



A Trip Down Memory Lane (Transcript)

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Voice Answering Machine (00:01): You have one new voice message.

Larry (00:04): Hey Mr Max!! It's Larry here from YONA, you know, the Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta? Anyways, I'm just calling to invite you and the podcast listeners to our 8th annual [Road to Joy Fundraising Concert](#). It's going to be livestreamed on the ESO YouTube Page on June 8th at 7 PM so make sure to save the date! I hope you can be there to celebrate with us YONA students all that we have learned this year. We'll be playing some music with ESO musicians virtually and you can bet that you'll hear our rendition of Ode to Joy. You can find more information to join the celebration and how to donate at [winspearcentre.com](#). You won't want to miss it! See-ya later!

Max Cardilli (01:12): For almost 70 years, the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra has performed for it's Edmonton audience. This episode, we take a trip down memory lane to hear some stories from the early days of the ESO by speaking to musicians that were there from the beginning. But first - why was the orchestra started in the first place? I asked Musicologist David Gramit for his perspective.

David Gramit (01:34): There are several orchestral projects in the first part of the 20th century in Edmonton. The longest lived one is an orchestra that was also called the Edmonton Symphony that started in 1920. About the time that they were trying to get going the Journal had an article about how this was getting underway and wrote this very sort of memorable phrase.

"No city of any size or musical standing is quite complete without a Symphony Orchestra. It has been felt therefore that Edmonton should not remain behind other cities in this matter."

It's easy to dismiss that and say they weren't really caring about the music - but I don't think that's really true. There were people who really clearly cared about the music and were enormously dedicated to promoting it - but also, it was good for the city to do that. As I said, that's not the first project. There was one at least around 1912 - the Edmonton Orchestral Society. It's not exactly clear when it ceased to exist - certainly sometime during World War I. It died out. Simply couldn't make it anymore.

But there's a real dedication to it. In fact, Vernon Barford, an interesting character in Edmonton's early musical life, talked about that group. He said these players were union members, so they had to get paid. But they were so eager to play in an orchestra, and wanted to see it succeed - so the majority of them turned over their paychecks immediately back into the orchestra, just to keep it going. What they were making their money on was dances, theater, music, playing at restaurants - sort of the kinds of things that supported a lot of musicians in the days before recording and especially before sound movies. But they also wanted to have an orchestra. So that's that's one factor playing into the establishment of classical music. Another is women. In 1908, you get



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what was originally called the Ladies Musical Club of Edmonton. It eventually becomes the Women's Musical Club. It supports women teachers of music for one thing, but also holds lectures, organizes musical recitals, chamber music programs - brings in visiting artists. You get operatic societies formed, there's a Mendelssohn Choir for a while - and this develops I think more in the late 19th into the 20th century.

There's something about an orchestra - maybe because of the aura of professionalism around it. Maybe because of the prestige that had accumulated around Beethoven and the symphonic repertoire over the 19th century, but the orchestra does tend to get regarded as sort of the jewel in the crown.

The second attempt at a symphony orchestra that started in 1920 made it into the early 30s. It's clear that the depression did that. In having said that it's hard to say how much of a factor the talkie may have been in undermining the possibility of there being a lot of musicians around who could populate a Symphony Orchestra. One of the interesting surprises for me as I started doing some of this work is just to see the sheer number of people who identified as musicians in early Edmonton. Again, this is not unique to Edmonton. The directories of the city, the phone books, one of the nice things about them from a historian's perspective is that - they're terrible invasions of privacy - but they list people's occupations under their entries. Happily now, they're online and searchable so you can type "musician" or "music teacher" and, within the limits of the sometimes fairly poor scanning that they did, you can get a pretty good list of the people who identified themselves as musicians across the years. There's a surprising number of them because if you wanted music to accompany your movie you needed live musicians before speakers were of a certain quality if you wanted music to accompany your dinner, you needed musicians. If you wanted to have a dance, you needed musicians. Sadly, for all the delights of the classic Hollywood film score, it was also a kind of death knell for the existence of a lot of musicians outside of Hollywood or New York or a few other centers. So, I think that not only did the depression make it hard to keep that institution going - I suspect that the musicians were less available as theater orchestras died out.

Max Cardilli (06:32): While the ESO wasn't the first orchestra in Edmonton or even the first by that name - it is the longest running. Our wonderful Cellist, Ronda Metszies, sat down with her mother Hope Metszies - who played violin in the orchestra when it first started - to hear some stories about the early days of our ESO.

[MUSIC -06:51]

Ronda Metszies (06:53): Hi max, it's Ronda. I'm here with my mom Hope Metszies and we're going to talk about early days of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. So, mom, I think what I'd like to start by asking you is what year did you join the symphony?



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Hope Metszies (07:11): I joined the symphony in 1952. It was a marvelous mixture of professionals and people that had other work who came and played with us.

Ronda Metszies (07:22): So how big was the orchestra back then?

Hope Metszies (07:24): Huge - you got up to about 80.

Ronda Metszies (07:26): That's awesome.

Hope Metszies (07:27): It was a really big batch. There were some good musicians that were in good practice and so we did a lot of Tchaikovsky in the first few years.

Ronda Metszies (07:38): Nice, and was that very close to when you immigrated to Canada?

Hope Metszies (07:44): Yes, it was a couple of weeks wait - but I was here on September 19th and we started rehearsing in October.

Ronda Metszies (07:52): Wow, I know it was a very strange time. You had just graduated from the Royal Academy of Music in London and immigrated here because of your dad consulting with the provincial government at the time. So, what were your first impressions when you saw the city?

Hope Metszies (08:10): It was lovely, but it was rather like going back a century. Most of the roads weren't paved.

Ronda Metszies (08:16): I think you and dad said the other day that there were still boardwalks instead of sidewalks.

Hope Metszies (08:19): Oh, they were lovely. I really missed the boardwalks because they sort of drained out the snow and they were everywhere.

Ronda Metszies (08:27): And so the Symphony then didn't have a concert hall. Where did you guys perform?

Hope Metszies (08:32): Oh, well, we rehearsed in various schools and then we rehearsed in the Community Hall and we had our concerts - my glory, where did we have the concerts?

Ronda Metszies (08:43): I think you said the Capitol Theatre.



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Hope Metszies (08:45): That's right. They put a wooden platform on the front because we were quite a big bunch of people, and it was in the Capitol. We did have one little accident in which a member of the orchestra went down somewhere between I think the addition and the platform in some way. She was a good violinist, and so, when she was going down through this crack she held - she looked like the statue of liberty - and held a violin way up above her head. It didn't get damaged, and she sort of got stuck before it got that far.

Ronda Metszies (09:17): That's an instinct that I think every orchestral player can completely relate to - save the instrument! Save the instrument!

Max Cardilli (09:25): Besides being the venue that the ESO performed its first few seasons - The Capitol Theater was primarily a movie theater, and the first place in Edmonton where you could watch a talkie. They even built a scaled down fully-functional replica that you can visit in Fort Edmonton Park - red velvet theater seats and all!

Ronda Metszies (09:43): Okay, so then I have to ask - and I know it's completely based on what income was at that time - but do you remember what you got paid for those rehearsals?

Hope Metszies (09:51): Yes, this was awkward. We got paid six dollars a rehearsal.

Ronda Metszies (09:55): I love it.

Hope Metszies (09:56): And after terrific negotiations - I was on the little group that represented the symphony - we managed to get it raised to nine. Then the Union got really fed up and raised it to 12 and just sent the board absolutely flying as far as organization.

Ronda Metszies (10:13): And so who was the music director in those early days?

Hope Metszies (10:16): Lee Hepner did a lot of work to get this together, and he was with us for quite a few years. Then we had a big gap of conductors coming from everywhere. We had some real characters, honestly.

Ronda Metszies (10:29): You have a story that I love about the conductor who was in his cups.

Hope Metszies (10:38): Yes [laughs]. Oh, we had a conductor that was in his cups as Ronda said. He was a borrowed conductor from somewhere - and we'll just leave him anonymous as far as her name - but he was a borrowed conductor with quite a



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reputation in Canada. And he took us through the first part, I think it had a bit of Wagner or something. A lot of brass, a lot of trumpets, and fine stuff like that. And then we had our...It was a bit odd the way he directed it. It was automatic - he just looked in one direction "more trumpets, less horns" and he sort of just talked off almost automatically. Whether they really were playing out or not - it was a bit suspicious. We had a recess and then when we came back these trumpets, horns, brass and everybody had been dismissed. We'd had the rehearsal that used them and now it's going to be the strings. The conductor seemed unaware that this had happened. He started the whole rehearsal the same way. "Now, we'll start from the beginning. One, two, three, four" - that was hard because we were in three and he wanted four. And the next thing was that he sort of said "more trumpets, more horns". They'd all gone - the place was blank.

Ronda Metszies (11:52): [laughs] That's awesome.

Hope Metszies (11:53): It was really something. He finally after quite a little while of doing this put his hand to his head and wandered off.

Ronda Metszies (12:00): So did the orchestra tour?

Hope Metszies (12:04): Yes we did tour. We toured when Brian Priestman came. We had two buses - smokers and non-smokers or something, because we were a big number.

Ronda Metszies (12:13): I just need to insert now that in today's symphony we have the party bus and the non-party bus. They're both non-smoking, but after that they're probably quite similar.

Hope Metszies (12:22): We went out West but our conductor felt he'd just like to drive himself. But unfortunately we were all there on the far end ready and he wasn't there. He'd been held up by the police for speeding. So, we wondered where he got to. He sort of puffed and huffed his way in just about on the moment when we should be starting, so that was all right.

Ronda Metszies (12:49): And did you not also do an Arctic Tour? I remember a story that you guys all flew on a flying fortress.

Hope Metszies (12:58): Oh gosh, yes. That's right. It was a flying fortress and the only way to leave the ground with us was for us to stand at the tail end. I don't know why the tail end but that's so it could leave. When we arrived almost everybody was deaf - it was the most peculiar concert. Everybody's ears got blocked up because it didn't have the conditioning for going at the height we went.



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Max Cardilli (13:21): Since the late 1950's, the ESO has toured the Yukon and the Northwest Territories several times, travelled all over Western Canada, and made their first performance abroad at Carnegie Hall in 2012!

Ronda Metszies (13:31): You also at times have talked about where recitals happened in Edmonton at that time. There was not really a recital hall, but I seem to remember that you said that amazing soloists including I think Heifetz and maybe Rubenstein came through and played at the -

Hope Metszies (13:52): It was called the Cow Palace and the fact was that during concerts the trains would come through and go "woo, woo", you know, right in the middle of a concert that's right. But we had marvelous people yeah and we had Anna Russell and we had um Rubenstein.

Ronda Metszies (14:11): and Rostropovich came through later. That was later, right?

Hope Metszies (14:12): yes that's right

Ronda Metszies (14:14): Then the other thing um that was spoken about that was a really big deal during that time was the opening of the Jubilee Auditorium. That must have been a game changer because you'd been playing in the theater, in The Capitol Theater.

Hope Metszies (14:26): Oh, it was very nice.

Ronda Metszies (14:27): Yeah, to have a really dedicated concert hall.

Hope Metszies (14:30): Oh yes. We really felt great there. Having our own changing rooms and, you know, the whole thing was a great treat.

Ronda Metszies (14:38): Oh, tell me about orchestra dress.

Hope Metszies (14:40): Oh, orchestra dress. We were told at the very first concert that we could have black or white dresses because you know it came rather suddenly. I was the only one in white. And I found this was really awkward because I was trying to fit in with everything and here was I in this. Well, I haven't got a black dress anywhere, you know, and so I came and looked as if I was going to be married or something.

Ronda Metszies (15:05): I think I remember you telling me too about the orchestra pit when it was new. It was tradition to raise the orchestra at the end of the opera. So that they could also be acknowledged in the applause, not just with a gesture, but they're actually lifted out.



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Hope Metszies (15:18): Oh yes, we used to travel up and and the leader of our orchestra was tying up his shoelaces and so when the thing went up he had his back audience “Sandy, Sandy, Sandy.” [Laughter]

Ronda Metszies (15:36): Oh, that is awesome.

Hope Metszies (15:37): Oh, yes.

Ronda Metszies (15:38): And you had some really dear friends in the orchestra.

Hope Metszies (15:41): Oh yes, there were some very nice people that came. And there were people who were very talented like Marguerite Marzantowicz - who came in a bit later than the beginning - and Dorothy Langbow and her brother.

Ronda Metszies (15:54): So out of the conductors you worked with, who was your favorite?

Hope Metszies (15:57): Oh, Brian Priestman. Yeah, absolutely, Brian Priestman. The main thing about him was that he didn't have any obvious favorites. Everybody was equal. In fact, after I had lost I lost the end of a finger in a badly botched operation, Brian Priestman said “oh, welcome back Hope.” And the leader of the orchestra said “well, can she play still? I mean, is she able to play now that she's got this damaged finger?” “We'll find out,” he says. Yeah, you know, he was extremely fair.

Ronda Metszies (16:31): And that injury, we may as well talk about it because it's now out in the open. The injury to your finger was caused by why?

Hope Metszies (16:38): Well, there was a time when little babies had diapers and used pins.

Ronda Metszies (16:44): Yes. [laughs]

Hope Metszies (16:45): Ronda's looking guilty.

Ronda Metszies (16:47): I know.

Hope Metszies (16:48): Because, unfortunately, I pricked my finger with Ronda's diaper pin and it went completely bad, my finger. It went all puffy and all poisoned. The surgeon looked at it but, unfortunately, he had to be away when they were going to do something about it. He left me to his understudies, and the understudies just cut the end off.



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Ronda Metszies (17:14): And that's the end of your first finger, left hand.

Hope Metszies (17:16): My first finger, left hand.

Ronda Metszies (17:18): Jeez, you lost the nerve endings...

Hope Metszies (17:20): Oh, it's just it's just a point. And the violin needs these nice pads that you have on your fingers.

Ronda Metszies (17:25): And sensation.

Hope Metszies (17:26): Yes, it never was the same playing after that actually.

Ronda Metszies (17:29): Luckily for you violin wasn't your only instrument.

Hope Metszies (17:35): Oh, that's right. I didn't start the piano till I was nearly 12 and I loved the piano. It was so easy after the violin. [laughter] Oh boy, was it easy.

Ronda Metszies (17:47): Yeah, so music continued even if the symphony didn't.

Hope Metszies (17:50): Oh yes.

Ronda Metszies (17:51): And then we joke that I've been trying to do penance for my diaper pin ever since. [laughter]

Hope Metszies (17:58): Oh Ronda. I couldn't keep it from her - she found out at an early age and has borne the burden.

Ronda Metszies (18:04): Yeah that's right. [laughter] Thank you for sharing those beautiful memories. I love them because they've kind of been part of my life. It's so lovely to hear you tell those stories, and honestly when I think of Edmonton with boardwalks it just sounds marvelous. Okay, thanks mommy.

Max Cardilli (18:24): Rhonda is not the only second generation ESO musician. I asked our next guest to share some stories from his long career with the orchestra.

Broddy Olson (18:33): My name is Broddy Olson and I've been a long time member of the first violin section of the Edmonton Symphony going way back to 1961. My history, though, goes back many years, back to 1929 in terms of how I got here. Now, in 1929 it was the start of the Great Depression. Both my grandparents lost their farms. So mom at the age of 17 and dad at the age of 18 found their way to Edmonton and found themselves in the same boarding house - right across from what is now the Legislature.



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Dad was working in the grocery store and the grocer said “well son, you don't want to be doing this all your life do you?” and dad said “no, I'd like to study the violin.” So Mr. McDonald the store master got lessons arranged with Roderick Cook at the Alberta College. In 1936, he decided to open his own music school. There were various names over the years - but the the name that would be most readily recognized in today's world is the Olson Music School. We brought our instruments in from West Germany and Czech Slovakia by the train load. We had like a thousand violin students, and we taught them in group.

There were community orchestras in the Edmonton area at that time - but the orchestra that we now know is the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra under the auspices of the Edmonton Symphony Society started in 1952. My dad was one of the founding members of the orchestra at that time. Now, in 1958 there was a violinist that came to Edmonton by the name of Thomas Rolston - a very famous name here in the Edmonton area - and whose daughter is a famous cellist Shauna Rolston. His brother-in-law was the conductor Lee Hepner. Tom was the Concertmaster of the Edmonton Symphony, and was the rehearsal conductor for us. In 1965, we hired well I guess you could say a full-time conductor by the name of Brian Priestman. When Lawrence Leonard came in 1969, we were still a community orchestra. Myself and another fellow in the orchestra decided to write a draft copy of the master agreement, and we started with a master agreement a daytime full-time Symphony Orchestra in September of 1971. We were going to now be playing and rehearsing during the day - because in the 60s we would be rehearsing at night. It was a wonderful opportunity for people in other worlds, whether they be a Doctor, a Lawyer, or a Dentist, or whoever. They could do their daytime job and then come and play with the symphony at night. But that all changed in 1971. Many of the players, of course, had to take a backseat to what was now going to be the new model for the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra with a master agreement. Those were some very interesting times because we did a recording with Procol Harum which became world famous.

Max Cardilli (21:29): The album, Procol Harum Live: In Concert with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra was released in 1972 and made orchestral history. It sold half a million copies and became the first album with an orchestra to achieve both “gold” and “platinum” status.

Broddy Olson (21:46): Also, in the early seventies, a wonderful local fellow that we all know so well by the name of Tommy Banks brought in what is called the In Concert series through a program from ITV. We did 47 or 48 of these live performances. The first one we did in 1971. We had Tom Jones, and then the second week Engelbert humperdinck, and we thought we'd really made it here in Edmonton. We started bringing in conductors from all over the world and soloists from all over the world.



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Ruggiero Ricci came. He was a Paganini expert. We all were absolutely mesmerized by him playing his Paganini concertos with us. We've had Igor Oistrakh, it was memorable when he came to play the Beethoven violin concerto and the Mendelssohn violin concerto. We've had fantastic pianists that have come here, singers. Rostropovich, the great Russian Cellist came. He played the Dvořák violin concerto, We were at the Jubilee Auditorium and he brought along his dog. A little dog. He brought the dog on stage - someone would carry his cello in and he carried the dog. The dog would sit under the chair while he played, even during the concert. At the rehearsal, I was kidding him, and I was saying to him "I know why you have your dog there. You've got your dog because every time the dog barks a little bit it's telling you you're playing out a tune." [laughs] So we had a tremendous laugh over that and so that was fun.

I mean, you know, getting into the orchestra in 1961 was a memorable moment. I'll never forget when I did the audition and then they called me up and they said "yeah, you've been admitted." You know, like the enormity of that you don't even realize when you're back then. It's not until you get older and you look at it and you say "wow, this has been an incredible honor and a privilege to be part of this group." I take great pride in the fact that I've been in the orchestra all these years.

Max Cardilli (23:54): Broddy is one of the longest serving tenured orchestral musicians in the world - with 60 years of service. The longest- Jane Little served for 71 years in the Atlanta Symphony!

Broddy Olson (24:08): We have a tremendous audience group and a support group in the Edmonton area. We can't tell you how much we appreciate it all and we just hope that as soon as we can get over this Corona business we can get back to the things that we love to do best - and that's to play and perform for all you folks and to see all your happy faces in the Winspear Centre. All the best, good health and happiness. Bye for now.

Max Cardilli (24:34): Thank you to our wonderful guests Ronda and Hope Metszies, Broddy Olson and David Gramit!

In this episode, you heard Ronda's recording of the 3rd Cello Suite by JS Bach. Check out the Show Notes for links to learn more about our guests, ESO history and more.

If you are a musician looking to tune up your skills: July 5th to 11th [correction - July 7th to 11th], the Rusty Musicians Summer Camp at the Winspear Centre pairs ESO musicians and other professional musicians with adult campers for five days of classes, rehearsals, and sectional instruction, all leading up to a performance on the Winspear Stage. You can follow the link in the show notes or Visit winspearcentre.com/rustymusicians to sign up. Don't wait – because some instrument categories have already filled up!



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This episode was produced in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan also known as Edmonton on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory - a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Métis, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Blackfoot whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community.

My name is Max Cardilli and if you want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to eso.offstage@winspearcentre.com. If you like our show, please consider leaving us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts.

[MUSIC -]