



STRIKING A chord

Quinte Symphony
Celebrates its Half-Century

BY PAUL DALBY

The road from Belleville to Batawa is only 22-kilometres long, but on a bleak Sunday in January 1960, even the shortest trip took an eternity. A blizzard had turned the deserted highway into a skidpan and one car carrying music teacher Marion Stratton slithered right off the road into a snow bank.

“I offered to help push the car out but the others with me said, you’ve just had a baby so you stay in the car,” Ms. Stratton recalled of that nerve-wracking journey. Once freed from its icy embrace, the car continued on its tentative trek to the Batawa Recreation Hall where dozens of other cars and trucks had arrived in the parking lot.

The winter’s drive to Batawa was perhaps symbolic of the occasion. Fifty men, women and children had defied the weather to travel from towns and villages scattered in an 80-kilometre radius, all

with a single purpose. They had come to play in the brand new Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra, later to become the Quinte Symphony.

Probably very few of them realized at that first rehearsal they would actually spend much of their time “on the road” bringing orchestral music to communities for the first time – and braving the worst that Mother Nature had to offer.

The background of the aspiring, mostly amateur musicians that gathered in Batawa was nothing if not eclectic. It included teachers, lawyers, Bata shoe employees, a printer, farmers, members of the armed forces and many youngsters from area high schools.

Also arriving at that historic rehearsal was Heather Ferguson, a 14-year-old high-schooler who discovered her grandfather’s French horn hidden away in a black bag in the basement and taught



left to right: Quinte Symphony in the 60s; Stephen Choma was presented to the Queen Mother in the early 1970s in recognition of his contribution to music and the local community

herself to play by “figuring out the fingering”.

The inaugural session of the new orchestra is clearly etched in her memory. “The Batawa hall was small, and smelled of wood preservative and cigarette smoke and fried food. It was kind of dingy,” recalls Ms. Ferguson, now the symphony’s president. “But we were all too excited to notice the surroundings.”

And so in this humble venue normally used for card parties, Sunday school, movie nights, and dances, the Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra was born without fanfare or flourish.

The orchestra was the brainchild of its first conductor Stephen Choma, also the personnel manager at Bata Shoe that had built Batawa as a company town back in 1940. In pursuit of his dream, he had started phoning people with musical backgrounds or interests back in the fall of 1959.

“It had all started because Stephen wanted a venue for young musicians to come out and also for people with instruments in their attic to bring them out and dust them off,” Ms. Ferguson said.

Luckily Mr. Choma had the full support for his ambitious project from the Bata family, who not only provided the recreation hall free of charge for rehearsals but also paid for the orchestra’s sheet music.

It’s no coincidence that today as the symphony enters its 50th anniversary season, its honorary patron is Sonja Bata, whose late husband Thomas had provided the support needed to breathe life into the original concert orchestra.

Indeed the first Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra that assembled in January, 1960 looked like no other classical music ensemble in the province.

The age of the musicians ranged from eight year-old Peter James on violin to the redoubtable 80

year-old Major Frazer on base drum.

“Entire families played together in the orchestra and sometimes it numbered 60 musicians,” said Ms. Ferguson. “If we had 15 clarinetists show up, then we had 15 clarinetists in the orchestra.”

Violinist Marion Stratton, who is still the symphony’s concertmaster, said, “There was always a shortage of strings – we were a bit outnumbered, but it was a very interesting time. We played in school gyms, churches, and town halls and we just adapted accordingly.

“Sometimes we worked in very cramped areas but I was fortunate to sit on the outside so I had more elbow room,” said Ms. Stratton, who brought along one of her music students to play in the orchestra – a teenaged Kerry Stratton, later to become a world-renowned conductor.

Today Marion Stratton, 80, and Heather Ferguson, 63, are charter members of the symphony – living links to the long artistic journey, which has brought them to a permanent home in the acoustic paradise of the 800-seat Bridge Street United Church in Belleville.

“Fifty years later I’m still here. That’s strange,” Ms. Ferguson says with faint surprise. “But if you have your health, you can still play in the orchestra.”

By all accounts it was certainly an eventful journey. Only two months after their inauguration in 1960, just as they prepared for the debut concert in Stirling, the Batawa Recreation Hall burned down to the ground.

Undeterred, the orchestra moved its base temporarily to the Legion Hall in Trenton until a new community centre could be built in Batawa three years later. In the nature of musical nomads, they later used the students’ lounge at Loyalist College and other locales for rehearsals.

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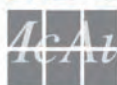
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They played a gruelling schedule of ten concert dates throughout the winter, and then rehearsed all summer long with just one week off for vacation because conductor Choma didn't want them to "lose their concentration".

And no-one ever missed a concert.

"If it was a bad night for weather, we just left home early," Ms. Ferguson said. "We travelled through freezing rain, snow, everything to play."

Marion Stratton's worst trip was navigating through a pea-soup fog trying to reach a concert date at the Campbellford District High School. "We missed our turnoff and we were too afraid to back up the car so we drove on to the next town before we could turn around safely then drive back," she said. "We only just made it as the music started up."

Local community groups such as service clubs and the I.O.D.E hosted most of their concerts. Heather Ferguson said they would often have a local person performing on the programme so that "the audience would have to stay and listen to us."

And all too often, real life had a way of intruding on these live performances in the most unexpected fashion. At one concert in Batawa, floodwater seeped in under the doors and trickled right across the floor while the musicians kept on playing. Another evening, conductor Choma – no doubt caught up in the high drama of the music – lost hold of his baton and it sailed up in the air "like a javelin" but luckily descended without striking any human targets.

"And at one performance Stephen was conducting and couldn't understand why we were all smiling at him," Heather Ferguson said. "He didn't realize his young son was standing behind him mimicking all his moves."

But in 1976, tragedy struck the orchestra with the untimely death of their founding light, Stephen Choma. The orchestra could easily have fallen apart without their inspirational leader but instead – in the true tradition of "the show must go on" – they bestowed their affection and respect onto a young new replacement, Kerry Stratton.

Mr. Stratton held the Eastern Ontario baton for one year after Mr. Choma's death. He was succeeded in turn by Bruce McGregor in 1977, Clifford Crawley (1982), James Coles (1984), Dezső Vághy (1988), and Gordon Craig in 1990.

Famed conductor Kurt Masur once said, "An orchestra full of stars can be a disaster" and perhaps with that sentiment in mind, there was no room for prima donnas in the Eastern Ontario Concert Orchestra.

For starters, no-one was paid for their efforts and in 1977, they made it official by forming into a

non-profit organization. Even today, only the conductor, guest musicians and a small group of orchestra leaders are paid a concert fee.

Year-in, year-out the orchestra served up a rich smorgasbord of music that quickly attracted a large and loyal following of fans, many of whom had never before seen an orchestra of 40 musicians performing live.

A programme from November 22, 1962 at Belleville College auditorium listed music that ran the full gamut from Edward Grieg and opera to Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Hollywood fare like the themes *Exodus* and the *Snow White* fantasy.

In recent years, the repertoire of the orchestra has also changed with its metamorphosis from the East Ontario Concert Orchestra to the Quinte Symphony. Once a staple of the early programmes, Broadway music is reserved for the special Pops Concert and the orchestra today delivers more symphonies and concertos.

Over its five decades, the orchestra has performed with many world-class performers such as Mary Lou Fallis, Eduard Minevich and Anton Kuerti. The symphony has also featured "homegrown talent" like pianist Greg Butler, the Belleville Choral Soci-

ety, Donna Bennett, Marilyn Woolven and Steven Belanger.

The Quinte Symphony has certainly travelled a long and colourful journey from its first rehearsal in a musty community hall. But the energy and excitement present at each and every concert has never flagged.

"It's the thrill of playing the music, and with live music you never know what's going to happen," observed Heather Ferguson. "The energy goes between the orchestra and the audience, and we never get tired of seeing their reaction."

Glenn Gould said, "The purpose of art is not the momentary ejection of adrenaline, but rather the lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity." And after 50 years of helping the Quinte Symphony to create that special place for the music lovers of this community, Ms. Ferguson agrees, "It's a healing art form... for the people listening and for the players."

For more information on Quinte Symphony's concert dates and performances, please call 613-395-0444 or visit www.quintesymphony.com



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