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## **Play it again, Provençal**

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By Karin Dear

CANADIAN country girl Doris Provençal was sure she had discovered the best of all worlds when, at the tender age of two, she embraced the musical magic of the piano, correctly picking up notes and chords with her stubby little thumb and index finger.

That is, until 16 years later, when a Barbadian soldier severely wounded in Second World War combat in Northern Italy, in 1944, arrived one golden autumn day on the steps of her father's Montreal-based pipe organ building and repair shop, and turned her universe upside down.

Little did John Kirton, devastatingly handsome and then 24 years old, realise he had met a phenomenal mezzo-soprano who would one day become his wife and establish the now globally-acknowledged Cecilian Singers.

Kirton had spent two years at Montreal's Veterans' Hospital having his face "repaired" after he was shot through the head by German soldiers. The bullet entered behind his right ear and exited through the corner of his left eye, leaving a trail of cerebral devastation that would cost him his sense of smell. Miraculously, he survived with his sight intact but a dream to become a doctor had to be abandoned.

Instead, fate led Kirton, himself from a musically-talented Barbadian family, to Montreal's Yellow Pages, through which he connected with Doris' father, Elphège, a leading expert in the construction and maintenance of pipe organs. In fact, it was Elphège who built the organ for the St. James Methodist Church in the 1960s.

Trained in the rural Quebec town of St. Hyacinthe, birthplace of the world-renowned Casavant organ, Doris' dad provided John with the expertise that would eventually place in his care the exquisitely crafted, yet somewhat temperamental, organ at St. Michael's Cathedral.

For Doris, who literally cut her teeth on the foot pedals of her mother's piano, the course had been set.

Within weeks, the then 18-year-old French-speaking woman – who is now firmly established as a musical icon – fell hopelessly in love.

Another five years would pass, however, before the renowned founder of the Festival Choir would marry and move to Barbados.

"It will be 50 years on March 11, since I stepped off the Lady Nelson," Doris noted yesterday. "And, today, I'm celebrating my 74th birthday along with world-famous composer (Franz) Schubert! Last Sunday was (Wolfgang Amadeus) Mozart's birthday, and February 6 is (Felix) Mendelssohn's, so I'm in very distinguished company," said the artist, feigning a snobbish pose and throwing back her head in laughter.

Inspired by its mistress' warm belly-laugh, a slate-grey Great Dane, the size of a pony and named Phoebe, raised itself onto flagpole-length legs, poised to cavort playfully.

"No, not now, Phoebe," Doris chided gently, as she mentally surfed the encyclopaedic memory bank that holds the precious data of her life.

A basin brimming with freshly-picked peas waiting to be shelled nestled in her lap while she reflected on the events that spanned a half-century.

This evening, the air in her rambling Maxwell Coast Road residence is perfumed with the fragrance of tropical blooms, releasing their aromatic essence into the night.

Doris has just completed a music lesson with several of the 50 students she tutors throughout the week, and the sessions have gone well.

The cheeks of the septuagenarian are flushed with anticipation and her eyes sparkle mischievously as she waves a wisp of silvered hair from her face and turns back the clock.

Standing on the threshold of her new life that brisk March day in 1952, one ankle daintily perched to disembark from her sea voyage onto terra firma, Doris Provençal had no idea she would discover an extraordinary, award-winning musical talent among Barbadians which she, in turn, would harness and propel onto the world stage.

Nor could she ever imagine on that day so perfectly bathed in hope and sunshine, that 23 years later, her 18-year-old son, Michael, a student at The Lodge School, would be killed in a car accident. Or, that her beloved husband, stricken with cancer, would follow his son to the grave eight months later.

For Doris, the dual tragic losses draped 1975 and 1976 in black and wrapped her soul in a shroud of despair in a futile attempt to hide the gaping hole left in her heart.

“But, God is good,” stated Doris as she recalled that 1975 was also the year in which a milestone was reached by one of her private pupils, Maria Ward, the only Barbadian to be selected from a number of West Indian students examined for a scholarship to study in England by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music.

“I am proud to say Maria Ward won the scholarship from among all those West Indian students, from Jamaica to Guyana, and she is the only Barbadian ever to get it,” underscored the music teacher, herself the 1986 recipient of the Silver Crown of Merit for her contribution to music.

Eight years earlier, Doris was equally honoured with the Queen’s Silver Jubilee Medal for her overall contribution to music.

For Doris, playing the piano while barely out of diapers “was instinctive”, recalled the mezzo-soprano. “I played by ear and when I turned nine, my mother decided to teach me to play the piano. I used to love to play so much that she had to put a piece of linoleum on the floor under the piano, because I would come in from winter ice-skating and go straight to the piano without removing my skates. I was that anxious to play.”

While her mother, herself an accomplished musician, was busily teaching her daughter easy exercises and sonatas for students, Doris was secretly practising the first movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. She was 12 years old. Her father, who also played the violin and possessed a “good tenor voice” doted on his offspring, who practised two or three hours every day. By the time she turned 13, Doris was enrolled in music appreciation classes at the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

“My mother and father used to take me to all the organ recitals and I heard the greatest French organist of the century, Marcel Dupré, play,” she recounted, savouring the memory.

Her studies took her to Montreal's prestigious McGill University, where she pursued her career in music, while John patiently waited to get married.

It was a letter from his mother informing him that there was no one available to take care of the organ at the St. Michael's Cathedral, and that "they were ready to receive him" that saw John board a flight for home on February 6, 1952. Married before his departure, Doris followed her husband five weeks later.

It wasn't long before Doris met her "uncle-in-law" Lionel Gittens, who was the organist at the Christ Church Parish Church.

"He had heard that his nephew's wife could sing, so he presented me with a book of The Crucifixion by Stainer," noted the musician.

On March 29, Good Friday, 1952, the thrilling voice of Doris Provençal sent shivers through the congregation as she delivered an excerpt from The Crucifixion – King Ever Glorious.

From that moment, there was no turning back. In September, 1953, Doris founded the Festival Choir. "We gave our first concert on November 22, 1953, the feast of St. Cecilia at the police band barracks at Passage road," where, Doris admits, she was swept up by the sheer talent of the Royal Barbados Police Force Band. Tapping into the orchestral skills of the band, Doris and her entourage of singers began performing "opera things" such as parts of Bizet's Carmen and Gounod's challenging opera, Faust. "We could never have done that without the Royal Barbados Police Force Band," she insisted.

Several teaching assignments at a number of local schools including the Modern High School, Foundation Girls' School and the Ursuline Convent, St. Gabriel's and St. Winifred's followed, before Doris abandoned teaching in schools in 1975, following the death of her only son. Her illustrious career was highlighted as early as 1958, when she started to work for Barbados Rediffusion preparing nine programmes of classical music each week, plus a children's party on Saturday morning.

It wasn't until September 1971, that she founded and breathed life into the awesome Cecilian Singers, who for 27 years have inspired and enriched Barbadians with their Christmas concerts.

One of the crowning moments for the group, which rapidly swelled from 20 to 33 singers, came when the choir sang in Wales in 1989 at the annual Llangollen Eisteddfod Choir Festival and placed seventh out of 22 international competitors.

"It was a tremendous accomplishment and honour," observed their musical mentor.

Subsequent tours took the Cecilian Singers to the Canadian cities of Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, and to the United States – New York, Boston and Washington. They also sang in the famous Cologne Cathedral in West Germany in 1982, and have toured the Caribbean extensively.

It is impossible to separate Doris Provençal from her pupils who have gained recognition of their own. They include mezzo-soprano Grace Hackett; baritone Wendell Pilgrim; Dr. Raymond Maughan; soprano Evelyn McClean and Doris' daughter, Carole Bishop.

When her son and husband died, however, a golden and fulfilled existence ended abruptly and Doris resigned from her school teaching posts. A shattered widow and her daughter were

plunged into profound mourning. However, an indomitable spirit saw Doris spring back, stronger than ever.

In 1997, she resigned from the Cecilian Singers and passed the baton over to John Bryan, now the organist at the St. Michael's Cathedral.

Ironically, despite all her accomplishments, Doris never completed her studies at McGill, opting to marry and move to Barbados instead.

"So, I don't have all the letters after my name," she disclosed. "But it doesn't matter, because I know my stuff." Unquestionably, the international music world would agree.