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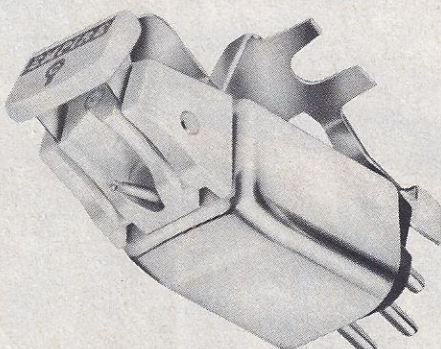
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Percy Faith (1909-1976)



## Percy Faith— Master of More than Mood Music

by Gene Lees

AS IS WIDELY KNOWN, the CBS Records Group has made a reciprocal agreement with the Russian Melodiya label. This has given CBS access to a large and important catalogue of Russian classical recordings. What did the Russians get out of the deal?

The answer is surprising. At the top of the list of recordings they wanted were the albums of Percy Faith.

Percy Faith? Yes—he of “mood music” with the pretty string sections.

Whether the Russians know or even care is hard to say—few Americans realize it—but Percy Faith, who died of cancer at the age of sixty-seven this March, holds a significant place in American popular music. He was one of the first arrangers to bring to the performance of popular music the skills, scope, and instrumentation of classical music. And he was doing it as far back as the mid-1930s.

In an association with Columbia Records that lasted nearly thirty years, Faith recorded more than sixty-five albums—even he wasn't sure of the precise number. “None,” he said, “ever went into the red, despite the large orchestras I used.” He also wrote scores for eleven motion pictures.

If your memory, or record collection, encompasses the early 1940s, you know that the songs of the period were superior to their orchestrations. The writing, particularly accompaniment for vocals, was often awkward and unevolved, with bad instrumental balances and clumsy voice-leading. And the string writing, on those rare occasions when it was heard, was especially unimaginative. The good writing was found in jazz orchestration, but this was limited to trumpet, trombone, saxophone, and rhythm sections. When Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, and Harry James added strings to their bands, the effect was unsatisfactory, partly because they could not afford to carry on the

road the number of strings needed to balance the brass.

One of the most pervasive influences on pop orchestration, and not only in the U.S., has been Robert Farnon. Virtually every professional arranger—from André Previn and Quincy Jones to J. J. Johnson and Roger Kellaway—has been influenced directly or indirectly by him. But what many of his followers don't know is that Farnon himself was greatly influenced by Percy Faith. He had been one of Faith's trumpet players when the two Toronto-born musicians were with Canada's government-owned network, the CBC. “I learned a lot from Percy,” Farnon has told me. “I admired him very much. I admired his taste. He especially taught me what to leave out.”

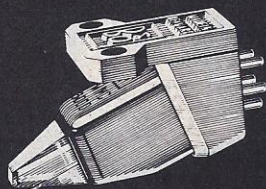
Faith studied at the Toronto Conservatory under a strict disciplinary system. “I was ready,” he told me, “to jump two or three years ahead of what I was doing. But I was told by my harmony teacher, ‘You must learn the basics. You must learn Bach, all the preludes and fugues, on the piano, then orchestrate them for string quartet, for brass quartet; learn Beethoven. Learn that foundation, and then when it's become a part of you, forget it and go on.’”

In 1934, Canada established the CBC. Percy went to work there almost as soon as it was organized and began writing and conducting the music for a series of shows called *Music by Faith*. From the beginning he used strings and “classical” woodwinds, as opposed to the customary saxophones.

“The strings were always quite busy in anything I wrote,” Percy said. “But the trumpets would have many, many bars' rest, and I gather that Bobby [Farnon] did a lot of listening.

“I had added six girls to the orchestra. I wanted certain sounds. The

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budget wouldn't allow for extra percussion and extra woodwinds, and I found I could get six girls for \$5.00 each per show. They did nothing but vocalise at first, in conjunction with three or four flutes plus a vibraphone and a celesta. We got a great sound. People thought it was an organ or some kind of electronic instrument.

"Once this clicked, the CBC suggested, 'Since you've got them, why don't we hear something with lyrics?' So I turned the girls over to Bobby, and I said, 'Let's do one number a week.' But since we were so avant-garde, I said, 'I don't want any ballads. Let's do nothing but out-of-left-field tunes like "Where, Oh, Where Has My Little Dog Gone?" but do them in a jazz idiom.' So Bobby started writing these vocal arrangements for me, and they were fantastic. With the band and six girls, it really swung."

In 1940, a CBC executive ordered the *Music by Faith* budget cut, even though it was one of the few CBC productions to be carried regularly to the larger audience of an American network. Faith was angered by these economies.

NBC was at the time auditioning conductors to replace Joe Pasternak, conductor of the *Carnation Contented Hour*, who had died. Faith, now thirty-one, went to Chicago to audition in July of that year, was hired for the summer, and in September became permanent music director of the program. But his pioneer work had already been done in Toronto. "As a matter of fact," he said, "as late as 1955 I recorded some arrangements that were, practically note for note, arrangements I did in Toronto in the Thirties."

A little over two years ago, we talked in the Hollywood office of his son Peter, a composers' agent (who died a few months later at the age of thirty-seven). "Jerry Goldsmith said that the art of film scoring is gone—scoring in the style of Max Steiner, Alfred Newman, or his own," Percy told me. "And he's right. It's an electronic world now, and I've been studying the Moog, the Arp, the Fender-Rhodes piano. I use them in my recordings sometimes.

"But you walk into the recording studio, the sound stage, and you don't see any big string sections, any ninety-piece orchestras for the main titles. You'll see three or four keyboard men, the finest in the country, all sitting around with synthesizers and electric pianos and the E-3 Yamaha organ, which can practically simulate any orchestra sound, and that's your score.

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