

# Malka's Mission

Radio documentaries that flow

BY PATRICIA HOLTZ

"I had my cards read in Los Angeles last month and the woman said to me, 'Congratulations — you've just started a brand new cycle.' And I said, 'Oh, *no!* Not again.'" Malka laughs with enormous delight, lights a cigarette and sips her Burgundy. "I consider this as one of the fortunate things, though, because sometimes when you reach your 30s your life is carved out for you. It hasn't been the case for me and I think I've been lucky."

Malka is Malka Cohen, but no last name is needed to identify her as one of the most talented folksingers to come out of the Yorkville era a decade back. If she says *not again* with such determination, it's because the last 10 years have already taken her from a two-part singing career to a brief flirtation with television reporting to her present job as a perceptive, highly professional radio producer. In the past few years she has interviewed, among others, Pablo Casals, **Joni Mitchell** and Leonard Cohen. Last month CBC aired her marathon eight-hour musical documentary (in four parts) of the life and death of a Broadway show. Next month, her special on the state of Canadian poetry and the particular impact of Irving Layton's work will be heard on the same network. So she has been busy.

There is a firm but unspoken understanding that we will leave her private life private, which I respect — she would do the same if an interviewee of hers asked for the consideration, and after all it is her work and not her private life that is the reason we have met.

The more we talk, the more the meeting takes on many of the aspects of a good radio interview. Perhaps it springs from Malka's own ability to use simple conversations to get to the essence of a person. Maybe it is just that she's most familiar with that conversational format and slips into it now automatically. But I think at the core of Malka there is always a clear notion of which questions really matter, and of the importance of answering them thoughtfully. When it came to

presenting a picture of the woman, and where she is today, I soon realized that no one could do a better job of it than Malka herself.

Malka grew up in Israel, where she danced professionally as a child; in 1954, she married a Canadian, moved to Toronto and had two sons. She taught Israeli dances at the YMHA and sometimes sang at dance concerts.

About the time her first marriage ended she met Yugoslav-born Joso Spralya, a singer, sculptor and coffeehouse regular. She taught him some of the songs she knew, they began to harmonize, and ultimately became one of Canada's best-known and most successful teams. As Malka and Joso, they introduced ethnic music to thousands of Canadians; at their peak they were bigger than Ian and Sylvia, Gordon Lightfoot or Joni Mitchell. But in 1967, after making three records, starring in their own TV series, appearing on the Johnny Carson show, at Carnegie Hall, and in London before Princess Margaret, they split. Joso stayed in Toronto to run his own coffeehouse, sculpt and spend more time with his family. "It wasn't that we decided, well, it was good business to quit while we were at the top; it was decided because Joso couldn't continue working. He's older than me, so he went through then what I went through a few years later." Malka struck out on her own. "I was not finished with my singing. I was curious to know if there was still something new to express," she says. For four more years Malka travelled, giving concerts here, in the U.S., South America and Israel.

Then in 1971 she took a crash course in television production. "I studied television because I wanted to see what other avenues were available for me. Actually, how it *really* started was with some friends of mine who told me I might be good at it. I went to Don Cameron, who was the head of a local CBC news show then, and said, 'How

about giving me a chance?' He looked at me and said, 'You think you'll be good? Do an interview live, today, on the air, with Charley Pride.' Pride had refused to do it before and I guess Cameron thought, well, if she can do it, why not? [Cameron, now vice-president of news features and information programming at CTV, says, "Actually she didn't do too badly. And I felt that anyone with that much desire should be helped."] So it is to Don Cameron that I am forever grateful in my happy moments and forever angry in my bad moments. Although I did a bad interview, he *saw* something in me, and told me I could hang around and learn my craft. It could only happen in Canada, I think." **Despite** personal misgivings about her ability to communicate effectively in English (Hebrew being her native tongue), Malka had got her start in broadcast journalism.

"I switched to radio documentaries because I was not satisfied with what I was doing in television. I found that my strength was to do in-depth things — to ask why and how and where all these things come from, the deep roots. I approach each interview as a person who is curious and I think I ask the questions that everyone would if they had the opportunity. Some of my questions are not so sophisticated, but if it interests me I figure it will interest other people too.

"I borrowed a tape recorder and went to Israel. There, I interviewed Pablo Casals — it was the last interview he gave; I interviewed members of a Bedouin tribe; I did musicians Leonard Bernstein, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Daniel Barenboim. I recorded and then I listened, and I thought, well, you know, there might be something good here."

After three months she came home to Canada and went looking for a market. Diana Filer, then the executive producer of CBC-Radio's *Concern* series, listened to five minutes of Malka's work and pronounced the content terrific. Ann Hunter, who is now executive producer of CBC's *Special Occasion* series,

listened too and says now, still slightly dazzled at the memory, "She was *instant good*. One of the best freelancers I've ever known." CBC bought all those programs, including the Bedouin documentary, for which Malka received an Ohio Award from the U.S. for excellence in radio programming.

Next, Malka did the now-legendary interview with **Joni Mitchell** for CBC's *The Entertainers*. "I didn't know I had an exclusive until Sid Adilman [entertainment columnist for the *Toronto Star*] called me and told me I did.

"I knew Joni before," she told me, "only as I know you. I met her when she was performing at the Riverboat before she was famous, maybe seven years before the interview. I thought she was a genius when I heard her and I figured, if there is any sense to this world, this person will be recognized." Malka approached her then for permission to sing two early compositions. "I was so sure she would make it that I saved the serviettes where she wrote the words for me to sing. But that was many years and thousands of people before the interview and I doubt if she remembered. I never asked."

Malka was already at a point where her work spoke quite eloquently for her, but still she worried about her English. "When I interviewed Leonard Cohen I apologized for not knowing how to speak better, and he told me that he thought it was an advantage, that I could come at the person from a sense of gut rather than a sense of polish. But I said, wow, this man is so sensitive and his English is so gorgeous, I'm polluting his mind!"

She approached that interview with the idea that there is something of the prophet in most poets. "So I asked him about fate, sort of gave him random words, and at one point he said, 'The truth comes out most in my poetry, so if you want truth I'll answer you in poetry.' And I said, 'All right. Let's go for the trip.' I asked him if he was married — I figured, how can he answer this in a poem? He leafed through his un-



published poems and said, 'Ah, here is the answer.' It was a whole interview with a poet, *with him answering in poetry*. Now if you didn't really listen perhaps you would think it was evasive, but if you *listened* you would hear that the answer is indeed there . . . .

"When I met Pablo Casals I went in with a prepared interview and he said, 'Oh, no. Not another interview — do you know how many I've done in my lifetime?' *The man was 96 years old*. And so my first question was 'Why *not* another interview?' and that was how it went. That's how I work — I prepare very well and then when I get there it assumes its different life."

More recently, Malka has just completed her most massive project to date, *A Bite of the Big Apple*. Aired in January, it was the radio documentation of an ill-fated musical conceived in Toronto,

born on radio, as *Kronborg: 1582*, christened at the Charlottetown Festival, reincarnated (as *Rockabye Hamlet*) and ultimately murdered on Broadway. For more than a year Malka haunted producers' offices, rehearsal halls, actors' hangouts, tape recorder running; absorbing all the insecurity, the emotional excess, the simple economics of entertainment. Then for another six months she worked alone, editing more than 100 hours of tape into four comprehensive two-hour segments that are truly astonishing for their impact and candor.

"I'm usually a good judge of my own work, more critical than anyone else is of it, but sometimes my judgment is warped. If something is very difficult to do, I think, wow, it's really good, just because it was so difficult . . . . With *Bite* I thought maybe I should put in how hard it was for me to do, the physi-

cal effort, the pain to my ego, but then I said, no, if it flows like this, let it flow. I almost resented the work for flowing so easily and yet I had worked very hard to make it flow like that . . . .

"So you can see that you are talking to a tired person," she said when I met her New Year's weekend, and yet she was already in the first stages of editing the special on Canadian poet Irving Layton, which is to be aired on CBC's *Special Occasion* series late in March.

Technically, she knows the business of editing well, and her documentaries show her to be truthful and uncompromising, but she also has the reputation of being admirably discreet.

"If I am responsible, it is only because people, for some reason I cannot comprehend, put a lot of trust in me and they really bare their souls. I don't try to draw a portrait that is completely pastel, but

people tell me *incredible* things. Why do I have to use a remark that will mean a young person will not be able to go on working for the people he works for now, or not live fine with his wife? With *Bite*, it already had the strength, it had the salt and pepper — so why do I need to put a knife in?"

"When I began to do this work, there were people who 'did me a favor' by not helping me — so that I would go back to singing. And some people who were journalists came to me and said, you're a singer, so why should you want to do this? But that wasn't fair, because this is *fantastic* work, to spend your life meeting people and learning. I'll tell you, it's the best school around.

"I still find that, being a woman, if I do something aggressive I'm criticized for being too aggressive and if I do something soft I'm criticized for being too soft. Look at Mike Wallace on CBS's *60 Minutes*. He is a very abrasive, very good reporter. He doesn't mess around; he just comes to the point in the shortest possible way. What if I asked a question that way? Or Barbara Walters? She was so hurt by criticism that right now she's trying to compensate by being very soft, and she ends up with a preface that's longer than the question.

"There are advantages though. The fact that I am a woman journalist helped me a lot with the Bedouin story. There is such a male-oriented society that a male journalist couldn't have talked to the women — but I could. The men treated me as a foreigner and the women just treated me as a woman."

Obviously she believes in hard work — "hard work is *it* for me; I don't understand any other thing. Hard work as opposed to talent. I don't know anyone who does something good, or something really worthwhile, who does it easily. I have met nobody so gifted as Casals and yet he worked *so* hard, he always cared. And I think this is a sense of responsibility these people have. I mean, God has given them something. They have to work on it and refine it."

Malka spoke to me several times of the difference between the written interview and that heard on the radio — "you must be so careful when you write, to record the nuances, the raised eyebrow, the laughing tone, the wink." And of course, she is right in that meaning comes as much from the orchestration and choreography of speech as it does from the words themselves.

But we also spoke at length of poetry; how it can communicate clearly, simultaneously, on many levels. How it can be both simple and full. I know Malka regrets the limitations of her English. But to me her vocabulary is ample and her speech like good poetry; simple and complex, eloquent, true. As she might say, "It flows." ☽