Greater Victoria Youth Orchestra

40th ANNIVERSARY TOUR

April 20 - April 25, 2026

Pamela Highbaugh Aloni's Musings and Memories

Preface:

In this auspicious 40th anniversary year of the Greater Victoria Youth Orchestra, it seemed to me to be a good time to dive into some of the Orchestra's history. In mid-April, I had the wonderful pleasure of visiting with two of our distinguished founders of the Youth Orchestra, Diana MacDonald and Susan MacRae. I enjoyed chatting with them and they answered many of my questions about the origin of the orchestra. Among other things we spoke of were the decisions that were made at that time which have proven to be instrumental (no pun intended) to the GVYO's continued success today.
One such decision was to support the experience of the musicians in the orchestra by touring to share music with those in our wider community and schools who may not have the opportunity to hear orchestral music. The past tours have always been very meaningful in the region and in our conversation, Diana and Sue shared that one of the goals was "to take music to young people in other communities in British Columbia" and a secondary goal "was to make the experience meaningful for our players, not just in musical enrichment, but in understanding the society in which they lived."

It seems to me that this year's tour to northern Vancouver Island carried on with the founders' generous wisdom and in this great tradition. It was my pleasure to be a part of the admin team (as well as add a bit in the percussion section) for this year's tour, and I am happy to share some of my musings and memories from the April 20-25 tour.

April 20 Monday

After a marvelous final concert of the season in the Farquhar on Sunday afternoon, the members of the orchestra going on the tour met early in the morning at the bus in St. John's parking lot and we began the explorations of how best to load the instrument truck and ensure all those who were joining us were there. It was a gray day for the drive up to Courtenay and many caught up on their sleep. There was also some lovely chatter and a rather lively 20 Questions game adding to the general joyous anticipation of the week.

We arrived at Highland Secondary School, and the assigned teams unloaded the truck and set up the percussion. It was a great start to see how necessary teamwork was needed for the tour. The orchestra had a quick sound check and played a concert for part of the school. It was impressive how the orchestra members held their concentration as some members of the audience were less attentive than one would have hoped. After the concert, all the equipment and instruments had to be moved to the band room, and it was impressive how quickly everyone joined in to do their part.
It was a gorgeous warm day (20 degrees) in Courtenay and there was time to settle into the hotel, relax or do some exploring and walking.

Dinner was in two shifts at Taco Bandido, and we all enjoyed a beautiful walk along the river to 5th Street and up four blocks or so. It was fun to see 5th Street with some stores which have been there for many years and some of the newer boutique stores. (Sadly Hot chocolate was closed!) The restaurant had a great family style taco offering at two designated tables. We all walked home a bit slower perhaps but with happy and full bellies.

April 21 Tuesday

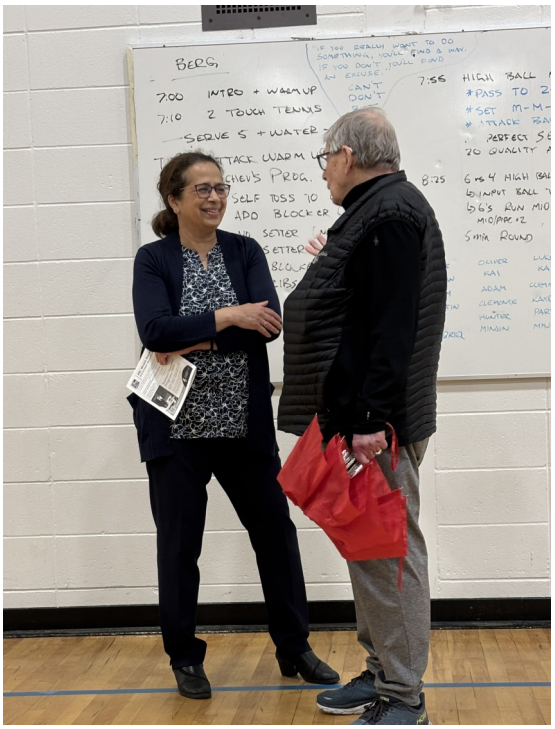
We had a bit of time in the morning, and it was fun to all be in the same place for breakfast and connecting over coffee and a good meal. Many of us had breakfast around 9 am just before taking the bus over to the workshop / rehearsal with Highland Secondary Band. After sorting out the percussion and who played what, the combined group rehearsed *Earthdance* with their music director, Carly Swain and *How to Train your Dragon* with Yariv.

As it was raining, we enjoyed our lunch from Subway in the gym. Some of the group had apparently enjoyed watching the movie "Whiplash" and one of the great lines in the movie - "Not my tempo" came in handy for Yariv working with the snare drum, so in hearing this phrase, Kevin was able to quietly stabilize the group and the workshop finished with everyone ready for the evening concert.

Here is a great shot of Yariv conducting during the workshop with the school's eagle mascot in the background.

We then were off to the Heritage House Pub. The owner and servers were so welcoming, and our orders were distributed by name! At the table some of us played an alphabet game with composers' names (and learned a few more options for composers starting with Q and Z). After eating we took the bus back to the school in time to change and focus for the community concert.

There was a wonderful crowd for the concert including John and Jane Sterk (former President of the GVYO board) and Neil, Jen and Kai Bulman-Fleming representing recent Past-President Syd Bulman-Fleming.



John Sterk with Amita Modi Shandro

The orchestra played with great energy and discipline. Highland Secondary performed two pieces on their own and the GVYO then continued with the second half. The concert finished with the two pieces with the combined group.

I overheard some of the orchestra members talking at dinner that their inner child was enjoying the pieces with the band – and it was evident that wonderful connections were being made within our orchestra and also with the students at Highland Secondary.

The system for loading up the truck was becoming ever refined and in packing up we were all grateful that some lost headphones were found after a quick check after loading everything up.

Back at the hotel we all enjoyed some snacks in the lobby. - It was a bit like Halloween as they came in waves - some already in their pajamas :). Everyone was then off to bed for an early start in the morning.

April 22 Wednesday

We met at the bus before 7am for our trip to Port McNeill and to catch the ferry to Alert Bay. Of course, we needed to pack up the truck - the system for everything was now down to a science. Our truck driver Tracey was a rockstar truck driver and packer, and her partner Amita an amazing overseer of what was needed. We were so grateful to have such a great team with us, and the teams were all working well - the system starting to flow.

We had a 3-hour drive to the north. It was beautiful sunny weather for the drive, and it was just amazing to go up to this northern part of the island which many of us had not ever seen before despite living for decades on Vancouver Island! We do live in a great place!!

We arrived at 10am for the ferry and had to wait as the ferry needed to first offload from Sointula before loading the Alert Bay ferry. It was a very windy day, but clear and many of us enjoyed walking around Port McNeill and taking in the sea air.

We ate sandwiches on the ferry, and it was wonderful to see some of our orchestra members chatting with other passengers and sharing about the orchestra and tour as well as listening to the stories and learning a bit about the people living in Alert Bay.

The orchestra played a concert for the entire T'lisalagi'lakw School in Alert Bay which was comprised of 50 or so students from kindergarten through to 8th grade. The students were extremely respectful and attentive. Near the start of the program, Yariv had the principals (or in some cases a group) of each section play a small sample to introduce the listeners to the instruments. We learned that the only instruments any of the students had seen or heard before were the ukulele and the cello :) Needless to say, the oohs and aahs in seeing and hearing all the instruments were delightful to hear!

At the end of the program, which was the end of the students' school day, they sang to us a gratitude and welcome song which they sing to and for one another as well as guests each day! Their commitment and energy were infectious.

We then had the privilege of visiting the U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay. We watched a film and were given a guided tour of the collection by Brennan whose family has lived in Alert Bay for generations. Brennan shared stories with us as well as sharing a bit about the practice and meaning of the potlatch for their community. For many of us it was a highlight of the trip and an experience we will cherish always.

We enjoyed a smooth ferry ride back (it was a special electric ferry and noticeably smooth despite the windy weather) and drove on to Port Hardy, checked in to the hotel, had pizza for dinner at the hotel and off to bed.

April 23 Thursday

We enjoyed some time in the morning, and many walked to the beach and downtown Port Hardy. Our hotel was just on the water and across the street the trees were home to few bald eagles which seemed to watch us as much as we were watching them!

We boarded the bus and were warmly greeted at the Port Hardy Secondary School. Here as well the GVYO joined with the music students to rehearse the piece *Alpha Squadron* before their performance later in the afternoon.

The entire school was in attendance, and they were an amazing audience. They listened so attentively and it was a joy to play for them.

The school hosted us for a Taco dinner that was cooked by the cooking class, and I think we all would give them top marks! It was not only delicious and filling, but the beautiful tablecloths and flowers made it feel very special!

The evening community concert went very well. Having more experience playing together has made the group increasingly more flexible and engaged. After the concert and loading up of the truck, we went back to the hotel for snacks and to bed for another early start time in the morning.

April 24 Friday

Despite the very detailed preparations and requests for our breakfast choices the day before, there were some bumps in how the morning breakfast was handled, yet we were all able to somehow eat something and get on the bus on time for our drive back south to Campbell River. Everyone kept a positive attitude, and we even had a few good laughs.

We had beautiful sunshine again for the drive and arrived at Phoenix Middle School a bit early. We were able to unpack all the equipment and set up before the provided lunch of sandwiches, bags of veggies, and dessert treats. It was all very well organized (and fun to be in the school and take in the lunchtime atmosphere).

We sat in the gym to eat and some of the students (Clara, Amani, Justine and Annabelle) were singing “Let it go” from “Frozen” very beautifully – it was nice to hear and we all enjoyed being serenaded at lunch. The orchestra warmed up for the school concert and after more performances, Yariv’s wish for “quite his tempo” in the Glinka was realized! The ensemble’s ease and expressivity continued to improve in all the pieces and the orchestra sounded so excellent!

The entire school attended as well as their teachers and they really seemed to enjoy it. They clapped for all the instrument demonstrations. As this was the last concert of the tour it was a wonderful way to finish. The experience of repeating programs and playing for different audiences is an important way that all musicians grow and you could hear so clearly the huge leap of growth in every section. It was fine music making the entire tour and equally impressive how each concert brought more from the group. Great thanks go to Yariv for inspiring and challenging the group to always strive for more in every performance!

The formal concerts were finished but there was more music to come in the evening!

After checking into the hotel, most of the orchestra went for a short hike to Elk Falls where we enjoyed some forest air and the falls. We traversed the suspension bridge and some even crazily went to the rocks level at the upper falls. We got back on the bus with everyone intact.

After enjoying a wonderfully prepared buffet dinner, we all met for a night of chamber music fun. Several groups had prepared some wonderful music including arrangements from *Frozen* and even a piece by Ian McDougall. There were all sorts of duos, (mostly all playing in the correct clefs☺) a wind quintet with an arrangement from Holst's *Planets*, Dvorak American quartet with a flute on violin 1, and then larger groups enjoyed some Grieg Norwegian pieces, the Mendelssohn Octet and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* with added winds and brass! It was great to share the pieces and experience the fun of sightreading together in a very supportive group. Many thanks to those who loaned instruments and bravo to all who bravely took on playing some of this music for the first time.

April 25 Saturday

We all enjoyed a leisurely and generous breakfast at the hotel. The meals on the tour were so carefully planned out and big kudos to Sheila and Evelyn for their attention to the details as well as wisdom in how to ensure all of us in such a large group were fed well. I would be surprised if anyone went away from this tour hungry. Snacks were always available and plentiful as could be seen in what was left over even at the end of the week. Not only the food, but also all the hotels were so wonderfully planned out. In addition, the timing and arrangements with all the schools worked so well and our bus driver was great and helpful throughout the week. We, our instruments and our luggage, were all

cared for and transported thoughtfully throughout the whole week, and it is with HUGE thanks to Sheila and Evelyn and our great team.

We had two stops on the way home – Coombs for some lunch and a chance to catch some goats on the roof. And then to Rathtrevor Beach. We stopped for an hour there and enjoyed some time at the beach and snacks in a picnic area that Sheila and Evelyn had reserved for us. The tide was low and there was also a very fun playground.

Some played Frisbee and Noah, Rob and Gabriel were playing a game of Hacky Sack. I am not sure what number they got up to, but you had to add a clap each time before catching the sack. They seemed to go on for quite a while without dropping the sack so those of us watching were duly impressed.

Of course, there were more snacks and drinks available, and we all did our best to help finish what snacks were still with us.

From Rathtrevor we headed home, had a quick stop off to drop off Olivia in Nanaimo and then back to St. John's by 6 pm.

I noticed a lot of smiling faces amidst the sadness that the tour had come to an end. Huge thanks and thunderous applause to the amazing team of leaders, and to each of the orchestra members for being so willing to help in every way. The attitude and supportive nature from everyone was infectious and I have no doubt that all those who heard the GVYO in the week experienced something memorable and special. It was certainly fun for me to be a part of such a group, and I imagine all of us came away more inspired and grateful for a most wonderful week together.