

Charles Dutoit as a Cultural Hero in Québec
by Andrew Schartmann

L'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal (OSM) is recognized today as one of North America's leading orchestras. The 2008-2009 season program alone, riddled with the names of world-renowned artists, testifies to the OSM's place amongst the world's great symphony orchestras.¹ Like most organizations of its kind, however, the OSM was once a relatively unknown group, for whom international recognition was nothing but a distant *rêverie*. It was only in the 1970s, with the appointment of Swiss conductor Charles Dutoit, that the orchestra began its rapid ascent to the world stage. Whereas most communities would embrace the artistic merit of such success alone, the exposure came to represent something entirely unique for the Québécois people. Aside from bringing worldwide recognition to Montréal's musical culture, Dutoit's reign fortified the kinship between Québec and France that had been recently invigorated by the Quiet Revolution, and provided a vehicle through which Québécois culture could escape the long-standing influence of the British regime and flourish independently.

As Dutoit came to represent much more than a leading conductor, it was inevitable that his resignation in April of 2002 would have severe cultural ramifications. Complicated by the rather messy situation that caused Dutoit to step down from his illustrious post, the immediate consequences were a harbinger of the even darker times that would follow. In light of these events, this essay will focus primarily on the degree of influence Charles Dutoit had on the OSM's ascent to the international music stage in the 1970s-80s, what his tenure as conductor of the orchestra meant for Québécois culture, and how his sudden departure incited an immediate decline in the OSM's activity at home and abroad.

1. World-renowned artists include violinists Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell, and Anne-Sophie Mutter; pianists Yefim Bronfman and Emanuel Ax; and one of the United States' greatest living composers, John Adams. See *l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, La 75e de l'OSM: Sur un air de fête, 2008-2009 Season Program, 2008.*

Cultural Identity and the History of the OSM

Charles Dutoit's appointment as conductor of the OSM was deeply rooted in the Québécois struggle for identity, which had come to the forefront of Canada's attention during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s-70s. While it is true that "Québec had undergone a new awakening since the death of Duplessis in 1959"², the central battle of preserving a distinctly Québécois identity was by no means a novel cause; it had taken many guises in past years, and had permeated circles beyond the political sphere.

In Montréal, the conflict between French and English was at the heart of the classical music scene throughout the 1930s. Not long after Douglas Clarke—who was dean of McGill University's faculty of music at the time—established Montréal's first permanent orchestra in 1930 (the Montreal Orchestra), a disagreement concerning the choice of programs broke out. This led the dissatisfied faction, who were largely French-speaking, to establish their own orchestra: *La Société des concerts symphoniques de Montréal* (CSM).³ Officially founded by Anthanase David, the new ensemble featured French-Canadian conductors and laureates of *le prix d'Europe*⁴, with the clear purpose of better representing the French people.⁵ When Clarke, conductor of the Montreal Orchestra, openly accused David of promoting favoritism, the CSM's founder argued that the new ensemble would never have been founded had Clarke's orchestra invited more French-Canadian conductors and soloists.⁶ This statement, along with the CSM's

2. J.M.S. Careless, *Canada: A Story of Challenge*, rev. ed. (Toronto: MacMillan, 1974), 431.

3. Eric McLean and Hélène Paul, "Montreal," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 2001), 17:66.

4. Established as an annual research grant by the Quebec government in 1911, candidates must have a diploma from from *le Conservatoire de musique et d'art dramatique de Québec* or a bachelor's degree in performance from a Québécois university. Although applicants may be from outside of the province, they must have lived in Québec for three years prior to the competition. See Cécile Huot, "Prix d'Europe", in *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd ed., ed. Helmut Kallmann and Gilles Potvin (Toronto: Univeristy of Toronto Press, 1992), 1079.

5. Georges Nicholson, *Charles Dutoit: Le maître de l'orchestre* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'homme, 1986), 19.

6. Gilles Potvin, *Les 50 premières années* (Montréal: Stanké, 1984), 35.

devotion to French-Canadian musicians, suggests that the issue of cultural identity and representation was central to the division of the Montreal Orchestra in 1934. Thus, it seems that the alleged conflict over concert programs was a mere distraction from the deeper issue at hand.

When the Montreal Orchestra folded in 1941, the CSM became Montréal's sole professional orchestra, and tensions between the two language groups gradually faded. The implementation of bilingual programs and the renaming of the orchestra to *L'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal - Montreal Symphony Orchestra* in 1954, testify to the fact that differences had been reconciled, at least temporarily.⁷ Issues of language would resurface following the resignation of conductor Raphael Frühbeck de Burgos in November 1976, as the OSM sought to strengthen the francophone identity of the orchestra.

Shedding the English Skin: In Search of a Québécois Image

The period from November 1976 to May 1977 was one of deep reflection for the OSM with regards to its public image. In particular, the orchestra's directors were concerned with the degree to which Montréal's French community could relate to the ensemble.⁸ Of course, contemplation over francophone representation within the ensemble was quite common following periods of crisis during the Quiet Revolution. In 1973, for example, while under great financial strain, general director John C. Goodwin identified the orchestra's predominantly anglophone image as a hindrance to its credibility.⁹ When crisis knocked at the door following the departure of Frühbeck de Burgos in 1976, Goodwin turned to the issue of francophone

7. Charles Barber, "Charles Dutoit," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 2001), 7:773.

8. Georges Nicholson, *Charles Dutoit: Le maître de l'orchestre* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'homme, 1986), 139.

9. *Ibid.*, 138.

identity once again, stating that “*il fallait que le directeur soit en mesure de communiquer avec la majorité de façon à se faire comprendre; la majorité de Montréal, c’est-à-dire, francophone.*”¹⁰

It is not surprising that the issue of cultural identity became such a prevalent topic in Montréal society. David Kaplan explains why in his article on spatial identity:

Montreal has emerged as a focal point of friction because it epitomizes the discordance between anglophone and francophone views. As the one-time financial and economic center of Canada and the home of a substantial English-speaking population, Montreal figures largely in the English-Canadian consciousness. As the largest city in Quebec and as the focus of the new Québécois culture and economy, Montreal is equally essential to the French-Canadian identity.¹¹

With such strong territorial claims from both English and French communities, international recognition of Montréal as a distinctly French city became an important step in the battle for Québécois identity. Although the exact reasons behind Dutoit’s appointment in 1977 remain somewhat vague, one can assume that his international reputation was seen as a vehicle through which Montréal’s musical culture could be presented on the international stage as a purely French tradition.¹² Incidentally, Dutoit himself was a strong advocate of expressing community through the orchestra, having once said, “I want the orchestra to become a living part of the community. That is my duty and my responsibility.”¹³

Recapturing the Past

There is no doubt that Dutoit had the musical training necessary to bring an orchestra up to international standards. Having studied under the great Austrian conductor Herbert von

10. Ibid., 139

11. David Kaplan, “Two Nations in Search of a State: Canada’s Ambivalent Spatial Identities,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84, 4 (Dec., 1994): 599.

12. Three reasons seem self-evident: his strong character, his extraordinary musical abilities, and his international reputation.

13. Jacob Siskind, “A New Captain at the Helm for MSO,” *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 1978, p37.

Karajan at the Lucerne Festival in 1956, having held the post of principal conductor of the Berne Symphony Orchestra for ten years, and having recorded for *Deutsche Grammophon*, Dutoit was a star on the rise when he came to Montréal in 1977.¹⁴ These attributes alone, however, do not account for the warm welcoming he received in Montréal.

Rather, it was Dutoit's clever use of the media that initially grasped the public's attention so strongly. Through a series of television commercials and public appearances, Dutoit not only managed to procure corporate and private contributions, but also attracted the attention of the *Parti Québécois*.¹⁵ It was likely Dutoit's publicly stated preference for hiring French-Canadian musicians, even in the presence of a more qualified candidate from the "outside", that garnered such support from Québec's ruling party in the first half of the 1980s. After all, it was only logical that Dutoit wished to please this governmental ally, for it provided 30 percent of the OSM's annual budget.¹⁶

Having clearly committed to the development of a predominantly French-Canadian orchestra, Dutoit was well on his way to recapturing the francophone image that had been such an integral part of the original ensemble of 1935. The time was now ripe for a French orchestra from Montréal to take the international stage.

The Rise to International Fame

The entry for Charles Dutoit in the 2001 New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians states that "since assuming this appointment [director of the OSM] in 1977, Dutoit has managed

14. Charles Barber, "Charles Dutoit," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 2001), 7:773; Georges Nicholson, *Charles Dutoit: Le maître de l'orchestre* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'homme, 1986), 59 & 127.

15. Glenn Plaskin, "A Swiss Conductor's French Touch Comes to Canada," *New York Times*, May 9, 1982, Arts and Leisure Desk, 2.

16. *Ibid.*

the extraordinary feat of making it [the OSM] the leading orchestra in the French-speaking world.”¹⁷ While this sums up Dutoit’s achievement over the majority of his tenure as conductor of the OSM, the ensemble was, in fact, being hailed as the leading French orchestra as early as 1983.¹⁸ This reputation was largely due to the orchestra’s increasing number of exceptional recordings devoted to the music of French composers. For example, the ensemble’s 1983 recording of Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony was said to have surpassed a recent recording of the same work by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic.¹⁹ The validity of this judgment was confirmed when the record was awarded the French Music Award from *l’Académie du disque français* in February of 1984. Far from being a one-time incident, many of the OSM’s recordings in subsequent years were awarded prizes, including *le Grand Prix du Président de la République* (France), *le Prix mondial du Disque de Montreux*, and 2 GRAMMY awards, all under the baton of maestro Dutoit.²⁰

While the success of the recordings brought the orchestra international recognition, the cultural implications at home were far-reaching. When the illustrious English music magazine Gramophone asserted that “Decca has found the finest French orchestra on earth, not forgetting Parisian contenders”²¹ in reference to the OSM’s 1980 recording of Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé*, it became certain that the orchestra had finally succeeded in establishing a French identity unique to Montréal, and visible on a global scale. No less important was the fact that Charles Dutoit had

17. Charles Barber, “Charles Dutoit,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 2001), 7:773.

18. John Raymond, “Music at Home: ‘Best French Orchestra’ has fine recordings,” *Globe and Mail*, April 16, 1983, E6.

19. Ibid.

20. L’Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, “Discography,” 2008, http://www.osm.ca/en/index_orchestre_discographie.cfm (accessed November 16, 2008).

21. Glenn Plaskin, “A Swiss Conductor’s French Touch Comes to Canada,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1982, Arts and Leisure Desk, 2.

brought the names of French-Canadian musicians international recognition. François Dompierre's *concerto pour piano et orchestra* and *Harmonica Flash*, for example, were recorded by the OSM for *Deutsch Grammophon* in 1980. This was of particular importance for two reasons. Firstly, a French-Canadian composer gained exposure on one of the world's premiere record labels, and secondly, Dompierre's unique orchestration of the concerto saw the addition of a folk-violin intended to recall the traditional Québécois *violoneux*.²² Thus, the orchestra was once again strongly associated with a French culture particular to Québec.

All of the OSM's recordings provide a snapshot of a given period in its development, but with these alone, it is difficult to imagine the ambiance of the live performances that were celebrated the world over. As one critic wrote of an OSM performance, "anyone can play loud and fast, but with certain leaders [Dutoit] the momentum seems to well up from some unknown source, while players and conductor together ride it like a horseman at a gallop."²³ The continued success of performances abroad, along with Dutoit's great strength at conducting French music, eventually led to an international reputation of unprecedented success in the orchestra's history.²⁴ The sheer number of tours that the OSM completed between 1977 and 2002 (see figure 1) is an indication of the type of exposure the symphony received under Dutoit's direction. Having completed a mere 4 tours in 16 years prior to his appointment, the orchestra made 34 tours during the Swiss maestro's twenty-four-year reign.²⁵ These included several very special

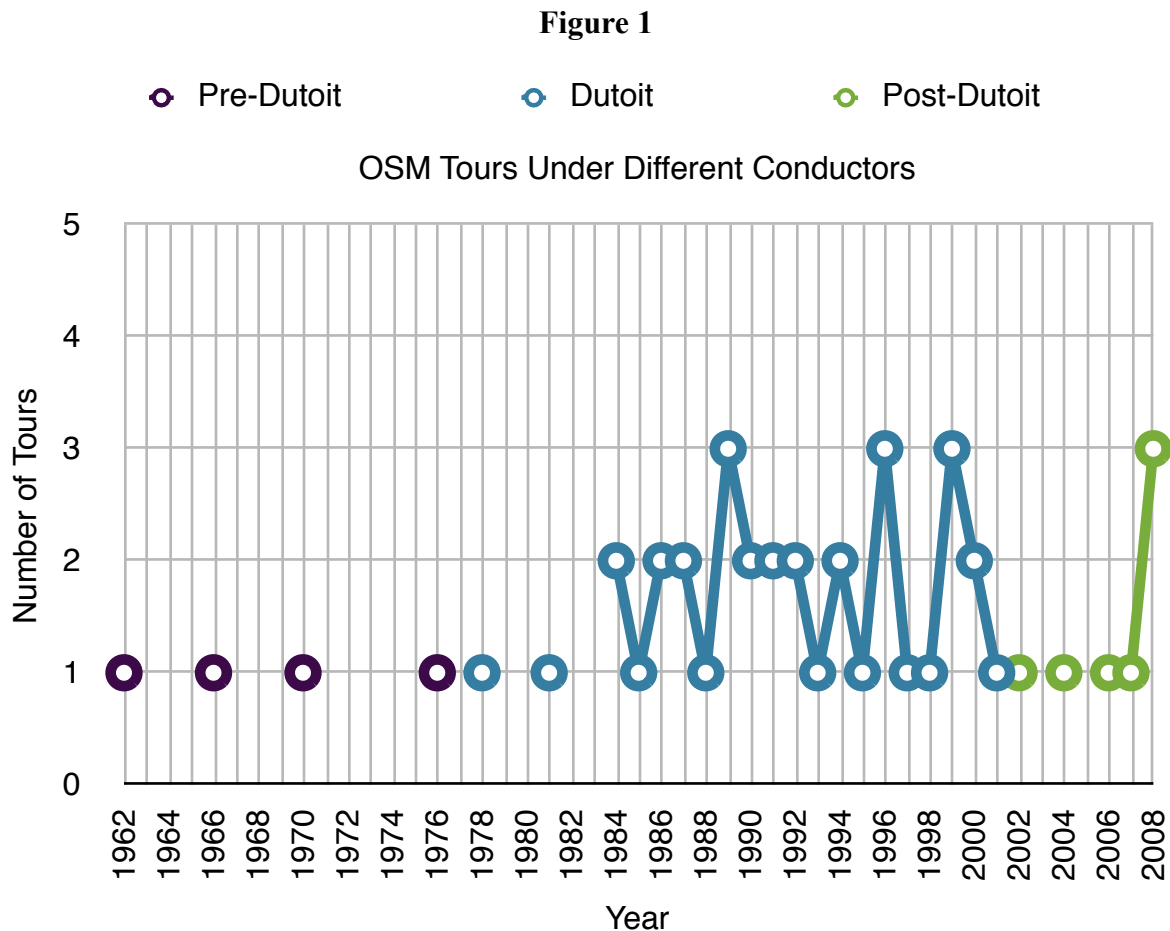
22. François Dompierre, *Concerto pour piano et orchestre, Harmonica Flash*, orchestra dir. Charles Dutoit, Deutsch Grammophon 3301 265, 33 rpm.

23. Will Crutchfield, "A dazzling MSO at Carnegie Hall," *Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1986, D10.

24. Charles Barber, "Charles Dutoit," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 2001), 7:773.

25. L'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, "Tours," 2008, http://www.osm.ca/en/index_orchestre_tournees.cfm (accessed November 16, 2008).

appearances at New York’s prestigious Carnegie Hall, where the orchestra was always greatly anticipated and enthusiastically received.²⁶



There is no doubt that the orchestra had come a long way since the years prior to Dutoit’s appointment, but the extent to which the ensemble was celebrated on the international stage is astonishing nonetheless. For many, the OSM was the best French orchestra the world had ever seen, and critics and musicians alike praised it for its gorgeous sound. While recording with them in 1999, violinist Leila Josefowicz remarked that “the OSM plays together and feels together like one instrument...Somehow the music becomes more spiritual here...”²⁷ And in one rather special

26. Will Crutchfield, “A dazzling MSO at Carnegie Hall,” *Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1986, D10.

27. L’Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, with Leila Josefowicz (violin), orchestra dir. Charles Dutoit, *Leila Josefowicz*, compact disc, Philips Classics, 1999.

case, Gramophone's Edward Greenfield wrote of the orchestra's 1984 European tour, "je me sens dans l'obligation de réviser mon jugement sur l'orchestre de Montréal et de le déclarer non seulement le meilleur orchestre français de tous temps, mais aussi le plus bel orchestre d'Amérique du Nord."²⁸ For Québec, however, the success was not just one in the domain of music. The recognition Dutoit brought the Québécois culture, by building a distinctly French orchestra and representing French-Canadian musicians, was recognized by *l'Ordre national du Québec* in 1995 when he was named grand officier "pour avoir dirigé avec brio l'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal et l'avoir fait connaître sur la scène internationale."²⁹

A Musical Crisis in Montréal

In early April 2002, it was reported that the musicians of the OSM were threatening legal action against maestro Charles Dutoit for harassment.³⁰ It did not take long for Dutoit to respond to the allegations, issuing the following statement through his assistant Carmen Lamarche:

It is with great sadness that following hostile declarations made by the president of the Quebec Musicians' Guild, Mr. Emile Subirana, shared by a majority of Montreal Symphony Orchestra musicians, I see no other choice but to announce my resignation as artistic director ... effective immediately.³¹

Although early accounts of the so-called Dutoit affair adhere to a story that views Dutoit as a tyrant conductor in the tradition of Toscanini and Furtwängler, the truth of the matter lies more in the fact that clause 12.05 c of the 1998 collective agreement allows for the dismissal of an orchestra member with support from just 25% of the dismissal committee.³² When Dutoit asked

28. Georges Nicholson, *Charles Dutoit: Le maître de l'orchestre* (Montréal: Les éditions de l'homme, 1986), 182.

29. Ministère du Conseil exécutif, "Les nominations étrangères," July 23, 2008, http://www.ordre-national.gouv.qc.ca/membres/nominations_etrangeres.htm (accessed November 17, 2008).

30. "Musicians threaten legal action," *Calgary Herald*, April 9, 2002, B10.

31. Michael Higgins and Rob McKenzie, "Dutoit quits as conductor of Montreal's symphony," *National Post*, April 11, 2002, p1.

32. Alan Conter, "Montreal's icy storm," *Globe and Mail*, April 13, 2002, R8.

to meet with two of the orchestra's musicians to discuss their performance, the guild immediately assumed this to be the first step to a dismissal. As guild president Emile Saburina could do nothing to save their jobs in light of the collective agreement, he resorted to threatening a law suit against Dutoit.³³

The consequences of the affair were far-reaching for the OSM. The incident occurred just after the orchestra had announced its star-studded 2002-2003 season, which was to celebrate Dutoit's 25th season as its conductor. In fact, the OSM's executive committee foresaw the potentially disastrous repercussions of Dutoit's resignation when it asked the conductor to return for the 2002-2003 season.³⁴ When Dutoit declined the request and vowed never to conduct in Montréal again, unless accompanied by a visiting orchestra, classical music legends Mstislav Rostropovich, Yo-Yo Ma, and Vladimir Ashkenazy all cancelled their scheduled performances in solidarity with the maestro.³⁵ The OSM's woes continued as subscription sales plummeted and the orchestra was forced to find replacements for 35 concerts the following season.³⁶ But perhaps more significant than any of this was the the fact that the OSM was losing support from the Montréal community. In the first concert following Dutoit's departure, the orchestra hadn't yet played a single note when the audience made their dissatisfaction known with one long boo.³⁷

Aside from the problems at home, the OSM suffered considerably with regards to its international reputation. 2003-2004 marked the first time in a decade that the orchestra was not invited to play at Carnegie Hall, where it had been extraordinarily successful in previous years.

33. Ibid.

34. Brian Daly, "Flamboyant MSO artistic director lauded and panned following resignation," *Canadian Press*, April 11, 2002, p21.

35. Joseph So, "Dutoit Resigns/MSO Begins," *La Scena Musicale*, February 2003, 30; As Rostropovich is now dead and Ashkenazy no longer plays due to arthritis, Montrealers will never have the chance to see them play.

36. Robert Everett-Green, "Montreal symphony conductor debacle worsens," *Globe and Mail*, May 9, 2002, R3.

37. "Symphony director flap hits sour note in Montreal," *Times Union*, April 18, 2002, A2.

To add insult to injury, the Juilliard Orchestra took the OSM's regular spot under the conductorship of none other than Charles Dutoit himself.³⁸ The world clearly saw Dutoit's departure as the OSM's loss; the conductor was in high demand and the orchestra, quite simply, was not. As the number of over-seas tours diminished—there were none from 2000-2005—the international community began to forget the orchestra, which finally hit rock bottom in May 2005 when its musicians went on strike.

Moving On: Since Dutoit and the Future of the OSM

Despite the unpleasant circumstances surrounding Charles Dutoit's resignation from his post as conductor of the OSM in 2002, the influence he had in elevating the orchestra to a position of world renown cannot be denied. Moreover, his devotion to maintaining a French-Canadian identity within the orchestra following the Quiet Revolution was of great importance to the Québécois people, as it brought them recognition on an international stage. The degree of influence Dutoit had on the OSM is remarkably evident when one examines the hardships that followed his resignation. Not only did the orchestra's presence wane on the international stage, but respect for the ensemble at home and abroad also diminished.

The road since the Dutoit affair has been rough for the OSM, but the orchestra is now in a position to flourish once again under the leadership of their new maestro, Kent Nagano. Since his appointment, the OSM has toured more frequently—including three tours in 2008—and world-renowned artists are once again present in Montréal's music scene. Since 2006, a new mania—Naganomania—has taken over Montréal's music scene, with growing excitement over the ensemble's new conductor; however, it seems all too unrealistic that Dutoit will be so easily

38. Arthur Kaptainis, "MSO at Carnegie Hall in '08: Nagano on board for first visit since 2004," *Gazette*, January 30, 2007, D5.

forgotten. As one member of the OSM anonymously said in 2006, “We would love to have a visit by Dutoit, but we are not holding our breath. There is no denying what the OSM musicians and he did together, and not to acknowledge that would be dishonest and ungracious.”³⁹ In recent years, the OSM’s chairman of the board, Lucien Bouchard, has promised the return of Dutoit as a guest conductor.⁴⁰ With many of the wounds now healed, and a promising future on the horizon, there may still be a place, after all, for Charles Dutoit in Montréal.

39. Arthur Kaptainis, “Happy Birthday Charles, I miss you: After all that Charles Dutoit did in Montreal, we seem to have forgotten his time leading the MSO to greatness,” *Gazette*, October 21, 2006, E11.

40. *Ibid.*

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