

Counterpoint to a City: A History of the Women's Musical Club of Toronto. By Robin Elliott. Toronto: ECW Press, 1997. 249 p. \$22.95 ISBN 1-55022-306-2

Robin Elliott has used the opportunity of a centennial commission from the Women's Musical Club (WMC) to produce an admirable research study of a Canadian musical institution. The preface reviews previous articles and books about the club, noting that each "had something interesting to say about the WMC, but ... also said much about the individual interest of the respective authors." Elliott lets a couple of pages go by for the reader to speculate on what his interests might be, then allows he hopes to "shed some light on ... a few of these talented and generous women, as well as on the organization that they created and nurtured," light which will reveal a "rich life in music or a significant contribution to arts patronage."

The initial chapter, "Setting the Stage," describes the architecture, industry, and population mix of Toronto at the end of the 19th century, notes the social situation of women's organizations generally in the western world, and cites American studies and examples of other Canadian musical clubs, concluding that Toronto displayed a typical division of musical life into male/public and female/private spheres. There were many musical clubs, at least eight of them for women only. "Origins" unravels the confusions created by earlier accounts, of the WMC name and date of establishment, and gives the musical and personal backgrounds of the "remarkable and accomplished individuals who founded the club."

The next 10 chapters, with evocative titles from "Back from the Brink" to "Look Back in Pride," are a decade-by-decade account of the club's concert-giving activities, often with biographical snippets about the artists, and reviewers' comments on performances. Near disasters - late arrivals, replacement artists,

conflicts with other events, among them Armistice Day in 1918 - are related cheerfully. Details of the lives of successive presidents (and sometimes of their husbands) are given, with the rise and fall of membership numbers, the vicissitudes of changes in performance venues, and information about annual meetings and other committee members.

In early days, the active members were accomplished musicians who had married bankers and industrialists, and the 200 concerts they organized in the first 10 years were private, and therefore socially acceptable, performance opportunities. The gradual "transformation ... into an organization which only sponsored professional concerts," mainly of chamber music, was made by the end of the 1920s. Toronto critics who then noticed them more and more are quoted extensively, sometimes (e.g., p. 176) it seems, with the purpose of illuminating the reviewer's foibles as much as the development of the club. Otherwise, with the exception of the inevitable Sir Thomas Beecham anecdote in the context of his carrying on with a pianist who once appeared for the WMC, the writing sticks to a sober scholarly trek through program archives and special collections, society columns and musical reports in newspapers and periodicals, with tentative side trips into the literature of the women's musical club movement, and of current studies in class and gender.

The main title of the book, *Counterpoint to a City*, receives, I think, very much shorter shrift. After the first chapter, references to the urban situation of the WMC are few, far between, and unspecific. In the chapter covering the late 1940s, the club is blandly described as "well-positioned to benefit from

the postwar expansion of Toronto's musical life." The "great many changes in the musical life of Toronto" between Betty Jean Hagen's 1953 and 1987 recitals appearances are left to the reader to discover elsewhere. Almost the last allusion to the WMC's context is on p. 165 concerning the 1962-63 season, and at three sentences is the most detailed in the book. And the notes of occasional conflict with another city musical event suggest dissonance rather than counterpoint.

Elliott first mentions the club's "great skill in introducing important young artists" in the context of programs mounted during World War I, notes that by the late 1950s "the reputation of the WMC as a discoverer of new talent was at an all-time high," and describes the 1963 debut of Hermann Prey as providing "further confirmation of the WMC's reputation for introducing the most exciting young singers of the day to Toronto audiences." Nearer the end, he cites the contracting of Angela Hewitt several months before she won the 1985 Bach competition as "further confirmation of the WMC's uncanny ability to spot rising young talent." An indexed list of WMC concerts from 1899-1997

prepared by Hanna and Fred Feuerriegel proves it: many of the most respected artists of the past and present were indeed sponsored for the first time in Toronto, Canada, or even North America by the WMC, from Wanda Landowska and Joseph Szigeti in the 1920s, through Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Leontyne Price in the 1950s, to Elly Ameling and the Tokyo String Quartet in the 1970s. However, except for a couple of passing references to the use of a New York artists' agency, the actual working methods of the concert convenors are not explained. The underlying mystery of how they did it may remain, but who they were and what they did are revealed (Elliott's stated purpose) in this official history in generous detail, supported by extensive footnotes, an abstract, bibliography and list of sources, various appendices, and an index in which, as in the text women are listed with their own personal and maiden names, not (as they were in their lives) by their husbands' initials.

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Healey Willan: Life and Music. By F.R.C. Clarke. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c1983, 1997 paperback reprint. 300 p. \$24.95 ISBN 0-8020-8136-3

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Healey Willan's death, so a reissue of a volume dedicated to his life is not unexpected. Several events are planned to honor the life and work of a man who is still regarded as one of Canada's greatest composers, and certainly one of its most prolific. Although he is mainly remembered for his sacred vocal and organ music, Willan wrote in many forms. His sacred and secular works appear regularly on concert programs.

His opera *Deirdre* was recently performed in Toronto by Opera in Concert. As a parishioner of the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Toronto, where Willan was precentor, organist and choirmaster for 47 years, I hear and sing his music almost every Sunday.

In recent years, both the Church of St. Mary Magdalene Choir and the Vancouver Chamber Choir have produced compact discs