

by Laurie Townsend

Jean Coulthard was just 11 years old when she attended the very first performance of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO) in January 1919. At the downtown theatre more than 50 musicians played music by Tchaikovsky, Schubert, Sibelius and Haydn. Coulthard's memories of that night are not of the *Nutcracker Suite* or the other music played, but the elegant gowns the women wore; flowing fabrics in beautiful colours mixed like a flower garden as the women mingled in the foyer. Coulthard had no idea that she and the VSO would be associated and influence each other most of her adult life.

She did know that she was a composer. At her home in the West End was one of Coulthard's prized possessions: a book of music manuscript paper bound by green leather. Her name was embossed in gold on the front cover and many of its pages were already filled with her first piano compositions.

That January night at the concert hall was also a very important one for her mother. Mrs. Jean Coulthard (nee: Robinson), a pianist and singer originally from Moncton and trained in Boston, had helped create this new Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. Mrs. Coulthard was one of the first music teachers in town and started the Vancouver Women's Musical Club. She gathered together and organized women interested in music, many of whom were also prominent and financially influential in the city.

Coulthard says this enterprising and pioneering group of young ambitious women began bringing high calibre international musicians and artists to Vancouver and it was through their vision and determination that the Vancouver Symphony, the Vancouver Art Gallery and many other cultural events in Vancouver began.

In the 1940's when England was being bombed during WWII, English

Canada's Grand Dame of Composing Still at Work



Jean Coulthard composing at her home in West Vancouver.

Photo: Andreas Poulsson

composer and conductor Arthur Benjamin brought his mother to Vancouver for a safer life. He became the conductor of the VSO. Coulthard was thrilled to have such a great composer close by and became a student immediately. He taught her orchestration and encouraged her to write for the larger forces of an orchestra.

"I used to teach some of the composition students the individual lessons in my car because there was no place for us to go."

Soon the programs of the VSO included world premiers. Under Benjamin's baton, *Canadian Fantasy*, *Excursion*, *Ballade (A Winter's Tale)*, and *Song of the Sea* came to life in front of audiences and established Coulthard's reputation as a major

Canadian talent.

Under conductor Kazuyoshi Akiyama, the VSO toured Japan for the first time, in 1974. It took with them "Canada Mosaic," a piece it had commissioned from Coulthard. The VSO's current conductor, Maestro Sergio Comissiona, conducted "Canada Mosaic" in 1990, and the orchestra toured this province performing "Kalamalka (Lake of Many Colours)" last year.

Coulthard describes the Vancouver of her youth as a "beautiful, little, quiet city." Musically there was very little. At the age of 20 Coulthard went on a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Music in London, England. There she studied with Ralph Vaughan Williams and met the 13-year-old Benjamin Britten, who was also a bright and promising student there.

Over the years, studies led Jean Coulthard to many musical centres such as London, Paris and New York and into the circles of many of this century's greatest composers. She studied composition with Bernard Wagenaar and Gordon Jacob and took her works to Copland, Schoenberg, Milhaud, Bartók and Nadia Boulanger for criticism.