

## Book Review

### JOHN BECKWITH

Schabas, Ezra. *Sir Ernest MacMillan: The Importance of Being Canadian*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. xviii + 374 pp., illus. ISBN 0-8020-2849-7 (cloth 35.00), ISBN 0-8020-7871-0 (paper 18.95)

Of twenty-seven book-length biographies and nine autobiographies listed under “Musicians — Biographies” in the most recent Canadian bibliographic guide to Canadian music (Morey 1997), this work is one of a handful of seriously researched items. A strong successor to the author’s study of the pioneer U.S. conductor Theodore Thomas (Schabas 1989), it well deserves the success it has enjoyed, including publication in both hard-cover and paperback editions and the 1995 Toronto Book Award (a first for a publication on music). In fleshing out our sense of MacMillan and his era, it valuably fills a gap in Canadian-music studies. Although a selection of MacMillan’s writings is announced for 1997 publication by Dundurn Press, his incomplete memoirs have never been published, and none of the previous treatments by other writers — popular and scholarly articles, birthday tributes, and the like — has exhibited this kind of historical and cultural scope.

Even more than with Thomas, Schabas had here promising riches on which to base his research. MacMillan (1893-1973) — organist, conductor, composer, scholar, educator, administrator — was the dominant figure in many, perhaps most, facets of Canadian musical life from the 1920s through the 1960s. His career from *Wunderkind* to craggy eminence is full of well-documented detail and variety, to which Schabas responds with both enthusiasm and fine critical judgment. The inspired sub-title draws attention to MacMillan’s central role in many organizational efforts espousing a national identity in our music; it is also a reminder that during his World War I incarceration in a German prison camp the young MacMillan acted in amateur theatricals and

sometimes played female roles, one of them being Lady Bracknell in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Admitting to a keen admiration for MacMillan, Schabas nevertheless manages to give a fair and rounded account of the two crisis situations MacMillan found himself in during the early 1950s, the "Symphony Six" ruckus (in which MacMillan the conductor was criticized for failing to support six Toronto Symphony players under attack by commie-hunters of the U. S. immigration service) and the University of Toronto's reorganization of its music programs during which MacMillan the dean resigned in disagreement). The latter especially has been studied by several other writers, but Schabas's version is the most meticulous, drawing on hitherto little-known archival materials.

While crediting MacMillan with first leading the Toronto Symphony into the prominent position it still occupies among North American orchestras, Schabas suggests weaknesses in his conducting style and abilities, My own early immersion in live-orchestral listening took place at MacMillan's concerts, and I retain vivid memories of many standard works as he performed them. Hence I, felt defensive in reading some of Schabas's strictures. However, he is dead right that the last few years of MacMillan's TSO régime saw a decline (ch. 16, "Successes and Failures"). Was MacMillan's departure in 1955 a "forced resignation"? That may be a taboo question.

Recent performances and CDs have rekindled interest in MacMillan's compositions, among them a brilliant orchestral Overture and the first String Quartet by a Canadian-born composer. His concert arrangements, derived from Canadian traditional and native sources, are similarly undergoing renewed appreciation and revival. Schabas reviews (ch. 6, "Canada's Musical Heritage") the absorption of MacMillan the scholar in many aspects of this repertoire—an area of his study which will have special interest for readers of this *Journal*.

Central to this part of the biography is MacMillan's long association with the ethnologist Marius Barbeau. He set a number of

Barbeau's transcriptions of French-language songs, and in the summer of 1927 spent three weeks with Barbeau and a field crew at Arrandale in northern British Columbia, recording and transcribing music of the Tsimshian nation.

Barbeau records that he and his party collected 139 songs that year. His selection of 75 of these, transcribed and analyzed, was intended as vol. XVIII of *Publications of the American Ethnological Society*, but the uncertainties of working with a German publisher in the late 1930s resulted in a long delay; the book did not appear until 1951, almost a quarter-century after their collecting expedition. Although, in common with most other authorities, Schabas credits MacMillan with making all the transcriptions, Barbeau writes: "the majority of the musical transcriptions were made by myself, and eight of them by Dr. (now Sir) Ernest MacMillan. . . ." (Garfield et al. 1951: 99). But what is the exact story? Of the transcriptions reproduced in the book, eleven (not "eight") are ascribed to MacMillan: nos. 14, 15, 26, 29, 32, 38, 46, 52, 69, 72, and 73.

As Schabas notes, MacMillan made successful concert arrangements of three songs in the collection (*Three Songs of the West Coast*, based on nos. 46, 59, and 29; no. 59 is not among the transcriptions ascribed to him. The collection has been drawn on by other composer-arrangers: nos. 33 and 56 for Leo Smith's *Indian Songs*, no. 21 for the second of my own *Four Love Songs*, and no. 69 for the beginning motive of the lullaby "Kuyas" in Harry Somers's opera *Louis Riel*. Schabas quotes (p. 87) Barbeau's recollection of one song whose transcription caused MacMillan special pains by its polyrhythmic character; this is evidently no. 73, where the vocal line is transcribed in 9/8 metre and the accompanying drum beat in 6/4. In a colourful interview recording (Barbeau 1957), Barbeau himself sings, to drum background, three of the songs.

An isolated and not-repeated episode, the Arrandale sojourn and its spinoffs nonetheless had real importance in MacMillan's development. His work with the music and his propagandizing about it realized, in a modest but genuine way Barbeau's often-expressed hope



that the collecting of traditional music would inspire the creative musicians of the country.

The two editions of *Sir Ernest MacMillan* are not identical: the paperback, issued a year or so after the original hardcover, contains a number of small corrections. All in all, this readable and timely (indeed, overdue) life-and-times account of a complex and fascinating Canadian is highly recommended.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Barbeau, Marius. (1957). *My Life in Recording Canadian and Indian Folk-Lore*. Folkways LP FG 3502.
- Garfield, Viola E., Paul S. Wingert, and Marius Barbeau. ([1951]). *The Tsimshian: Their Arts and Music*. New York: J. J. Augustin.
- Morey, Carl. (1997). *Music in Canada: A Research and Information Guide*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Schabas, Ezra. (1989). *Theodore Thomas: America's Conductor and Builder of Orchestras, 1835-1905*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

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*John Beckwith's fourth opera Taptoo!, composed 1993-94 to a libretto by James Reaney, is a semi-documentary treatment of the founding of York. Later this year, The Golden Dog Press, Ottawa, will publish Beckwith's Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961-94.*