

By Audra Kent
Photos Courtesy: Quinte Symphony



In 1974, Stephen Choma was presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, in recognition of his musical achievements.

Organization continues to spread joy of music

This year marks an auspicious occasion in the Quinte Region – that of the 50th anniversary of the Quinte Symphony. With a line up of concerts featuring celebrated local and national musicians, the 2009-2010 season promises to be Quinte Symphony's best ever.

Originally known as the Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra (EOCO), the organization was created in 1960 under the direction of musician and violinist Stephen Choma, then the Paymaster for Bata Shoes. It was he who approached Thomas Bata with the idea of creating a local orchestra, and with Bata's support, calls for auditions were made.

"It looks as though we may be getting back to participation in music, a thing somewhat neglected in recent years in favor of merely listening," boasted a newspaper clipping from that time. "We hope the new group is formed and succeeds. It will be a real step forward in the cultural life of this area."

According to Choma, "The orchestra was founded for the following reasons: to give youngsters who are studying instruments an opportunity to perform on their instruments; for those who have studied and just had instruments hidden away in the attic and to assist the communities in their cultural development."

With approximately 40 volunteer musicians, rehearsals began in January of 1961 at the Batawa Recreation Hall; members travelled from as far afield as Peterborough.

Among those musicians were husband and wife William (Bill) and Ioline Grant, and their daughter, Heather. Bill played in the first violin section, Ioline played the piano, and Heather, who was 14 at the time, played the French horn. Heather (now Fer-

guson) has played with the orchestra ever since. In fact, she is currently President of the Quinte Symphony, a position her mother held – twice! Both



Three of the orchestra's conductors include Kerry Stratton (l), Gordon Craig (c) and Bruce McGregor (r). Maestro Gordon Craig, this year celebrating 20 years with the orchestra, will perform Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major in the opening performance of the Quinte Symphony's 50th anniversary season.

mother and daughter have been instrumental in the organization of milestone anniversaries with the symphony.

"She was here for the silver anniversary and now I'm here for the gold," says Ferguson.

Only one other charter member is still with the orchestra today: Marion Stratton, Concertmaster from day one.

"Everybody came out for the joy of playing," says Stratton. "It's great but you know it's just my work. The Quinte Symphony happens to be one of the things I participate in, giving back to the community."

Many years ago, Marion Stratton was the violin teacher for a young boy named Kerry Stratton (no relation) who at one time played with the EOCO. In April 1976, after the untimely death of Choma, it was Kerry Stratton, then a university student, who stepped in as conductor to ensure the completion of the concert season. Stratton put his studies on hold until a permanent conductor could be found.

"Music making in smaller centres is the backbone of our orchestral culture," says Stratton, who continues to conduct orchestras throughout North America, Europe and Asia. "My earliest experiences of an orchestra were as a boy in the audience of the Quinte Symphony and later as a member of the orchestra (The Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra). Every piece they played was my favourite and the annual concert at BCI auditorium was always

over far too quickly to suit me. I can tell you that I actually dreamed of conducting it in those days and I got my wish. I can only express my inad-

Photo: Audra Kent



Heather Ferguson (l) and Marion Stratton (r) are charter members of the Quinte Symphony; both have played with the orchestra for 50 years.



Five of the original orchestra members, from left to right: Stephen Choma, William Grant, Ioline Grant, Joachim Reimann and Marion Stratton.

equate gratitude and affection to those wonderful musicians of my youth.”

Following Stratton's departure in 1977 a number of conductors took centre stage with the EOCO including Bruce McGregor, Clifford Crawley, James Coles, Dezso Vaghy and in 1990, Gordon Craig, who this year celebrates his 20th season with the orchestra.

“I took over and what I wanted to do was turn it into a very viable classical orchestra with excellent soloists, and over the last 20 years, that's what's happened,” says Craig.

Throughout the orchestra's history the number of musicians has hovered around 40, however, membership has become more Quinte-based. And so it was with the celebration of the 40th anniversary, the Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra was renamed the Quinte Symphony.

Education and community outreach continue to play an important role in the orchestra's mission. Through a number of programs, scholarships and awards, the Quinte Symphony continues to encourage and educate young musicians throughout the Quinte region.

“I think what impresses me most is the dedication of the musicians who, by and large, are volunteers. The players commit very strongly to

providing a very high quality of music,” says Craig, adding the Board of Directors, all of whom are volunteers, is equally as committed.

The Quinte Symphony's 50th anniversary season will commence on October 3 with the “Savour Your Symphony Gala” at Dinkel's Restaurant in downtown Belleville. In honour of Craig's 20th anniversary, the first concert will feature Maestro Craig performing one of the most difficult clarinet concertos ever written: Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major.

“It's interesting; one of the very first things I did when I took over, I think to prove to the musicians and the audience I can do more than just wave, was a clarinet concerto for the first or second concert I was here,” says Maestro Craig.

Referring to the challenging piece he will perform on October 18, Craig says delightedly, “It'll be fun!”

The Quinte Symphony will perform a total of five concerts throughout its 50th anniversary season; four Masterworks concerts and the ever-popular Pops Concert, all in their home, the acoustically sound Bridge Street United Church.

Sonja Bata, O.C., wife of the late Thomas Bata, will act as the Quinte Symphony's Honorary Patron throughout the season.

As for Marion Stratton and Heather Ferguson, neither, as yet, have any plans to retire.

“As long as I have my health and I'm able to play, I will continue to play,” says Stratton. ●

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