

**In Their Own Words: Canadian Choral Conductors.** Edited by Holly Higgins Jonas. Toronto, Ont.: Dundurn, 2001. 315 p. ISBN 1-55002-358-6 \$24.99

One of the problems with Canada's being a fairly insignificant nation, globally speaking, is that it seems to feel an obligation to project itself as a major influence in various fields of endeavour. We are often told from inside Canada how important we are. Anyone who has spent time outside the country knows how illogical this is.

So a 315-page book devoted to the thoughts of Canada's choral conductors is in danger of projecting an overblown image of the significance of choral conducting in Canada, except as it is seen by Canadians. "We are a singing country and are known as such internationally," we are told. "Our choirs are second to none." This risks being too cozy and self-congratulatory and almost the stuff of vanity press, a little too inbred to be taken seriously as anything other than an opportunity for self-promotion.

Some would say, perhaps, that importance actually depends partly on self-promotion. It certainly does seem to be the way these days. The trouble is that when everybody does it, it's hard to tell the truly great from the good and the mediocre. And let's face it, most of us are mediocre and don't deserve to be read about in a book, even a book like this.

The book is unevenly and strangely divided into three parts. This division immediately sets up a kind of league table among conductors. The first-rank conductors get up to 10 pages to tell their stories in the first person, the rest get a "vignette" of about a page each beginning in the third person then switching to paragraphs of first person with quotation marks. Very strange! Then there is a postlude, "Donald Patriquin: Reflections on Canadian Choral Music, Composers and HIMSELF" (my capitals).

The very idea of giving some conductors major billing, some vignette status and omitting others altogether seems an odd way

of going about the project, especially when the choices are often odd. For instance, Ged Blackmore is first division while Morna Edmundson or Ramona Luengen are "runners-up" and Sarah Hoblyn gets twice as much space as Courtland Hultberg, Deral Johnson and James Fankhauser combined. How can you possibly out-rate the influence that those three giants have had on the future of choral music in this country?

For me the most successful contributions, like those of Don Cook, Helen Litz, Walter Klymkiw and a few others, show the greatness of their subjects not by an accounting of their achievements, although that may well come up—how can it not?—but rather by an acknowledgement of how the greatness of others has led them to do what they did. Then one sees the influence continuing far beyond their immediate spheres and in some cases beyond the scope of music itself. We need these reminders that we do indeed have truly gifted individuals among us, whose influence will live on after them, just as they acknowledge those who have gone before. It is interesting and warming to see the two especially great shining lights of the past recognised so many times, the amazing Robert Shaw who touched just about all of us, and the equally amazing Elmer Iseler, to whom we all owe so much, whether we realise it or not.

The message also comes through from some of those involved in education, especially John Barron, Paul Murray and Bruce Pullan, that the last decade of cuts to music programmes throughout the country is going to have a devastating effect on the future of music in this country. Where will tomorrow's greats get their nourishment?

There are a surprising number of misprints, misspellings and mistakes throughout the book. They are so numerous that they become a major distraction. They

certainly deserve their own paragraph here. Some show atrocious ignorance, some could be carelessness. To ignore many and highlight just a few: I have searched in vain for Schubert's Mass in B Major and Bach's "Brandenberg" concertos! Nor does one expect to see major performers' names like Streatfeild and Harnoncourt spelt wrong. (Twice right and once wrong for the latter actually. It's not even consistent!) There is some small excuse, I suppose, for getting Lorne Elliott and John Elliott Gardiner wrong. A bit confusing, but if I know the difference, so should the author and/or proof-readers. It may take a Brit to recognise that it's Gloucester Cathedral not Gloucestershire Cathedral, Downing Street not Dawning Street, and Kneller Hall not Nellor Hall, but surely a book about choral music should be able to spell Llangollen, and a book about Canadian choral music should certainly be

able to get Minnewanka right. And how hard can it be to check the spelling of Jurgen Gothe? (Try spelling it to the tune of Mickey Mouse.) Mickey Mouse indeed!

The book purports to be "an important part of our social history and artistic heritage." How can it be? Many of its stories are rather homey, the stuff of magazines not a book. Only a few offer any real insight. Nor is it really a reference book. It lacks an index and without changing running titles it is very easy to lose one's way. It is a welcome addition to the relatively meagre resources on Canadian choral music, but it really is a seriously flawed effort.

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