

Can't stop making music

● **SUSAN MERTENS** talks to composer Elliot Weisgarber, who has just retired from teaching music at UBC but has not stopped creating new works.

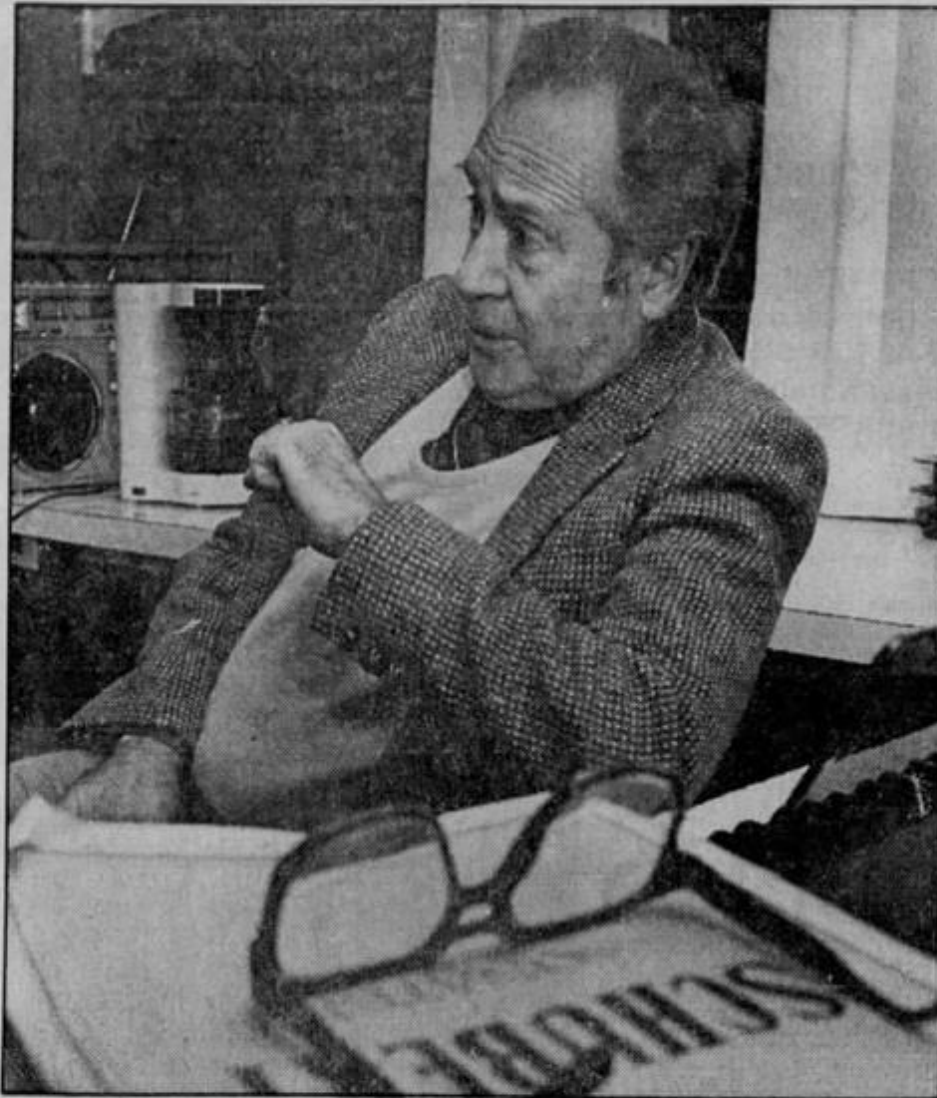
"The longer I'm in music, the less I understand it and the more marvellous the mystery becomes."

TWO weeks ago composer Elliot Weisgarber packed up the books and scores and momentos of 25 years of teaching at the University of B.C. and brought them home to his basement study to fit in alongside the coffee maker and the practice piano and the pile of works-in-progress.

Weisgarber the teacher has retired — Weisgarber the composer is still going to work every day.

At the age of 65 he's finally getting around to orchestrating his completed first symphony ("As for who plays it - who knows? But it will be there.") The premiere of his Violin Concerto is coming up. He's finished a setting of Japanese imperial court poetry commissioned by the Vancouver New Music Society and due to be premiered in March. And, also in March, he'll be conducting the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra in the Canadian premiere of another orchestral work first performed in Britain.

Weisgarber's retirement from the UBC department of music marks more than a personal milestone. He and the department grew together — the department is marking its own 25th anniversary in March with a star-studded concert celebration at the Orpheum.



ELLIOT WEISGARBER: *'I've always tried to imbue my students not with shallow, ephemeral things but with beautiful and eternal things'*

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and "someone sooner or later picks it up and performs it." His latest royalty statement from the Performing Rights Organization showed "a nice little amount" coming from a foreign account. "I have no idea what works were performed or where or by whom but it's an enjoyable sensation."

Still, he says, "I agree with Ingrid Bergman that career, fame and all those things are imposters. You make your art and you make it work — that's what it's about. I'd never stop writing just because people stopped playing my music."

Teaching has made him especially sensitive to the problems of finding your own voice as a creative artist. His students have included Brian Gibson and Brian Griffiths who started the Little Mountain Studios, producer-composer Claire Lawrence of Chilliwack and Hometown Band, David Keeble, and film and dance composer Michael C. Baker

"One of the saddest things about the state of contemporary music is that many young composers are intimidated by the dictators of taste to write things that are not really natural to them. It's difficult to write music in the late 20th century because we've been without a unified language for so long. When or whether we'll find a language again — well, I wonder. We've been without it so long. But what it all comes down to is wholeness and naturalness."

During his years at UBC, Weisgarber has become an acknowledged expert in Japanese composition and performance practice — and one of the country's finest players of the flute-like shakuhachi. His own work often borrows certain structures, cadence formulas or rhythmic material from the Japanese tradition. "But more importantly, there were certain esthetic values in the arts there — more so than the arts themselves - that found a resonance in me.

Orpheum.

Weisgarber considered his move to UBC in 1960 "a real gamble". For 15 years he'd been composer-and-performance-in-residence at Women's College at the University of North Carolina at a time when the college was attracting people like Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline for extended residencies. But he was 40 and ready for a change and the Pacific Rim and its cultures held a fascination for him.

The UBC music department was another matter, however. "It was a real pioneering situation. It was a very, very small opera-

tion — there was Harry and Fran Adaskin, Jean Coulthard and Barbara Pentland and that was about it. The expansion when it came was almost overnight."

But Weisgarber's fondest memories are of those early days when his studio in the old Forest Products building could only be reached by walking through a room where a singing or trombone lesson would be going on.

"It was rather a fun place. The idea of anyone being a specialist was not around at all. We all did everything.

Now it's bigger and more corporate in structure — but you have to accept these things philosophically."

Weisgarber isn't grouching. Far from it. "I've not just been able to exist as a composer there — I've thrived at it. There have been disappointments, bad reviews. But I never stopped composing. I never felt that I was just a campus composer — a captive of the campus. Maybe the CBC has something to do with that. But I've written almost always for my colleagues, and there was never really any problem getting works performed. That's important because it gives a composer a sense of reality. You're not just writing experimentally or theoretically — you're writing really."

Weisgarber is now the position however where he can write a new work, deposit it with the Canadian Music Centre library

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"I was always haunted by the natural world and I think my music is full of this. I make no bones about it — I'm an unreconstructed romantic and I'm not about the change."

Of 20th-century composers he particularly admires Benjamin Britten as the kind of composer "who was really rooted in his community - who never lost sight of music as a human, loving act . . . I was never a book teacher. I was always pretty independent . . . but I've always tried to imbue my students not with shallow, ephemeral things but with beautiful and eternal things."

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