

## Sonia and the Bear: Madame Eckhardt-Gramatté Meets the New Canadian Frontier

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**W**hereto? Wherefrom? These words are a recurring motif in the letters and private musings of Dr. and Mrs. Eckhardt, two of the most storied immigrants ever to take up residence in the city of Winnipeg. In the fall of 1953, Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt arrived from Vienna to take up his much-anticipated directorship of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. At his side was Madame Eckhardt, a European composer of some note, whose full name was the formidably hyphenated Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatté (her friends were allowed to call her Sonia).

“Wherefrom,” for the Eckhardts, was Vienna, a city of over-large chandeliers, haughty civil servants and incessant cold war intrigue. Vienna considered itself to be the undisputed world capital of music and Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatté had, after many years of determined effort, succeeded in becoming one of its leading contemporary composers. In 1950, she was the recipient of an Austrian state prize for her *Triple Concerto*, an honour that prompted one Viennese official to say: “Now you are no longer a Komponistin [female composer], you are a Komponist!”

This was a signal achievement for Sonia. Her entire life, to that point, had been characterized by her titanic struggle to achieve world-class recognition as a composer of contemporary twentieth-century music. That struggle was complicated by the fact that she was a woman, and because, in a strange irony of fate, she was also an astonishing virtuoso on two instruments, piano and violin. As a young woman living in Berlin, her early patrons, which included the Mendelssohn family, were happy to support her career as a concert prodigy, but not as a composer. It was 1916 and women, it was generally held, simply did not become composers, any more than they became conductors or politicians.

In 1920, Sonia married her first husband, Walter Gramatté, a young Berlin artist who fully supported her need to create music, despite their limited financial resources

and the ill-health that plagued him throughout his own career. For the first time, she was able to concentrate on composing, and her works began to earn serious recognition among the musical cognoscenti of the Weimar Republic. Tragically, Gramatté's poor health led to his early death in 1929 from tuberculosis: the music was silenced for his grieving wife, who found herself unable to compose for several years. However, Sonia would eventually find solace in the attentions of a young art critic, Ferdinand Eckhardt, who had taken an interest in the graphics of Walter Gramatté and found himself even more taken with Gramatté's widow. Ferdinand pursued Sonia with his characteristic determination and the two were married in 1934.

Just as Sonia's musical ambitions began to awaken once more, the rise of the Nazi regime dealt her career a second devastating blow, as it did many artists' of the period. Joseph Goebbels, the infamous Minister of Propaganda, immediately set about skillfully fusing the arts and Nazi politics into a fascist polemic on patriotism. Sonia's music, indeed her identity as a female composer, fell outside the Nazi re-versioning of German culture. In 1939, Sonia and Ferdinand attempted to escape the onset of World War II by locating to Vienna, the city of Ferdinand's birth. But in the same year, Hitler rapidly annexed his native Austria under the iron grip of the National Socialist Party. Vienna's glitter was obscured by heavy bombing by the Allies during the final years of the war, a consequence of its ambivalent relationship with the Nazi leadership.

Nevertheless, the cultural predominance of Vienna reasserted itself with amazing speed after 1945. The brutal artistic repressions of the National Socialist regime were blown away in a fresh atmosphere of rigorous musical experimentation. Sonia placed herself firmly in the centre of Vienna's musical establishment and her career began to flourish once more. In 1948 and 1950, she was honoured with a number of nominations and awards for composition. There wasn't much time to savour her success, however. Three years later, at the age of fifty-four, Sonia would be forced to begin building her career all over again.

"Whereto" was Winnipeg, Manitoba, circa 1953. A steady sort of place—low-key, quiet, a great-place-to-raise-your-kids kind of city. Musical tastes ran to the classical repertoire, Mozart, Schubert, Chopin—nothing too terribly avant-garde. There were a few restaurants (Childs Restaurant at Portage and Main was de rigueur after a night of Gilbert and Sullivan or a religious revival meeting), and a fair assortment of night clubs, movie houses and bowling alleys.

There was also the Winnipeg Auditorium on Vaughan Street, a sort of all-purpose centre for dance performances, music recitals and wrestling matches alike. The Winnipeg Art Gallery of 1953 was rather infelicitously located in a hallway on the

second floor of the same building. On those evenings when a big wrestling match was scheduled, all the artworks had to be taken down (presumably for fear they would somehow be shaken off the walls), and then reinstalled the next morning before the gallery opened.

For the younger set, there were movie houses and there was the Salisbury House, where you could go for a Nip and a coffee. But most people didn't have a lot of money and many of them pretty much stayed at home, listening to the radio or 78s, playing cards or socializing.

That's not to say, however, that the city's cultural leaders of the early fifties didn't have ambition. They wanted to give the citizens of Winnipeg something more by way of cultural diversion. Prominent members of the city's musical and artistic elite had begun actively developing a vision for the city—a vision that relied upon a broader, more international perspective of the arts. Part of their campaign would focus upon attracting individuals from outside the province, preferably outside the country, who could bring a degree of artistic sophistication and erudition that would provide a fundament for genuine cultural development and appreciation for the arts.

At this time, Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt was an art educator at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Austria's state art museum) and not particularly happy with the lack of opportunity for advancement. To his surprise, he received an invitation to consider the directorship of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The invitation was tendered by Dr. Richard Hiscocks, a professor at the University of Manitoba, who was one of Ferdinand's many North American connections developed through the British Council in Vienna—connections Ferdinand had assiduously pursued after the end of the Second World War, despite the cold war paranoia that seeped into every communication with the West.

Dr. Eckhardt looked Winnipeg up in the dictionary because he had never heard of it before. Then, after a preliminary visit to the city, Ferdinand wrote to his wife: "The news from Hiscocks may indeed be very meaningful under the circumstances. But, let's not be excited too soon and let us think through and deal with everything calmly. If it is to be so and it should work out, I would view this purely as a foresight of fate, in which I have almost believed for some time." Ferdinand's letter went on: "Your suppositions are once again naturally very exaggerated. W. is not located in California, where the wonderful fruits come from, but in the north, in Canada, exactly halfway between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans . . . it is not much bigger than Salzburg or Linz. I will write [Hiscocks] immediately, though in a very relaxed and calm manner, that I am interested in the matter, but that I have to first hear what exactly it is dealing with, and what the conditions are."

The conditions were ultimately acceptable. Sonia and Ferdinand left Vienna for Southampton, where they boarded the *Mauretania* bound for Montreal. From there, they travelled by train to Winnipeg. Although she had, at first, been excited by the rapid change in their circumstances and the potential for her husband's advancement, Sonia grew more uncertain and disconsolate with each passing mile. "Where are you taking me?" she said to Ferdinand, looking out the window at the rock-strewn landscape of the Canadian Shield rolling by. "This looks like the moon!"

Once Sonia and Ferdinand finally arrived in Winnipeg, the local intelligentsia were both intrigued and intimidated. Winnipeegers simply had never seen anything like these two: the tall, distinguished, silver-haired Ferdinand with his courtly Viennese manners, and the "passionate atom" that was the extraordinary Sonia, five feet tall with her shoes on. Her thrilling, husky voice tossed English, German and French all together in a high-speed blender of mispronunciations and mashed-up metaphors. Equally surprising was her loud, braying laughter, her powerful hands waving wildly, her furious energy, her fearsome temper and her childlike moments of charm.

It was also hard to miss Sonia's short-cropped hair, and the suit jackets and ties she wore with a distinctly masculine flair, in lieu of the feminine fifties silhouettes worn by most women. "There's a mad woman in town" was a general sentiment expressed in musical circles when she arrived. But then they heard her play, and those who knew something about music were astounded. "I was absolutely staggered by her technique," cellist Peggy Sampson later recalled. Former CBC music producer John Roberts put it another way: "She had a gift from God. You either have it or you don't. And she had it."

Sonia, for her part, was less impressed with her new surroundings, at least in the early years. Winnipeg was certainly not Vienna, and her forceful opinions about music and musicianship were not widely embraced by the locals. Her virtuosity could be terrifying because it was accompanied by an insistence upon the highest international standards, to which few could aspire. But perhaps most alienating of all was Sonia's relentless determination to have her own compositions performed in public—she had, after all, been fighting this battle her entire life and the timidity of western Canadian tastes wasn't going to stop her now. This occasionally led to uneasy encounters with musicians who found her works tremendously difficult to play—music written by a virtuoso for other virtuoso musicians to perform.

It must be said that some of Sonia's initial isolation was self-inflicted, but she nevertheless felt it keenly. Her diary entry of December 22, 1953, reads: "I am not at all happy in Winnipeg, when we should be very happy. This house becomes too solitary. It's but a work residence—the soul does not know where to take refuge." On the other hand, she now finally had the peace and quiet she needed to compose and after having

suffered through a perpetual series of upheavals, both personal and political, Sonia began to appreciate that what appeared to her a backwater at first, could be a place for calm and unforced inspiration.

Ferdinand was also there for her, ever the consummate diplomat, smoothing over Sonia's ruffled feathers, glossing over a tactless or ill-considered remark (hers, mostly), perpetually ironing out the wrinkles in her relationships with Canada and Canadians. It was a job he never seemed to tire of, and to some people, it seemed clear that Sonia and Ferdinand were that rarest of couples, who saw one another clearly, honestly and completely, and who still loved what they saw.

Eventually, Sonia and Ferdinand settled into a little bungalow at 54 Harrow Street, which would soon become the centre of regular social and musical evenings, their Hausmusik concerts, as the Eckhardts called them, which were reminiscent of the gatherings they had held at their apartment in Vienna. Both Dr. and Madame Eckhardt were gregarious and generous hosts, entertaining their own intimate circle of friends with Viennese specialties like Wiener schnitzel and Apfelstrudel prepared by Ferdinand using secret recipes he smilingly refused to divulge.

In his dual roles as director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Austrian honorary consul for Western Canada, Ferdinand was often obliged to host large groups of visitors. He and Sonia regularly crammed upwards of fifty to sixty people into the bungalow at 54 Harrow Street. This was made easier when they converted the basement into another space for entertaining, a bohemian rhapsody straight out of Berlin, circa 1927, replete with oriental kilims, Viennese crystal, black ceilings and even a wet bar built into one corner—one of their few concessions to Canadian customs.

Their chosen mode of transportation never varied during their years in Canada—they travelled everywhere in a Volkswagen Beetle. Like many women of her generation, Sonia left the driving to Ferdinand. They loved the freedom a car was able to provide, never forgetting the war years in Berlin and Vienna when fuel to heat one's home was impossible to find, much less fuel to drive an automobile. And they would pack carefully for their travels, as Sonia had learned to pack throughout a lifetime spent on the move through the capitals of Europe. Plates, knives, forks, shoes, shirts, purses, suitjackets, ties, handkerchiefs, correspondence, diaries, photographs and many other essentials—all were crammed into as many suitcases as it took. And often, it took many. Curator and friend Pat Bovey remembers watching the Eckhardts prepare for a trip, remarking that it was like going to the circus and watching twenty clowns pile out of a tiny car, except in reverse.

Once on the road, Sonia and Ferdinand explored many parts of the Canadian countryside, but one of their favourite destinations was the Rocky Mountains. On one

trip, they stayed in Banff, and a photograph taken on that trip seems to say it all. It's summertime. Sonia is standing in front of a tall pine tree. She has combined her regulation suit jacket with a pair of rolled-up jeans and sports a jaunty pair of dark sunglasses. She looks casual, relaxed, completely unlike the self-conscious, serious composer of her many studio portraits. A few yards away from her stands a small black bear, a bear cub actually, and there's a curious resemblance somehow between the two. Sonia is completely intent on the bear, unafraid and smiling. She looks very much at ease with the situation—in fact, she looks very much at home.

In 1973, Sonia wrote Ferdinand a letter, one of many, many letters between them. The date was October 24th, the anniversary of the day they left Vienna to come to Winnipeg. "Mein Junge [my boy], 20 years ago we broke up our little home in Europe and came here to build a new little home. In spite of all the adversities that we have behind us, there are still things that were successful for which we should after all be thankful . . . we want only to hope that the strength that we'll need for the next years to come will be granted to us and the great love that binds us will without doubt help us in that. Love alone is one of the greatest strengths—a godly one. Your second self, dein kleiner Junge [your little boy]."