

From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall. By Maria Noreiga Rachwal. Toronto: Second Story Press, 2015. viii, 197 pp., illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-927583-87-6.

I must admit that before reading this book, Ethel Stark was a name I knew only peripherally. Clearly I was the poorer for this omission for, as Maria Noriega Rachwal outlines in her book, Stark's achievements as a musician and conductor are nothing short of stunning. I am persuaded to say that Stark's story should be required material for courses in Canadian social history—and not just those contained in a music curriculum.

Although well researched, Rachwal's prose is geared more towards the general public rather than the music professional. This is not to dismiss the author's achievement; on the contrary, her wise decision ensures that Stark's story will reach a wider audience. Nonetheless, the author's somewhat casual writing style does occasionally get her into problems, a point about which I will comment later.

Rachwal devotes the opening chapter to Stark's childhood, family environment, and college education at the Curtis Institute of Music. The author makes a convincing argument that her family's passionate commitment to civic duty and human rights was vital in shaping the dogged independence that was a part of Stark's personality.

Born in 1910, Ethel Stark's amazing life includes several firsts: she was the first Canadian to be accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music; while at Curtis, her steadfast resolve led to her being accepted as the first female student in Fritz Reiner's conducting class—no mean achievement, as Rachwal points out, given the Hungarian conductor's notorious male chauvinism. Indeed, Reiner did not favour female musicians in general, and especially soloists. The fact that Stark was hand-picked by the conductor to be the violin soloist for a nationwide radio broadcast of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto with the Curtis orchestra makes the circumstances surrounding this performance all the more remarkable.

While it is clear that Stark was an excellent violinist, garnering a respectable CV both as a soloist and chamber musician, her most significant contribution was as the founding artistic director and conductor of the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra. The account of Stark's fortitude to cultivate and shape an amateur orchestra to a high level of musicianship within a short period of seven years is astonishing. As Rachwell notes, at the time of the orchestra's formation, prejudices were ample against women not just performing in an orchestra, but even particular instruments (for instance, brass, double bass, and percussion). There are other noteworthy aspects of the orchestra, though. For instance, women from all socioeconomic levels were admitted; Stark's sole requirement, regardless of skill level, was a commitment and love of music. Even more unusual was



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Stark's invitation to Violet Louise Grant to be the first clarinet of the orchestra. It is quite likely that Grant was the first black musician to hold a regular chair of any North American orchestra.

The orchestra's greatest achievement was its performance at Carnegie Hall on October 22, 1947, which also ranks as a milestone for Canadian culture overall. Despite its mere seven-year existence, Stark's orchestra was the first Canadian group to perform at Carnegie. The accomplishment is all the more impressive when one considers that older, more high-profile orchestras such as the Toronto Symphony Orchestra had been attempting to schedule a concert at the venue for decades.

With the ever-higher standards Stark placed on the orchestra, members during the 1960s began to leave the group to accept positions with other, predominantly male, orchestras. Further, with the changing societal expectations for women musicians, the need for a venue where they could be heard gradually became redundant, and in 1968 the orchestra disbanded. During its thirty-year existence, Stark's ensemble advanced the cause of equity and human rights, shattering many barriers; this remains its lasting legacy.

Rachwell's narrative style occasionally runs into trouble. For instance, Stark is identified at various points as Ethel Stark, Ethel, Stark, and Ms. Stark. Further, the book contains grammatical lapses that could have been resolved with a keen pair of editorial eyes. The book is well researched, although there are some glaring, unexplained gaps. Consider, for instance, the narrative surrounding the orchestra's first rehearsal. Rachwell goes to great lengths to describe the work leading up to the rehearsal, including obtaining the space and instruments—she even builds up the tension by describing Stark's initial downbeat. Yet Rachwell neglects to identify one key element: what was the first work the orchestra performed at the rehearsal? Another gap involves the repertoire the orchestra played during the early years. While the standard Austro-German, French and Russian composers are noted on page 90, one name stuck out for me: the English composer William Walton, who also is the sole twentieth-century composer on the list (unfortunately, the work is not identified). I would have very much liked to have read how and why Walton came to be the composer the orchestra performed—since he was definitely not a household name in Canada during the 1940s.

The book contains a wealth of photos both of musicians and the orchestra. There is an appendix of endnotes (oddly entitled "footnotes") and a serviceable bibliography. Surprisingly, there is no index.

This is an important story of a remarkable woman whose push against the established norms led her to form one of the most remarkable music ensembles of the mid-twentieth century. *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall* is highly recommended for all Canadian libraries.

Edward Jurkowski
University of Lethbridge