

THE LADY MUSIC TEACHER AS ENTREPRENEUR:

Minnie Sharp and the Victoria Conservatory of Music in the 1890s

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IN THEIR HISTORY OF MUSIC education in Canada, Paul Green and Nancy Vogan write of nineteenth-century BC music teachers who worked without recognition or fanfare and are now forgotten.¹ This article recovers the story of one of these unremembered educators. From 1893 to 1900, Minnie Sharp earned a living in Victoria through music teaching. A well trained and effective instructor in voice and piano, she recruited a team of associates to join her under the banner of the Victoria Conservatory of Music. Sharp owned the business name and was its “principal,” and her flair for building on standard techniques of music teachers to attract business was considerable. Her Victoria Conservatory was never the stable enterprise its grand name was meant to imply, but, until distractions in Sharp’s personal life caused it to falter, it remained the largest studio in a city that was mad for music.

This view of Sharp’s conservatory years blends information from her personal journal with coverage in Victoria’s lively press. Details are somewhat biased towards 1894 and 1895, years she passed completely in Victoria; all other years were interrupted by summer and fall months spent in her native New Brunswick. The perspective her journal offers on conservatory operations is necessarily a foreshortened one. It tells who laid the morning fires and charts the houseboy’s progress as a baker but leaves to inference and guesswork some basic questions about the Victoria Conservatory as a business. Still, for all its limitations, Sharp’s journal offers rich, probably unique, detail on music teaching as a business in the 1890s.

* I am grateful to the Adney family for permission to quote from Sharp’s journal and to Daryl Hunter for assistance in reproducing photographs.

¹ J.P. Green and N.F. Vogan, *Music Education in Canada: A Historical Account* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 180.



Figure 1. Sharp (right) with Beth Walker, her principal assistant, at the Conservatory in 1895. Private collection.

“THE FINEST MASTERS BOTH FOR PIANO AND VOICE”

Minnie Bell Sharp (1865-1937) was born in Upper Woodstock in western New Brunswick among what she recalled as the “most wonderful and productive orchards in America.” Francis Sharp, her colourful father, was the new Dominion’s foremost developer of winter-hardy apples and plums. Schooled mainly by her mother, she never did have much formal education apart from a year at an Anglican girls’ boarding school in the Eastern Townships and a term at a church school in Halifax.²

Sharp records that, by age four, she had already planned “what [she] would do and be.” At age seven she could “play well,” but it was probably the terms at boarding school that introduced her to formal music instruction. About 1881, her father imported New Brunswick’s first Steinway piano for his three musical daughters. Soon, he was supporting the eldest girl’s professional study in New York City. Sharp’s New York

² Material on Sharp’s early life comes from her “Autobiography,” an essay published in the *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel* (10 October 1919) on the occasion of her first attempt to stand for Parliament. On her father, see *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 13:941-42.

sojourns began in 1883 or 1884 and continued in the winter months of at least most years until 1890.

Sharp claimed instruction from “THE BEST TEACHERS IN AMERICA,” men who had rubbed shoulders with the musical royalty of Europe.³ Just as her teachers gloried in their European connections, so Sharp would spend her own teaching days boasting fiercely of the techniques and insights her New York tutors had instilled in her.⁴ Among these tutors was the leading US-born piano teacher of the day, William Mason. Sharp’s later advertising would refer often to *Touch and Technic* (1889), Mason’s famous work of piano instruction, which he prepared during the period of her study.⁵ There were also daily voice lessons, emphasizing the physicality of sound production. Through them, Sharp could claim to follow the “method” of several notable vocal theorists of the day. Her advertising would often make the point that, unlike teachers of less distinguished pedigree, she was schooled “scientifically” in “natural” voice culture, not just in pretty singing.

These exciting New York musical winters ended in 1890, when Sharp was twenty-five. Well before then, she was making a name back in Woodstock, a town of thirty-five hundred. Beginning in the mid-1880s, press notice of her as a performer is eclipsed by her work as a teacher and as a promoter of pupils in concert. In 1889, her annual return from studies in New York was marked by her most ambitious concert yet, advertised as “high-class” music.⁶ Sharing the bill with her own pupils were musical friends imported from Fredericton and New York. She repeated this style of programming in 1890 and 1891 in many concerts in western New Brunswick and eastern Maine.

Music teaching was not Sharp’s only line. She and her four siblings had a continuing role in the family fruit concerns. Their father was now in his mid-seventies and failing in strength. A chance newspaper reference reveals that, in 1889, Minnie Sharp was in charge of harvesting and marketing the plum crop to the big Saint John and Boston markets.⁷ The family business was under stress, and this led Sharp to spend winters

³ *Woodstock Dispatch*, 8 July 1914.

⁴ Apart from her “Autobiography,” Sharp’s accounts of her musical formation appear in advertisements such as those found in *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel*, 7 May 1887 (her first advertisement); *Woodstock Dispatch*, 28 July 1897; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 1 January 1899; and *Dispatch*, 8 July 1914 (the most detailed).

⁵ For example, on her return to Victoria from New York in 1898, she boasted of having “reviewed” with Mason the new edition of his great work. See *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 1 January 1899.

⁶ *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel*, 13 and 27 July 1889; M.H. Miller, *History of Upper Woodstock* (Saint John: Globe Print, 1940), 113.

⁷ *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel*, 10 August 1889; 20 September 1890.

teaching music in Fredericton, and to her return home in the summer and fall to help with the fruit. Then, in 1892, the brother who was intended to revive the family fortunes died of consumption. In the wake of this blow, Sharp used her musical training to create an independent professional life much further afield. Yet, as with many late-nineteenth-century single daughters who left the farm, her tie to the homestead remained. Soon she was sending back cash and then dashing home repeatedly, across an entire continent, to add her own labour to the family enterprise.

“REAL MUSICAL TALENT AMONG ITS POPULATION”

Sharp’s motive in relocating from western New Brunswick to Victoria in 1893 was economic rather than artistic, but she could not have found a more musically promising Canadian city to which to move. Despite the Canada-wide hard times of the 1890s, which was also the decade Victoria fell behind neighbouring Vancouver in size, its eighteen thousand inhabitants were mad about music. They saw Victoria as having “more real musical talent” in proportion to population than any other city on the Pacific coast.⁸ Twenty-nine Victorians told the 1891 census-taker their primary occupation was musician.⁹ The city’s two daily (*Daily Colonist*, *Daily Times*) and two weekly (*Victoria Home Journal*, *Province*) newspapers tracked a marvellous parade of amateur performance, especially choral and band music. Notices of “Grand” and “Grand Sacred” concerts were frequent, often with entire programs advertised. Local amateurs staged many operettas, especially those of Gilbert and Sullivan. Not even the grand operas of Gounod and Verdi were beyond the city’s vocal and orchestral talent. Victoria’s coastal location brought it a stream of professionals touring up from San Francisco as well as musicians stationed with the Royal Navy. The city’s bandsmen were ambitious enough in 1890 to unionize. Six of its churches offered serious choral music. In 1891, one of them acquired what the press called the finest organ north of San Francisco. Another offered what it claimed was the only choral Eucharist in British Columbia. A sacred concert at the Roman Catholic cathedral might draw a congregation of two thousand.¹⁰

⁸ From the 1918 memoir of Herbert Kent (1862–1958), printed in R.D. McIntosh, *Documentary History of Music in Victoria, British Columbia* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1981), 1:255. (Kent rented Sharp pianos when extra were needed.)

⁹ E.W. Sager and P.A. Baskerville, eds., *1891 Canadian Census: Victoria, British Columbia* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1991). Seventeen of these musicians were sufficiently prominent to appear in McIntosh, *Music in Victoria*.

¹⁰ On the naval contribution, see R.D. McIntosh, “Ships of the Fleet: The Royal Navy and the Development of Music in British Columbia,” in *Musical Canada: Words and Music Honouring*

To guide Victoria's artistic taste on approved lines, three newspapers of the 1890s employed pseudonymous music and drama critics: *Metronome* (*Daily Colonist*), *Moderato* (*Daily Times*), and *Touchstone* (*Province*). One thing on which they agreed was that the city's vibrant music scene lacked stability. Choral and orchestral organizations formed to great applause, then died out or broke up. Few of the twenty-nine professional musicians of the 1891 census remained in 1901. They set up shop, fell into debt, and moved on. Minnie Sharp's own Victoria years and her trail of debt might seem to typify this pattern. In fact, Sharp's seven-year run made her one of the city's longest-tenured music teachers of the late nineteenth century.

The earliest reference to Sharp in the Victoria press appeared in July 1893. Laura Adams, proprietor of the Victoria Conservatory of Music, announced that its new vocal instructor would be a "thoroughly qualified assistant, capable of teaching sight singing and giving class lessons."¹¹ This looked-for arrival must have been Sharp. Two months later, Adams informed the press of her own impending departure for advanced study in Leipzig and that Miss M.B. Sharp of New York and Fredericton would succeed her.¹²

Victorians of the 1890s would not have thought it remarkable that a Miss Sharp should succeed a Miss Adams in the music business. By Canadian standards, the city had a comparatively small female population but a comparatively large number of single women engaged in professional pursuits. Most were music teachers.¹³ Music teaching was a rare late-nineteenth-century sphere in which North American women could compete credibly with men.¹⁴ The great European conservatories were a male realm, but in a small Canadian city like Victoria female music teachers could be accepted, respected, and sometimes make a comfortable living.¹⁵ Of those twenty-nine music professionals in the

Helmut Kallmann, ed. J. Beckwith and F. Hall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 143-48. On unionization, see *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 4, 6, and 9 July 1890. On the organ, see *Daily Colonist*, 22 May 1891. On choral communion, see *Daily Colonist*, 29 July 1891.

¹¹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 1 July 1893.

¹² *Victoria Daily Times*, 5 September 1893.

¹³ P. Baskerville, "She Has Already Hinted at Board: Enterprising Urban Women in British Columbia, 1863-1896," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 26 (1993): 219. Baskerville's generalization applies to Vancouver and Victoria combined.

¹⁴ M. Buddle, *The Business of Women: Marriage, Family, and Entrepreneurship in British Columbia, 1901-51* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 53, 75-76. Victoria's women also played an unusually prominent role in the city's production of fine and decorative art. See K.A. Finlay, ed., *"A Woman's Place": Art and the Role of Women in the Cultural Formation of Victoria BC, 1850s-1920s* (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 2004), 1.

¹⁵ J. Tallentire, "The Ordinary Needs of Life': Strategies of Survival for Single Women in 1901 Victoria," *BC Studies* 159 (2008): 49-50, 56, 61-62, 71. Even in Victoria it was only men who led

1891 census, fourteen were women and nine of these single women. The census-taker even elevated Martha Harris (1854-1933) to the rank of “professor,” an honorific usually accorded male music teachers, though perhaps it helped that her father was Vancouver Island’s ex-governor.

“MISS SHARP HAS ALREADY BECOME A FAVORITE”¹⁶

When Minnie Sharp acquired it in September 1893, the conservatory business was already a few years old but less grand than the name was meant to suggest. The late nineteenth century was Canada’s age of “conservatories”: Mount Allison was founded in 1885, Toronto in 1886, Halifax in 1887, London in 1892, and Hamilton in 1897.¹⁷ These and similar turn-of-the-century music ventures were precarious enterprises, many of them short-lived. The earliest press mention of a Victoria conservatory dates from the spring of 1890, when one of its two male proprietors absconded back to the United States, stripping the premises of furnishings but leaving behind his debts.¹⁸ A year later, the conservatory business name was in the hands of Laura Merea Adams (b. 1858).¹⁹ The program for a December 1891 concert by pupils and staff shows that Adams was associated with two other teachers and that the business’s credibility was apparently restored.²⁰

No Sharp journal for 1893 survives, but aspects of her entry strategy in Victoria are evident. Music teachers of any pretension always opened for business by touting their pedigree. As Sharp herself lacked a formal music credential, her advertisements took the line that musical artistry was attested by performance, not certificates. Nevertheless, she opened her Victoria career by circulating testimonials from many Frederictonians, including the premier, the bishop, and the university president.²¹

Also by way of introducing herself, Sharp was more willing to collaborate with other artists in joint musical ventures or charity concerts than she would be later in the 1890s. Her Victoria debut came on a mixed bill at the Presbyterian church hall, and one newspaper thought it of

choral, band, and orchestral performances.

¹⁶ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 20 November 1893.

¹⁷ E. Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 123-27.

¹⁸ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 22 and 23 May 1890.

¹⁹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 5 September and 19 November 1891. Adams was “amiable, jovial, well and widely travelled” and a “natural born musician, devoted heart and soul to her profession, which she greatly adorned” (*Victoria Home Journal*, 9 September 1893).

²⁰ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 22 December 1891. The British Columbia Archives holds a copy of the printed program.

²¹ *Victoria Province*, 3 March 1894.

“almost unprecedented musical merit.” “She is possessed of a magnificent soprano voice,” reported the *Times*, “very expressive and capable, from its careful training and the control its owner has over it.” “Flexible” and “impressive” added the *Colonist*.²² Soon after, the conservatory’s six teachers won plaudits for a benefit concert in support of the YMCA.²³ Later philanthropic efforts helped a new school gymnasium, the Boys’ Brigade, a lacrosse club, and a children’s ward for the new hospital. In general, however, though she often acted as accompanist for others, Sharp was a teacher, not a performer who taught.

Sharp celebrated her acquisition of the conservatory with paid publicity. Among Victoria’s musicians in the 1890s she was the heaviest advertiser – by far. Within days of Adams’s announced departure for Europe, Sharp was in the press touting the conservatory’s “full and efficient” staff of teachers. Eventually, she would buy space in all four city papers and was the only musician to advertise regularly in the Victoria Theatre’s *Opera Glass*. Until 1897 she also published an annual conservatory prospectus. No examples survive, but her journal shows the great effort put into getting them just right: she would line up someone important to provide a prefatory endorsement and see that they were widely distributed. For the prospectuses and other job printing, such as invitations and letterhead, she patronized both the *Colonist* and the *Province*. Printing needs were considerable as every concert and many recitals were preceded by a flutter of inviting. For the 1895–96 year-end concert, she and her crew addressed 700 printed invitations. Even a monthly pupil recital might have invitations for 150. Once, to publicize a new sight-singing class, she addressed and dispatched (by messenger service) 3000 circulars as well as 300 prospectuses.²⁴

The very best advertising was favourable notice in the press. Good relations with editors helped ensure that newspapers would reproduce programs and otherwise give advance notice of conservatory events, then dispatch critics to attend them and even occasionally print self-generated items. Compared with other music teachers, especially women, the ambitious Sharp was well served by the press. She was bold enough to lobby editors at their offices, even tackling one at his home. In the latter 1890s, it was helpful that the *Colonist* was edited by fellow New Brunswicker Charles Lugin, whose daughters took lessons at the conservatory.

²² *Victoria Daily Times*, 9 and 13 September 1893; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 September 1893.

²³ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 22 November 1893; *Victoria Daily Times*, 21 and 22 November 1893.

²⁴ Minnie Bell Sharp, personal journal (hereafter MBS journal), 21 November 1894, 15 November 1895, 13 February and 22 May 1896. The five surviving volumes of Sharp’s journal are held privately.



Figure 2. Sharp posed for this formidable portrait at Victoria in 1900, five months after wedding Tappan Adney in New Brunswick. Courtesy Carleton County Historical Society, by family permission.

The *Province*, in the period when it was published in Victoria and kept up a regular arts column, was conspicuously respectful of Sharp's work. At the paper's launch she was one of its original advertisers. The editor reciprocated by devoting an entire page of the first issue to a puff piece on Sharp and her enterprise, obviously written by herself. Occasionally she pushed too hard. When the *Province's* critic complained that allowing young children to sing in recital endangered unformed voices, Sharp was indignant. Reputation was at stake. Arthur Scaife, the editor, refused to print her rebuttal (which she then tried to get into the *Colonist*); however, on her fourth visit, he agreed to a mild retraction. Elsewhere on the same page the paper's arts critic regretted the hypersensitivity to criticism of some musicians, especially "lady members" of the profession.²⁵

²⁵ *Victoria Province*, 2 and 16 June 1894; MBS journal, 6-9 and 13 June 1894.

"A FINE COMMODIOUS BUILDING"

As was typical when it came to late-nineteenth-century female entrepreneurship, the Victoria Conservatory's premises served both as a place of business and as a residence. In the final months of her proprietorship, Laura Adams operated from a fifteen-room house at 97 Quadra Street. Sharp moved the enterprise to 288 Yates Street. Here it remained through all but two months of her seven-year tenure. Newly built, 288 Yates was a "fine commodious building" with a "splendid" view, lending the unstable conservatory operation an aspect of solidity and gentility. The house had electric lighting, running water, (eventually) a telephone, tall chimneys, and much fancy exterior trim. It well merited the publicity photographs Sharp had taken. Shortly after she left Victoria, when 288 Yates became a private residence, the *Colonist* depicted it as one of the city's most gracious houses.²⁶ Here Sharp and Beth Walker, her principal assistant, lived and worked until 1900, along with Mary Ruth Adney (from 1893 to 1896), Sharp's pupil from New York City days and future sister-in-law. Their succession of Chinese houseboys did not live in.

Sharp and Walker gave their lessons from 288 Yates, and usually the music theory, history, and sight-singing classes met there. The violin, elocution, and language instructors may have taught from their own premises. The house had several teaching rooms, at least three pianos, and, for "hand culture," a technicon.²⁷ Perhaps Sharp leased it semi-furnished, but she supplied the office furniture and purchased shelving, a bulletin board, and the like from time to time as well as painting floors and white-washing walls. Along with teaching spaces, the ground floor had a reception/reading room stocked with "all the leading musical papers and standard works on music." Sharp took the *Etude* (Philadelphia), the *Musical Courier* (New York), and the *Vocalist* (New York), and she subscribed to multiple book series on the great composers. Finally, there was what may have been a series of connected parlours. On recital days they could seat an audience of 150, so Sharp claimed grandly. For such occasions she rented six dozen chairs, which may give a better idea of seating capacity.²⁸

²⁶ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 12 August 1906. The house is described at the time of its eventual sale: *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 14 January 1900. A publicity photograph of 288 Yates is attached to a notice of Sharp in H.H. Godfrey, *Souvenir of Musical Toronto* (Toronto: The Author, 1897), 32-33. Its civic address corresponds to the current 1222 Yates; the building was demolished in 1958. One might speculate that the reason such a fine new house was available for Sharp to rent in 1893 was the recession of the 1890s. Even in 1900 it sold for less than it had cost to build it.

²⁷ A technicon was an apparatus allowing keyboard musicians to develop strength and flexibility in the wrist, hand, and fingers without needing access to a piano.

²⁸ "Where Do You Study Music?," *Opera Glass*, 16-20 April 1895; MBS journal, 4 June 1894. At some recitals the "rooms" were so crowded that people stood. Sharp's male friends, such as

"A FULL AND EFFICIENT STAFF OF TEACHERS
IN EVERY DEPARTMENT"

Sharp's Victoria Conservatory resembled the standard US operation rather than a European *conservatoire*. That is, it had annual examinations in theory and history, prizes, and even occasional gold medals, but students were not admitted by examination or trained to a credential.²⁹ Sharp styled herself the institution's principal, but the other staff – at one point as many as five – were associates or contractors rather than salaried employees. She described the conservatory's business form as a sort of joint operation.³⁰ What bound them to Sharp was that she did all the advertising (which was extensive), billed students or their parents monthly, paid staff, maintained 288 Yates, and handled complaints.

As violin teachers Sharp engaged only males. The recurring problem with late-nineteenth-century professional musicians was instability, and this is the theme of the conservatory's attempts to retain a violinist. Just as Sharp's first teaching season got under way, the violinist inherited from Laura Adams left abruptly to compose operas in New York City.³¹ The same newspaper that advertised Sharp's boast of "a full and efficient staff of teachers in every department" recorded this departure.³² So it was that, when the conservatory opened for the fall term of 1893, it had no violin master. Not until a few days before Christmas could Sharp announce the arrival of Max F.P. Gipprich (1856–1948), lately of Dusseldorf, Cologne, and San Antonio, and present him at the conservatory's year-end recital.³³ But then, on New Year's Day 1894, a startled Sharp recorded in her journal that Gipprich had "skipped." Within a week she had managed to replace him with a graduate of the Copenhagen Conservatory and pupil of Niels Gade, Carl Vandal.³⁴ Vandal impressed her neither as a musician nor as a person, and a month later she paid him off and back to San Francisco he sailed.³⁵

E.H. Russell, Keith Middleton, and Harry Fuller, acted as ushers. Sharp's office was on the upper floor, as was Walker's teaching studio.

²⁹ A. Lavignac, *L'Éducation musicale* (Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1902), 436. These observations about US conservatories apply with even greater force to Sharp's business at Victoria.

³⁰ *In the Supreme Court of Canada ... Trustees of School District No. 6, in the Parish of Woodstock and Minnie A. [sic] Sharp* (hereafter *Appeal Book*), 8. This privately printed record of testimony at the trial of the Upper Woodstock school trustees for false imprisonment was prepared around 1899 for the purpose of taking the trustees' appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada.

³¹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 18 January and 15 October 1893.

³² *Ibid.*, 15 October 1893.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23 December 1893, 2 January 1894; *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 December 1893.

³⁴ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 9 January 1894.

³⁵ MBS journal, 8 January and 7 February 1894.

Just days after taking on the Dane, Sharp and the violinist/conductor Anton Zilm (ca. 1847-1934) of Portland began a correspondence that would stretch to many letters and a personal visit to Portland. As a former concert master in the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, Zilm would have been quite a catch.³⁶ First, Zilm was to arrive the week after Vandal left. When that fell through it was to be in May so that his Victoria debut would coincide with the conservatory's spring concert. When he had still not turned up the night before, Sharp wrote in her journal that she was worried that Zilm would not appear. Nevertheless, she sent the program to the *Colonist* for doing up. Finally, at 5:00 p.m. on concert day, Zilm reached her door and they set to practising – for she was to be his accompanist.³⁷ Their concert went off without a hitch.

As summer was the low season for music teachers, we find the chronically indebted Sharp lending Zilm money, and, in August, he left for better prospects in Portland. He would return to Victoria, he said, but only if she sent the “where with all.” By mid-September, with the conservatory's fall term about to open, she was in correspondence with Portland music dealer George Foss over Zilm and another violinist of his acquaintance, the English-born Trevelyan Sharp. Sharp, who was keen for the job, arrived to begin instruction in late October 1894.³⁸ He was the conservatory's fourth violinist in nine months.

Affairs between the principal and the violinist went smoothly for a time. When he returned to Portland to marry, Beth Walker and Mary Adney fixed up the room where he boarded so it would be fit to receive his bride, the accomplished pianist May Cook (1869-1901), late of the Berlin Conservatory. After the Trevelyan Sharps settled in, the women at 288 Yates honoured them with an elaborate reception. Yet not all was well. Minnie was always behind in paying her teachers, and Trevelyan Sharp was less tolerant of this than were others. Still, she was taken aback in mid-August to hear a rumour from Portland that the Sharps were returning there.³⁹ May Cook, it turned out, was to take over her ailing father's music school. Minnie accepted the Sharps' decision but urged Trevelyan to remain in Victoria until she could find a replacement violinist. When he refused, she “deferred” a financial settlement and claimed an offset for his breach of contract. Ten days later he had her in small claims court, winning judgment for \$30.90 (she had offered

³⁶ The link to Theodore Thomas (founder of the Chicago Symphony) appears in Sharp's advertising: *Victoria Province*, 2 June 1894.

³⁷ MBS journal, 21-22 May 1894.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 August and 10 September 1894.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 August 1895.

\$25.00). Still, as she recorded in her journal, she had yet to “fork over” on the judgment. Months later, he had still not made her “stump up” any money.⁴⁰

Principal Sharp went to some lengths to look around before making her next deal with a violinist. Victoria always drew its violinists from the United States, so off she went to Portland to talk business with Emil Thielhorn, a thirty-one-year-old immigrant from Hamburg. She took him on but had to pay his passage. Soon the ever-indebted Sharp was lending the violinist money. Early in 1896 he left, carrying her letter of reference.⁴¹ In the remaining four years of her management, the Victoria Conservatory operation never engaged another violinist or another male.

Two other men were associated with the Victoria Conservatory as teachers in Sharp’s time, both at the outset and only briefly. Sharp inherited voice teacher (Walter) Edgar Buck (1864–1902) from Laura Adams, but he ended his conservatory arrangement with Sharp at the close of 1893. Then Buck and his wife opened a rival school of music, elocution, and languages, eventually called the Victoria College of Music.⁴² E.H. (Ernest Howard) Russell (1867–1926) was, briefly, an organ instructor with the conservatory in 1893–94, but for a time his contribution to the enterprise was considerable. He, too, was a newly arrived New Brunswicker. When Sharp knew him, his job was teaching mathematics at a high school just across the street from 288 Yates. Soon Russell and his friend Keith John Middleton (1874–1969) were frequenting the conservatory for voice lessons, free meals, and high-spirited fun. Russell practised choral conducting by leading some of Sharp’s sight-singing classes for children, and he took on, heroically, the job of monthly bookkeeping, calculating what pupils owed the conservatory and what the conservatory owed its teachers.⁴³

In the spring of 1895 these good times ended abruptly. Their breakup coincided with an outrageous misstep on Sharp’s part. In an *Opera Glass* program for an amateur run of *Il Trovatore* at the Victoria Theatre, Sharp took out a full-page advertisement, the page facing the cast listing. Her initial text for it was too brief, so she filled up the page with the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15, 16, and 27 August 1895; 30 October 1895.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8 January 1896.

⁴² On Edgar Buck’s “College,” see *Victoria Province*, 6 October 1894. By mid-1897 a college, now in different hands, was a Yates Street neighbour of the conservatory (see *Victoria Daily Times*, 26 June 1897). There was also a “Victoria School of Music” (see *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 6 August 1891).

⁴³ E.H. Russell’s future fame was as leader for a quarter-century of the Arion Club, the city’s celebrated choral group. After leaving Victoria in 1897, Keith Middleton founded a similar male chorus at Tacoma. See *Victoria British Colonist*, 30 November 1930.



Figure 3. Publicity photograph for the Victoria Conservatory taken in 1894. When landscaping was in place, the *Victoria Daily Colonist* called 288 Yates one of the city's most gracious residences. Private collection.

extraordinary observation that the reason most of the singers on stage sang so poorly was that they had received “pernicious” vocal training. The evening’s orchestra was playing out of tune and time, she advised, because it was not led by the city’s only competent conductor (she meant the conservatory’s Trevelyan Sharp). As both she and Trev Sharp attended opening night, they experienced first-hand what her journal discreetly calls the “great excitement” that this advertisement generated. It was the negative sensation created by this gross blunder that cost her the friendship and services of E.H. Russell. Even the normally indulgent *Province* scolded.⁴⁴

Sharp’s faithful assistant throughout her years in Victoria, as well as her housemate at 288 Yates, was the pianist Beth (Elizabeth J.) Walker. Walker was essential to the Victoria Conservatory’s operation, sustaining it during Sharp’s long New Brunswick sojourns. The two women met

⁴⁴ “Where Do You Study Music?,” *Opera Glass*, 16-20 April 1895 (theatre management pulled the advertisement from the program on subsequent nights); MBS journal, 15-17 April 1895; *Victoria Province*, 20 April 1895. The advertisement’s egregious placement – facing the cast list – may not have been Sharp’s doing. The implied denigration of the opera’s conductor, William Greig, was all the more extraordinary as his wife was one of Sharp’s pupils and as he employed Beth Walker as an occasional accompanist for the Arion Club chorus, which he directed.

in New York City in the late 1880s. When Sharp began taking pupils to support her own musical studies, Walker was among them. In 1890, with Sharp returning to New Brunswick, Walker followed in order to continue working with her. She and her half-brother, the violinist Arthur Neville, joined in the series of classical concerts in New Brunswick and Maine that Sharp arranged in 1890 and 1891, respectively. By the fall of 1893, Walker was with Sharp at 288 Yates, teaching the younger piano students while still taking occasional lessons herself. To Victoria's press she was not a dazzling pianist such as May Cook or even Laura Adams, but she had a formidable repertoire and her concert performances were always reported favourably. Sharp thought she played magnificently.⁴⁵ Within the conservatory establishment Walker was as important for her steady habits as she was for her teaching skills. She often took over Sharp's piano classes on her friend's frequent headache days in bed. Despite professional and domestic intimacy over nearly a decade, Sharp's extensive journal never refers to her as anything other than "Miss Walker" or "EJW."

For all the publicity Sharp generated and the advertising she purchased over seven years, there is only one place where all of the conservatory's teachers, as of that point, are named. For this reason, and because women teaching languages and elocution did not create the same stir in Victoria as did the arrival of a new male violinist, it is difficult to give a full account of the Victoria Conservatory's female associates. French-born Mary Jorald (b. 1832) appears briefly in 1894 as a teacher of French and Italian. Two doors away from Jorald on Johnson Street lived Nonie (Mary Amelia Eliza) Powell (1873-1953), who taught German and possibly speech arts. Of genteel parentage, she had spent three years in London (studying acting?) and was always treated respectfully by the press. Powell's debut came in a conservatory staff charity concert in 1893, at which she performed the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.⁴⁶

Powell was succeeded at the Victoria Conservatory in mid-1895 by Olive E. Agnew. After auditioning her and engaging in a "business conflagration" over terms, Sharp advertised Agnew as giving lessons in the "Department of Elocution, Delsarte, and Dramatic Training."⁴⁷ She created a conservatory debut recital for Agnew in the unusual month of

⁴⁵ This judgment was pronounced on a rendering of the extraordinarily difficult Schubert/Liszt "Erlkönig." See MBS journal, 11 February 1897. Little biographical detail is known of Walker. In the 1890s, Sharp visited her mother in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

⁴⁶ *Victoria Daily Times*, 22 November 1893.

⁴⁷ MBS journal, 9, 10, and 22 July 1895; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 18 July 1895. "Delsarte" was a method of declamation emphasizing unity of voice tone and gesture, tending to melodrama.

July. The *Province* was there and rated Agnew, with Anton Zilm and May Cook, as among Sharp's most notable discoveries. As always, however, there was little stability among conservatory personnel. Three months after signing on, and with quite a few pupils, Agnew left town to aid an ailing lover in Idaho. Soon came news that she would marry and remain there.⁴⁸ Of two other women associated with the conservatory little is known. Florence M. Goward (b. 1862) offered German and French in 1898. Abbie Frances Gardiner (1867-1927), one of Sharp's piano students, taught music theory and history from 1896 to 1899 as well as continuing lessons herself.⁴⁹

"STARTED ON 'TONIC SOL FA' BOOKS TONIGHT"⁵⁰

A teaching year began at the first of October and ran until early summer. Lessons were given Monday to Saturday, morning, afternoon, and evening. In her first years in Victoria, Sharp was more than willing to have pupils during the summer holidays, but this was precluded once she stepped in to market the annual family fruit harvest back in New Brunswick. Some students took more than one lesson weekly, but it is unclear whether this was typical. It is also not clear how long an individual lesson lasted or what the fees were per session (the Victoria Conservatory billed on a monthly basis). Theory and music history classes (given on Saturdays) were free to pupils otherwise taking lessons, but the sight-singing classes (usually given Tuesday evenings for adults and Saturday mornings for children) that Sharp launched with fanfare at the end of 1894 carried a modest fee.⁵¹ She and her occasional assistants (E.H. Russell and Trevelyan Sharp) taught sight-singing by the sol-fa method, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become standard.⁵² It required pupils to appreciate the pitch of one note in relation to another but not to read music per se. Sharp used these sight-singing classes as a way to draw in some students who would then move on to private lessons. In addition to fees for teaching, she profited by selling a good deal of music to conservatory students and, at least with Toronto manufacturers Mason and Reich, was able to earn a commission on piano sales.

⁴⁸ *Victoria Province*, 25 July 1895; MBS journal, 2 and 18 October 1895.

⁴⁹ MBS journal, 29 October 1896, 29 May 1897; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 June 1898. Gardiner had been a conservatory instructor in the time of Laura Adams (*Colonist*, 22 April 1893).

⁵⁰ MBS journal, 8 January 1895.

⁵¹ MBS journal, 15 November 1894; *Victoria Province*, 1 December 1894. The *Province* commended the modesty of the fee charged, attributing it to the prevailing hard times.

⁵² Green and Vogan, *Music Education in Canada*, 91, 96-98.

By 1895, Sharp was claiming sixty pupils for the Victoria Conservatory, the same number mentioned two years later.⁵³ Judged by those whose names appear in her journal – mostly for having missed lessons – and in concert programs, the great majority are female, ranging from childhood to early middle age. For example, the 1895 spring commencement program names twenty-four pupils, only two of whom were male. Seven pupils were under fourteen years (the youngest ten); eight were older than twenty (the eldest thirty-four).⁵⁴ Concert reviewers typically agreed that the conservatory's work in voice and piano evinced "perfection of training." And this was so not just of the stars. To the *Colonist*: "The playing and singing of the very youngest pupils – and some of them very, very young – gave unmistakable evidence of careful and systematic training. One notable thing was the distinct pronunciation of the words in the singing, and another was the clean cut execution of the piano playing – two very admirable features."⁵⁵ Also impressive was the fact that Sharp's keyboard students always performed from memory.

Probably Sharp saw Gertrude May Flumerfelt (1882-1961) as the brightest star among her Victoria pupils. She was inherited from the Victoria Conservatory in the days of Laura Adams, and Sharp came to think so highly of Gertrude that, in 1897, she procured scholarship papers for her to some European institution. Years later she would recall that among her Victoria students were sisters who then "entered one of the foremost Conservatories in Europe and began immediately to play in public recitals." These were likely Gertrude and her younger sister Norma (1885-1975).⁵⁶

Sharp had a hand in several west coast musical careers. Both E.H. Russell and Keith Middleton, her voice students, became well known choral conductors. May Toland Heathfield (ca. 1867-1905), one of Victoria's leading mezzo-sopranos, was a regular pupil and also turned to Sharp for coaching when preparing significant roles, such as Yum-Yum in *Mikado* and Nancy in Flotow's *Martha*. Heathfield was a performer well before Sharp came to Victoria, but now the press noticed that "her vocalization had been wonderfully improved of late."⁵⁷ Abbie Gardiner, the conservatory's instructor in music theory, and her partner Agnes Gibson (b. 1867) were other Sharp pupils of note. The 1901 census shows

⁵³ *Victoria Daily Times*, 8 July 1895; *Appeal Book*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Victoria Conservatory of Music... Concert and Commencement Exercises... July 8th, 1895*, in R.D. McIntosh Collection, University of Victoria Archives.

⁵⁵ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 21 May 1899, 20 December 1894.

⁵⁶ MBS journal, 9 February 1897; *Appeal Book*, 8; *Woodstock Dispatch*, 8 July 1914.

⁵⁷ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 12 April 1894.

them already making a fair living from music teaching.⁵⁸ The same was true of Ada Saunders (b. 1873), who taught music in Victoria for at least a generation.⁵⁹

“CROWDED TO THE DOORS”

As with all music teachers, Sharp sought to attract new business through publicity generated by regular exhibitions of pupils. Such recitals, said the *Times*, served a double purpose: “[to] show[] the patrons and friends the progress of the pupils and to give the public a display of the rare ability of the teachers of the several departments of the conservatory.”⁶⁰ This involved two different styles of public presentation, which Sharp distinguished as recitals and concerts.

Pupil recitals were held in the parlours at 288 Yates. Sharp considered them a distinctive part of Victoria Conservatory instruction and aimed to offer them monthly during the teaching year. Judging from press reportage, this was more often than did other teachers. These recitals were meant to encourage and stimulate the ambition of even quite junior students. Typically on Saturday, they began at 4:00 p.m. and might be followed by tea or more casual refreshments. She called them “impromptu” but often they involved printed invitations.⁶¹ Some recitals had themes. In 1896-97, there was a recital for works by Beethoven, one for works by Schubert, and one for works by Mendelssohn. Not everything was concerned with performance as music history students would also read their essays on the composer of the day. Olive Agnew’s recital featured recitation.

Sharp’s account of a spring recital in 1895 shows invitations going out over several days beforehand, a piano tuner at work, and the *Colonist* printing up a program. Then came the day.

Worked hard all day. We decorated the rooms with yellow broom and they look very fine. Mr [F.W.] Galpin [violin] is away and can’t get home so the quintette is “off.” The recital was a howling success. The house was full and everything went well, no hitches. Mrs [Emma] Fuller and the ushers and several others remained for coffee and cake after the recital.⁶²

⁵⁸ Tallentire, “Ordinary Needs of Life,” 68.

⁵⁹ Sharp was also approached by Selina Frances Smith (1854-1938) (MBS journal, 10 May 1895). Despite being (as Sharp noted) “colored,” Smith would become one of early twentieth-century Victoria’s most successful piano teachers. See Tallentire, “Ordinary Needs of Life,” 71-72. It is unclear what proposal Smith was making, but nothing came of it.

⁶⁰ *Victoria Daily Times*, 20 December 1894.

⁶¹ Sharp explains her rationale for monthly recitals in *Victoria Province*, 3 March 1894.

⁶² MBS journal, 14 May 1895.

Sharp's relief over no hitches and her usual practice of leaving the program to be printed on the day of performance reflect the hazards of bringing together quite a number of adults and children. An account from the fall of the same year follows a similar pattern:

Practised a lot with Mr Thielhorn for the recital this evening ... Made out programme for tonight and sent it to the printers. Helped arrange the rooms ... The recital came off in evening and was a great success. Everything went off without a single hitch. Canon [Arthur] Beanlands voiced his appreciation in fine style afterward. We had coffee & cake and a little dancing after the affair was over.⁶³

When the conservatory held a recital in the evening, such as the one discussed in the preceding quotation, it was to showcase a particular performer. In this case it was for the conservatory's violinist. Once, it was for May Cook, the distinguished pianist ("Miss Sharp's rooms were taxed to the utmost").⁶⁴ Other evenings showcased star piano pupils: fourteen-year-old Gertrude Flumerfelt in 1896, her fourteen-year-old sister Norma in 1899, and twenty-six-year-old Ada Saunders and eight-year-old Marjorie Carne (b. 1891), both in 1900.⁶⁵ When no reporter was present, it was usual for Sharp or one of her circle to submit a notice – sometimes published – to the press.

Twice or more each year – usually December and June/early July – conservatory teachers and pupils offered a concert. Unlike recitals, the performances that Sharp classified as concerts were held in rented accommodation, usually nearby Institute Hall, and always in the evening. Apart from fundraisers for charity, concerts, although free of charge, were by invitation.⁶⁶ For days in advance Sharp and her team addressed hundreds of invitation cards. Then there was the moving and tuning of conservatory pianos to arrange (as well as the rental of others), the hall to be decorated, flowers – even shrubs – to be lined up, and on-site rehearsing. It all paid off with a big, enthusiastic audience ("crowded to the doors"), no hitches, a "splendid notice in the 'Colonist'" next day, and "lots of compliments flying."⁶⁷

Spring concerts were the most work as there were pupil examinations to be conducted for the theory, history, and harmony classes; a year-

⁶³ Ibid., 20 November 1895.

⁶⁴ *Victoria Province*, 18 May 1895.

⁶⁵ MBS journal, 25 March 1896; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 21 May 1899 and 27 March 1900; MBS journal, 1 March 1900. The conservatory's other gold medalists in Sharp's time were Gertrude Flumerfelt (1895), Agnes Dier (1896), and Winifred Wilson (1897).

⁶⁶ MBS journal, 20 May 1897.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 19 December 1894 and 9 June 1897.

end prize list to be drawn up; sheet music to have bound into books as prizes; and sometimes one or more gold medals to be commissioned from jewellers. There was also a prize-presenter to be lined up – perhaps a musician prominent in the community, a cleric, or Supreme Court judge – for Sharp thought this brought more cachet than just doing it herself.⁶⁸ Her aim was not just to have a large audience but to hold a “fashionable” event.

One of the conservatory’s most exciting and fashionable performances came up suddenly in November 1894 when the vice-regal couple – the earl and countess of Aberdeen – descended on Victoria. As soon as she heard the news, Sharp wrote to secure their promise of a visit to 288 Yates. A note from the earl’s aide-de-camp naming the day set off a paroxysm of invitation addressing, piano tuning, and rehearsing. “We worked like Trojans,” her journal records. When Sharp wanted to add gravitas to a musical function, she always turned to Church of England clergy; for a visit by the governor general she enlisted the bishop of Columbia to help smooth the welcome. When the great day arrived the countess disappointed her with a letter of apology, but the earl attended, accompanied by British Columbia’s lieutenant-governor. The absence of the Aberdeen children was also a blow as Sharp had created the program with them specially in mind, a characteristic touch. All else went smoothly. Her journal records a sleepless night, but Bishop Perrin helped her through.⁶⁹

Seven of the conservatory’s vocal and piano students performed that afternoon, with three staff members. Their recital opened with one of Sharp’s typical student show pieces – a two piano/eight hands piece from *Tannhauser* thumped out in unison.⁷⁰ Sharp intended that it conclude with Beth Walker playing the final movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” sonata. At the last minute Walker sprained a finger and was not up to playing *presto*. At His Excellency’s special request, Sharp herself stepped in with a simple vocal offering.⁷¹ The governor general praised her, and two newspapers wrote it all up.

⁶⁸ For example, MBS journal, 8 June 1895.

⁶⁹ MBS journal, 8 November 1894. Lady Aberdeen’s excuse was her need to prepare for her evening meeting on behalf of the National Council of Women. Sharp attended and got to make her curtsy.

⁷⁰ Unison performances on multiple pianos, even of quite complicated pieces such as Gottschalk’s “Pasquinade,” were a standard Sharp recital stunt. However, in this she was outdone on occasion by Laura Adams, one of whose pupil recitals featured a unison rendering by twelve hands. See *Victoria Daily Times*, 12 May 1900.

⁷¹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 9 November 1894; *Victoria Province*, 17 November 1894.

"NO LETTERS TODAY. HAD SEVERAL DUNS THO."

Although she was present physically in British Columbia, Sharp's thoughts were never far from the family homestead in Upper Woodstock. Letters and postcards flowed back and forth incessantly. Her ailing parents did not press openly for her return, but a married sister did. This led to Sharp's extraordinary commute between Victoria and western New Brunswick each summer from 1895 to 1900 to help harvest and market the family fruit production. She also supported her parents and unmarried sister financially. By the last third of the nineteenth century it was more or less understood that single women leaving the farm for paid employment would inject part of their earnings into the family economy.⁷² Sharp bowed to this duty without hesitation, regarding it as "perfectly voluntary." To make such remittances she added to her other financial stresses by borrowing money.⁷³

Compounding Sharp's money woes was the fact that she was no book-keeper. After E.H. Russell broke with her in 1895 she let the accounting slide. Only when Tappan Adney, her future husband, visited Victoria that fall was much attention devoted to the books. "Spent every crumb of spare time in assisting in the unravelling of the accounts etc of the Conservatory," she recorded. The unravelling took a tense week. When she and Adney were together a year later in New Brunswick, the painful operation was repeated.⁷⁴

It was a rare week that Sharp was not dunned or sent to town scrambling to renew debts with moneylenders. "No letters today," she wrote in the fall of 1895: "Had several duns tho."⁷⁵ She was dunned by her landlord (rent always late), by Gonzalo Nuñez (for voice lessons taken when passing through New York), by the *Province*, by her cabinet-maker, by A.G. Salmon of Tacoma/Seattle and A. Waldteufel of San Francisco (music distributors), by G. Schirmer of New York and Theodore Presser of Philadelphia (music publishers). She was dunned for water, for electricity, and on and on. Seldom could her journal record: "Went to town this a.m. and paid a lot of small bills thereby taking a load off my mind."⁷⁶ Overdue bills were rarely off Sharp's mind. Her whole personal

⁷² J. Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 9, 26, 109-11; B. Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 12, 32, 125.

⁷³ *Appeal Book*, 22-23.

⁷⁴ MBS journal, 2 November 1895, 19 September 1896.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 October 1895.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 October 1895.

and professional life would be haunted by financial mismanagement and its consequences.

Few late-nineteenth-century consumers bought goods with cash: most everyone lived for a time on the merchant's tick. The debt that haunted Sharp was not that incurred by casual shop accounts but that incurred by a promissory note on which the creditor could conveniently sue if payments fell behind. Considerable debt followed Sharp from Fredericton and Woodstock, including the claim for school taxes that would see her gaoled twice in 1897 on her annual return east. Given her chronic shortage of money, how was Sharp able to acquire the Victoria Conservatory in the first place?

What Laura Adams sold Sharp in late summer 1893 was chiefly the conservatory's business name and pupil list. As Sharp came to Victoria to work as a vocal instructor, the suddenness of the purchase opportunity must have limited her ability to judge the conservatory's worth as a running business – she arrived during the off-season – and to come up with the purchase price. The sale arrangement struck with Adams was for about twelve hundred dollars, seven hundred in cash and the balance by promissory note.⁷⁷ Probably the cash was borrowed. A few months later, when her earliest journal opens, she was already making payments to several Victoria moneylenders. Sharp always paid something on the balance, and creditors routinely renewed her loans, usually for three months. One loan was for the purchase of pianos, but it is probable that others helped raise the cash portion of the conservatory purchase price.

We know more about the part of the price that Sharp covered by giving Adams a promissory note for six months beginning in September 1893. Here, as with several other of Sharp's notes to moneylenders, the co-signer was L. Robert Landells (1860–1930). A Nova Scotian and Dalhousie College graduate, Landells had become acquainted with Sharp when he was at Woodstock as a school principal. In 1887 he began teaching in Victoria.⁷⁸ When Sharp arrived in the city six years later, Landells was one of the few people she knew. For whatever reason, he rashly accommodated her by co-signing notes in favour of Laura Adams (and others) and so was drawn into the web of Sharp's legal troubles. Without access to credit derived from her friendship with Landells, Sharp could not have taken advantage of the sudden opportunity to buy Adams's business.

⁷⁷ *Appeal Book*, 19.

⁷⁸ While at Woodstock, Landells performed on concert bills as a "reciter" and reader. See *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel*, 2 October and 20 November 1886; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 7 July 1887.

Sharp made no payments on the Adams note. Her professed reason was that Adams had misrepresented the worth of the conservatory's business by guaranteeing a number of pupils who did not materialize. But it was certainly convenient to put off payment when Adams was far away in Europe. When Sharp and E.H. Russell, her bookkeeper, approached Adams's mother for access to the conservatory records from Adams's time in order to gather evidence of the true state of the business when purchased, she rebuffed them.⁷⁹ Then, late in 1895, just as she was battling the violinist Trevelyan Sharp over his fees, came the awful news that Laura Adams was returning to Victoria. She tried to work something out, but Adams broke off communication and sued. Sharp persuaded the court that she had enough of a defence to forestall summary judgment, and then she argued that the trial should be postponed until she returned from a lengthy visit to New Brunswick. She lost the bid for delay but headed east anyway and so never did get her day in court. Judge Montague Tyrwhitt-Drake gave Adams judgment for five hundred dollars plus interest and what looks like heavy costs.⁸⁰ Robert Landells was Sharp's co-defendant, but there was no judgment against him. Perhaps he and Adams had reached an accommodation in return for some cash. If so, that proved a better deal for Adams than did her court judgment against Sharp, who, by 1900, had still not paid up.⁸¹

"I FEEL SO DREADFUL THESE DAYS
I CAN'T SIT DOWN TO PRACTICE"⁸²

In welcoming Sharp to Victoria in 1893, the *Home Journal* judged her to be "firm and determined in manner" and yet possessed of a "very sensitive temperament."⁸³ Both the drive to assert her worth and the sensitivities and distractions that tripped her up are on view in the nearly two thousand entries in her journal. Sharp was twenty-eight when she came to Victoria, and she was thirty-five when she left in 1900. All surviving volumes of her journal date from these years. She was an informative diarist, keeping track of a vast number of letters and postcards written and received, pupils missing lessons, promissory note payments and renewals, piano practice (often, her guilt over failure to

⁷⁹ MBS journal, 16 March 1895.

⁸⁰ *Adams v. Sharp and Landells*, 30 June 1896, British Columbia Archives, Supreme Court order book, GR 1366, vol. 19. Sharp's lawyer was fellow New Brunswick émigré Arthur Belyea. Adams's counsel at the hearing was the future chief justice of Canada, Lyman Duff.

⁸¹ *Appeal Book*, 12, 19.

⁸² MBS journal, 26 January 1899.

⁸³ *Victoria Home Journal*, 9 September 1893.

practice), technicon exercise, recitals, and social engagements. With the whole business and planning side of the Victoria Conservatory operation on her shoulders, and with family distractions a continent away to fret about, she documents a busy, care-filled life.

Although she wrote a substantial entry most days, Sharp was not a soul-searching diarist and sometimes only alludes to scrapes into which she had managed to get herself. What she does record faithfully is her state of health. Ardent of temperament and high-strung, she was prone to nervous indisposition in the form of headaches. Some were triggered by her menstrual cycle (recorded in code), and big conservatory events usually led to nervous prostration, but there may have been something more. Her father said she had been troubled with headaches her whole life.⁸⁴ In 1894, the first full year of her journal, she was sick – often in bed – on sixty-six days. In 1895 it was sixty-two days.

Sundays were for recuperation. Although on good terms with a number of Anglican clerics, she seldom went to church. Her reading consisted mainly of US music journals. Except for going to hear the great Madame Albani, she attended musical performances mostly when a friend or someone she had coached was involved and had sent her complimentary tickets. Yet Sharp was sociable, able to entertain visitors for meals or music quite spontaneously. She was skilled at the “womanly” tasks of sewing and baking (she made her own wedding cakes), and, right from childhood, she was expert at making fruit preserves. Her journal records sending many little kitchen or garden treats to neighbours and receiving treats in return.

The five-month Victoria sojourn of her fiancé-to-be, the US artist and illustrator Tappan Adney (1868-1950), was an exciting time. By mid-1895, the two had known one another in New York City and Woodstock for about a decade but had not often spent time together. Now they could quarrel and reconcile, break off and get back together like ordinary lovers. By the end of Adney’s visit they had an “understanding.”⁸⁵ The social highlight of their time together was an exhibition of Adney’s watercolours of Victoria scenery, which was hosted at 288 Yates. Sharp procured a special afternoon viewing for the lieutenant-governor and his

⁸⁴ *Appeal Book*, 13, 40. Eventually Sharp went blind. Other family members suffered from Fuch’s dystrophy, a genetic corneal disorder causing blindness, and this may have been the source of Sharp’s headache problem. See B.S. Free (grandniece) to G. Campbell, 21 March 2012 (held privately).

⁸⁵ MBS journal, 11 January 1896.

wife. In the evening there followed a showing for invited guests. Her journal records this as a great success.⁸⁶

When Adney ended his visit a few days after the exhibition he did not foresee a hurried return to Victoria in August 1897. He arrived to assemble provisions and arrange transport for Alaska and the Klondike, where he was dispatched to chronicle the Yukon gold rush for British and American magazines.⁸⁷ But Sharp was not on the dock to greet him. She was in New Brunswick, drawn into the effort to salvage enough of the family fruit operations to support her aged parents. Even though the Victoria Conservatory was in recess from the spring closing concert until the beginning of October, this absence from Victoria was an enormous distraction from Sharp's work and a drain on her mental energies and finances. Just as Tappan Adney was on the west coast embarking on the project that would bring him modest celebrity, Sharp was gaoled in New Brunswick for unpaid school taxes. On the second such occasion she remained locked up for seventeen days. The consequence of these eastern sojourns was that, from 1896 to 1899, she never managed to return to Victoria in time to participate in the conservatory's proper October opening. In such circumstances it is not to be wondered that both her business credibility and her spirits suffered.

Perhaps it was in reaction to a sense that people were now viewing her enterprise as unstable that Sharp opened the year 1899 with her most aggressive advertising to date. The conservatory was the "only" thorough music school in British Columbia. It taught piano by the "only" technique used by serious pedagogues. It taught voice by the "only true and natural method." This irritating notice appeared in the *Colonist's* New Year's Day issue. The day was not out before a lad was at the door with a letter of complaint from another vocal instructor, Helen Bridges (b. 1848). The *Times's* arts correspondent recorded other objections to Sharp's "galling" unprofessionalism and added his own dismay.⁸⁸

"THE BEST ON THE COAST"

From the time in 1898 when Sharp became engaged to marry a New Yorker it was taken for granted that she would return to the east. In her journal entries for the first half of 1899, the music business competes with the intense energy she put into assembling a trousseau. That summer she made her usual long visit to New Brunswick. In Woodstock, on 12

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 January 1896; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 10 January 1896.

⁸⁷ E.T. Adney, *Klondike Stampede* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 11-12.

⁸⁸ MBS journal, 1 January 1899; *Victoria Daily Times*, 7 January 1899.

September, she and Tappan Adney wed. Among her six bridal attendants was Beth Walker. Sharp's return to Victoria late in 1899 as Mrs. Adney must have been to wind up her operation of the Victoria Conservatory.

Norma Flumerfelt's star pupil recital in the spring of 1899 was the last conservatory event to make a splash in the press.⁸⁹ But soon Norma left Victoria. The mother of Agnes Dier, another of Sharp's gold medalists, also wanted to stop lessons.⁹⁰ Sharp was still sufficiently organized to stage two star pupil recitals early in 1900, but one of them earned only a single sentence in the press and the other – coinciding with civic frenzy over the relief of Ladysmith – was ignored.⁹¹ By now the landlord had sold 288 Yates out from under the conservatory, and the business was in temporary quarters down the street. This was the impetus for Sharp and Walker to start an orderly dissolution. Walker sold her own piano. Sharp did the same, but no sooner was the deal struck than Laura Adams got wind of it and served the buyer with a garnishment order. This obliged him to pay the purchase price to Adams, not Sharp, as partial satisfaction of the court judgment won against Sharp in 1896. Seven years after selling the conservatory business, Adams was finally collecting on the purchase price. Sharp then spoke to a collection agency about realizing on her own delinquent receivables.

The Victoria Conservatory's final star pupil recital was on 29 March 1900. Three days later Minnie Sharp Adney left the Pacific coast forever. A month earlier Ada Saunders, one of her best students, had approached her "re sale of pupils," but Sharp's journal never mentions the idea again. Though Saunders launched herself as a music teacher about this time, there is no evidence that she purchased the pupil list or that saw herself as continuing the conservatory or as successor to it.⁹²

"The best on the coast" was Sharp's own assessment of the Victoria Conservatory.⁹³ She had arrived with only her talent. Within weeks she leveraged friendship with Robert Landells into credit sufficient to buy Laura Adams's conservatory business. Having secured a rather grand headquarters for the operation at 288 Yates Street, she set a high tone through the varied forms of publicity she contrived. Despite unsettled health and pressing debt, she had the sort of imagination that could wrangle a visit from the governor general and the flair to bring it off.

⁸⁹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 21 May 1899.

⁹⁰ MBS journal, 2 and 10 January and 7 June 1899.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1 March 1900; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 27 March 1900.

⁹² In 1903 and again in 1913 there are press references to a Victoria Conservatory of Music (on Yates Street), but they had no obvious relationship to Sharp's former business.

⁹³ *Woodstock Carleton Sentinel*, 10 October 1919.

Crucial to sustaining the enterprise was her success in commanding the loyalty of Beth Walker. Observers agreed that the musical training conservatory pupils received was creditable, even if they came to regard Sharp's assumed superiority as grating and tiresome.

Victoria was accustomed to good musicians moving on. After two years of Sharp's being increasingly distracted from the conservatory business, the city was willing to see her go. Once the press had been her ally; now it did not even notice her departure. Two decades later, when the *Colonist* carried stories from New Brunswick concerning the curious case of a "Mrs. Minnie Bell Adney, music teacher," the first woman in the British Empire to stand for parliamentary election, it displayed no recognition that, as Minnie Sharp, this woman had once been an imaginative contributor to Victoria's musical life.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 12 September, 18 and 21 October 1919. On the context of Sharp's several electoral ventures, see S.M. Risk, "The Magnitude of My Services': Minnie Bell Adney and the Women of Woodstock," in *Making Up the State: Women in 20th-Century Atlantic Canada*, ed. J. Guilford and S. Morton, 35-44 (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2010).