

Growing with Canada: The Émigré Tradition in Canadian Music. By Paul Helmer. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xii, 388 pp. ISBN 978-0773535817. \$49.95

Paul Helmer's book, *Growing with Canada: The Émigré Tradition in Canadian Music*, documents the emergence and rapid expansion of post-secondary music education in what was then an obscure corner of a decaying empire. In it, the author explains how a smattering of mainly German-speaking émigrés transformed institutions previously run by an equally small group of 'Great Britons,' whose mission it was to elevate local musical practice to meet imperial standards. As we know, by mid-century those standards had become shabby and tattered, if they had ever been anything but mediocre in the first place. Barbara Pentland famously complained that before 1950 the art music establishment outside of Francophone Québec was run by a few "imported English organists," whose creative contribution had been negligible at best.¹ Thirty years later, John Beckwith, in a moment of nostalgic generosity, noted that among his former teachers he had found "good craft and ideas."² Alas, even this must be questioned. Looking back on his studies at the University of Toronto that he began soon after his arrival in 1940, Oskar Morawetz admitted that the teaching was "terribly primitive at the time...terribly bad."³

Growing with Canada is unfortunately a disappointment. Whereas it attempts to tell too much, it ends up telling too little. In preparing his book, Helmer conducted seventy-nine interviews over a ten-year period (1997-2007) with the émigrés, members of their families and their students. This allows the author to dwell at length on fine biographical detail, giving the book a lively, personal character. Thus the body of the text, together with the thumb-nail biographies of the 121 émigrés in an appendix, constitutes a fascinating pool of information that will make the book a significant source for scholars. However, a consequence of this strong focus on biography is that large and significant portions of the context within which these individual stories unfold go unmentioned.

First, the book's title is misleading: it should be *Growing with English Canada*. At its core (chapters 4, 5 and 6), the book explains how Arnold Walter and Helmut Blume

¹ Barbara Pentland, "Canadian Music, 1950," *Northern Review* 3, no. 3 (February-March 1950): 43.

² John Beckwith, *Music Papers: Articles and Talks by a Canadian Composer, 1961-1994* (Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 1997), 101.

³ Oskar Morawetz cited in, Friedemann Sallis, "Deconstructing the Local: The Aesthetic Space and Geographic Place of Oskar Morawetz's String Quartet No. 5 'A Tribute to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart' (1991)," *Canadian University Music Review/Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 24, no. 1 (2003): 10. Morawetz obtained his BMus and DMus degrees from the University of Toronto in 1944 and 1953, respectively. However, as Helmer correctly points out, he was "largely self-taught" (160).

were able to transform the faculties of music at the University of Toronto and McGill, respectively. Helmer also addresses some collateral development in smaller urban centres (primarily Halifax and Vancouver). Missing is an examination of the crucially important development of art music in Quebec, outside of its English enclaves. Given the central importance of Toronto and Montreal for the development of art music in Canada, the author should have focused his attention on one or the other. This would have allowed him to expand his rather narrow time frame beyond the arbitrary cut-off date of 1948 that he used to decide who would be discussed and who would be left out. Restructuring the project in this way would have permitted the inclusion of such prominent émigrés as John P.L. Roberts and Maryvonne Kendergi (both mentioned in passing, on pages 165 and 201 respectively). This is a travesty because their enormous contributions are completely ignored in favour of such luminaries as Carl Bamberger, who spent one season (1947-48) in Montreal as conductor of the Little Symphony before moving back to the United States (205-6). As it is, Helmer, lost in the solitude of another age, has left us with a one-sided, distorted version of the story he is trying to tell.

Second, Helmer glosses over the difficult and darker sides of this country's history that pertain directly to his topic. At the outset, he baldly states that "once the émigrés had decided to immigrate to Canada they faced no real impediments because of race, religion, or nationality" (8). This is a curious statement. Others have noted that during the first half of the twentieth century, Canada was a country "permeated with racism and anti-Semitism [and] arguably had the worst record of any Western nation in accepting Jews attempting to escape the Nazis."⁴ To be fair, three pages (10-12) are devoted to a discussion of this issue.⁵ Surely the topic warrants a more detailed examination. Is Helmer suggesting that, once in the country, émigré Jewish musicians were somehow spared bigotry, hatred and intolerance? Though levels of anti-Semitism may not have been as severe as they were in their homelands, for Jewish immigrants arriving here before the Second World War, "Canada was not the 'Golden Land' for which they had hoped."⁶ The reader of Helmer's book is left with the impression that discrimination based on race and religion somehow miraculously vanished following the war. The anti-Communist hysteria of the post-war era also goes almost unreported. For example, the book touches briefly on Sir Ernest MacMillan's career as director of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, noting that "MacMillan's TSO weathered the storms of the Second World War and the subsequent postwar period" (90). However, MacMillan's role in the notorious case of the six musicians, who lost their jobs with the orchestra in 1951 because they were restricted from travelling to the United States, is completely

⁴ Irving Abella, "Confronting Our Dark Past," *Globe and Mail*, January 18, 2011.

⁵ In these pages, Helmer focuses primarily on numbers of refugees and whether their Jewish identity was recognised or not.

⁶ Benita Wolters-Fredlund, "'We Shall Be Better Canadians by Being Conscious Jews': Multiculturalism and the Construction of Canadian Identity in the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir," *Intersections: Canadian Journal of Music/Revue canadienne de musique* 25, no. 1-2 (2005): 188.

ignored.⁷ Helmer does mention an anecdote concerning Mariss Vetra, a Latvian tenor working in Halifax, who spent some of his spare time prowling the docks on the lookout for Stalinist sympathisers among arriving immigrants. The brief account leaves the reader wondering whether these activities were merely those of an amateur bungler playing private investigator or if Vetra's actions had more serious consequences.

Outside of the three chapters that focus on the faculties of music of the University of Toronto and McGill, Helmer has delivered a kind of scrapbook containing snapshots of émigré musicians who played a crucially important role in transforming Canada's art music scene from a colonial backwater to the place it now occupies on the world stage. The snapshots do provide a wealth of information that is fascinating, but also anecdotal. The book (inadvertently?) conceals as much as it attempts to reveal. In terms of history this is a distortion. Canada and the protagonists of Helmer's book deserve better.

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⁷ Beckwith suggests that MacMillan's refusal to comment and to stand up for the musicians seriously damaged his relations with the orchestra. Beckwith, *Music Papers*, 156-57. For more on this sorry episode, see Len Scher, *The Un-Canadians: True Stories of the Blacklist Era* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), 29-38.