

Ron Smail: Forty Years of Harmony

For over four decades, Ron Smail has shaped choral sound in Canada through hundreds of arrangements and compositions. In this personal reflection, he traces the roots of his musical voice—from family car trips to transformative artistic influences—and the joy that continues to guide his work today.

For forty years, I have been creating music for choir – some original compositions, and more than 400 arrangements. This is a reflection on how that journey began.

Harmony I

I come from a musical family. All four of us sang, and on long car trips we would sing together – often in three-part harmony.

My brother Bob inherited a unique ability from my father: both of them could harmonize instinctively, not only with each other but with the melody. To this day, I'm not entirely sure how they did it. On trips to the Okanagan or down the Oregon coast, my mother and I would carry the melody while Bob and my dad created arrangements on the fly.

We were, quite simply, a harmonious family.

Harmony II

My parents enrolled me in piano lessons at age seven. In Grade 11, my father introduced me to Bob Doyle, a remarkable pianist who was then performing at Isy's Supper Club in North Vancouver. Every Saturday, we made the trip from Richmond for lessons.

Bob's teaching style and my way of learning fit together seamlessly. In those two years, I absorbed as much as I could, and his influence has stayed with me ever since. Even now, when I shape a chord, develop an ending, or write a piano part, I often think of him.

Much of my harmonic language traces back to those lessons.

Harmony III

Around 1977, I was visiting friends who were house-sitting for Miles and Corlyn Ramsay. They played me an LP from their collection – *A Cappella II* by The Singers Unlimited – and it changed everything.

I was transported by the sound and complexity of those arrangements. From that moment, I wanted to understand how that music worked – and how to create it myself.

I found an ideal environment for that exploration with the UBC Chamber Singers, conducted by Cortland Hultberg. It was a small, highly skilled ensemble of excellent sight-readers, and Cortland and I had developed a strong rapport while I sang in the choir.

I would bring him my pieces, and he would play through them on the piano, offering minimal but precise guidance. He might pause, point to a spot in the score, and say, “Needs something here.” That was often all I needed.

Many of my most adventurous arrangements were written during this time, for choirs led by Cortland, including the UBC Chamber Singers and Phoenix.

Harmony IV

In 1986, Patrick Wedd invited me to Montreal to sing with the Tudor Singers. I often describe those six years as a “paid vacation” – I was making a living singing and enjoying every moment of it.

During that time, I met my wife, Marla, who introduced me to the music of Stan Rogers. His work opened a door I had not previously considered: arranging folk songs.

This led me to develop an entirely new harmonic approach. Soon after, I discovered Wade Hemsworth. In the middle of a snowstorm, I made my way to a Montreal bookstore to buy his collection of songs, and I was fortunate enough to meet him as he signed my copy.

From that book, I arranged *The Log Driver’s Waltz* without having heard it before. Only later did I realize how widely known it was through the National Film Board’s animated film.

For forty years, my goal has been simple: to create music that brings joy to singers and listeners alike.

On occasion, I think I’ve managed to do just that.

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