

Victor Feldbrill: Canadian Conductor Extraordinaire. By Walter Pitman. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 430 pp. ISBN 978-1-55488-768-2. \$40.00

Victor Feldbrill (b. 1924) is one of the most important Canadian orchestral conductors of the mid-to-late twentieth century. A champion of contemporary Canadian music, Feldbrill is also an advocate of orchestral concerts for young people, a patient but demanding teacher, and a builder of both student and professional orchestras. At the same time, judging his career as a conductor is a difficult proposition. Outside of his seminal recordings of music by such composers as Adaskin, Beckwith, Pentland, Weinzweig, Ridout and Somers, he has a relatively small discography. One can hope that the Toronto and Winnipeg symphonies, the Geidei Philharmonia in Tokyo, the CBC, the BBC (of which he was a frequent guest conductor) and other ensembles might someday release his concert recordings. Even if this happens, however, one has to take into consideration the fact that Feldbrill—perhaps with the exception of his stint as Resident Conductor of the Toronto Symphony in the mid-1970s—never received the opportunity to perform subscription series concerts with a first-tier orchestra on a regular basis. Without question, Feldbrill has a wide circle of admirers today, but without an extensive discography, his reputation a generation from now is not assured.

The author of this biography, Walter Pitman, is a former member of the Ontario and federal parliaments and Ryerson University president who shares Feldbrill's love of classical music and left-leaning politics. Over the past decade, Pitman has documented the lives of Torontonians who have made distinguished contributions to classical music in Canada, including Louis Applebaum (2002), Harry Freedman and Mary Morrison (2006), and Elmer Iseler (2008). Although *Victor Feldbrill: Canadian Conductor Extraordinaire* is not an academic book per se, there are eighteen pages of footnotes that demonstrate his close readings of Feldbrill family letters and concert reviews; he also conducted extensive interviews with Feldbrill, his family, friends, and colleagues. There is, however, no discography.

One of the highlights of Pitman's book is the detailed and heartwarming descriptions of Feldbrill's teachers, such as Brian McCool at Harbord Collegiate in Toronto and Herbert Howells in England. Their excellent training helped to produce a hard-working and tenacious man who, rather than making a name for himself, focused more on raising the standards of Canadian orchestras and promoting the works of Canadian composers. Feldbrill was also dedicated to teaching young people to love classical music and student musicians to aspire to the highest levels of professionalism. Pitman also explores at length the conflict between Feldbrill's conducting career and his family life. The book often discusses Feldbrill's loneliness when he was away from his family and his insecurities about his relationship with his wife, Zelda.

Overall, Pitman's biography confirms Feldbrill's reputation as an efficient and reliable conductor with a remarkable ability to get second- and third-tier ensembles to open up their sound and thereby raise their standards. His remarkable ability to connect with children and teenagers is also well documented. The book's attempt to paint Feldbrill as a "conductor extraordinaire" is, however, less convincing. Perhaps because Pitman is not a professional musician, he relies on anecdotes of orchestral musicians and newspaper critics, rather than his own assessment of concerts and recordings, to evaluate Feldbrill's conducting. Additionally, Pitman rarely delves deeply into aesthetic and musical ideas in an effort to understand Feldbrill the musician. An example is his discussion of a rehearsal with a student orchestra at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music:

Before a note [of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony] was played, Victor explained the meaning of *forte* in a Beethoven composition and the contrast in sound to that same indication of volume and articulation in a Mozart or Schubert score. He then emphasized the importance of the achievement of balance between sections and "soon they were mesmerized by the sound they were making." (p. 333)

This statement reveals that, for Felbrill, the precise definition of *forte* is composer-dependent, but it provides no information about how one can produce a Beethoven *forte*. As a practicing musician myself, I am grasping for further details or even a metaphor. The same can be said of the sentence about balance, as every good conductor has a slightly different idea of what the ideal balance is in Beethoven's *Eroica*. This lack of detail in the discussion of Feldbrill's musical ideas is unfortunate, since recordings of his performances of standard repertory are not readily available.

A second problem is that Pitman's analyses of Feldbrill's opponents are sometimes unpersuasive, at least without the presentation of additional evidence. In the following passage, Pitman explains why some Winnipeg Symphony board members and patrons opposed Feldbrill's advocacy of Canadian music:

Victor's repertoire choices were seen to be fuelled by a vision of a world of greater equality and a more compassionate social environment. He was supporting that mission through the playing of these more complex Canadian works. Though it was much more than simply "left-wing politics." It was no mystery that John Weinzweig was of a radical and intellectually questioning bent of mind. Though Victor's enemies might express these predilections more as a personal preference for the unfamiliar and challenging, it was not entirely inconsequential that Victor Feldbrill wanted to play the music of these musical social activists. (p. 227)

Here, Pitman does not explain the connection between the “more complex Canadian works” and “greater equality and a more compassionate social environment.” It seems to me that—in the context of a Cold War that contributed to the development of high modernism in the West and produced such articles as Milton Babbitt’s “Who Cares if You Listen?”—the use of complex modernist techniques can as easily imply elitism as equality.¹ Moreover, how many patrons in 1960s Winnipeg were aware of who Weinzweig was, let alone his politics?

That said, an examination of Feldbrill’s achievements and challenges is crucial to understanding the programming and performance of classical music in English Canada during the past half century. I am therefore grateful to have Pitman’s informative biography, which astutely places Feldbrill’s life and career in the historical and socio-political context of Cold War Canada. At the same time, I hope that this biography will spark further research into the art of this important maestro—something that might only be possible when more recordings of his performances become accessible. I urge all major university libraries to purchase this biography.

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¹ See, for example, Amy Beal, *New Music, New Allies—American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?” *High Fidelity* 8, no. 2 (1958): 38-40.