. Rumboldt enjoyed while sowing the seeds of "The Joy of Singing" wherever he went. It attempts to supply an answer to the question "Why did everyone love to sing for Nish?" and while doing so, it will demonstrate that much of the popularity of choral singing and the singing culture in general in this province can be directly linked to his labours of love.

In addition to articles and interviews, I have examined materials found in a collection of Dr. Rumboldt's electronic tapes and personal papers which has been recently put into the MUN Folklore Archive. What better place could there be for this paper on the life and work of Nish Rumboldt, than right here and now, at a conference based on the phenomenon of singing? After all, it was this very phenomenon that enabled Nish to work his magic making him "Newfoundland's beloved Pied Piper".

Early years:

The magic is first perceived

Born in Curling, Newfoundland on November 30, 1916, Nish was one in a family of seven. His mother's early death (Nish was six years old) precipitated the splitting up of the family, and brought him to Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. John's. This event, while tragic on one hand, proved fortuitous on the other. It re-located Nish to a community where education was important, and music was expected to play a major role in one's education. In fact, fate placed Nish Rumboldt in an environment where his talent could be well and truly developed, a course of events that would have been most unlikely had he remained in Curling.

Paul Woodford (1984) tells us of Nish's recollections of his early training at Mount Cashel. Nish credited, Brother J.A. Conway (Nish's first music teacher), with providing an opportunity to acquire "an appreciation for music and a tremendous

admiration for human beings" (Woodford, 1984, p. 9). Even from that early age, Nish noted the kindness proffered to him and the other boys at Mount Cashel. He strongly felt that those experiences provided him with invaluable "positive" feelings for people and music. In a 1988 Evening Telegram interview, he explained the faith models that represented the underpinnings of his boyhood.

Christmas was pivotal on the boys' lives. The great emphasis when we were children was on the birth of Christ ... the boys always enjoyed Christmas because there was a **community spirit** (emphasis mine) which provided good fellowship and love (Walsh, J. 1988, December 23, The Evening Telegram, p. 16B).

Early in his career as a student, Rumboldt, as a young clarinetist met Charles (later to become Sir Charles) Hutton. Hutton's accomplishments in Newfoundland life have been well-documented and he is recognized to be the single most important musical figure on the entire island in the late 19th and early 20th century. His reputation in Newfoundland with vocal and instrumental music is legendary. Hutton had a reputation for recognizing potential in his young charges, and although Nish, in his own words, allowed that he was not a very good clarinetist, Hutton saw considerable promise in his musical ability in other areas. In fact, Hutton's regard for Nish's talent was well known throughout St. John's ... even in the Anglican School system. In a 1994 interview, Edgar House, one time principal of Bishop Field School remembered asking Brother Innes, a teacher from Mount Cashel, about a bright young boy whom he observed writing the public exams. House was told that "Mr. Hutton" was keeping his eye on this boy, since he had already mastered three or four instruments but hadn't decided which one to specialize in. News of Rumboldt spreading beyond the Roman Catholic Schools System was in itself somewhat remarkable for the time. But there was a reason for this reputation. Nish was already a very well-known musician, and was in constant demand. He recalls his "busy schedule" in a MUN Gazette retrospective from August of 1975.

I would sometimes be booked up for weeks ahead ... I was far better known as a child than I am today. I remember at one point I'd been out in a "Tux" every night for six weeks. I didn't know how to say 'no', you see - still can't for that matter - a bit of a ham too, I suppose. Still, I was free, and I enjoyed doing it (MUN Gazette, August, 1975, p. 5).

He was free and able to do the performing, and he enjoyed it so much, so why not do it? This path proved to be one that he would continue to follow largely unchanged for the rest of his musical career.

Musical employment:

The Magic is invoked in his first "jobs"

Things always seemed to develop at a rapid pace in Nish's career. At the tender age of fifteen (1931), Hutton offered him the post of Assistant Organist at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (now the Basilica). When faced with the prospect, Rumboldt expressed some self-doubt as to his own organ playing ability. Woodford (1984) tells about this incident, mentioning that Rumboldt's protestations were cut

short when Brother Innes suggested that he could soon learn to play better.

In an interview years later, Nish conceded that this experience of being put under pressure to "produce" forged another basic concept to which he would adhere. Openness and a willingness to learn from his students as well as other musicians personified Nish as he grew as teacher and performer.

In 1936, Nish took over the full job of organist and choirmaster at the Cathedral. He worked with a choir of seventy-five singers, and found it extremely gratifying. But this was not the only iron he had in the fire. Simultaneously, he worked with school and community groups, "putting off" musicals and shows by the dozen. Over the years, he began to virtually collect choirs, ranging in makeup from the St. Patrick's Boys Choir, to the Fort Pepperril American Armed Forces Officers' Wives Choir.

After a falling out with Archbishop Skinner at the Cathedral in 1952, Nish accepted a position teaching music at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The next year, 1953, he was hired to conduct the choir for a new television station, CJON. The Choir, known as the Glee Club, featured 80 voices on TV and enjoyed household familiarity in the 50's and 60's. Working with the Gerald S. Doyle Songbook and local supporters Fred Emmerson and Bob McLeod, Nish became a central figure in the performance and preservation of Newfoundland folk songs.

In "Man of Song", *Atlantic Advocate*, April, 1958, Michael F. Harrington relates the first time Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national radio host Max Ferguson played the early CJON recordings of Folksongs. Harrington described Nish's work in the most glowing of terms,

Many of them [the CJON Glee Club Members] had never seen one another before he took them under his baton and almost overnight fused them into a band of harmonious singers (*Atlantic Advocate*, April 1958, Vol. 48, p. 43).

MUN Extension:

The magical net is cast more widely

Paul Woodford in his book, "Nish" Rumboldt, tells us that Nish resigned as musical director of CJON for a new position at Memorial University in 1960. His workload included the MUN Glee Club, classes teaching young new teachers, and a post as instructor in the newly formed Extension Services. Part of his time was spent managing a concert series that boasted performances by the Orford String Quartet, the Halifax Symphony Orchestra, the Swingle Singers, The Netherlands Chamber Choir and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra with Rudolph Barshai conducting. The remainder of his time was spent in organizing participatory musical events. In Nish's own words, his role in Extension Services was, "to extend University services to the communities and to offer them opportunities to develop and organize choirs, musical groups and, particularly orchestras" (Woodford, 1984, p. 49).

According to Nish, the goal of the extension department was,

to make people aware of the importance of being involved in musical groups and giving those who desire that the opportunity of becoming a

member of some musical group which probably brought satisfaction and joy to them and gave the community something to be proud of when they had a successful Glee Club or musical group of some kind (Woodford, 1984, p. 57).

Nish took the job and ran, or one might say galloped with it. The first choir to be formed was the 90-voice Conception Bay Glee Club at Harbour Grace, 1960. The St. John's Extension Choir began at approximately the same time. It was also during this time that the St. John's Extension Orchestra was initiated. It was also during this time that the St. John's Extension Orchestra was initiated (Woodford, 1984, p. 51). Later, organizational changes led to the formation of the St. John's Symphony which incorporated as the present Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra in 1979.

According to Woodford (1984), no fewer than 12 choirs, three orchestras and one concert band were under Nish's supervision at one point. Between 1962-68 Nish oversaw the creation of choral groups and music classes in Conception Bay South, Stephenville, Lewisporte, Channel-Port-aux-Basques, Corner Brook, Gander, Grand Falls, Labrador City, Port au Port East, Stephenville Crossing, Wabush, Springdale, and Buchans. By 1965, as many as 7,522 persons were participating in Extension sponsored ensembles. This kind of impact was considered to be monumental at the time. It would be monumental today. It is safe to say that there has never been one single person or programme to have such a successful impact on island-wide participation in an art form in Newfoundland before Nish Rumboldt. There certainly has not been one since.

The "Pied Piper" analogy is at its strongest position at this juncture of his career. What else other than magical musical sorcery could entice so many people to want to sing? Some might think that we could use a little of that magic today.

He worked some of that magic with the CJON Gleeclub, and the Mun Extension Choir by promoting Newfoundland folksongs. In 1966, he recorded *Newfoundlanders Sing Songs of their Homeland*. This recording was re-issued in the 1970's with 10,000 copies produced — an unprecedented number for such a project at that time. These recordings were also highly significant in the process of the renaissance in the interest of Newfoundland Culture that was stirring among the populace. Woodford describes the phenomenon of Rumboldt's recordings with the CJON Glee Club and the St. John's Extension Choir to be "authoritative reproductions of a choral singing style for those songs" (Woodford, 1984, p. 56).

Nish's choral performances were not relegated to radio and records only. In March 1966, he amassed a combined choir of 250 in a musical tribute to the "Come Home Year." The editor of the *Evening Telegram* praised the concert, hailing it as,

Another splendid success in the long list of performances St. John's audiences have been treated to down throughout the years through the musicianship, dynamic direction and infectious enthusiasm of maestro Rumboldt... the program was broad without being banal (The Evening Telegram, March 23, 1966.

The road to Corner Brook:

The magic comes home

There are many chapters of Nish's life that cannot be elaborated upon in a paper of this length. Suffice it to say that Nish had considerable impact on the growing influence of music at Memorial, on the stage, and in programme development. Among his early recommendations was the inclusion of Donald Cook on the University Faculty. Some health problems along with the marginalization of his services in St. John's led to Nish's eventual request to move to Corner Brook in 1975 ... a move which turned out to be one of the sweetest successes of all his projects. Nish described his return to the west coast as returning home. [Curling is now a suburb of Corner Brook] Indeed, his reputation preceeded him, and within months Nish was directing a 150 voice Community/University choir that was the toast of the town.

The 1975 yearbook for the Community College captures the essence of what happened in that first year.

The Glee Club received many standing ovations, but the special credit was deserved by the organizer, Mr. Ignatius Rumboldt, better known as "Nish". Without his wit, charming personality, and above all undying devotion to his work, Corner Brook would be a much sadder place. The Glee Club spread happiness wherever it went and without Nish Rumboldt it would never have been accomplished. He was always willing to give his time. He is a man who made the lives of his acquaintances much brighter and who instilled in them a desire to strive for perfection. His ambition and everlasting energy encouraged them to excel in performing ... Nish Rumboldt **we love you** (Woodford, 1984, p. 66-7)!

Secret of his success:

How did the magic work?

In my research about Nish Rumboldt, I found that the people who worked with him were aware of his special qualities, his "magic" way of being able to bring out the best in his choir members, and make them love to sing. Many people, including Nish himself, have articulated specific traits that identify his particular successes with the phenomenon of singing - choral style.

Michael Harrington describes the success of the album, *Newfoundlanders Sing Songs of their Homeland*,

No one in the Glee Club would deny that this success is due to the remarkable personality of Nish Rumboldt.. Earnest and sincere, no one but "Nish" could have looked for and received the loyalty and co-operation he has been given (Atlantic Advocate, 1958, p. 43).

(As an aside, it was amazing for me, as a researcher, to keep hearing people describing Nish's work by prefacing their comments with those same words, No one but Nish ...) About Nish's particular knack to get the best out of everyone,

Harrington continues,

Nish Rumboldt bubbles over with vigour and charm, and his name is a household word where ever choral singing is concerned. One of "Nish" Rumboldt's greatest attributes is his magnetic charm and an ability to get people of every temperament and outlook to work with him (Atlantic Advocate, 1958, p. 43).

Dr. Don Cook, colleague of Nish Rumboldt and founding director of the School of Music, concurs with this description of Nish.

He is a community musician; he is one of the best public relations men in front of a choir that I know. He takes an intense personal interest in every person in front of him. It is not a business [with him] it is not even a profession - it is a dedication (Woodford, 1984, p. 51)!

Cook continues,

Nish's forte was the University Glee Club, for non music students, and the St. John's Extension choir. **He got people to sing ... and love it** [emphasis mine]. And many people learned to read because of what he was doing. There are music teachers in schools around Newfoundland now who support music because they remember the good times they had back in 1961 with Nish Rumboldt and the University Glee Club (Woodford, 1984, p. 51).

In a 1989 Evening Telegram article, Marjorie Doyle gives her impression of the "essence" of the magic as she experienced it.

A sleepy child of three and crotchety old gentlemen in their eighties were equally powerless to resist him. Everyone sang ... He was able to bring to his teaching and choir training those special personal gifts he had. In addition, he had the qualities that every student values in a teacher - he was patient, positive and kind (The Evening Telegram, October 22, 1989).

Another writer suggests, "No other musician in the province has succeeded in capturing the love, loyalty, and high regard of so many Newfoundlanders of all ages" (Woodford, 1984 p. 67). Helen Marquis is one such Newfoundlander who found it easy to be loyal to Nish. A frequent soloist in his choirs, she elaborates on the patience and kindness to which Marjorie Doyle alluded.

He was so gentle with his singers. Even if they couldn't sing that well, he never put anybody down, he kind of lifted you up ... if you tried and if you really wanted to do it, then you'd sing because you loved music ... Nish's motto was, don't ever hurt anyone (Marquis, Interview, 1997)!

And as for the magic? Helen certainly thinks it was there.

He certainly performed magic. Nish had a certain kind of personality.

He was ... bubbly and very dedicated to his work. It was almost like he liked - he loved everyone who sang for him. He had a lot of love in his soul. Wherever he could get a group of people together who had any love for music at all, he just did it. He made time, always, and if he thought there was a need for music in any particular school, or group, he did it. He loved it ... absolutely. It was his life (Interview, Marquis, 1997).

And what about Nish. To what did he attribute the magic?

In a *Newfoundland Herald* article, he explains.

I've always been fortunate in working with people with whom I've had a tremendous rapport. You can't accomplish anything on your own. That sums up my life in the musical profession (*Newfoundland Herald*, November 22, 1980, p. 12).

The article continues,

One of his main interests has been voluntary performing for people in hospitals and homes for the elderly. Their appreciative reaction, he says, gives him more joy than anything else. "**It all comes down to sharing with others. That's my philosophy of life.**" [emphasis mine] (*Newfoundland Herald*, November 22, 1980, p. 14).

Nish further elaborates in an interview with Paul Woodford.

My association with Glee Clubs was "people". Understanding them and their feelings and placing music as an avenue of happiness and joy for them which they probably did not realize at the time. Yes - people - developing a love of music in them which would, I hope, last for a lifetime (Woodford, 1984, p. 67).

Therein seems to be the essence of his magic ... the essence of what made people love to sing for him ... it was the fact, that he loved to work for and with them. They loved him, and he loved them back!

And what a legacy he left! It was his dream that some of this work of his might be preserved for the future. When discussing the sizeable collection of his choir's recordings, he said,

I'm hoping that I can find a way of receiving a (government) grant in order to produce these in cassette form which would be more accessible to the general public (*The Evening Telegram*, December 23, 1988, p. 16B).

He continues with the following,

This is my final dream, to conserve the music which I think has become a part of Newfoundland's musical heritage (*The Evening Telegram*, December 23, 1988).

Unfortunately, that grant did not become available while Nish was alive. In fact, many doors that should have been opened were closed to him, and he went to his grave believing that much of what he had done would be lost when his generation passed with him.

However, we now have a government grant, and we are in the process of going through Nish's tapes and personal papers for the purpose of making their contents more accessible to the general public. And in this spirit, we will work to be sure that Nish's magic ... his legacy of love for people and singing will not be lost to future generations of Newfoundlanders. The "Pied Piper" will still play on.

Note:

In the actual paper presentation, two excerpts from Nish's tape collection were played ... a little residue left over from the magic of Newfoundland's pied piper, the man whose life truly was music. The first excerpt features a "typical" Nish thank-you at the end of a concert. He thanks the audience for coming, and allows that if they had half as much enjoyment listening to the concert as the participants had in the preparation, then the evening was worthwhile. The concluding excerpt was one of the Newfoundland folksong arrangements from the album Newfoundlanders Sing songs of their homeland, "*The Ryans and the Pittmans*".

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