

# Arts & Entertainment

## EYO conductor Massey makes music his life

interview by Pat Hughes

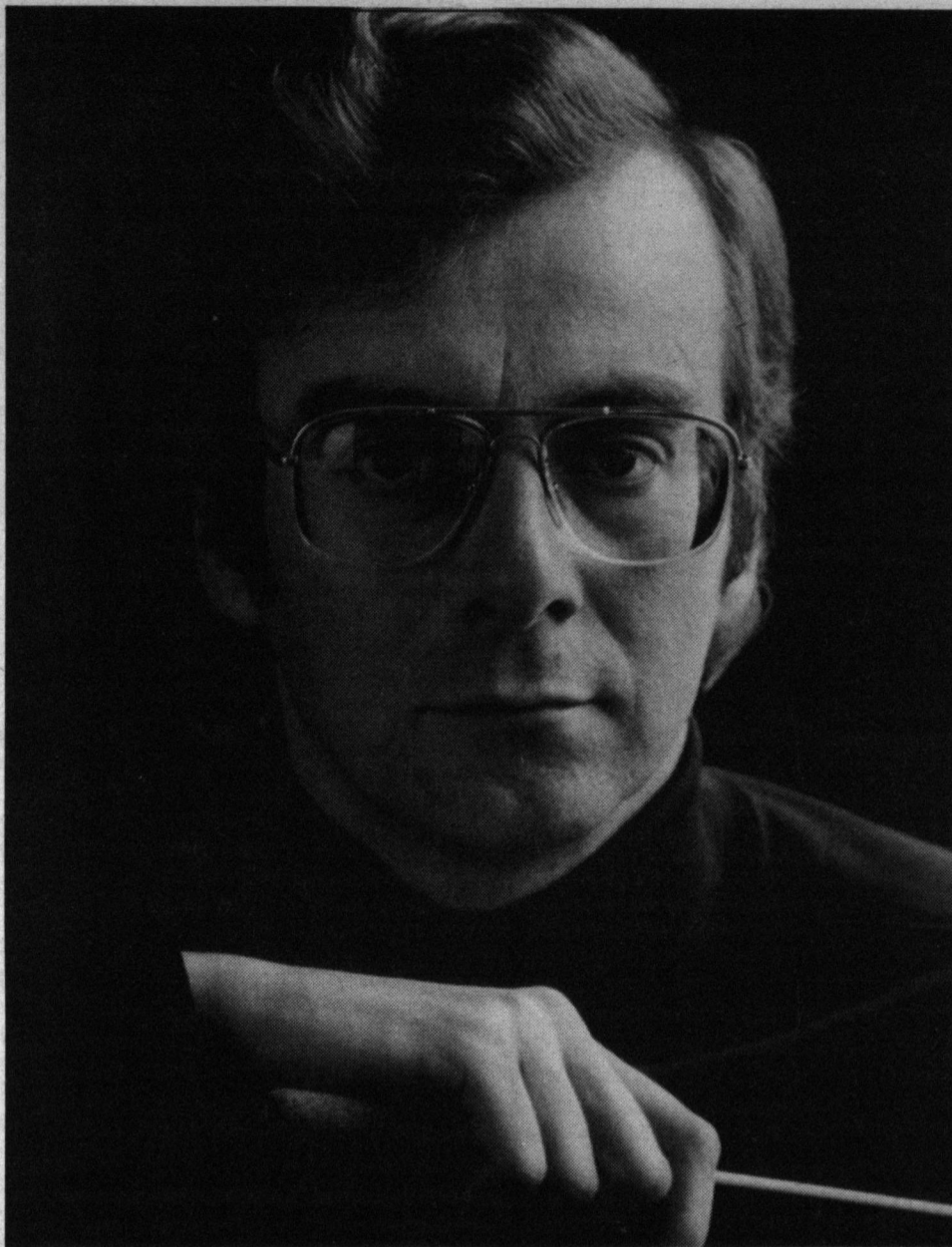
For Michael Massey, music is life. Such a phrase may sound trite, but in Massey's case it applies perfectly.

In addition to his role as orchestral pianist of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, he is the music director of the Edmonton Youth Orchestra, a full-time job in itself. Add to these duties the positions of accompanist, cellist, vocal coach, chamber music coach, piano teacher, and public speaker, and throw in some time for leisure and other necessities of life, and you come up with the impression that Michael Massey is a busy man. Indeed he is busy, but he loves doing everything he does, and wishes he could do more.

Emigrating to Canada from his native England in 1957, Massey continued his early piano studies with Jean-Pierre Vetter in Edmonton. Having completed two years with the ESO as a cellist, in 1972 he decided to return overseas to "try England as a pianist." After about two years there, Massey returned to Edmonton as orchestral pianist for the Symphony, a post he has occupied ever since.

His early involvement with the Edmonton Youth Orchestra was of a somewhat unusual nature. Having substituted for former conductor John Barnham a few times, Massey toyed with the idea of doing more conducting. When Barnham left the EYO, the selection committee asked Massey to recommend a replacement. He suggested a few names, his own not among them, and things appeared to have been settled until the committee's final selection declined the post at the last minute. With scant days remaining before the beginning of the EYO's 1977 season, Massey graciously accepted the appointment, and an extremely fruitful, not to mention long association was begun.

Now entering his twelfth year as music director, Massey is certainly glad he accepted the position. He is very enthusiastic about conducting, and holds some very strong views on that particular orchestral role, especially in terms of training: "I think that [formal conducting training] isn't what a lot of people do. A lot of them start 'studying' conducting, which means you learn 'down is one, in is two, out is three, and up is four.' Then they take a course and they learn beat patterns and a little bit about the instruments, and then



Edmonton Youth Orchestra conductor Michael Massey will lead the orchestra's senior group in a concert this Sunday, 3 pm at Convocation Hall.

they call themselves conductors. That's not what I call formal training." Massey's "formal training" came through his years of study at the piano and his experience as both cellist and orchestral pianist. Having started conducting he realized that there were some things he needed help with, and he filled in the gaps in his training with George Hurst in England.

For the past eleven years Massey has advanced his conducting skill each year

with the EYO. The Edmonton Youth Orchestra actually consists of two groups, a junior and a senior orchestra, with junior members ranging in age from 11 to 14, seniors from 14 to 22. All of the prospective players are auditioned at the start of each season, a factor contributing to the necessity of the season's early start in September. The players are auditioned each year to check improvement or decline in playing skills, and to scout new talent as well; thus the orchestra's composition changes every

year. Each orchestra rehearses once per week, and the senior orchestra performs about five times per year. The junior orchestra usually puts on two full programs later in the season, sharing a concert with the seniors earlier in the year. The concerts are sponsored by various local groups, as are some of the competitions held by the EYO.

Although the group changes from year to year, Massey ranks the EYO consistently in the top three among youth orchestras nationwide. A highlight of Massey's career as music director was the 1981 orchestra, a superb one which travelled to Australia for an international festival of youth orchestras. Competing with orchestras from the United States and Germany among others, the EYO was ranked "right up there" according to Massey. Another solid orchestra was that of 1986, which went on a tour of Europe. Both trips were very successful, but Massey would like to restrict such ventures to the better orchestras, the ones that can handle the enormous effort. The EYO this year has planned a tour of Eastern Canada with possible orchestral exchanges in later seasons.

Inaugurated in 1952, the Edmonton Youth Orchestra has been in existence for thirty-six years, Massey having been music director for almost one-third of that period. In his career with the EYO, he feels that his greatest contribution has been the variety of music that he brings to the organization. "There are certain works and certain kinds of music that are often overlooked; youth orchestras are sometimes not challenged enough. It's difficult: you really have to search out works that are going to suit the orchestra that you have. I take a lot of time to do that. I take a lot of care to try and expose them to as many different kinds of things [as I can]." As well, with the full range of instruments in the group, it is sometimes difficult to choose works which satisfy everyone. "[Everyone has] paid their money, and they all want to play as much as possible. So if you're doing Mozart [the trombones] have nothing to do. There aren't any trombone parts in Mozart symphonies, no tuba, and no percussion except timpani." Although it isn't easy, Massey has done well in music selection over the years, using the freedom inherent in the non-commercial organization to select a broad range of music, often getting to a lot of pieces which the ESO itself has not yet

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## Irish-set play challenge for Reese

interview by Elaine Ostry

"If you haven't got stamina and if you can't take a lot of disappointment, you shouldn't be in the theatre," chuckles Barbara Reese.

Reese has been acting since 1965, when there was no professional theatre in Edmonton, only Studio Theatre and Walterdale Theatre. Reese waited until her children were in their teens before launching into the theatre world. After working with the Walterdale, she worked for the Citadel, which opened in 1966. Since then, she's worked with most of the theatres in Edmonton, and has seen the growth of the theatre community. "I think anybody can find live theatre in this town to suit them," she says.

The Phoenix Theatre launches its season this Friday with *Flight of the Earls* by Christopher Humble. The play is set in Northern Ireland in 1771, when the troubles there boiled over again and the Special Powers Act of internment (which allows the police to jail anyone on suspicion alone) was enforced.

*The Flight of the Earls*, Reese says, is "an excellently written play," with lots of action, humour and emotion. Reese plays Kate Earl, the mother of a family of three sons. The Earl family is Catholic, and the sons are "deeply involved in the IRA," Reese says. The boys idolize their father,

"a hero who died for Ireland," and want to follow in his political footsteps. "The mother's ideas are different. She is very much against the way the boys are involved in the politics of the day.... It's a tug of war between ideologies."

The play required a good deal of study on the part of the cast. "The director, Jim Guedo, brought in everything from the library on the subject," laughs Reese. "It has been fascinating for all of us to research Irish history... it's an eyeopener for everybody."

Research also included coaching on the Northern Irish accent. Marcus Collier, an Irishman, has been helping the cast assume this accent, which Reese describes as "hard, rasping... it's quite a different sound of the voice."

Reese is used to challenge, though, having mastered the Ukrainian accent for *After Baba's Funeral*. Last year she acted in Theatre Network's *The Oldest Profession*. This weekend the Princess Theatre premieres *Housekeeping*, in which Reese plays one of the two sisters, Nona. She describes director Bill Forsyth (*Gregory's Girl*, *Local Hero*) as "quiet, soft-spoken, honest, with a quirky sense of humour."

The important thing to remember when pursuing a career on stage, Reese says, is to "be persistent. A lot of people start out and get a lot of work right away, then hit a slow period and get discouraged."



Barbara Reese appears in the Phoenix's season opener, *The Flight of the Earls*, set in Northern Ireland.

Paul Menzies