



[*Massey Hall*](#). David McPherson. Foreword by Jann Arden. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2021. 257 pp. ISBN 9781459744998.

Reviewed by Rob van der Blik (York University)

David McPherson's *Massey Hall* is an attractive compilation of anecdotes, personal testimonies, photos, and brief historical summaries starting with the opening of the venue in 1894, and ending with the recently revealed renovations of 2020, which may well prove to be the resurrection of the "Grand Old Lady of

Shuter Street." McPherson conducted over one hundred interviews with performers, promoters, and former and current staff at the venue to supplement the historical facts with personal insight and opinion, most of them contemporary and distinctly rhapsodic. The lingering theme throughout these accounts is one of fond retrospection and respect. For many, Massey Hall is a shrine, whether from the perspective of performers, who may have viewed their performance as the pinnacle of a career, or an audience member, who has had the opportunity to hear a favourite artist in what has regularly been described as an intimate and acoustically superior environment.

McPherson's account of the early history of Massey Hall draws on William Kilbourn's *Intimate Grandeur: One Hundred Years at Massey Hall* (Stoddart, 1993).¹ Kilbourn's book is by far the more historically oriented and detailed of the two, delving into founder Hart Massey's story; his selection of architect Sidney Badgley, whose Moorish shapes and rich colours defined the hall; and the beginnings of the long-term residencies of the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and Toronto Symphony Orchestra. And, significantly, Kilbourn also recounts how the longstanding grievances launched by the musicians of the TSO about not being able to hear each other on stage and having to store their instruments in a "dungeon" were first addressed during the residency of Seiji Ozawa during the period 1965–69. It is worth mentioning this since, as gleaned from the numerous quotes in McPherson's account, the sound of the hall was considered outstanding by both visiting performers and audiences and had been favourably compared to the likes of Carnegie Hall, Symphony Hall



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¹ Kilbourn's book is available on the Internet Archive website (<https://archive.org/details/intimategrandeur0000kilb>). He describes Hart Massey as a "sire of tall sons, protector of women and children, guide to the weak and uncertain, absolute captain of industry... [He] took offence readily, was swift to fury and unfairness, and given to withering sarcasm" (p. 14).

(Boston), and Concertgebouw (Amsterdam). But the 1960s was a period when the new was favoured over the old, and with the burgeoning role of acousticians in the mix, classical musicians, in particular, began to demand modernized performance spaces. Just as the New York Philharmonic ended up moving, in 1960, from Carnegie Hall to Lincoln Center's newly built Philharmonic Hall, which proved to be acoustically inferior, the TSO followed suit two decades later with a move to the "New Massey Hall," or Roy Thomson Hall, completed in 1982. And like the Philharmonic Hall, Toronto's new hall immediately proved to be an acoustic failure, with its highly suspect moveable plexiglass sound deflectors and interior concrete cladding; it took several decades before fixes were implemented.

McPherson's contribution to documenting the ongoing history of Massey Hall clearly lies in the rich recollections of the many who have performed, worked, and heard music there. In the early twentieth century, the hall was used for a wide selection of events, including political rallies, comedians, boxing and wrestling, and even a typewriting championship. But its history was also marked by iconic concerts such as the appearance of Charlie Parker and his cohort in 1953, labeled as the "Greatest Jazz Concert Ever," Bob Dylan and the Band (1965), Neil Young (1971), Rush (1976), The Police (1980), Tragically Hip (1988), and Ronnie Hawkins' sixtieth birthday party in 1995. Gordon Lightfoot marked several career milestones at Massey Hall over the course of 165 performances there, beginning with his debut in 1967 and ending with the reopening of the hall in 2021 after three years of renovations. McPherson even dedicates a chapter to the singer-songwriter titled "The House of Gord." Many of these concerts are acknowledged and highlighted by McPherson through quotes and illustrations, judiciously placed in capsules that separate them from the main text. In all, it gives more the impression of a journalistic scrapbook than a history but, given the fact that Kilbourn had previously documented Massey Hall's history up until its 100th anniversary, McPherson's strategy is perhaps the best way to continue the story.

I would have liked to see a more systematic approach to documenting (perhaps in the form of an appendix) who played and when they played, with a breakdown by genre, since it is clear that this distribution has changed significantly throughout the hall's 130-year history. But I do believe the book is successful in what it sets out to do, which is to bring to life an essentially inanimate object with a storied social history attached to it. With Massey Hall's "revitalization" and reopening in 2021, to which McPherson devotes an entire chapter, it should, once again, be able to compete with the by now numerous other venues that have sprung up in Toronto over the years. And to give the final word to McPherson: "Massey Hall is regarded as one of the finest sounding concert spaces in the world. Reputations are built note by note, melody by melody, one lyrical line at a time. Each performance builds on this reputation. One acoustic. One voice. No amplification. That's when the grand dame of music halls truly shines" (p. 177).