

Niki Goldschmidt: A Life in Canadian Music. By Gwenlyn Setterfield. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. xv, 222 pp., [16] p. of plates, ill., ports. \$50.00. ISBN 0-8020-4807-2

In undertaking a book-length profile of the nonagenarian baritone, conductor, and (most prominently) entrepreneur Nicholas Goldschmidt, Gwenlyn Setterfield draws on her long experience as an arts administrator (music officer and later director of the Ontario Arts Council). She has made intelligent selections from scores of interviews, with the subject and with many associates, and the result is a compact and readable biography of considerable fascination.

Born in 1908 into the distinguished family of a Czech estate overseer and educated at the Vienna Academy (playing four-handed piano with a fellow student, Herbert von Karajan), Goldschmidt by twenty-five was an assistant in a provincial opera house in Teplice-Šanov, Bohemia, hired by the then-intendant, Rudolf Bing. His upbringing in opulent circumstances in a cultured family had featured piano and vocal studies that brought out his musical bent. A strong early influence was that of his Belgian uncle, Paul Hymans, a high-ranking diplomat and signer of the Treaty of Versailles. From him, Setterfield suggests, Goldschmidt acquired his skill at cultivating individuals of influence and power. When family support drastically declined under the Nazis, Goldschmidt cheerfully pushed forward with his operatic career. At Teplice, he says, "after work, we went to the coffeehouse for our supper and mine consisted of black bread, an egg, and a glass of milk" (p. 27). Moving through other appointments in the 1930s, he encountered a young stage director, Herman Geiger-Torel, a close associate years later in Toronto.

With political storm-clouds gathering over Europe, Hymans advised his nephew to emigrate to America. The riches-to-rags story resumes on board the *Normandie*. Assigned to a modest cabin, Goldschmidt persuades the purser to give him better accommodations in exchange for a few self-accompanied lieder recitals, a specialty he had perfected in student days. The passenger list includes Erich Leinsdorf, Pierre Monteux, and Helene Thimig (Max Reinhardt's second wife); the name-dropping continues. Already fluent in two or three European languages, Goldschmidt quickly acquired, one gathers, a command of idiomatic English. During eight years in the U.S. (New York, San Francisco, New Orleans), he taught, gave recitals and talks, coached, and conducted wherever opportunities arose. A chance meeting in New York in 1946 resulted in a permanent move to Canada that year, to head the Royal Conservatory opera program, precursor of the Canadian Opera Company. He married a well-to-do Torontonian, Shelagh Fraser, became a Canadian citizen, and built a unique pattern of enterprise in Canadian musical circles.

Festivals! Attending one of the early Edinburgh International Festivals with his wife in 1948, he dreamed of establishing something similar in Canada. Dropping his Toronto activities in the middle 1950s, he spent the next few years developing and producing the Vancouver International Festival. It was a spectacular series of summer programs on the international model ("you must have stars"), with conductors such as Walter and von Karajan and singers such as Sutherland, but also with an emphasis on Canadians who had

achieved, or looked about to achieve, comparable celebrity – Simoneau, Gould, Stratas. In winters, he would travel widely, checking out the new international sensations. Relinquishing the Vancouver post in the early sixties (the festival was experiencing financial setbacks), he returned to home base in Toronto and announced typically “think big” plans for a Toronto International Festival, which however failed to materialize. (Setterfield for some reason omits this part of the tale.)

We next meet our hero as he takes on management of a festival for the 1967 Canadian Centennial. Though less ambitious than the artistic program of Expo 67 in Montreal, it was a rich and geographically extensive music and dance experience, with the “joy” and “celebration” characteristics that were to become his trademark. Starting in the sixties, enduring local festivals at Guelph in the spring and, from the early seventies, at Sault Ste. Marie in the fall, broke new ground and established another key trait, community involvement. Goldschmidt’s smooth diplomacy and taste-convictions became widely known in the profession at large, especially in Canada, but not just there. The English-born stage director Colin Graham, who worked on two productions at Guelph, is quoted (p. 137): “It was only Nicky’s ‘undeniable charm’ that had us all eating out of the palm of his hand – and for peanuts!”

In festival programs, Goldschmidt would appear as operatic or choral conductor in a favorite repertoire of European classics (Gluck, Mozart, Schubert, Johann Strauss, Bruckner). But there were new works also – conservative operatic ventures (Britten, Menotti, Argento, Maxwell Davies) alongside commissioned instrumental works by

Canadians (Harry Somers, André Prévost) and even the occasional commissioned opera (Charles Wilson, Derek Healey).

The irrepressible idea-man and traveler reappears in the eighties and nineties mounting one, two, then three Toronto International Choral Festivals, bringing large choral groups from twenty or more countries and several continents to Toronto for an amazing array of presentations of music new and old, traditional and experimental, western and non-western. The latest occurred in 2002. Niki, now over ninety, attended every event and press meeting, and in the formative months worked at his office in Metro Hall daily from ten until after two. He had only recently completed the most geographically extended of his festivals, MusicCanadaMusique 2000, a celebration of the all-digit calendar-change that year. (The inaugural, in the inspired locale of Whitehorse, Yukon, at the winter solstice of 1999, makes a neat opening vignette for Setterfield’s account, since it encapsules so many of Niki’s notions on community and the arts.)

At present writing, Niki is again hard at work on a series scheduled in several central-Canadian venues for the fall of 2003 – another celebration, this time for the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Britten. He has consistently favored in his programming *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Noye’s Fludde*, and other Britten works. Don’t ask why the honoree should be Britten rather than Shostakovich or Berg or Takemitsu. The world’s greatest currently-living composer in his view is Krzysztof Penderecki, principal star of the 2002 Choral Festival lineup, and a “longtime friend.”

If the “Canadian music” of Setterfield’s subtitle means the repertoire created by

Canadian composers, Niki has always been most interested in works yet to be written, to judge from his skill at administering commissions. You don't see him often in audiences of the local new-music enclaves: "a mini-program is no program" (p. 132). MusicCanadaMusique 2000, Setterfield says, added sixty new works to that repertoire. At a reception announcing the huge federal-government grant for this project, the Honourable Herb Gray, minister responsible, conjured in clichéd terms its expected legacy: "Just as Bach is revered and enjoyed today, three hundred years after he composed his great works, so will today's composers, with the help and encouragement of MusicCanadaMusique 2000, create timeless masterpieces that will resonate far into the next millennium..." (this from the reviewer's files, not the book). One is left to wonder how many of the sixty works have by now received second performances, let alone how many will still be played in 2472. But all this raises general issues that cannot fairly be left at Niki Goldschmidt's doorstep. "Ten or perhaps a dozen [of the commissioned pieces]...will really last," is his more realistic estimate: "...a very good record, by any standard" (p. 188).

The successes have been impressive, and it is good to have this positive and well-documented account of them. Goldschmidt's approach has been one of streamlined simplicity: music is a joyous force, and participating in it with large community groups is wonderful. With longevity, his unshakeable optimism as a promoter has become less and less resistible. Among a host of "longtime friends" he can count major names from the arts, university presidents, company presidents, and even ex-Presidents (would you believe Herbert Hoover? – p. 44).

The publication is attractive and there is a lively choice of illustrations, many from Goldschmidt's own collection. The sentimental and surprisingly self-centred foreword by Teresa Stratas could have been dispensed with: "...the next year, Niki conducted me in *Gianni Schicchi*"; "...Niki would visit me in New York from time to time. We would sit in my apartment and discuss music and life and..." That criticism aside, the book is thoroughly enjoyable, and worthily celebrates the man and his period.

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