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**"A Jewish Maestra and a Lady too":  
Reflections on Femininity in the Career of  
Ethel Stark**

*Ethel Stark (1910–2012) was one of the most important conductors and concert violinists in Canada in the Twentieth century. This article highlights how an Austro-Canadian Jewish woman who lived outside the constraints of conventional domesticity, both navigated through and defied the ideals of the “Cult of True Womanhood” and spearheads a movement of feminism in music. I argue that Stark’s exposure to Jewish cultural traditions of social justice and womanhood in her childhood formed a critical dimension of her feminist activism later in her life, and in particular in the founding of The Montreal Women’s Symphony Orchestra (1940).*

*Ethel Stark (1910–2012) figure parmi les chefs d’orchestre et les violonistes de concert canadiens les plus importants du XXe siècle. Cet article décrit comment Stark, une femme juive austro-canadienne qui vivait à l’extérieur des contraintes de la domesticité conventionnelle, s’y est prise pour, à la fois, négocier et défier les idéaux du « culte de la véritable féminité » (Cult of True Womanhood), alors qu’elle menait un mouvement féministe dans le domaine de la musique. Nous soutenons que le fait d’avoir été exposé, dans son enfance, aux traditions culturelles juives ayant trait à la justice sociale et à la féminité, a contribué de manière essentielle à l’activisme féministe dans lequel elle s’est engagée plus tard dans sa vie, en particulier lors de la fondation de l’Orchestre symphonique des femmes de Montréal (1940).*

Ethel Stark (1910–2012) was one of the most important conductors and concert violinists in Canada in the Twentieth century. She was praised for her rare virtuosity and compared to the likes of Leopold Stokowski and Sir Thomas Beecham. Almost single-handedly, Stark spearheaded a movement of feminism in the musical profession by creating the first all-women’s symphony orchestra in Canada. She also gave countless broadcasts and appeared as a soloist and guest conductor with leading symphony orchestras in Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Asia. In 1947, she was the first conductor to take a Canadian symphony orchestra to the United States to perform at Carnegie Hall, New York. Her role in enriching the musical heritage of Canada has been highlighted in documentaries, films, and books.<sup>1</sup> Scholars, however have given little attention to her Jewish background, though her Austro-Canadian Jewish identity played a central role in her life.<sup>2</sup> Stark passed away in 2012, leaving behind an unpublished memoir which sheds much light on the influence of ‘Jewishness’ in her life.<sup>3</sup> Growing antisemitism in Canada during the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the rise of feminism affected her understanding of herself as a Jewish woman. In this article, I focus on three separate but overlapping facets of Stark’s identity — Jewish, female, and classical musician. I show how the construction of Stark’s identity was an ongoing process of interpreting and integrating various cultural discourses, a navigation that eventually resulted in a complex and unique moulding of her relationship between Jewishness, music, and feminism.

## Femininity and Domesticity

Feminist historians have long debated the extent to which middle-class Victorian notions of respectable domesticity and femininity influenced gendered behaviour in working-class American women of the early to mid-Twentieth century. Some scholars have argued for middle-class notions of a patriarchal domain that divided society into gendered spheres, private (female) and public (male). The most prominent of these theories is what Barbara Welter (1966), coined "The Cult of True Womanhood" or "The Cult of Domesticity."<sup>4</sup> Other authors have "dismantled" the "binary" structures of separate spheres, including Linda Kerber, Nancy Cott, and Mary Kelley, arguing instead for a cultural framework in which gender was structured by men and women in both public and private spheres.<sup>5</sup> Kelley, in particular, offers a new gendered cultural geography in which women "performed" in multiple "sites."<sup>6</sup> Kelley makes one critical observation — a kind of allowance — concerning middling women reformers, who, *both* "dismantled" gendered binaries and "simultaneously deployed" them as they claimed their citizenship.<sup>7</sup> It was a revolutionary compromise where these female reformers "claimed a special authority based on difference," on "female moral superiority" and thus the "sharply demarcated spheres...had a significant impact on the approach women...took to make their influence felt."<sup>8</sup> While challenging Welter's "binary spheres" it is also clear that Kelley's study re-emphasizes the complexities surrounding the "performance" of gender by women who sought to make societal changes. In fact, although "Cult of True Womanhood" may have long been "dismantled" as a *geographical* map, the ideals borne out of it nevertheless continue to have a strong influence on work by recent scholars, in particular feminist historians who study women on the periphery of society, including Jewish women.

Recent studies by Mara Steinitz, Hasia Diner, Jodi Giesbrecht, and Keshet Shenkar have examined how Jewish women's narratives unfolded within the context of "domesticity" and the gender dynamics of that era.<sup>9</sup> Giesbrecht, looking more specifically at Canadian Jewish women, examines the "extent to which middle-class upper-class Victorian notions of respectable domesticity and femininity can be said to characterize the ways in which working-class women conceived of proper gendered behaviour."<sup>10</sup> In her study of German Jewish immigrant women of the early Twentieth century, Nancy B. Sinkoff also shows that the domestic agenda of the "Cult of True Womanhood" influenced Jewish women's integration into American upper-class society.<sup>11</sup>

In the realm of music, scholars also continue to grapple with the effects of domesticity, debating not so much the boundaries between public and private, but instead focusing on how the ideology influenced women's shifting subjectivities and their personal narratives. Sherry Tucker, for instance, assesses how the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra replicated the values of the Cult of True Womanhood and cultivated a femininity that was middle-class, white, domestic, and leisurely.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in

analysing women in jazz in film and television in the early Twentieth century, Kristin McGee lifts the veil of domesticity to reveal talented hard-working musicians who refused to be victims in a male-dominated jazz world.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, despite the shifts in emphasis and controversies surrounding Barbara Welter's gender theory, it is clear that "domesticity" in its many expressions and colours had a deep influence on the lived experiences of Jewish women of the early Twentieth-century. Laurie Stras's work on femininity is especially useful in my study. She theorizes femininity as a multidimensional performative act, a process of various practices of "creativity, conformity, resistance, or accommodation."<sup>14</sup> In some cases, it is a masquerade, a "submission to the dominant social code" and a "resistance to patriarchal norms."<sup>15</sup> Stras's theory is a useful starting point and has obvious advantages for feminist analyses of female performers on stage. It allows us to examine femininity in both political and personal terms, as something that can be self-protective, performed (in Judith Butler's sense) to fit within one's context, and something chosen or forced upon.<sup>16</sup> After briefly discussing Ethel Stark's family history, I focus on how Stark navigated the ideologies of femininity popular in her time, and show how her Jewishness informed these discourses.

### **The Starks as Austrians**

Ethel Stark was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1910, into an assimilated Austro-Jewish family. Her parents had lived in Tarnopol for many years, but rising antisemitism eventually forced them to seek refuge in Montreal, Canada, in 1907.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the antisemitism and rejection they experienced in Austro-German society compelled them to step back into a more traditional Jewish culture and way of life. The experience brought about an opportunity for retrospection and a desire to start a new life, one in which Adolph educated his children in music and fine culture, but also in the value of what it meant to be Jewish. He was so afflicted by this experience that he never forgot what it meant to be in exile and devoted the rest of his life to helping other Jewish immigrants to settle in Montreal.

Before the turn of the Twentieth century, Jewish Montrealers had settled in what is today downtown, in the area just north of Old Montreal, and along Saint Laurent Boulevard.<sup>18</sup> Tulchinsky explains that "the fact that this 'Jewish quarter' was at the geographical centre of the city and divided the French and the English sections of Montreal was symbolic of the precarious marginality of the Jewish presence to both."<sup>19</sup> Saint Laurent Boulevard (The Main) was a vibrant artery of Jewish life, consisting of a synagogue, Yiddish theatres, kosher food shops, Jewish organizations and businesses, and of course, Jewish homes. The Starks lived there for many years, advancing economically and socially. By the 1920s, Adolph had become the president of Jewish Immigrant Aid Services.

## Classical Music and the Stark Family

Ethel Stark began formal violin lessons at age seven and studied at the McGill Conservatory of Music.<sup>20</sup> Her parents had a European vision for their daughter's musical education. Unfortunately, this was an education that Canadian schools or culture could not offer, for at the time Canada's rudimentary cultural milieu lagged far behind those of Europe and the United States.<sup>21</sup> North America in general looked to Europe as arbiter of culture and as the standard of cultural value, and thus classical music held a greater degree of prestige and respect among middle- and upper-class society than jazz or other forms of music native to North America. Classical music conferred on the Starks a sense of privilege and set them apart from the vast majority of Jews in Montreal who were not of their same socio-economic stature.



Ethel Stark,  
Violin, Courtesy  
of Library and  
Archives Canada.

Although the Starks considered themselves Jews of Austrian descent, of a higher class than Eastern European Jews, their early lives in Montreal forced them to experience a common poverty.<sup>22</sup> In addition, having encountered antisemitism in Europe, Ethel's parents no longer frowned upon having to mingle with the "non-enlightened" Jew but in fact embraced and empathized with persecuted Jews who had fled their homelands, such as Shepard Broad, a fourteen year-old orphan from Russia.<sup>23</sup> Adolph and Laura Stark were so passionately committed to civic duty and to human rights, that they even offered to adopt him into their own family.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, Laura's work zealously with the lady's branch of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services supported the family, and this was a source of pride for her. From her mother and the women around her, Ethel Stark had learnt what "woman" could be: assertive, independent, and astute in business.<sup>25</sup> She slowly absorbed these values, and social justice became a vital lens through which she would later interpret the world.<sup>26</sup>

In 1928, when seventeen-year-old Ethel Stark became the first Canadian to be accepted at the renowned Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, the family restructured their framework to allow the young violinist to study at one of the most prestigious schools of music in North America. Laura Stark moved to Philadelphia to care for her daughter while Adolph remained behind in Montreal with Ethel's two siblings. Mother and daughter would spend more than five precious years together, learning music, culture, and what it meant to be a Jewish woman.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ethel Stark and the Cult of Domesticity**

Having been raised in the Jewish area of Montreal, young Ethel Stark would not have been exposed much to Victorian rules of femininity of the time. Montreal's Jewish community lived, in a sense, in a self-imposed ghetto without walls. Restrictions imposed on the majority of the Jewish community by their faith circumscribed where Jews could shop for food, pray, socialize, and educate their children. Interlocking networks of economic and social relations strengthened community identity, and communal institutions (such as the synagogue) also reinforced a deep sense of difference from outsiders. The priority that Yiddish occupied amongst the community and the compactness of the Jewish neighbourhood allowed for a certain isolation — this is where they lived, worked, shopped, and played. As Hernan Tesler-Mabé argues, in the sense that it traced the outline of their previous lives, this neighbourhood became the "shtetl" of the New World.<sup>28</sup>

Gender roles in Eastern European Jewish culture were analogous to those of the Victorian cult where women were defined in terms of their duties as wives and mothers. Hasia Diner notes that Jewish girls were raised in "immigrant, working-class environments that supported a more aggressive and savvy notion of womanhood" than that idealized by middle-class American Protestant culture.<sup>29</sup> Jewish wom-

en cooked, cleaned, laundered, took care of the children, and so forth. However, the most fundamental difference was that Jewish women were not only encouraged, but expected, to contribute directly to the family income. Traditional East European Jewish culture was deeply patriarchal in nature, with the religious scholar as the ideal Jew; thus a wife's financial contribution to family life was "viewed positively within some traditional Jewish communities."<sup>30</sup> Ruth Frager argues that this Jewish ideal, though "remote from the realities of the lives of many Jewish families," legitimated women's role as direct contributors to the family's income.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, studies by Melissa Klapper, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Hasia Diner and others show that women's work outside the home was normal in traditional East European Jewish communities.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the ideology of the time, which viewed women as docile, physically and mentally fragile, and too domestic to participate in the general labour force, Jewish culture saw women as assertive, even cunning, and able to withstand the pressures of work in the public labour force. Frager writes, "lacking the Victorian notion of the superior purity and piety of women," Jewish culture in Canada lacked the Protestant "highly idealized Victorian conception of the home as a 'haven in a heartless world.'"<sup>33</sup> Jewish mothers also taught their young daughters to be assertive in the marketplace.<sup>34</sup> In her unpublished memoir, Stark relates such an example from her early childhood where her mother began sending her alone to the market in order to teach her how to handle money.<sup>35</sup> A store owner tried to scam Stark into buying less than perfect tomatoes, and Stark boldly took her coins back from the seller's hand, choosing to return home empty-handed rather than to give in to his trick. Rather than being cross, Stark's mother was only too proud of her daughter's independence and assertiveness.<sup>36</sup> Such incidents of female confidence stayed in Stark's memories for years to come.

While cultural norms saw domesticity as the ideal model for all women, it was not a reality or even an option for Jewish women. As Frager notes, Victorian domesticity was foreign to traditional East European culture: "The fact that Jewish women were not confined—either in terms of the ideal or the realities of their lives—to the private sphere of domesticity contrasts sharply with the Victorian emphasis on the domestic ideology."<sup>37</sup> Donna Goodman argues even more forcefully that "in some very important ways, the cult of True Womanhood was both irrelevant and impossible for most Jewish women who lacked the financial means to enjoy full-time domesticity. Quite simply, immigrant women had to work outside the home (or bring work into it) if they and their families were to survive."<sup>38</sup> Yet although Jewish women did not fit in with Victorian ideals, they nevertheless worked under its mantle. Many Jewish women who laboured in factories, sweatshops, and other low paying jobs contested these Victorian ideals of femininity as their class hindered their economic opportunities, and their position as outsiders kept them from attaining upward social mobility.

The classical music world in North America stood in blatant contrast to traditional Jewish culture. For many centuries classical had been deeply informed by gender norms. Victorian ideology regarding femininity was still prevalent in the early Twentieth century. It stressed music as a domestic accomplishment insofar as it was *needed* to encourage domesticity and institutionalize gender codes.<sup>39</sup> Musicologist Kay Dreyfus notes that by the end of the Nineteenth century, “the cultivation of music as an [unpaid] accomplishment by female members of the household became a symbol of leisure and stability for upwardly mobile or upper-class moneyed families.”<sup>40</sup> Music was believed to be a trivial accomplishment for women, an ornament to her essential role as wife and mother. Musical education was sometimes a snare for a woman, for while it offered the possibility to liberate her from her domestic life and boredom, it also prevented her involvement in the world outside the home. Despite fierce opposition from moralists and “father-authors” of the early Twentieth centuries, the number of female cellists, violinists, and other orchestral instrumentalists continued to increase. Playing such instruments became both a “sensation” and an emancipatory tactic that reflected deeper societal forces that would soon signal changes in the music profession for women.<sup>41</sup> Yet, even by the turn of the Twentieth century, “careers” for female instrumentalists were limited to teaching music lessons.<sup>42</sup> The devotion that the Stark family had for their daughter’s musical education was, therefore, a deviation of North American standards of domesticity.

Stark did not have had much contact with Victorian domestic ideology while living in Montreal, at least not so much that it influenced her values and attitudes. When she finally began to work in the music profession in 1934, however, she quickly learned from her white colleagues how a “good” female musician acted and what a “good” family looked like. To move up and out of the working class or, in Stark’s case, in order to have certain career opportunities, she would have to replicate the values of the Protestant elite. Stark’s first exposure to Victorian domestic ideology when she joined the ‘Hour of Charm’ Orchestra in New York City in 1934 ignited her desire for radical changes in the music profession.<sup>43</sup>

### **‘The Hour of Charm’ Orchestra**

The Great Depression had hit America hard by the time Stark was ready to embark on a career as a solo violinist. A top graduate from one of the most prestigious schools in North America could not have found a worse era in which to start a career.<sup>44</sup> She had little money and travelled to New York City to live with her brother, Jules. Now, at age twenty-five, Stark finally witnessed how society considered it worthwhile for a woman to play a musical instrument only because it increased a lady’s prospects of marrying into a wealthy family, and she realized that the dedicated support she had received from her parents was unheard of. With the exception of the pit orchestra for the Jewish theatre, which had twelve women, orchestras in New York City did not



welcome women in their ranks, and thus it was both a relief and a curse when she discovered that one orchestra was looking for a "lady" violinist.<sup>45</sup>

The 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra was a vaudeville, all-female ensemble of violinists, cellists, trumpeters, trombonists, saxophonists, a flutist, drummer, harpist, two pianists, and two main singers—one specializing in classical works and the other in popular tunes. Conductor and music director Phil Spitalny alleged to have scrutinized the country looking for the best female talent in America, and after six months, 1500 auditions, and at a cost of \$20 000, Spitalny selected the first twenty-two ladies who would form the group.<sup>46</sup> Musical talent was not the only criterion for hiring; all the women were required to sing well, to be white, attractive, slim, and to abide by the rules of proper courtship in their private lives, as outlined by their conductor.<sup>47</sup>

The orchestra made its professional debut in New York City at the Capitol Theatre and began a network radio program, 'The Hour of Charm,' on January 3, 1935. It would be broadcast live over the NBC and later CBS networks for more than ten years. It also performed live at "movie palaces" such as the Paramount and Capitol theatres on Broadway, the Paramount in Brooklyn, and at Radio City Music Hall and in cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and Toronto, Canada.<sup>48</sup> The orchestra played a wide variety of music, from Mozart to Strauss, from religious hymns to secular jazz tunes, and from the solo sounds of concertmistress Evelyn Kaye's "Magic Violin" to the vocal harmonies of the "All-American Glee Club" led by the deep-voiced Maxine Moore, the featured vocalist with the orchestra.<sup>49</sup> Each live show finished with an act for dramatic effect, such as a dancer, singer, acrobat, or cannon balls. A 1939 *Washington Post* article describes the ensemble as follows:

Famous on the air as well as upon the stage, the Spitalny group possesses the rare gift of mastery of both the classics of standard music and the crazy rhythms of modern swing. It merges the finished musicianship of a schooled symphony with the wild abandon of a rug-cutting jam session and punctuates its concerted numbers with solo, trio, glee, sextet and comic interludes that comprise a program of great variety and uniform excellence.<sup>50</sup>

Such an orchestra was a double-edged sword for its musicians, for while it offered them employment, it also undermined their talent, education, and even dignity. In the classical music world this type of ladies' orchestra was considered low-brow, not only for its type of music, but also for its association with femininity, which was interpreted as amateur. Thus, it could both threaten and finish off a fledging classical music career.<sup>51</sup>

### True Womanhood and the 'Hour of Charm'

Stark auditioned and won a position in the orchestra immediately.<sup>52</sup> Relieved to have work, shamed to join such a low-brow ensemble, and helpless to do anything about it, Stark accepted the invitation. What she encountered at the 'Hour of Charm' was different from anything she had faced before.

Although North American society in general frowned on the idea of women performing publicly, the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra became an overnight commercial success. This was only possible because the Orchestra was an emblem of cultured white Victorian femininity in almost every aspect of performance: old-fashioned images of domestic ladies of leisure, dressed in billowing gowns, playing their instrument as charming "accomplishments."<sup>53</sup> Glamorous white gowns, make-up, and blonde wigs adorned with flowers were not only decorative elements; they transformed the musicians all into cultured ladies and underlined their femininity, precautions that made playing 'masculine' instruments appear like a leisurely activity. It reassured audiences that women who played instruments associated with men could simultaneously uphold ideals of white, middle-upper-class femininity and play music on the stage.<sup>54</sup>



1937 NBC The Hour of Charm Orchestra (Front, Right: Ethel Stark, violinist). Credit: NBC, Buda Baker, N.Y.

Performing 'charm' became part of the women's labour; their dress and mannerisms were important cultural signifiers that affirmed stereotypes about women's domestic roles. Corseted dresses and pointed shoes were not always comfortable to play in, especially for the woodwind and brass players who needed large breaths to play their instruments well. As Tucker writes of female musicians of that time, "...high heels reassured audiences that women musicians were feminine as well as skilled, but they also marked women musicians as visual entertainment...many women musicians recalled that it was more work, not less, to perform glamorous femininity."<sup>55</sup> This cultivation of the orchestra as a place of charm, as a heavenly domestic sanctuary where music-making was part of the framework of domesticity, allowed the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra to be accepted and flourish in the entertainment industry.<sup>56</sup>

### **Jewish Women and the 'Hour of Charm'**

Ironically, Ethel Stark was a Canadian Jewish woman representing white, cultured, upper-class (i.e., Protestant) American womanhood. In fact, she was not the only Jewish woman in the Orchestra. Sonia Slatin was born in 1910 in New York City to a Jewish immigrant family from Russia that worked in the garment industry.<sup>57</sup> Slatin grew up speaking only Yiddish and Russian, and her first personal experiences in school were filled with such exclusion and social ostracism that it took her years to later gain confidence.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, these experiences fuelled her want to be part of the rewards of white, upper-class society.

The Slatins' garment business was on the brink of ruin. As Slatin reminisced, "I was the only one, really, old enough to have the possibility of bringing in some money.... I could not afford to give up an opportunity [with the orchestra] to make about 10 to 20 times the amount earned by the average office or store or factory worker and thus help the family in our predicament."<sup>59</sup> Soon after graduating from The Juilliard School she auditioned for the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra and was accepted, much to her family's relief and joy. Slatin and Stark became immediate friends. They had similar life experiences, upbringings, and outlooks on life.

Stark and Slatin, two Jewish working-class women, and the latter from a Yiddish-speaking family, appeared to embody white, cultured, Victorian womanhood on the stage. As Jewish women they knew they were neither 'fully white' nor 'fully cultured' in the sense that some of their colleagues were. To borrow Urszula Chowaniec's words, they entered this "inevitable female disguise" both "as a submission to the dominant social role" and as "resistance to patriarchal norms."<sup>60</sup> In other words, they chose to enter the cultured, white, 'feminine' spectacle partly as a strategy that allowed them to ascend into white, upper-class society, with all the opportunities and financial gain it brought them, while appearing as nonthreatening in a male-dominated music world. By joining the orchestra, they carefully entered into a system of

values that was not theirs and in which they could become visible only as they reflected the ideals of the cult of femininity. Stark and Slatin not only performed music onstage, they performed (in Judith Butler's sense) white, cultured womanhood and all the conventions attached to it.<sup>61</sup> This self-fashioning of themselves provided "the essential link between private and public," between their "willingness and ability to project [themselves] into the public."<sup>62</sup> Stark and Slatin thus renounced certain claims to personal freedom in return for a privileged and secure employment.

Ironically, Stark and Slatin's values in real life were incongruous with those they portrayed on the stage—a challenge shared by many other Jewish men and women fighting to assimilate into white, Protestant American culture.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to the ideal 'white domestic lady' who played an instrument for leisure, Stark and Slatin were public professional musicians, highly accomplished and educated, and led unorthodox lives outside the constraints of conventional domesticity.<sup>64</sup> They had no plans for marriage or housewifery—an interesting point since as Rebecca Kobrin writes that as late as the 1950s "Jewish women were expected to see motherhood as their top priority."<sup>65</sup> Instead, Stark and Slatin managed their own solo careers playing outside the Orchestra, handled their own incomes, and with the wages they made from playing in the Orchestra, became the primary earners of their families. Indeed, their public labour, commercial ventures, and positions as primary-earners placed them firmly outside Victorian femininity, rendering their gender, whiteness, and even sexuality as questionable. Conventional images of the orchestra would suggest that Stark and Slatin were passive and subordinate mannequins, but while both women worked under the umbrella of Victorian femininity, they defied its narrow ideology and protested its lofty ideals. As Laurie Stras notes, even though many women of this era were "willing to dance right into marriage and motherhood," many other women contested this "version of womanhood," highlighting that "female femininity was in fact a complex process influenced by class and race."<sup>66</sup>

Stark and Slatin also performed as soloists and cast aside the social convention that frowned on women who travelled alone, and toured parts of North America and Europe without a male chaperone. Stories about their transactions in the European Black Market in order to exchange American money for local currency further accentuate their independence and daring spirit.<sup>67</sup> As they developed their professional identities, they also fashioned models of a new and emerging womanhood opposed to the ideal Victorian lady. Their Jewish upbringing played a role in shaping their choices, shattering prevailing notions of how middle-class women should live and act. Stark performed these gendered discourses with great success, akin to Shenkar's description of "a multifaced and intriguing character with at times contradictory attributes and chameleon like qualities...difficult to pin down in a simple monolithic argument, instead producing seemingly endless layer of interpretation."<sup>68</sup>

Even more contradictory to Victorian ideals was that Ethel Stark wanted to conduct professional symphony orchestras at a time when women were not hired by any of the major professional orchestras in North America. Women performing publicly was still controversial, and the idea of women leading any kind of male institution was inconceivable.<sup>69</sup> No woman who subscribed to Victorian ideals would have aimed for such a career. Stark's decision was simultaneously informed by her liberal Jewish upbringing and also her highly musical upbringing, however. Her mother had placed much importance on the assertiveness and industriousness of Jewish women and had so stressed the value of an enterprising spirit that Stark saw no contradiction between her gender and her ability to lead—even to lead an all-male institution. An undercurrent of the ideals of women's suffrage had been a part of the Stark household throughout Ethel's adolescent years, and such encouragement had gone a long way in shaping the dogged confidence and independence that was part of her personality.

Although Stark worked for the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra for two seasons, she was well aware that in the world of classical music a vaudeville ensemble was not considered a real orchestra that played real music.<sup>70</sup> She respected Spitalny's talent for arranging a wide variety of music but she considered such music and such an ensemble with a slight condescension. Stark considered her enormous talent to be above playing Schubert's "Ave Maria" and popular Protestant hymns such as "Rock of Ages." She had climbed one rung of the ladder of whiteness when she joined the seemingly aristocratic ladies of the 'Hour of Charm,' but she was ready to climb a second rung by devoting her talent exclusively to playing the music of the great masters, that which the major symphony orchestras were performing. Such was the stigma attached to playing 'low-brow' music, and so much did she wish to enter the Eurocentric circle of classical music, that Stark was embarrassed to admit she had been a part of this vaudeville ensemble, even years later. Consequently, Stark never spoke of her involvement with the 'Hour of Charm' to anyone. It is from her friend Sonia Slatin that we learn of the extent of their association with Phil Spitalny. In 2017, James Phillip Komar, Stark's secretary of many years, wrote,

I was never aware that Ethel Stark had been connected with Phil Spitalny's all-girl orchestra. I once told Ethel that she and the MWSO were the real thing, not a novelty like Phil Spitalny's all-girl orchestra with Evelyn and her magic violin. No wonder Ethel never told me of her connection with them!<sup>71</sup>

### **The Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra**

Stark left the 'Hour of Charm' after two seasons, even as Spitalny pleaded with her to stay.<sup>72</sup> She tried hard to obtain work with symphony orchestras as a conductor, but this was almost futile. By stepping into the field of conducting Stark had de-

fied a conventional gender trope, and this resulted in discrimination from orchestra boards that were not keen on hiring a woman to lead their male musicians. Women conducting professional orchestras were an anomaly. Stark had no desire to return to a 'proper' ladies orchestra such as the 'Hour of Charm,' but neither did she have an alternative steady income from her profession. Such treatment from the world of classical music—to which she believed she belonged, especially given her Austrian heritage—appalled her and compelled her to protest. Unlike her parents, she was not an activist and had no experience with social activism, yet she did intend to have a positive social impact on the life of female musicians in Canada. The opportunity came to her in 1940 when she returned to Montreal.

In January 1940, Margaret (Madge) Bowen, a wealthy Anglophone woman who had a desire to learn chamber music, requested that Stark start a small 'ladies' ensemble in Montreal. Initially Stark was insulted and dismayed by a request to work with amateurs.<sup>73</sup> She had left the 'Hour of Charm' Orchestra years ago and had no aspiration to mimic anything like it, especially its repertoire. This was an important indicator of Stark's movement into a higher social class. Bowen pricked the violinist's conscience, however, by pointing out that if female musicians were to ever join the ranks of professional orchestras they would need a training ground first. After giving it some thought, Stark countered Bowen's request with an even bigger project: to start a large symphony orchestra of eighty to one hundred players that would rival the male ensembles of any city.<sup>74</sup> Any woman of any class, race, and age could join the orchestra, the only requirement being that she know how to read "a little bit of music."<sup>75</sup> Stark and Bowen would expand the boundaries of the traditional symphony orchestra by creating the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra (MWSO).

I documented the story of the MWSO in great detail in my book *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall*, thus I will make only a few brief remarks about this orchestra.<sup>76</sup> In 1940, the same year that women in Quebec won the right to vote, Stark assembled a group of 'housewives,' teachers, factory workers, students, mother-daughter pairs, Catholic women, and Jewish women, from ages 16 to 60, to form the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra, the first all-women's orchestra in Canada.<sup>77</sup> Despite the challenges and criticisms they faced, year after year, the women of MWSO hauled their instruments to rat-infested basements and drafty lofts for rehearsals.<sup>78</sup> Students from North American music schools also trained with the MWSO on various occasions, and Sonia Slatin became one of the orchestra's pianists. Stark's fortitude and desire to cultivate and shape an amateur orchestra to a high level of musicianship within a short period paid off. Within only six months the Orchestra gave its debut concert at the Chalet of Mount Royal to a crowd of five thousand people. In only seven years the MWSO became the first Canadian orchestra to represent the nation at New York's Carnegie Hall, and to rave reviews.<sup>79</sup> Stark's dreams for Canadian women were unfolding. The MWSO had caught the attention of the world; fan mail from women

as far as Japan arrived by the hundreds of letters, and invitations were extended for appearances in cities in Europe, South America, and Asia.

The Orchestra was supported financially by a small liberal Jewish community of musicians and followers. It is clear that the Orchestra was an important artistic venue for pioneering Jewish female musicians from the fact that many of its players were of Jewish descent, and increasingly so with each year. In *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall*, I note that most players in the MWSO were Francophone and Catholic, followed by English-speaking Protestant elite, and Jewish women.<sup>80</sup> However, since 2016 I have studied a wider selection of concert programmes which reveal that Stark's orchestra may have been more Jewish than I first noted. As Stark gained upward social mobility, she internalized ideals of upper-class womanhood and sought to impart those values on her female musicians. What Mary Kelley writes of American women reformers applies equally to Stark's case: These women "claimed a special authority based on difference," on "female moral superiority" — in this case artistic superiority<sup>81</sup>. The concerts of the MWSO were important cultural Jewish activities. They fostered a musical community within Jewish society of Montreal. Further studies could illuminate the extent of this influence on North American Jewish culture as well. A brief survey of surnames from concert programmes does seem show that women from New York, Boston, and St. Louis who played with the Orchestra may have been Jewish as well.

Stark also requested the assistance of many Jewish professionals in the field, all whom offered to perform with the orchestra for nothing more than a place to sleep and travel allowances. Through Stark and the MWSO, Montreal's cultural life was enriched by the contributions of these professional and rising Jewish artists from around the world: Lea Luboshutz, Yehudi Menuhin, Nadia Reinsenberg, Boris Goldovsky, and Zara Nelsova, among others. Stark was also close friends with Jewish composer Ernest Bloch, whom she had met in Geneva years earlier on tour as a violinist.<sup>82</sup> She gave premieres of his music in Canada and furthered his profile by playing his music on CBC Radio.<sup>83</sup>

Stark was welcomed within Montreal's small Jewish musical community.<sup>84</sup> Her orchestra was a source of pride and likely a symbol of success in a new land. The Montreal Jewish Public Library generously hosted many performances by Stark and her orchestra, since during its existence the MWSO never managed to obtain a home in which to rehearse and perform. To this day, the Library continues to expand its collection on Ethel Stark and the women's orchestra.

By the late 1950s Stark's efforts had been vindicated. She had trained a small army of women from across North America—many of them Jewish—who were ready to encroach upon and gain their place in professional orchestras throughout the con-

continent. Some of them were the first women to break into their professional fields. Doriot Anthony Dwyer, for example, became the first woman to be accepted as a principal player of any major professional orchestra when she won the job as principal flute player of the Boston Symphony orchestra.<sup>85</sup> Trombonist Dorothy Ziegler also scored a “first” for female brass players when she was hired by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra to play principal trombone.<sup>86</sup> The MWSO gave its last performance in 1968, by which point Stark’s revolutionary pioneering work in the profession had taken a life of its own.



Ethel Stark, Conductor. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

Stark set out to build a ‘real’ orchestra devoid of the ‘feminine’ trappings and the Victorian feminine ideology of the ‘Hour of Charm.’ The MWSO played the standard repertoire of the traditional symphony orchestra, the musicians wore simple black uniforms with a white collar, and their programs did not include acts, dances, or any other vaudeville entertainment. It was Stark’s decision to invite a black woman to play in her orchestra was by far her most radical defiance of Victorian feminine ideals and the rigid conventions of classical music, however. Ironically, it was also a decision that would confirm that as a Jewish woman she could not entirely break free from the chains of the Victorian femininity.



## Ethel Stark and Blackness

The most noteworthy social aspect of the MWSO was the inclusion of women from all socioeconomic levels, and in particular, Stark's invitation to Violet Grant States in 1943 to play principal clarinet in the Orchestra. It is quite likely that Grant States was the first black musician to hold a regular chair of any North American orchestra.<sup>87</sup> Stark's decision to embrace women of lower classes, especially a black woman, into the institution of the symphony orchestra, a bastion of masculine patriarchy and an institution entrenched in elitist and Eurocentric ideals, was nothing short of shocking. Indeed, the inclusion of a black musician in a symphony orchestra in Montreal was even noted by the *Negro Digest*, a popular African-American magazine of the 1940s based in Chicago.<sup>88</sup> At this time, black musicians were considered too 'feminine' (i.e., irrational) to play music of the European canon and were thus excluded from major symphony orchestras in North America. It was not until 1948 that a major symphony orchestra in North America, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, first hired a black musician.<sup>89</sup>

This radical move on Stark's part was in no small part due to her Jewishness. This is evident from her own unpublished memoir. In 2012, Stark died and left behind an unfinished memoir that was meant to be published. This memoir details her triumphs and struggles and reveals her desire to be remembered as an important contributor to breaking down barriers for women in classical music. The first chapters are filled with proud recollections of her Jewish heritage, from kosher recipes to significant Jewish figures, family members, and her mother's account of Tarnopol. Many vignettes connect her Jewishness and feminist views with her childhood experiences, her parents' support of her as a musician, and her family's love of music. What stands out most from Stark's writing style is her meticulous attention to chronology, which is very important in explaining her empathy with the black cause.

Near the end of the unfinished memoir, Stark recounts one of her last performances with the MWSO. It was 1968, and the Orchestra was scheduled to play at Loyola college in Montreal. The drama room was designated as the green-room for the orchestra. When the Orchestra members arrived, however, they found Nazi swastika signs pinned to the walls. Stark writes that many women in the Orchestra were Jewish and felt uncomfortable, but at first no one dared to say anything. Stark alerted the college official, who refused initially to take down the signs, insisting he had no authority to touch anything in the drama room. After a heated confrontation Stark left the college with a threat: take the down the signs or, instead of playing their instruments onstage, the women would observe silence, and Stark would explain to the audience the reason for it.

Fortunately, when Stark and the members of the MWSO returned that night, the signs had been taken down, but alas, seconds after the concert ended, a pageboy came running to Stark shouting, “Dr. King is dead!” Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot to death minutes before. Stark writes, “This was too much for me—the swastikas, and now Dr. King dead. I buried my face in my hands and began to weep [...] One of the women asked me why I had such a reaction and I told her this story about [my cousin] Herman...”

In the late 1930s, while Stark was living in New York City, Herman, a distant cousin on her mother’s side, escaped from Germany to the United States to avoid capture by the Nazis. He arrived in New York and was detained at Ellis Island with the threat of being sent back to Germany, and only Ethel Stark’s persistence saved him from this peril. Unfortunately, Herman’s father, wife, and child missed a ship sailing to Canada and were captured and executed in the Nazi gas chambers.<sup>90</sup>

The linking together of these events from separate periods in her life shows that Stark saw antisemitism and racism against blacks as immutably connected, and that she identified and sympathized with the black struggle—a feeling shared by many other Jewish citizens of the era. It is especially interesting that Stark had not mentioned her cousin earlier in her memoir. Hasia Diner, Wendell Pritchett, and other historians have documented the many contributions Jewish leaders made to the American civil rights movement and their motivations for doing so.<sup>91</sup> Like many of these Jewish reformers, Stark’s main interest in the Black cause stemmed from a special sympathy towards another disadvantaged person. She understood Violet Grant State’s suffering due to social prejudices. For instance, when the MSWO was invited to play at Carnegie Hall, Stark took special care to warn and prepare Grant States for possible racism in New York City. Grant States recalled, “Ethel was worried the hotel wouldn’t let me stay there and I wouldn’t have anywhere to go....My brother had been there before and told me it was such a cosmopolitan place that I would have no problems finding a place to stay.”<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, Stark’s decision to include a black woman in a white orchestra was primarily based on need; Stark needed a female clarinetist for the Orchestra and wind players were difficult to find anywhere in North America. However, while her music making was a way to forge a career, it also became her weapon to fight injustice whether this was based on gender or race. In fact, the rising antisemitism in Montreal in the 1940s along with the loss of her relatives to the Holocaust affected her deeply. In aiding the black cause in some small way, Stark was validating her own ethnic identity at a time when signifiers of Jewish identity were eroding in the world around her and her own life.

In order to retain the class status she had gradually gained from her musical accomplishments, however, and to maintain the tolerance of the Montreal community, Stark also had to at least appear within the norms of proper white femininity and the conventions of classical music. In doing so, she dispelled common stereotypes about Jews and in particular Jewish women. She had thus aligned herself with the dominant culture, creating a contrast between herself as a 'white' person and Violet Grant States, a marginalized black woman, whom in the press she referred to simply as "a negro girl."<sup>93</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell's self-reflection mirrors Stark's inner struggle. Prell writes,

"I...yearned to be identical to the white middle class. There was a silence about our difference as Jews from the Protestant majority. We appeared to be like the majority. We're not 'minorities.' ...opinion polls suggested that our white Christian neighbours did not dread living near us or marrying us to the degree they did African Americans. We worked to be part of an apparent sameness that by necessity made many of us hyperconscious of our difference."<sup>94</sup>

While Grant States recalls Stark as taking special care of her, there was in fact little interpersonal interaction between Stark and Violet Grant States. This suggests that while Stark may have been oriented toward the black cause, she did not feel completely liberated from the social pressures of white, cultured womanhood and the conventions of classical music. As Grant States recalls,

Most of the women went west [read higher social class], but I was the only one going east [toward a poor area of Montreal]...They were very friendly and welcoming within the orchestra, but we never mingled outside of the orchestra's activities. They had their lives and I had mine. Miss Stark was very kind to me, and she even took special care.... [She] was concerned about me at times because I was black...but no, she never invited me outside of the orchestra.<sup>95</sup>

As a 'cultured lady,' Stark was mobile within white society and could claim, negotiate, and manipulate this white privilege, but Violet Grant States remained socially immobile and mute. In giving Grant States a place in the Orchestra, Stark empowered her and shared with her some of the rewards of white privilege. This process of self-regulation on Stark's part highlights the tensions surrounding power and agency in the production of her identity through social and cultural norms. Indeed, Stark negotiated carefully the norms of white femininity, her Jewishness, her career mobility, and her commitment to social-justice ideals, all within the bounds of classical music culture. Many Jewish women of this time, as Rachel Kranson notes, were aware that "while American Jews might have been *in* the middle, they were most certainly not *of* it."<sup>96</sup> Their anxieties over upward mobility manifested in different ways as they responded to the challenge of retaining their sense of self as Jewish peoples.<sup>97</sup>

When Stark's fight for higher ideals interfered with her ability to remain within the ranks of white society, her place on the scale of cultured whiteness became ambivalent. It was at these fragile times that Stark became dependent on the whiteness of others, particularly Madge Bowen's class, race, and status, to lend the MWSO an air of acceptability and respect. Bowen, an upper-class Anglophone lady, managed the orchestra behind the scenes and played the violin in its ranks simply for the joy of it rather than for professional experience.<sup>98</sup> Bowen became the face and the force behind the success of the Orchestra.<sup>99</sup> Without Stark's talent, the MSWO would never have made it to Carnegie Hall, but without Bowen's image of femininity and respectability, the Orchestra would not have been as accepted outside of the Jewish community. Bowen had many contacts with the wives of high-profile businessmen who lent their philanthropy to a struggling 'ladies' orchestra.<sup>100</sup> When Bowen died in 1952, Stark's sister, Doretta Stark, took over managing the Orchestra. Despite the support of the small (and secular) Jewish community, the Orchestra's activities began to diminish until it eventually folded in the late 1960s. The two Jewish sisters did not have the cultural capital (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense) outside the Jewish community that Madge Bowen had.<sup>101</sup> Having been raised in a highly musical and assimilated Austro-Jewish family aspiring to a higher social status, relying on someone else's social attributes became a painful reminder for Stark of the fragility of her own 'whiteness.'

### Further Notes on Stark's Jewishness

Although there are many interesting stories that shed further light on Stark's Jewishness, one event in particular broadens our view. On May 14, 1948, the United Nations declared Israel an independent state. In 1952, the Israeli government and several cultural organizations hosted the first International Festival of Song, "Hazamir" or "The Nightingale." Jewish choirs from outside Israel were invited to participate in this act of solidarity and diplomacy. In Montreal, the United Zionist Council of Canada examined the possibility of participating. Pauline Donalda, the famous Canadian soprano and founder of the Opera Guild of Montreal, and Hanann Aynor, Vice-consul of Israel, along with Cantor Nathan Mendelsohn and Rabbi Samuel Cass, were chosen to organize and lead a group of Canadian representatives. They knew there was only one person who could organize such an exciting venture in such short notice: Ethel Stark.<sup>102</sup>

Donalda presented the details: There was at present no choir, no music, no funding, and they would only have three months to put everything together.<sup>103</sup> "Once again, I found myself in the middle of a project of herculean proportions," Ethel wrote in her memoir, years later.<sup>104</sup> Three months to build a choir and prepare it for a performance on the world stage was a colossal feat. After assembling a group of 42 voices, rehearsals began 6 nights a week: one evening for the sopranos, followed by the altos



Second World War and the 1948 Israeli War of Independence.<sup>106</sup> It was now outfitted as a passenger ship for 300 people.<sup>107</sup>

Ethel writes that the first full day on board was Tisha B'Av, a national day of mourning in Israel, commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, the exile of the Jews, and other national calamities. The Book of Lamentations is read as part of the synagogue services and is marked by special prayers, intense fasting, and abstinence from all pleasurable activities. Despite the chaos from the previous night, and the fact that there were so many different nationalities—Canadian, American, Irish, Yugoslavian, Finnish, French, British—all complaints ceased and they all prayed with one voice in Hebrew.

After four days and three nights, the port of Haifa finally emerged. Two boats bearing Israeli flags triumphantly sailed toward the *Negba* to greet and welcome the choirs. At the sight of land and flags, immense emotion overtook the passengers on the ship. Teary-eyed, they watched Haifa emerge little by little—the Holy Land, the land of their ancestors. Everyone wanted to see and experience the glorious entrance into Israel and almost as if they all had the same thought at the same time, they all rushed to one side of the ship.

“The weight shifted and the boat began to slowly capsize,” writes Stark. “For a moment, everyone thought they would overturn. Disaster was averted, and at last the ship was anchored safely.” As the members disembarked, a large Israeli Choir and another thousand Jewish people greeted them with the song, “Hevenu Shalom Aleichem!” (We Bring You Peace/We Welcome You!).

From the moment Ethel Stark stepped in the homeland, festival organizers took special care of her as a *female Jewish musician*. Since Ethel was the only female conductor there, the festival management arranged for a special car with a chauffeur to driver her to the Hotel at Ramat-Yam (the Garden City), a suburb of Tel Aviv. At other times, an ambulance followed the choirs around on their trips around Israel and arrangements were made to make it Stark's dressing room. She writes, “I was delighted with the arrangement since it was the only vehicle with air conditioning.” She also recalls being escorted through the crowds by Israeli Army soldiers. These small gestures were not extended to any other conductor during the festival.

According to Stark, the opening performance of the festival took place on Mount Herzl, at an open-air amphitheatre filled to capacity with approximately 60 000 Israelis, including government officials. A memorial service commemorated the sacrifice of those who had served to rebuild the Holy Land. The concert opened with all the choirs singing the Israel National Anthem, “HaTikvah” (The Hope). Finally, the Canadian Choir entered the stage, singing a mixture of Canadian folk songs in En-

glish, French and Hebrew, and a piece that Ethel had commissioned for this occasion from an emerging Canadian Jewish composer (incidentally, a husband of a member of the MWSO), Alexander Brott. The piece was called "Israel." Other pieces included those by Canadian composer Lionel Daunais, as well as arrangements by Leslie Bell and Hector Gratton. Ethel was determined to display Canadian culture and talent.

In the days that followed, the choirs performed concerts all over Israel, in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and in many towns in Upper Galilee. At Zikhron Ya'akov a crowd of about 3000 people came by every mode of transport possible, even on camels. Young families with children and babies, and older people alike brought along what little food they had for their meals and camped out the previous night to secure a spot on the grass. Stark writes, "Upon our return to Kfar Giladi in Upper Galilee, our hosts prepared the most festive reception with what little food and money they had. Eggs, fruit, and vegetables were placed on long table dressed in purest white. These were luxury items in those days. I am sure that they had taken the food from their emergency supply." As the reception wound down, an elderly gentleman made a most moving speech that almost brought everyone to tears. He thanked the Canadian Choir for crossing the ocean to share their talent with their kin in Israel. Ethel thanked him and said, "When I return home I will tell everyone how wonderful you were to us –." Before she could finish her sentence, the gentleman looked in amazement and said, "You Are at Home!"

"That gave me a jolt because he was right!...I will always have a very deep feeling towards Israel, a place where I will always be welcome," Stark writes. Her surprise shows her distance from the Jewish world, despite her conviction of her own Jewishness. Interestingly, Eric Goldstein's observations of Jewish civil rights activists apply to Stark as well:

If many of the Jews who immersed themselves in civil rights activity were acting on impulses that stemmed from their background as Jews, it was actually their distance to the Jewish world that freed them to support... [civil rights] causes in such visible ways.<sup>108</sup>

This "distance" came from her music-making. My 2016 interview with Polina Belkina, a long-time neighbour and friend of Stark, also sheds light on Stark's perception of herself as a Jewish woman. Belkina stated,

Ethel Stark was Jewish, and very proud of it. She considered herself an Austrian aristocrat, a woman of high stature...Her Jewish heritage was important, of course. She was an Austrian Jewish woman... She did not speak Yiddish. And she was not religious although she kept some Jewish customs and traditions. For example, on one occasion some very orthodox Jewish friends

invited her to a Bar mitzvah. At first she refused to go. She was not religious in that sense... On the day of the occasion, she showed up and everyone was shocked. She was like that. In fact, she was friends with all sorts of people... At one point she had Muslim neighbours and they respected her so much. They got along very well. For Stark, it was about the music, not the background of the people.<sup>109</sup>

Unlike certain assimilated Jews of Montreal who experienced ambivalence with their “Jewishness” at “home” and in the Diaspora (for example, Jewish conductor Heinz Unger), Ethel Stark seems to have had no ambivalence regarding her Austro-Jewish heritage.<sup>110</sup> She was not religious, although she belonged to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal. In fact, she seems to have been close to the Rabbi of the time, Dr. Solomon Frank, and even recalled saying special prayers with him. Stark negotiated strains of her Jewish identity, though not as two separate identities (one Jewish, one Austrian) but as one that fused together many aspects of her Jewish experience. Her European musical background was part of her “Jewishness.” This is why she was able to transcend borders, community affiliations, and markers of race. She was able reach out to those beyond the Jewish community, imbed herself in musical culture (whether Canadian, American, or overseas), and cooperate with other like-minded peoples. As Belkina alludes, the fact that Stark did not speak Yiddish did not take away from her Jewishness. For Stark, music-making was an integral part of being Jewish. Through her musical activities she fashioned a personal subjectivity fundamental to her sense of self.

Before her return to Canada, General Moshe Dayan, the most famous military leader of the War of Independence in Israel, invited Ethel Stark to perform for his military forces. Unfortunately, scheduling would not allow for a performance. As news of the quality of her own musicianship spread, other organizations were also eager to have her perform. The conductor of the Kol Israel Symphony Orchestra invited her to become the first Canadian and the first woman to conduct an orchestra in Israel.

Ethel would returned to Israel in 1962 to conduct more concerts with the Kol Israel Symphony. She was not only the first woman and Canadian to conduct an orchestra in Israel, she also helped to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Although this paper has painted picture of Ethel Stark as a Jewish female musician, there are many other questions for further exploration. For example, how did her “Canadianness” fit into this? How did people in the Diaspora view her? What was her part as an ambassador for “Canadian culture? And, what part did Montreal, with its class and linguistic divisions, play in the formation of this “Jewishness?”

These interracial, interclass, intergender discourses fashioned an interesting and



complex pluralistic identity in Stark—she was a woman working in a man's world, a Jewish woman from The Main operating in an upper-class musical society, and a "white" musician supporting the Black cause. This fraught task of navigating through the intricacies of class, race, and gender in the classical music profession involves Stark in a much broader discourse about women's rise to professionalism in mid-Twentieth-century North America. Her story is also the story of many other Jewish Canadian women who appealed to domestic ideology only to eventually disassemble outmoded versions of femininity and usher in modern ones, especially in the post-Second World War years.

### **Femininity and Feminism**

Ethel Stark played a key role in breaking down the walls of one of the last bastions of patriarchy—the symphony orchestra—and yet she did not openly label herself as a feminist. In fact, during a 1972 interview when she was questioned about feminism, she replied, "I am not a women's libber" but suggested "perhaps I was doing all along what they're now advocating. I was a pioneer."<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, she also expressed her discomfort with the "aggressive nature" of the second wave feminists, indicating that improvements could be brought about in a "nice and lady-like manner."<sup>112</sup> These statements to distance herself from feminism were not only descriptions of her taste, but statements about her identity as a musician of "high art" music. She used the language of the class to which she wished to belong. Stark's understanding of what it meant to be a feminist was also different from that of the white, middle-class, feminist housewife she saw around her. Although by the 1960s Stark had moved into the middle class, into the racial category of whiteness and into the more desirable neighbourhood of Mount Royal in Montreal, unlike her female Protestant, Catholic, or even Jewish peers, she was not married, had no children, supported herself financially, had completed many years of higher education, had travelled the world as a single woman, and had lost almost all traces of her Jewish religious background. Nevertheless, Stark saw herself as fully Jewish, fully woman, and a true classical musician. For almost fifty years, she had drawn on Jewish cultural traditions and ideals of justice that propelled her beyond the conventions of the time. Her exposure to Jewish cultural traditions of social justice in her childhood formed a critical dimension of her feminist activism later in her life.

Stark's life reached far beyond that of the conventional housewife of the Cult of Domesticity and Betty Friedan's paradigm of the feminine mystique. She may not have identified with the "feminist" women around her, yet by standing in the public sphere from which women had long been prohibited, Stark played an important role in the women's liberation movement in the field of music.<sup>113</sup> As stated earlier, Stark almost single-handedly spearheaded a movement of feminism in music, raising awareness of the situation of women in classical music and demanding change

in the profession.

Having negotiated the ideals of the Victorian femininity in the music profession throughout her career, Stark helped to usher in a new image of modern womanhood. Her Jewish background was instrumental in formulating not only the identity of this “new woman,” but of the modern female musician that could be of any class or race. We gain insight into the ethnic and racial dimensions of this new womanhood through studying her life.

This story about a single, Jewish woman who was a musician, conductor, and an entrepreneur, and who considered herself an Austrian aristocrat, indeed provides an interesting counterpoint to the historical paradigms that have dominated much scholarship. In historical accounts, female musicians and Jewish women appear as part of a homogenous group or as helpless victims of patriarchy. Stark stands in contrast as a professionally accomplished public woman who led an unorthodox life outside the constraints of conventional marriage and domesticity. Stark’s fascinating tale of determination and success opens new research horizons into the experience of Jewish women in the modern era.

**1**

Some examples include Christine Ammer, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2016); Maria Noriega Rachwal, *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women’s Symphony Orchestra* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2015); Merna Forster, *100 More Canadian Heroines: Famous and Forgotten Faces*, Foreword by Julie Payette, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011); David Gutnick, Producer, “It Wasn’t Teatime: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women’s Symphony Orchestra.” Radio documentary. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 29, 2012.

**2**

For example, Bonnie Eve Alger, “Their Own Agenda: The History, Development, and Culture of Women’s Orchestras Outside the United States,” DMA dissertation, University of Maryland, 2018.

Christine Ammer, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2016); Frances Rooney, “The Montreal Women’s Symphony,” *Atlantis* 5, 1(1979):71-72;

**3**

This memoir is in my possession. It contains approximately 100 pages, out of order, written

partly in the style of a memoir and diary. Stark had wanted to publish it but circumstances, such as illness and death of family members, prevented its publication.

**4**

Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” *American Quarterly* 18, 2 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

**5**

See essays by Linda K. Kerber, Nancy F. Cott, Robert Bross, Lynn Hunt, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Christine M. Stansell, in “Forum: Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 565-85; and Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006). Also see John. E. Brooke, “Spheres, Sites, Subjectivity, History: Reframing Antebellum American Society,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 75-82.

**6**

Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6-8.

**7**

Ibid., 5.

**8**

Ibid., 54.

**9**

Jodi Giesbrecht, "Accommodating Resistance: Unionization, Gender, Ethnicity in Winnipeg's Garment Industry, 1929-1945," *Urban History Review*, vol. 39, no.1 (Fall 2010): 5-19. Keshet Shenkar, "Daughters of Zion: Jewish Women in Victorian Literature," B.A. Thesis, University of Michigan, Spring 2007. Mara Steinitz, "Destabilizing Domesticity: The Construction of a Collective Memory of Jewish-American Womanhood from 1900 to 1950," *Macalester College History Honors Project* (2018): 23. Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson, eds, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America* (New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

**10**

Giesbrecht, "Resistance," 7.

**11**

Nancy B. Sinkoff, "Educating for 'Proper' Jewish Womanhood: A Case Study in Domesticity and Vocational Training, 1897-1926," *American Jewish History*, 77:4 (1988: June): 574, 580.

**12**

Sherry Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 71, 89.

**13**

Kristin McGee, *Some Like it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

**14**

Laurie Stras, ed., *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010): 8.

**15**

Urszula Chowanec, with Ursula Phillips and Marja Rytkönen, *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 4.

**16**

According to Judith Butler, gender can be socially constructed through verbal and non-verbal acts that serve to maintain a particular identity. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990. 2nd ed. 2006).

**17**Noriega, *From Kitchen*, 8.**18**

Ibid., 12.

**19**

Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008): 212.

**20**

Cécile Hout, and Maria Noriega. "Ethel Stark." *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Historica Foundation, 2012. 15 October 2012. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com>.

**21**

See Maria L. Noriega, "The Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra and the Emergence of Women as Professional Musicians (1940-1965)," (Master Thesis, University of Calgary, 2010): 13ff.

**22**

Before moving to Canada, the Starks had a Jewish Polish maid and nanny. Tarnopol was also home to many Polish and Ukrainian Jews.

**23**

Martin Merzer, "South Florida legend Shepard Broad Dies" *The Miami Herald*, November 9, 2001. Retrieved August 12, 2017 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20011110051552/http://www.miami.com/herald/content/news/local/dade/digdocs/055020.htm>>

**24**

Ibid. There is a wonderful photograph of 14-year-old Shepard Broad standing beside Adolph Stark in Marcia Jo Zervitz, Jewish Museum of Florida, *Images of America: Jews of Greater Miami* (Chicago and San Francisco, Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 98. Broad went on to become a successful business man and lawyer.

**25**

Ethel Stark, unpublished memoir, Montreal, 2012.

**26**

Ibid.

**27**Noriega, *From Kitchen*, 11-12.**28**

Hernan Tesler-Mabe, "A Jewish Conductor, A Devoted Mahlerite, and a Delicate String: The Musical Life of Heinz Unger, 1895-1965," (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2010): 43-44.

**29**Hasia Diner et al, *Feminine Mystique*, 8.**30**Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 2000): 43.**31**Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement 1990–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992): 150.**32**Ibid., Fishman, *Jewish Life*, 43; and Diner, *Feminine Mystique*, 1–2; Melissa Klapper, R., *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism, 1890–1940* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).**33**

Ibid., 152.

**34**Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 2000): 43.**35**

See page 22 in this article for more information on the memoir.

**36**

Ethel Stark, unpublished memoir, Montreal, 2012.

**37**

Ibid., 151.

**38**

Donna Goodman, "Montreal Synagogue Sisterhoods (1900–1949): A Female Community, Culture and Religious World," (Master's thesis, Concordia University, 2004): 2.

**39**Richard Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-Cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 29.**40**Kay Dreyfus, *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of Australia's All Girl Bands and Orchestras to the End of the Second World War* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999): 13.**41**Leppert, *Music and Image*, 122.**42**Noriega, *From Kitchen*, 2.**43**Noriega, *From Kitchen*, 29, 39.**44**

Yaëla Hertz, interview with author, Montreal, June 20, 2012. Hertz was a long-time friend and colleague of Ethel Stark.

**45**

Sonia Slatin, Letter to Susan Welber Meyer, April 10, 1994. New Jersey.

**46**"Hour of Charm Features All-Girl Orchestra," *The Tampa Tribune*, Florida, Tampa, June 24, 1951, 9.**47**Noriega, *From Kitchen*, 24; Sonia Slatin, Letter to Susan Welber Meyer, April 10, 1994. New Jersey; and Tucker, *Swing*, 89.**48**McGee, *Some Like it Hot*, 171ff. Also Tucker, *Swing-Shift*, 75ff.**49**

Kaye later became Spitalny's wife.

**50**"Hour of Charm' Feminine Orchestra Dominates a Feeble Screen Feature," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 1939, 14.**51**

Sonia Slatin, Letter to Susan Welber Meyer, April 10, 1994. New Jersey.

**52**

Stark was not one of the original twenty-two members. She auditioned after the orchestra had started performing live.

**53**Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 81.**54**

Ibid.

**55**

Ibid., 60, 85.

**56**

Ibid., ff.

**57**

Telephone interview with Sonia Slatin Lewis, conducted by Susan Welber. Boca Raton, Florida, April 8, 1994. Cassette tape in possession of Susan Welber.

**58**

Susan Welber Letter to author, "Educating Through Music: A Biography of Sonia Slatin-Lewis," May 10, 2014.

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Sonia Slatin, Letter.

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Urszula Chowanec with Ursula Phillips and Marja Rytkönen, *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 10.

**61**

According to Judith Butler, gender is socially constructed through verbal and non-verbal acts that serve to maintain this identity. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990. 2nd ed. 2006).

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John. E. Brooke, "Spheres, Sites, Subjectivity, History: Reframing Antebellum American Society," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 78.

**63**

For more information on Jewish assimilation see Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

**64**

Author has gleaned this information from Stark's memoir, as well as Slatin's letters.

**65**

Rebecca Kobrin, "Beyond the Myths of Mobility and Altruism: Jewish Immigrant Professionals and Jewish Social Welfare Agencies in New York City, 1948-1954," In Hasia Diner et al., *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 106.

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Stras, *She's So Fine*, 8.

**67**

Susan Welber Meyer, Letter to author, November 2016.

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Shenkar, "Daughters," 7.

**69**

Linda Kivi, *Canadian Women Making Music* (Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 1992), 46.

**70**

Sonia Slatin writes that playing in such an ensemble carried such a negative ensemble in the classical music world that it could have meant the end of their careers in classical music. Sonia Slatin, Letter to Susan Welber

Meyer, April 10, 1994. New Jersey, Unpublished.

**71**

James Phillip Komar, Letter to author, June 20, 2017.

**72**

From Stark's memoir.

**73**

Rooney, "Women," 71-72.

**74**

Ilse Zadrozny, "Stark Led Our First Female Orchestra," *The Gazette*, Montreal, 4 November 1995, C7.

**75**

David Gutnick, Producer, "It Wasn't Teatime: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra." Radio documentary. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 29, 2012.

**76**

See Noriega, *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall*.

**77**

Rooney, "Women," 72.

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Rooney, "Women," 73f.

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Sonia Slatin and Maria L. Noriega, "The Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra," *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Historica Foundation, 2012 <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com>>.

**80**

Maria Noriega Rachwal, *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2015), 143.

**81**

Kelley, *Learning*, 54.

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Ibid.

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Slatin and Noriega, "The Montreal Women's Symphony," *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.

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For example Heinz Unger. See Tesler-Mabe, "A Jewish Conductor."

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Slatin and Noriega, "Montreal Women's Symphony," *Canadian Encyclopedia*. Also see Kristen E. Kean, "First Flute: The Pioneering

Career of Doriot Anthony Dywer" (DMA diss., Louisiana State University an Agricultural an Mechanical College., December 2007).

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For more information see Maria Noriega Rachwal, *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall*, 150.

**87**

Ibid, 85.

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Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, "Conducting Motherhood: The Personal and Professional Experiences of Women Orchestral Conductors," *Outskirts Online Journal* 15 (November 2006).

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Robert D. McFadden, "Henry Lewis, the Conductor Who Broke Orchestra Orchestral Racial Barriers, Is Dead at 63," *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 1996, p. 1001030.

**90**

Ethel Stark was meticulous in detailing the order of her life story chronologically. Thus, I was startled when suddenly, in the midst of her grief over Dr. King's death in 1968, she takes an abrupt turn to the very distant past to share a highly emotional and detailed story of her cousin Herman and his life-and-death experience with the Nazis.

**91**

Hasia Diner, *In An Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Wendell E. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For much of the Twentieth-century Jews were not viewed as fully "white". Society saw them as "black" and this is also a reason why Jews aligned themselves to the Black civil rights movement.

**92**

Violet Grant States, Interview with author, Montreal, May 20, 2012.

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N.A. "More Women's Symphony Orchestras Advocated by Conductor Ethel Stark." *The Globe and Mail*, 12 April 1948, 14.

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Prell, *Assimilation*, 5.

**95**

Violet Grant States, Interview with author, Montreal, May 20, 2012.

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Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 16.

**97**

Ibid.

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Noriega, *From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall*, 148-49.

**99**

Ibid.

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Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

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From Ethel Stark's memoir.

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Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 147.

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Polina Belkina, Interview with author, December 10, 2016. Belkina was a friend and neighbour of Ethel Stark.

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See Tesler-Mabe, "A Jewish Conductor."

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Susan Lang, "Femmes Fantastiques," *The Suburban* (Montreal), August 6, 1972, 29.

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Ibid.

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Susan Lang, "Femmes Fantastiques," 29.