

# ... and a musical fiasco dashed promise

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*The Globe and Mail* (1936-Current); Aug 23, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail

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# ... and a musical fiasco dashed promise

By JOHN KRAGLUND

IT IS always disappointing when an outstanding music season comes to a close, but despite all the pre-season promises, it is exceedingly difficult to muster even a single tear over the Stratford Festival's music program. It ends this weekend with today's lecture recital and tomorrow's recital by Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar.

The reason is not hard to find. While there were more performances than have been heard in recent years, there were fewer memorable events. Consequently, most of our tears were shed during that arid period of July when it seemed an impossibly long time to early August and guitarist Julian Bream and soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

Perhaps it was the feeling that one's gullibility had been strained too much, too early in the season. Director of music Victor di Bello and associate artistic director John Hirsch had insisted that despite evidence to the contrary, opera had not been discarded from the festival.

It's well known what happened to that fairy tale, in terms of the Stanley Silverman-Tom Hendry pastiche called *The Satyricon*, which many spectators found entertaining—at least to intermission—but which had nothing to do with opera or any other art. In the past, opera, as the opener for the music season, has always provided an indication of the musical standard to be expected in concert events.

The warning was there, but it seemed expedient to ignore it. *The Satyricon* could be grouped with the dramatic productions (the usual fate of revues and musicals) and its small orchestra was not scheduled to fulfil the function of the opera orchestra in previous years. Unfortunately, the enemies of music at Stratford will probably insist upon charging its cost—reported as in the neighborhood of \$200,000—to the music season.

Besides, we were still being gullible at the time. The printed music programs continued to report the end of the season—over di Bello's signature—that "due to its dramatically altered concept, the 1969 Stratford music season can best be described as the season offering a total experience for musicians and audiences alike."

The principal change lay in the engagement of a Stratford Festival Orchestra to prepare some of the usual Saturday morning chamber music programs, two of the Sunday concerts, a Thursday Music at Midnight series, and, to justify their existence, a new Wednesday afternoon-Friday evening series.

Another change was the introduction of a special events series, featuring three concerts of folk music and two of contemporary works. In box-office terms, the folk singers were a great success, but only **Joni Mitchell** gave a wholly satisfying and musical performance. Gordon Lightfoot's program was acceptable if one did not mind an element of monotony. But Ian and Sylvia served only to try one's patience and eardrums.

There are those who insist that change is essential if we want progress, but the sort of change Stratford's music season indulged in this year is not likely to get anyone anywhere. In fact, Switched-on-Serkin, the contemporary program featuring pianist Peter Serkin, may well have set back the cause of contemporary music a whole generation, to say nothing of what it has done to Stratford's music image.

Contemporary Trends, the other modern program, was a little more considerate in its choice of music, including works by Schoenberg and Berg. If it had been better prepared, it might have done much to counteract the Serkin influence.

Of course, anyone who had attended the New Music at Midnight series, Friday nights at Rothmans Art Gallery, had already sampled this fare. And if the series did nothing else, it eliminated from the Contemporary Trends program a particularly depressing piece called Naboth's Vineyard by Alexander Goehr.

Granted, these may have been mistakes incurred by an excess of directors with various interests other than those of Stratford at heart. As a contemporary composer, Stanley Silverman, who functioned as music consultant as well as composer of *Satyricon*, naturally had an interest in contemporary music. Aside from his natural charm, his contribution to the Stratford season was scarcely gratifying.

It was a bit depressing when he suggested "we may bring Peter Serkin back next year."

There were some exciting and highly musical moments in the Wednesday-Friday series, but all too few for what was the Festival Orchestra's main series, and the only one the musicians seemed to enjoy playing. Their enjoyment seemed insufficient to prompt first-class playing in the first program, conducted by George Schick, until soloists David Nadien, violin, and Leonard Rose, cello, fired their enthusiasm in a spectacular interpretation of Brahms' Concerto for Violin and Cello.



Sitarist Ravi Shankar (middle) may prove one of the brighter spots in a dull music season.

The respect commanded by composer-conductor Aaron Copland in the second program resulted in generally respectable performances and particularly rewarding and sensitive interpretations of Copland's *Music for the Theatre and Ives' The Unanswered Question*.

And the concert conducted by Mario Bernardi, with mezzo-soprano Patricia Kern, revealed a sensitivity to compositional styles that was all too rare in the season's programs. But then it would have been worth the price of admission even if nothing had worked other than Miss Kern's musicianship and her remarkably flexible voice.

Miss Kern and Bernardi were arguments in favor of importing outstanding musicians—a

practice which Stratford has not always found necessary, although the only one that proved rewarding this year, with one or two exceptions.

The exceptions included a Sunday concert performance of Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, with especially memorable performances by tenor Leopold Simoneau and soprano Clarice Carson, both of Montreal. And there were also occasions in the Saturday concert by the Toronto-based Orford String Quartet when this group justified its acclaim as Canada's leading young string ensemble.

Imports provided most of the remainder of the season's enjoyment. One remembers, if with modified pleasure, that Britain's Procol Harum provided an excellent blend of sound with the Festival Orchestra in a Bach-rock program, and that there were moments when Rose lifted a Sunday concert out of the doldrums.

But for sheer musicianship and enjoyment, it was not until August that Stratford came up to expectations in its Sunday afternoon series. The Saturday morning series had provided an exception in the polished opening concert by the Guarneri String Quartet.

August provided not only the consistently surprising National Youth Orchestra of Canada, conducted by Victor Feldbrill — with two examples of how contemporary music should sound—but also the dazzling lute and guitar artistry of Julian Bream and the incomparable lieder singing of soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. If he matches his recent Toronto performances, Ravi Shankar should probably be added to this list after the weekend.

It is significant that these were also the programs that attracted the largest audiences.

As for the future, one can only hope that Stratford's music season has one. This year's results indicate that a return to the dull format of former seasons would be advisable. That is not to say that new and unfamiliar music should be ignored, only that someone competent to judge quality and public taste (not necessarily the same, but both of some importance to festival survival) be brought in to replace whoever was responsible for this summer's fiasco.