

The Montreal Women's Symphony

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In 1927, Ethel Stark began violin lessons at the age of nine. After graduating from the McGill Conservatorium she became the first Canadian to win a scholarship to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where she spent the next six years. While there, she played in the Curtis Orchestra under Fritz Reiner, North America's leading teacher of conducting and later permanent conductor of the Chicago Symphony. She decided to try to study with him.

Reiner was not enthusiastic about women as soloists, much less conductors. But he liked Stark and respected her musicianship. Those who knew him were surprised when he asked her to play

the Tchaikovsky violin concerto on a coast-to-coast radio broadcast; she was the first woman to solo under his baton. People were even more surprised at his warm praise of her performance. Nonetheless, he refused to have her in his conducting class. When she showed up anyway, he agreed to let her try, partly since she was at Curtis to prepare for a career as a concert violinist and had no intention of becoming a conductor.

When she had finished at Curtis, Stark toured the United States and Mexico. As a hobby she founded and directed the New York Women's Chamber Orchestra. In January, 1940 she went from New York to her native Montreal for a solo per-

ETHEL STARK IN ACTION



formance with the Montreal Symphony. While in the city, she was approached by Madge Bowen who asked her to form and conduct a women's string ensemble. Stark refused. An all-string group could be put together anytime, anywhere she reasoned. What would be more difficult, more interesting and ultimately infinitely more beneficial (since women were not at that time allowed to join major orchestras), would be a full-size all-women's symphony. (1)

That was on Thursday. By the next Tuesday Stark and Bowen had gathered forty musicians (the orchestra's final size would be more than double that number). The first rehearsal took place the next week. Six months later 5000 people gathered at the Chalet at the top of Mount Royal to hear the Bach, Mozart and Saint-Saens program of the first concert of the only orchestra in North America whose members, manager and director were all women, the only orchestra in the world conducted by a woman.

It had been a hectic six months. The first problem was to find musicians. In Canada in 1940, women played the violin, the harp, the piano or possibly the flute. So Stark convinced violinists and pianists who had never considered playing any other instrument to tackle the French horn and the oboe, the clarinet and bass, and even such orchestral ugly ducklings as the tuba and bassoon. She persuaded people who

showed musical inclination but had never played any instrument to learn. She and the other organizers scoured Montreal's music teachers for candidates. They looked for musicians in the bands at night clubs, bars and the Salvation Army.

The women they found ranged in age from 17 to 60. They included factory workers, clerical people, housewives, students, socialites, a seamstress and a photographer's model. Katharine Schultz, pianist and assistant organist at Christ Church Cathedral, took lessons to play the kettle drums. Gertrude Probyn, a member of the Montreal Philharmonic, played double bass. Composer Violet Archer, who now teaches at the University of Alberta, and who was at that time a lecturer at McGill and teacher of piano and theory--played percussion and cymbals.

Instruments presented the next difficulty. Strings were not hard to find, but the metal shortage of World War II made other instruments scarce. Once again, Stark called on friends and friends of friends. They went through second hand stores, they approached school bandleaders. Many of the instruments they located were missing parts. Most needed repairs which orchestra members paid for. They also paid for the lessons that Stark persuaded members of the Montreal Symphony to provide at unusually low rates.

Bowen's family owned all the rolling

stock of the CPR, and she was able to get the employees' cafeteria at Windsor Station as a rehearsal hall for the first few weeks. From there the group moved to the basement of a vacant store which they shared with rats and where they had to string rows of lights in order to read scores. There were no chairs so they spent \$10.00 for 50 second-hand ones which arrived in such bad shape that it took another \$40.00 to make them usable.

In addition to weekly rehearsals of the full orchestra, each section rehearsed once or twice a week. Most orchestra members were also taking lessons. Ethel Stark led all full and many section rehearsals, taught violin thirty hours a week (somebody had to pay for the orchestra's music) and did what only a handful of conductors have ever done: she continued a full career as a concert soloist. "It was," she said quite simply:

very, very difficult. But we tried it and it worked. It worked extremely well. At that first concert 2000 people couldn't even get in. We had a lot of publicity, this was something very new. People came--yes, I think they came out of curiosity, but they came. And we got excellent criticism, so we decide to continue.

The reviews definitely were good. The orchestra was called "vigorous and neat in execution," "radiantly colored," "admirably disciplined," "enthusias-

tic," "able to give a clear intelligent performance of a score." (2) And continue it did. For twenty years there were winter series and annual youth concerts in the aesthetically abysmal, acoustically disastrous Plateau Hall. But in spite of the hall, the orchestra's reputation grew. Although many intended compliments fell far short ("Yes, the Montreal Women's Symphony, though only five years old, is now compared with its big brothers; the infant prodigy has already put up its back hair, wears evening dress, and goes back into society."), (3) critics also took increasing note of the group's quality and enthusiasm, the rarely-heard difficult material they performed regularly and well, the unusually good support they provided for soloists, and the excellence, even brilliance, of their conductor.

A unique and unexpected break came in 1947. Ethel Stark's agent's New York partner spent a day in Montreal before the Symphony's concert. His plan was to take an evening plane back to New York. Her agent had promised to go to the concert and asked the partner to go with him. The partner, having had his fill of business and wanting simply to get home, reluctantly agreed to attend, but only for the opening composition.

The two men were waiting for Miss Stark when she got backstage after the concert. How, came the question, would

she like to take her orchestra to Carnegie Hall? She replied that she was too tired for jokes. Would she discuss the proposal over dinner the next evening? She thought the agent was returning to New York that same night. If she would consider the offer, he would stay another day. Stark's response was characteristically practical. "What did I have to lose? Miracles do happen, and I didn't mind going to the Ritz Carleton for dinner."

They closed the deal over champagne. Not only was the Montreal Women's Symphony to be the first Canadian orchestra to play outside Canada, it would face the notoriously harsh audience of the most prestigious concert hall on this continent.

With the exception of the Montreal Gazette's music critic, Thomas Archer, members of the Canadian press treated the event to characteristic thundering silence. Fortunately for Canadian music history, several American publications covered not only the performance but also the earlier plans and the rehearsal, and as Archer noted in his review, "most of the New York papers thought the concert sufficiently newsworthy to send their first-string critics to cover it."

They were not disappointed. "Tonight's audience," Archer wrote, "was not at all cold. On the contrary, there was a pronounced feeling of warmth and an interest which was decidedly striking."

Elsewhere it was noted that if the musicians "were suffering from nerves they never showed it. So far as steadiness, a consistently fine quality of playing and last but not least, that quality of enthusiasm which has always been a strong point, they might as well have been playing at the Plateau Hall in Montreal instead of the most publicized concert theatre in the Western Hemisphere, not to say the world." Another critic noted that the orchestra played "vigorously, rhythmically, with a large measure of creative fire." The strings were "brilliant and chivalresque," while "Miss Stark's direction told of technical ability, authority and knowledge of her scores." The occasion, all agreed, was "to the honour and credit of the performers." (4)

At the end of his review Archer speculated on the significance of this achievement for the orchestra:

Just what will come out of this debut it is difficult to say at this point. But there is no doubt that the orchestra, and especially Miss Stark, has passed a very prominent milestone in its career. It cannot be what it was before. It has stepped into another sphere and has now been received in that sphere. (5)

The first result was a tour of Windsor, London, Kingston (where tickets were sold out six weeks before the performance) and Toronto where the Symphony played at Massey Hall. There,

at the height of the mutual competition and suspicion between Canada's two largest cities, the women commanded a review headline that read "Montreal Women's Symphony Delights Toronto With Restrained and Scholarly Rendition of Fine Program."(6) The combined Carnegie and Massey Hall successes placed the Women's Symphony firmly in the front ranks of Canadian orchestras.

Press coverage changed significantly after this time. References to the musicians as "schoolgirls" or "grandmothers" largely disappeared. Gone, too, were the anecdotes about Miss Stark's meaning business at rehearsals and not allowing chatter about babies and recipes. What remained was the serious criticism, and in it the praise which attested to the place the orchestra had won and to its continuing excellence. Comments like "one of the finest orchestras in Canada," "its style and execution have made it internationally known," and "an almost faultless performance"(7) appear regularly in the reviews of the next decade. Invitations were received to tour England, France, Japan and the Soviet Union. Several concerts were televised. And the already impressive list of soloists grew.

Soloists, many of whom Stark had met while she was studying at the Curtis Institute, provided unfaltering support for her and the orchestra from the very beginning. Not one of the

people she invited to solo ever refused, despite the fact that there was little or, often, no pay. Many returned for a second or third performance. And they included some of the finest artists then working in North America: vocalists Reisenberg, Desjardins and Elizabeth Schumann; pianists Boris Goldovsky and the Canadian Ellen Ballon; the "Queen of Cellists" Zara Nelsova who was from Winnipeg and who now teaches at Julliard; and, of course, the violinists, Mischa Mischakoff, Orrea Pernel, Benno Rabinof, Mischel Piastro, Carl Flesch, Stark's own teacher Lea Luboshutz and perhaps the finest violinist of his day, Fritz Kreisler.

Then, in 1959 two huge difficulties, one new, one as old as the orchestra, combined to form such overwhelming odds that even seven more years of Ethel Stark's best efforts could not save the orchestra.

It is hardly surprising that money had been a problem from the beginning. Finding financial support for artistic undertakings has always been difficult at best. Even the most established and prestigious organizations still send out regular emergency cries for funds. Every orchestra lives with the fact that ticket sales almost never cover more than half their expenses. In some ways the Women's Symphony was lucky: rehearsal halls were nearly always free; soloists often accepted only travel expenses as their fees; in

twenty-five years the conductor not only never received a salary, she never stopped putting her own money into the orchestra; when the Symphony became a union orchestra and some of the members could not afford union dues, the Montreal Musicians' Guild provided the money; the Musicians' Guilds of Montreal and New York subsidized the trip to Carnegie Hall.

But luck and sporadic donations cannot take the place of a secure financial foundation. Individual and corporate subscribers are a mainstay of men's orchestras. The women never had that kind of backing. Nor did they get the public/political support that is part of the birth right of city symphonies. (As Miss Stark told me, "If a city symphony started to flounder financially, city hall would hear about it; if it went under because of money problems, city hall would be in trouble.") Nor, ironically, could the Women's Symphony ever rely on that traditional chaser of dollars for men's organizations, the women's committee. Finally, since the late fifties, most artistic organizations have relied more and more heavily on government funding. In its entire history, the Women's Symphony received two small grants from the federal government and one from the city of Montreal.

During the 1940s, women playing 'men's' instruments had been treated with curious and amused tolerance. When it became apparent that this was no cir-

cus act but a skilled symphony doing sophisticated work and doing it well, "Montreal swelled its corporate chest with pride and Ethel Stark and her symphonic suffragettes became the toast of the town." (8) Under those circumstances the Women's Symphony could, if not thrive, at least persist, but then active opposition was added to the orchestra's devastating financial vulnerability and life moved from difficult to impossible.

After years of relative indifference, Montreal decided to regenerate the city symphony. (Did the example of another, much younger and highly successful symphony in the city influence that decision?) An imported "big" name composer and conductor, the Russian-born Igor Markevitch, was brought in. Special grants allowed the employment of more fine musicians and the extension of the concert season. This rebuilt orchestra was to be Montreal's pride, but it needed time to build not only a repertoire but confidence and esprit de corps. It was as yet too fragile to tolerate any competition real or potential. The simple existence of the Women's Symphony constituted threat.

A Toronto Star headline read "Montreal Snubs Women's Orchestra." (9) Saturday Night called Stark "a prophet without honor in her home city." (10) Early in 1959 Hugh Thomson wrote:

With the [women's] orchestra up to symphonic strength and giving

fully professional concerts which tend to show up the larger but in no way superior Montreal Symphony Orchestra under its 'name conductor,' Ethel Stark has been given to understand by this city's officials that she and her orchestra 'no longer have a geographical place here'. . . . After nineteen years of struggling, she has brought her orchestra to a professional status that is too hot and too close for comfort to the city symphony. (11)

A year later, commenting on a performance, he noted the spirit that "makes an orchestra something more than a mere aggregation of instrumentalists, and it shows in their playing. Such esprit de corps is none too apparent in the rebuilt Montreal Symphony Orchestra which its city, strange as it may seem, feels obliged to get behind to the neglect or exclusion of the unique and, in every way, admirable Women's Symphony Orchestra." (12)

Regular performances stopped in 1960. The hope was that this would be temporary, but funds and if not support, at least lack of opposition had to be found before the musicians could resume a full schedule. Some of them went into other symphonies. Others did private teaching. Still others formed or joined chamber music groups--hoping that they could be the core of a rejuvenated full orchestra. For a time it looked as if the Symphony might be able to resume in 1964. Then

in January, 1965, twenty-five members came together for a return concert. True to form, the reviews were favourable. One reviewer wrote that the performance "magnetized listeners" and that this "orchestra of quality should give many more concerts." (13) It did not. The struggle was finally over.

In a recent interview, Ethel Stark described her final years with the orchestra. She recalled that an ordinary week in Montreal consisted of three hours' practice each day, one or two full orchestra rehearsals and at least as many section rehearsals, and thirty hours of teaching. In addition there were broadcast recitals (300 of them by 1946), guest appearances and solo tours. She conducted and played with most of the large orchestras in Canada and the United States, and with major orchestras in Mexico, Israel, Japan, Hong Kong, Europe and South America. She was the first Canadian, and only woman, to conduct the Tokyo Asahi Philharmonic and the Nippon Hose Kyokai symphonies in Japan, she was the first woman to conduct the Jerusalem Symphony, the Miami Symphony, the Quebec Symphony, the CBC Symphony, the Concert Hour/l'Heure de Concert and the Toronto Symphony. She went to Toronto in 1946. Two reviewers stated that the orchestra had not sounded so good in years. One columnist called the response to her excellence "The Queen City's Kiss of Death." (14) She has never been invited back.

In 1952 she founded and directed the Canadian Choir, which represented Canada at the World Festival of Song in Israel and introduced Canadian composers to that country. She has taught at the Catholic University of Washington and at Sir George Williams and Concordia Universities and the Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art and the Cardinal Leger Institute in Montreal. She has provided scholarships for music students in Canada and Israel. She was the subject of a National Film Board "personality short subject" which was shown in 300 theatres in Canada and translated into seven other languages.

A review of a performance Miss Stark gave when she was 16 noted her remarkably full tone on the violin. It also mentioned her fine musical expression and called her "a fine technician" who "never allows herself to be caught in the snare of virtuosity." (15) Such comments became commonplace in later reviews. She has also been called "gifted," "a genius," "a leading virtuoso violinist," "one of the most brilliant and versatile Canadian musicians," while as a conductor she has been termed "a genius; a patient, persevering leader; a strict disciplinarian" whose presence is arresting." (16) Note has been taken, too, of her fine relationship to the musicians under her baton:

Miss Stark not only has music in her blood. She has the kind of devotion and dedication that

Miss Stark not only has music in her blood. She has the kind of devotion and dedication that gives her the ability to inspire musicians to produce with brilliance the melodies. (17)

The orchestra under Ethel Stark's direction gave him [Boris Goldovsky] admirable support. Miss Stark proved herself a Mozartian by being at one with Mr. Goldovsky in that highly civilized give and take which is the special property of the composer's concerto style. (18)

One of the women who was in the Women's Symphony from the beginning said, "Idealism, love of music, the chance to play symphony, and perhaps more than anything else, the faith and encouragement of our conductor. That's what has kept us going." (19)

With so much opportunity abroad, why would a person stay in a country which at that time had little regard for any of its artists and put much of her time and energy into an orchestra that would never cease to be an emotional financial drain? Miss Stark wanted to make a place for women in symphony playing, and hoped that the example of the Women's Symphony would pave the way. She wanted to live and work in her home country and contribute to its culture; she wanted to be a permanent rather than a guest

conductor; and she was willing to pay
the price.

I asked her what she would tell a
girl who wanted to be a conductor:



ETHEL STARK AND THE MONTREAL WOMEN'S
SYMPHONY IN REHEARSAL AT CARNEGIE HALL,
1948

If she had the backing, the wherewithal, I'd size her up to see whether she had the stamina. If she did, I'd tell her to make her decision and act on it. It would be a little easier now than when I did it, but it would still be difficult--for anybody. Of course it's easier for men but it's not easy for anybody at any time. You know it's going to be hard. But if you want it badly enough, you don't think about that, you go after it and don't let anybody stop you. There's been progress. That's what we're fighting for.

How much progress has there been? In large symphonies, at least a fourth of the musicians are usually women. "Women as composers haven't gone far. For soloists, it's not great, but we're fighting. We'll get there." What about women on the podium? "There are two or three women conductors in the States. That's not bad, but it's largely because of International Women's Year. What happened to International Women's Year, anyway? It didn't work. . . It didn't even really happen. Here we're not doing enough. We've got to help our own."

Stark feels very strongly that it's doubly hard for Canadians because of the at best shabby treatment this country still metes out to its artists:

People who go through a career in anything, not just music, not just women, but Canadians, should push as much as possible for their own. Many, many people built this country culturally from scratch, many like me. We just get the groundwork laid and then others bring in often inferior people from the outside, from the U.S. or England. They push our talent out. The good ones only come back when they've made it. It's terrible, but they have to do it; they can't get work here, and when they can, they can't get a decent fee. I wanted to stay in Canada, and I had to get most of my education elsewhere.

In the States, if an orchestra had to have a woman guest conductor, the media would get behind it, it would be publicized all over the place. Canadians are afraid to stick their necks out. Here, if an orchestra had to get a woman, they wouldn't even consider a Canadian, they'd bring somebody in from outside, and then they wouldn't publicize it and nobody would even know it had happened.

Throughout her career, Stark has made a point of playing new and Canadian composers works. For example, the Women's Symphony premiered several of Violet Archer's compositions while

she was in the orchestra. I asked whether she had a policy of helping Canadian composers. "No, it's not 'helping.' It's an exchange. It only makes sense: they give to us and we give back to them. They do tremendous things for the country; we should benefit them. But we don't, so of course they leave."

The transformation that occurs when she talks about conducting must be seen to be believed. Her whole being becomes an instrument. The hands and arms, which have been moving throughout the conversation, take on a new presence and power!

Conducting. . . it's hard to say . . . conducting's a feeling. . . It's such a marvelous feeling to take 80 or 90 people, individuals with their own minds, their own opinions, people who are often opinionated--that's fine, they're strong people--and mould that into almost one human being, to get back what you want from that orchestra. We cooperate in a wonderful event. What could be more beautiful and greater in this world, especially in this jet age when you walk down the street and there are people flying over your

head in airplanes and walking under your feet in tunnels? Music, and the arts in general, are the only uplifting thing we have. It's a very spiritual experience. Whether I play the violin or play on an orchestra, I'm very moved and I like to feel that the orchestra is moved. Otherwise, we're not working together. It's exhausting, satisfying, mental and physical, heart and soul work.

When asked whether she'd lead a women's symphony again she replied, "I'd have to think about it, it's a big undertaking. If somebody came with enough money, I might consider it. . . I might do it again. . . I might. . . . It all comes down to money, you know. If you have the money that's three-quarters of the battle won."

But, after all, Stark is pleased with what she has done. Whatever else happened, she set out to make a place for women in the world of symphony orchestras, and knowing that she has accomplished precisely that gives her tremendous satisfaction. Very early in our interview, she interrupted herself in mid-sentence with, "It may sound as if I think I did big things Well. . . I think I did."

NOTES

1. Much of the information in this piece came out of interviews with Ethel Stark in Montreal in June, 1977. Unless otherwise indicated, quotes of Miss Stark are taken from those interviews.
2. Montreal Star (July 25, 1940), p. 12.
3. Winifred E. Wilson, "The Montreal Women's Symphony as Infant Prodigy," Saturday Night, vol. 61 (Nov. 10, 1945), 31.
4. Montreal Gazette (April 3, 1948). Note: many of the newspaper articles used were obtained from the papers' morgues and were labelled by date only. Where possible, page numbers are included in citations.
5. Winifred E. Wilson, "With Violin and Baton," Saturday Night, vol. 63 (April 7, 1948), 37.
6. Toronto Telegram (February 8, 1946).
7. Montreal Gazette (November 7, 1950), Montreal Gazette (October 17, 1949).
8. Hugh Thomson, "The Cold Toast of the Town," Saturday Night, vol. 75 (August 6, 1960), 25.
9. Toronto Star (March 7, 1959), p. 25.
10. Toronto Star (March 7, 1959), p. 25.
11. Thomson, "Cold Toast," 25.
12. Thomson, "Cold Toast," 25.
13. Montreal Gazette (January 12, 1965), p. 8.
14. Toronto Star (March 7, 1959), p. 25.
15. Montreal Gazette (November 30, 1933).
16. See reviews throughout this period in the Montreal Star, the Montreal Gazette. See also New York Times (October 23, 1947), p. 29, Wilson, "Infant Prodigy," *passim*, Iris Smallwood, "Women's Symphony," Maclean's Magazine, vol. 59 (February 1, 1946), 10, 42-43.
17. Montreal Gazette (April 28, 1976).
18. Montreal Gazette (October 17, 1949).
19. Montreal Gazette (December 17, 1949).