



A musical shape-shifter

Composer/conductor Scott Macmillan likes creative challenges

Scott Macmillan was 14 when he composed his first melody, a short riff plucked on a guitar. "I remember thinking that nobody had composed that before — it was mine," says Macmillan. Not that the musical epiphany had an immediate effect: "I still wasn't convinced then that music was my life."

Now in his early 50s with an established, multi-faceted career, there's no question he followed the right path. A musical shape-shifter, Macmillan, who divides his time between Halifax and Cape Breton, comfortably straddles musical genres, metamorphosing from performer and composer to conductor, teacher, arranger and producer. He is as comfortable playing the blues, jazz or Celtic music as he is conducting a symphony orchestra in a classical work. Among his many accomplishments is a large-scale choral work, *Celtic Mass for the Sea*, which has been performed over 60 times around the world, including at Carnegie Hall (his wife, **Jennyfer Brickenden**, wrote the libretto). He also heads a 12-piece jazz ensemble, *Scott 'n The Rocks*, that performs in Halifax twice a month. Buddy MacMaster, **Lennie Gallant** and **Jimmy Rankin** are among the countless musicians with whom he has shared the stage.

But music was not a part of his early life. "Music," he says with a laugh, "was something we put on the record player at Christmas." He gravitated to it naturally, however, teaching himself to play his older brother's guitar. At university, he studied math but paid for his schooling by playing in a blues band. During his third year he took an elective in classical guitar and things

got more serious. He found himself learning theory and classical history, later honing his skills as a full-time music student at Dalhousie University and in the jazz program at Toronto's Humber College. Macmillan intended to

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April saw the Halifax premiere of *Within Sight of Shore*, Macmillan's musical reflection on the last Canadian warship sunk in World War II, on which Macmillan's father was the commanding officer (he survived, but 44

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Scott Macmillan has been nominated for seven ECMAs and has won three: Instrumental Artist of the Year (1998) and Best Classical Recording (1995 and 2002).

He has served as a conductor for Symphony Nova Scotia, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, the Vancouver Symphony (with whom he has recorded with Rita MacNeil), the Calgary Philharmonic, the Winnipeg Symphony and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

He holds an honorary doctorate from Cape Breton University (1997) and an honorary diploma from Nova Scotia Community College (2008).



base himself in Toronto, but he was soon back in Halifax, where he started (thanks to what he calls "lucky breaks") finding work arranging and composing, some of it for the CBC. "I was flying by the seat of my pants," he says about his early opportunities. It was through the CBC that he met **Rita MacNeil**,

a singer who has since acknowledged Macmillan as being an "integral contributor" to her success. Macmillan became interested in the challenge of Celtic music, finding ways to fuse it with other musical styles. As a composer, he says his background in mathematics serves him well. "I'm always looking for pat-

terns, ratios, relationships," he says, "because simple mathematics is in all music." And in July, he premiered *Currents of Sable Island*, also in Halifax. Meanwhile, he's still juggling a busy teaching and performing schedule. But it's a lifestyle that suits him. "I challenge myself to do something creative every day," he says. "Any creative job that comes my way, that's what I want to do." —Meredith Dault

FYI

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Selected discography: *Scott Macmillan Presents The Minnie Sessions Vol. 1-3*, (composer/co-producer/guitarist; 1996, 1997, 1998), *Celtic Mass for the Sea* (composer/arranger; 1993). SOCAN member since 1987 Visit www.scottmacmillan.ca