

**Alexander Brott: My Lives in Music.** By Alexander Brott and Betty Nygaard King. Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 2005. xiii, 228 p., ill. ISBN 0-88962-854-8. \$24.95.

Alexander Brott was one of the most influential musicians working in Canada during the last two-thirds of the twentieth century. He was born in Montreal in 1915 and died there in 2005. To say that he was also a busy man would be a huge understatement. His long life was filled with achievements that most of us can only dream of. He made things happen.

The title of this book is almost inevitable, given that Brott was active and successful in so many fields. As a violinist, composer, conductor and impresario he seemed to live at least three lives simultaneously, remaining active into his late eighties. He even seemed to have sown the seeds of a dynasty, but, although both of his sons have had good musical careers, none of the grandchildren has become a professional musician.

Compiled by Betty Nygaard King from a variety of sources including interviews with Alexander himself as well as most of the Brott family and access to their archives, the book is divided into two parts. Part 1 lays out the early days in Montreal. Brott's first life begins with his marriage to the equally formidable Lotte, followed by their playing careers and the founding of the McGill Chamber Orchestra, which continues today under the leadership of son Boris.

When a problem with one of his fingers ended his playing career, Brott started his second life as a composer, then his third as a conductor and entrepreneur. Part 2 is written in a

slightly more reflective vein with some interesting anecdotes and a fond look back at his accomplishments.

The two parts of the book are preceded by a note, preface, acknowledgements, and foreword by each of his sons. After the main text come two appendices, one, strangely, a history of Montreal orchestras, the other a list of Brott's compositions, first original works, then the arrangements. They are in alphabetical order, including the duration of each piece, year of composition, and a reference number that is not explained. The book ends with an index which turns out to be unreliable.

This is not an easy book to read or review. Several times I almost gave up. Too much self-congratulation tends to diminish one's admiration for the achievements of this amazing family. There is no doubt that Brott was at the centre of some of the great steps forward in Canadian music, but I often wished the family had found a scholar or a critic to do the telling. It seems vain to refer to oneself as extending one's technique "to the virtuoso level" which he does twice (25, 46). Again on page 54 he refers to the "great virtuosity" required to do his job. Even as early as page 2 he refers to himself as an accomplished violinist. I'm sure he was, but....

By this time we have also been told, once by each son and once by Alex himself (with more to come), that they were survivors. Well, aren't we all! A lesson early on is that fate is capricious, so we should just get on with what we

should be doing. Alex certainly did that. Boris, in his foreword, says you have to keep “finding ways to re-invent yourself.” This book is full of re-invention!

Perhaps the most audacious chapter deals with “The Kingston Adventure”—although it’s not listed in the index. In the mid-sixties, Alexander Brott became Music Director of the Kingston Symphony Orchestra. He accepted this, he says, because he “still had the odd, free weekend” (97). Despite Lotte’s “consummate abilities as a manager” (153) and “imaginative concert programs” (154), the adventure ended badly. The Symphony board “didn’t understand” their “careful and expert planning and scheduling” (160). When in 1980 their contracts were not renewed, the Symphony returned to being “the parochial orchestra” (160) it was before. The chapter is going to raise some blood pressure in Kingston!

It’s not all turgid self-promotion. Not quite. The last couple of chapters are touching and made me feel perhaps I was being hard on the man. He clearly had a sense of humour and preserved many loyal friendships throughout his long life. His family apparently remained devoted to him, and he to them, especially to his beloved Lotte,

who died in 1998. Without her much of his success would have been impossible.

But perhaps the saddest criticism of the book is that it has been so poorly proofread and edited, despite the editing claims of at least six people. To cite just a few examples: co-author Betty Nygaard King is de-capitalized on the title page and appears as Bettry in the preface. On page 41 there is a reference to a non-existent discography at the back of the book. Even well-known musicians’ names are misspelled or appear in two different forms, e.g., Oistrach (89) and Oistrakh (35, et al.), Rostropovich (35 and photo caption) and Rostropovitch (89), and Entremont for Entremont. Yet Brott, in referring to the Kingston Symphony board members who criticized his hiring of big-name soloists, says “some of them would not have been able to spell these artists’ names, let alone how to engage them” (156). Ah, the irony! Most unfortunately, one of the pictures of Lotte appears to have been taken the year after she died.

Alexander Brott’s contribution deserves to be remembered and assessed, but more worthily and objectively than this.

*Peter Allen  
Kingston, Ontario*