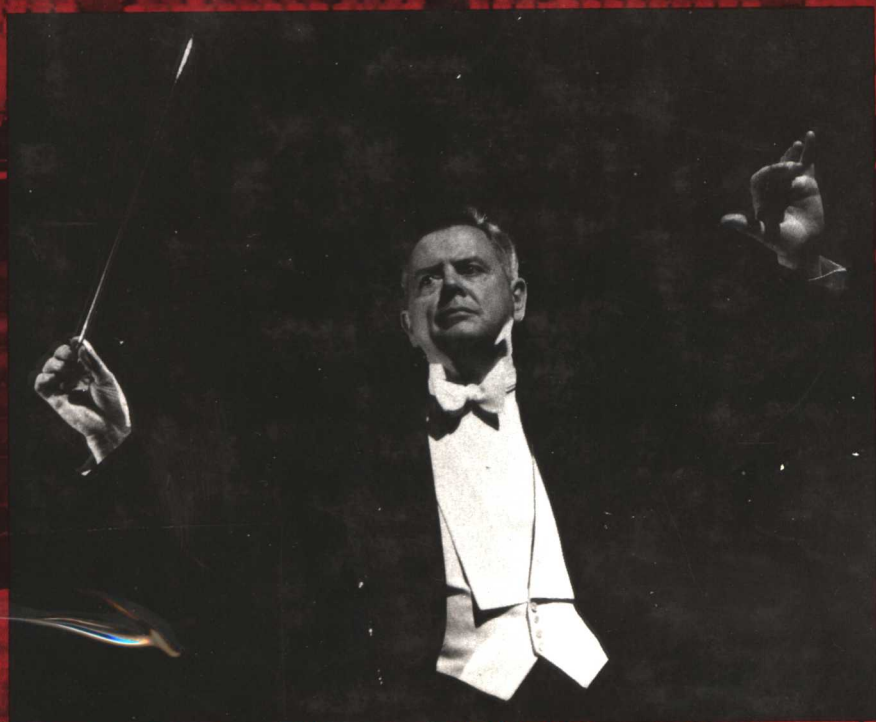


EZRA SCHABAS

# Sir Ernest MacMillan

The Importance of  
Being Canadian



*Sir Ernest  
MacMillan*

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OF BEING  
CANADIAN

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

University of Toronto Press  
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press Incorporated 1994  
Toronto Buffalo London  
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-2849-7



Printed on acid-free paper

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**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Schabas, Ezra, 1924-  
Sir Ernest MacMillan

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8020-2849-7

1. MacMillan, Ernest, Sir, 1893-1973.
2. Music - Canada - 20th century - History and criticism.
3. conductors (Music) - Canada - Biography.
4. Musicians - Canada - Biography.
5. Composers - Canada - Biography. I. Title.

ML422.M35S35 1994      780'.92      C94-931158-8

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The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance  
of The SOCAN Foundation.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the  
Canadian Federation for the Humanities, using funds provided by the  
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Unless otherwise noted, the illustrations are from the following sources:

Clare (Mazzoleni) Piller Family Collection (CPFC),  
Sir Ernest MacMillan Fonds (ECMF),  
Keith MacMillan Family Collection (KMFC),  
and Toronto Symphony Archives (TSOA).



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## *Preface*

When I first travelled in Canada for the Royal Conservatory of Music in the early 1950s, performing musicians, composers, music teachers, and assorted music lovers almost always asked me, 'And how is Sir Ernest?' I knew that he was the conductor of Toronto's two leading musical organizations, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (the TSO, as it was called) and the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, but I had no idea that he was so well known, had so many friends throughout the country, and was so central to Canada's musical life. I usually responded that I knew him only slightly and that to my knowledge he was doing well, thank you very much.

Not long after, I was fortunate to play the clarinet under his direction and, in the 1960s, to work with him on Canadian Music Council business. It was a pleasure to hear him speak with insight and substance on musical matters. I saw him for the last time at his home in late 1968. We talked about my plans for a sabbatical leave from the University of Toronto, and he was encouraging and supportive.

In the late 1980s I began to sense that interest in serious – or 'classical' – music in Canada was levelling off, perhaps even declining. There were no new orchestras being formed and some of the existing ones were in dire financial straits because of shrinking audiences and poor public and private support. Music was getting short shrift in the elementary and secondary schools, music schools were struggling to survive, and the CBC's budget for live music was decreasing. Only opera and early music were holding their own or growing in public popularity.

Concerned about what the future might hold, I decided to look to the lessons of the past, to the postwar period, to the 1950s and 1960s, to the people who made things happen in those years of musical growth. This led me inevitably to Sir Ernest (that was how we *always* spoke of him) and to his achievements. For over four decades, he had patiently and unrelentingly led Canadians out of their musical wilderness.

Sir Ernest MacMillan is twentieth-century Canada's major musical figure. He was a conductor, composer, organist, teacher, examiner, festival adjudicator, arts planner, educational administrator, ethnomusicologist, speaker, and writer. He conducted the TSO (1931–56) and the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir (1942–57). He founded and was first president of the Canadian Music Council (1949–66) and was president of the Canadian Music Centre (1959–70). He was also first president of the Composers, Authors and Publishers Association of Canada (CAPAC) (1947–69), president of Jeunesses Musicales du Canada (1962–4), and a founding member of the Canada Council (1957–63). And he was principal of the Toronto (now Royal) Conservatory of Music (1926–42) and dean of the Faculty of Music of the University of Toronto (1927–52). Over sixty Sir Ernest MacMillan Fine Arts Clubs flourished in Canadian high schools from 1936 until the late 1960s.

MacMillan conducted every important Canadian orchestra as well as major orchestras in the United States, Britain, Australia, and Brazil. As an organist in the 1920s and 1930s, he played widely in Canada and abroad and many thought he had no equal. He composed religious music, music for the stage, and music for orchestra, orchestra and chorus, a cappella choir, voice, keyboard, and chamber groups, and transcribed and arranged a wealth of French and English folk tunes and Native music. Throughout his life he promoted Canadian artists, and, for its first six years (1959–65), conducted the CBC Talent Festival.

Raised as a Presbyterian – his father was a minister and noted hymnologist – MacMillan, while still in his teens, committed himself to serving Canada. This narrative in great part addresses this commitment. It also tries to come to grips with his underlying ambivalences – how this same sense of service and responsibility to his country and its people conflicted with his desire to

develop his own extraordinarily promising artistic career to its fullest. The end result was a rich and complex life, with Canada the principal beneficiary.

Coming as it does twenty years after his death, this is, surprisingly, the first full-length biography of Sir Ernest MacMillan. Its publication follows immediately upon the centenary of his birth. In recalling our brief encounters, I regret that I did not know him better, but then I remind myself that being at some distance may have helped me to view his strengths and weaknesses more clearly. It is easy indeed to be overwhelmed by Sir Ernest's accomplishments, to write only paeans of praise – much as he may deserve them – and little else. I hope that I have succeeded in writing a balanced appraisal, even though I confess to admiring him even more now than when I first began working on this account of his life.

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## *Acknowledgments*

I wish to thank first the late Keith MacMillan, Sir Ernest MacMillan's older son, for encouraging me to embark on this biography shortly before he died. He left me the fruits of his extensive research and organization of material, including correspondence, many interviews, detailed analyses of Toronto Symphony concerts during Sir Ernest's tenure as conductor, a daily chronology of his father's life, excerpts from letters and press clippings, lists of letters, press notices, and Sir Ernest's writings, and some five chapters of a draft biography of his father, all of which have proved invaluable. I have thought of Keith constantly as I worked away at this challenging task over the past thirty months.

I thank next Ross MacMillan, Sir Ernest's younger son, and Patricia MacMillan, Keith's wife, for giving me complete access to the Sir Ernest MacMillan fonds at the National Library and to Keith MacMillan's papers. Their help in many other ways has been exemplary. I also thank other members of the MacMillan family – Keith and Patricia's second son Donald, Andrea Mazzoleni, Clare (Mazzoleni) Piller, Jocelyn Podhalicz, and Marion LeBel – for sharing their memories, letters, and papers.

I give special thanks to the archivists and librarians who assisted me, in some cases well beyond the call of duty. In particular, I thank Maureen Nevins, contract archivist-researcher at the National Library, who processed the MacMillan fonds, and, most recently, the Keith MacMillan fonds, and unselfishly shared her knowledge of its holdings with me whenever required. I also



thank Timothy Maloney, director of the Music Division of the National Library, and Stephen Willis, head of the Manuscript Collection, for expediting my research. Richard Warren, Toronto Symphony archivist, was a constant and informed supporter. He was always cheerful, no matter how many times I asked him for more – and still more – information. Thanks go to Gail Donald, coordinator, and Deborah Lindsey, researcher, of the CBC Radio Archives (Toronto), and Leone Earls, head librarian of the CBC Reference Library (Toronto); Mark Hand, librarian, Canadian Music Centre (Toronto); Garan Wells, university archivist and Harold Averill, assistant university archivist, University of Toronto archives; Kathleen McMorow, head, and Suzanne Meyers Sawa, librarian, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music Library; Raymond Peringer, archivist, Toronto Arts and Letters Club; Nicholas Baraket and Annette Wengel, librarians, Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library; Judith McEvel, archivist, Massey Hall and Roy Thomson Hall; Net Watson, archivist, Toronto Mendelssohn Choir; Vera Gardiner, archivist, Timothy Eaton Memorial Church; Joan Baillie, archivist, Canadian Opera Company; Joan Links and other staff, microtext room at the Robarts Library; and Jeff Walden of the BBC Written Archives Centre.

Many people have generously loaned or given me papers, photographs, and audiotapes. I thank Robert Creech for his extensive archival material on the Canadian Music Council and the Canadian Music Centre, Robert Rosevear for his taped recollections and archival material about the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music, Irene Rowe for a copy of her dissertation and other material on TSO children's concerts, and Gaynor Jones for her Toronto Conservatory material. I am also indebted to Gilles Lefebvre of Jeunesses Musicales du Canada, John Beckwith of the University of Toronto, Patricia Wardrop of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, Maud McLean of the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, former CBC producer Carl Little, and retired Royal Conservatory teacher Wilfred Powell, for letters, documents, press clippings, and other items.

Louis Applebaum, Victor Feldbrill, and Geoffrey Payzant helped me enormously in sharing their recollections and views of Sir Ernest with me, as did John Beckwith, who also assisted me in

reviewing Sir Ernest's compositions. I thank the following for their interviews with me: Louis Applebaum, John Beckwith, Helen Bickell, Edith Binnie, John Cozens, Victor Feldbrill, Frances Gage, Gordon Hallett, Maria Baumeister Kiors, John Lawson, Marion LeBel, Roy Loken, Donald MacMillan, Patricia MacMillan, Ross MacMillan, Lois Marshall, Mary Mason, Andrea Mazzoleni, Oskar Morawetz, Geoffrey Payzant, Harvey Perrin, Clare (Mazzoleni) Piller, Jocelyn Podhalicz, Laure Rièse, Paul Scherman, Muriel Gidley Stafford, Jean Tory, Nora van Nostrand Wedd, John Weinzeig, and Ethelwyn Wickson. Among the many people who talked with me about Sir Ernest and/or provided me with information and other services are Bernadette Antonacci, Mary Barrow, Eddy Bayens, Boris Berlin, Claude Bissell, M. Suzanne Bradshaw, Ruth Budd, Joe Cartan, Robin Elliott, Frank Fusco, Avrahm Galper, Clyde Gilmour, Frances Halpenny, Morry Kernerman, William Kilbourn, Marie Korey, William Littler, Jan Matejcek, John Mills, Carl Morey, Paul Pedersen, Eugene Rittich, William Rogers, Gwenlyn Setterfield, Peter Simon, Len Starmer, Sandy Stewart, Berul Sugarman, Vincent Tovell, Hazel Walker, Kenneth Winters, and the management of the Toronto Symphony. I thank Ron Schoeffel, editor-in-chief of the University of Toronto Press, for his unwavering support since I embarked on this biography, Robin Elliott, for editing the manuscript so imaginatively and thoroughly, Anne Forte, for her astute and cheerful management of its publication, and Antje Lingner, for the book's elegant design.

I wish to acknowledge the support of the following institutions for grants for travel, research assistance, and other expenses: The SOCAN Foundation, the University of Toronto Research Services, the Founders Fund of The Corporation of Massey Hall and Roy Thomson Hall, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Ann, with all my heart. She has worked with me from the outset as a researcher and then, once the writing got under way, as an uncompromising editor. If this book has merit it is as much her doing as mine.

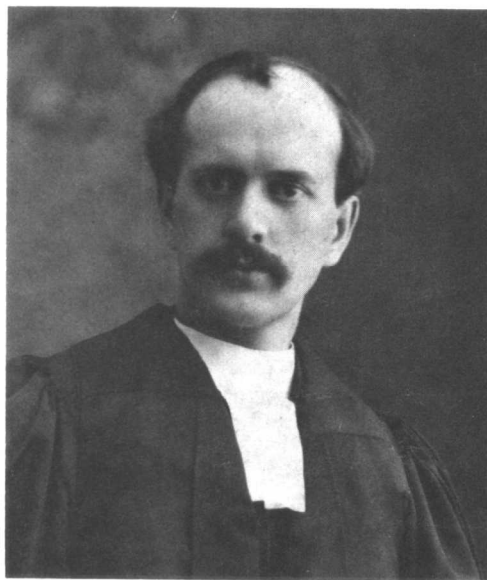
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# Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
AFM	American Federation of Musicians
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAC	Canadian Arts Council
CAPAC	Composers, Authors and Publishers Association of Canada Ltd
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CC	Canada Council
CISAC	Confédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Auteurs et Compositeurs
CMC	Canadian Music Centre
CMCI	Canadian Music Council
CMH	Canadian Musical Heritage series
<i>CMJ</i>	<i>The Canadian Music Journal</i>
CPR	Canadian Pacific Railway
ECM	Ernest Campbell MacMillan
<i>EMC2</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Music in Canada</i> , second edition (Toronto 1992)
JMC	Jeunesses Musicales du Canada
KMF	Keith MacMillan fonds
NLC	National Library of Canada, Music Division
RCM	Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto
TCM	Toronto Conservatory of Music
TMA	Toronto Musicians' Association
TMC	Toronto Mendelssohn Choir
TSO	Toronto Symphony Orchestra
UTA	University of Toronto Archives
VSO	Vancouver Symphony Orchestra



Winnie Ross when she first met Alexander MacMillan. (CPFC)



Alexander MacMillan when Ernest was six. (KMFC)



The MacMillan family in Scotland in 1883. Alexander is standing left.  
(KMFC)

OPPOSITE:

Ernest at seven months and as a precocious three-year-old. (KMFC)



The Reverend Alexander Ross, Ernest MacMillan's maternal grandfather, c. 1875. (KMFC)



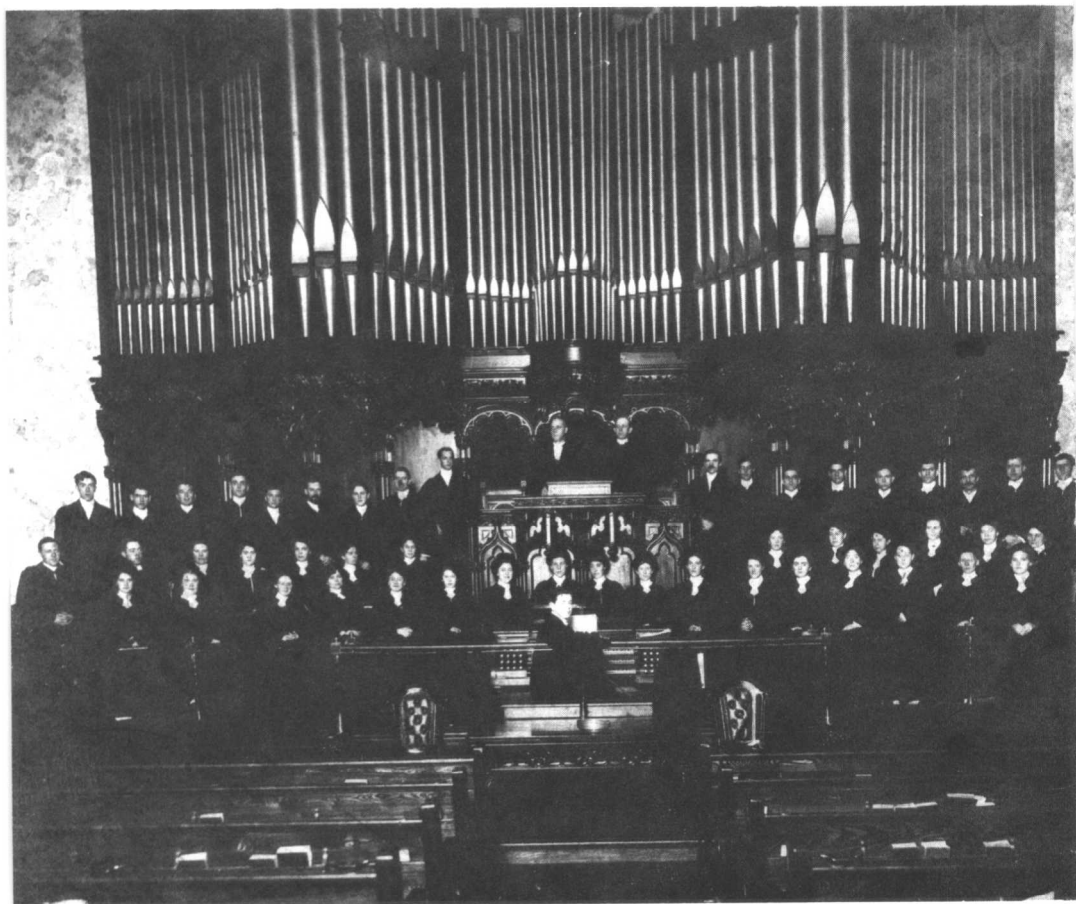


Seven-year-old Ernest with sisters Dorothy and Jean. (KMFC)



Ernest when he first played the organ at Massey Hall  
at age ten. (KMFC)





The 1910 Knox Presbyterian Church Choir – the youthful conductor is at the console – in its new building on Spadina Avenue. (KMFC)

OPPOSITE:

A dapper Varsity undergraduate. (KMFC)

*bottom:* Ernest happily wearing his Oxford hood in 1911. (KMFC)