

**A New Web Resource:
The Eric McLean Collection at the
Marvin Duchow Music Library, McGill University**

<http://music.library.mcgill.ca/bell-mclean/>

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In April 2003, the personal papers of the late Eric McLean, Music Critic Emeritus of the *Montreal Gazette*, were donated to the Marvin Duchow Music Library, McGill University. Multimedia in scope and content, the Eric McLean Collection consists of textual records, photographs, taped interviews, a substantial collection of musical scores, musicological monographs, and an extensive LP record collection of over 7,000 items.

The majority of the textual records relates to Eric McLean's career as a prominent English press music critic and consists of copies of articles and reviews written by McLean for both the *Montreal Star* and the *Montreal Gazette* from 1949 to 1980. Of particular significance within the textual portion of the collection is the concert diary inherited by McLean from Hugh Poynter Bell upon the latter's retirement from the *Montreal Daily Star* in 1949. Handwritten and consisting of more than fifty pages, Bell's diary constitutes a unique record of Montreal concert life during the period 1920-49. With entries relating to such notable figures as Maurice Ravel and Sergei Rachmaninoff, the diary underscores the importance of Montreal as a major North American musical

centre throughout the first half of the twentieth century.¹

H.P. Bell and Eric McLean

Critic and composer Hugh Poynter Bell was born in London, England, in 1872. After completing a Master of Arts degree at Cambridge University, he studied chemistry at the universities of Kiel and Bonn. Bell immigrated to Canada in 1912. In 1923, following periods of employment for the federal government and Hart House in Toronto, he became music and art critic for the *Montreal Daily Star*. Over the next twenty-six years Bell brought Montreal musical criticism to a previously unknown level of perception and richness, undoubtedly drawn from his own musical and compositional experiences. Bell had met Tchaikovsky and had heard performances by Clara Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, Saint-Saëns and others. Yet, in the words of one contemporary, "his writing never condescended." Bell died in 1961.²

¹ A corrected typescript copy of the diary, entitled "Music and Musicians in Montreal, 1923-1950: Date Book of Hugh Poynter Bell," is held in the Eric McLean Collection (MUS 173) at Library and Archives Canada.

² "Great Gentleman: Fine Music Critic," *Montreal Star*, Jan. 30, 1961, p. 10. See also McLean's article, "Bell, H.P.," in *Encyclopedia*

His pioneer critical work at the *Montreal Daily Star* was continued by Eric McLean. Born in Montreal in 1919, McLean received his musical education at the McGill Conservatory. He joined the *Montreal Standard* as assistant editor in 1946, becoming the paper's music critic the following year. In 1949 he succeeded H.P. Bell as music critic of the *Montreal Daily Star*. He was awarded the Order of Canada for his service to music criticism and architectural historical restoration in 1975. When the *Star* closed in 1979, McLean became critic for the *Montreal Gazette* until his retirement in 1988. He died in 2002. According to fellow critic Gilles Potvin, McLean's reviews constitute "a deft mixture of lucid writing, perceptive judgment, scholarship and subtle humour."³

The Web Site

Taken together, H.P. Bell's and Eric McLean's reviews constitute a significant documentary chronology of English musical criticism in Montreal over the better part of the twentieth century. In an effort to make the writings of both McLean and Bell available to the wider academic community, the Marvin Duchow Music Library has created a web site devoted to their organization and full-text access. Entitled *Sixty Years of Montreal Music Criticism: The English Press* (<http://music.library.mcgill.ca/bell-mclean/>), the site was launched in April 2006.

The plan in Phase 1 of the project is to fully digitize H.P. Bell's diary of

concert dates, and to index the content in a database that allows easy access to information about composers and performers. Concert announcements, previews, and reviews of concerts have been or will be digitized and made available in searchable full-text. The Eric McLean Collection additionally consists of 3.3 meters of textual records, 50 photographs of various sizes, several oversized documents, 164 reel-to-reel recordings, 98 cassette recordings and a personal portrait ("Eric McLean at the Piano") by the noted Canadian artist, John Fox. A brief list of these materials and bibliographies of his substantial collection of musical scores, reference works, and monographs are also included on the site.

Once permission from the copyright owners is received, Phase 2 of the project will involve digitizing Eric McLean's music articles and reviews, as well as excerpts from his taped interviews with performers and conductors. Funding from the McLean Foundation will support the cataloguing and selective digitization of his extensive LP recording collection.

The Bell Diary and Saturday *Montreal Daily Star* Articles

Bell likely began compiling his diary of performers towards the end of his career with the *Montreal Daily Star*. The diary consists of a significant, but in no way exhaustive, alphabetical listing of artists or groups who performed in Montreal during his tenure as music critic. Each name is accompanied by a series of performance dates. While not an index per se to Bell's reviews, the

of Music in Canada, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 107.

³Gilles Potvin, "McLean, Eric," in *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd ed., 835.

diary entries can usually be matched to his concert reviews. The reviews were published in the *Montreal Daily Star* a day or so after the date noted in the diary. Bell often reviewed two concerts given on the same night, attending a portion of each; the published reviews, however, appeared under separate headings. There are a small number of entries in the diary for which no reviews exist, often the result of more than two concerts occurring on the same evening.

In addition to his reviews, Bell also contributed weekly reflections on some aspect of musical performance, genre, education, or technology. These articles, which appeared regularly in the Saturday morning edition of the *Montreal Daily Star*, make for fascinating reading. Not scholarly in tone, they nevertheless constitute informed evaluations of the state of music during Bell's lifetime and cover a veritable gamut of issues, many of which still resonate in today's musical scene such as "The Cost of Opera" and "Protection or Free Trade" (the latter is about the "importation" of American performers to Montreal instead of engaging Canadian artists).

The McLean Collection

The Eric McLean Archive consist of his personal and professional papers, records including his classical music reviews and articles, music programmes, correspondence, copies of meeting notices, and minutes. There are also a number of items of antiquarian musical interest, notably a few of Glenn Gould's compositions.

McLean systematically kept copies of his published articles and reviews in the form of newspaper clippings from

1951 to 1979. Early clippings (1951-70) from the *Star* and *Gazette* have been preserved on microfiche. Digitized versions of the articles, concert, and record reviews will be accompanied by a searchable full-text companion database currently under construction. It will be launched during the second stage of the web site's development.

Project staff has prepared a list of the 262 reel-to-reel tapes and audio cassettes in the archive. Most of the content falls into two categories: copies of musical performances broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and recordings of McLean interviewing performers and conductors of international stature. Among the live broadcasts in the collection is a notable 1979 recital performance by soprano Jessye Norman accompanied by pianist Dalton Baldwin. McLean's taped interviews, conducted in person or over the telephone, were often in preparation for a review or an article. Highlights include conversations with Joseph Szigeti, Itzhak Perlman, Leonard Rose, Rosalyn Tureck, and Kenneth Gilbert.

McLean collected musical scores of standard repertoire from the common practice period (e.g., both the *Neue Mozart* and *Neue Bach Ausgaben*), as well as distinctive local items including works by Montrealer Samuel Levitan and by Québécois organist/composer Conrad Letendre. Bibliographies of McLean's scores and books—listing composer/author name, title, imprint and physical description—have been compiled and posted on the web site.

Eric McLean's career spanned the LP era and the long-play record

remained his preferred medium. The bulk of his working collection consisted of classical music from the high baroque to the early modern period (Bach to Bartók), with multiple performances of the standard repertoire on major labels. All genres are present, although solo piano, orchestral, and opera recordings are somewhat better represented. Bach, Handel, Mozart and to a lesser extent Haydn, seem to have been particular favourites.

Given the wealth of information and historical significance of the McLean

Collection, there is no doubt it will be used by students and scholars of music performance and its reception in twentieth-century Montreal. As the material continues to be digitized and analyzed, it is hoped that a more subtle and nuanced appreciation of the breadth and depth of international, national, and local musical activity will emerge. Through the prism of this music criticism, which strove to define, explore, and explain the experience of music in Montreal, we have the opportunity to deepen our understanding of this culturally rich and exciting Canadian city.