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In this issue, writer Jane Cooper takes us on her journey to find
the "Canadian Nightingale"

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Bertha Crawford, 'The Canadian Nightingale': Re-constructing the Life of a Forgotten Canadian Singer

by Jane Cooper

Have you ever wondered about the life of a little-known artist you find singing on an old recording? Well, I have found that a little bit of on-line research can tell you a lot about even quite obscure Canadian artists and the music industry they worked in. And if you are ready to venture into libraries and archives, you can learn even more.

I am writing a biography of Bertha May Crawford (1886-1937), a forgotten Canadian opera singer. I have found many enticing newspaper descriptions of her voice, but how much better would it be to actually hear how she sounded? I haven't found evidence of her ever making a commercial recording. But CAPS member Arthur Zimmerman suggests that there might be a possibility – remote, but not impossible - that somebody with an Edison M-1 could have recorded her in Toronto as a demonstration on a home-cut cylinder in the first decade of the last century. So I would love to hear if any collector has recordings that might include her from Toronto between 1903 and 1911 or in the early 1920s.

Who was Bertha Crawford?

I 'met' Bertha in a letter, written by my great aunt from Poland in 1924. Great Aunt Margaret thought that the soloist she heard in concert with the Warsaw Philharmonic was an English singer, but a quick Google search revealed to me that she was in fact a Canadian. Well, that is unusual, I thought – how did a Canadian opera singer come to be working in Poland in the 1920s?

That initial Google search gave me a few summary sources: a four sentence entry in the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada, a short obituary in the New York Times archives, and a few brief mentions in Google News. Just enough to understand that Bertha was a soprano

WITH THE H. Ruthven MacDonald Concert Party



Miss Bertha May Crawford

Soprano

Soloist Metropolitan Methodist Church, Toronto



born in Elmvale, Ontario, who sang in Toronto for several years before she went to Europe to study opera. Somehow she ended up singing in Russia during the First World War and then in Poland in the 1920s, where they called her 'The Canadian Nightingale'. She returned to Toronto in the 1930s where she died at the young age of 50 in 1937. So, how to find out more?

Early career revealed in the Toronto press.

Searching the Toronto papers, I turned up many references to Bertha in the music columns between 1904 and 1911 in Toronto. The *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* both have on-line archives, and many public libraries have subscriptions for the use of their members. I learned more about the general world of music in Toronto by reading *Musical Canada*, a monthly music journal, available from 1906 to 1918 through the Internet Archive site. Bertha began her career singing in church. In Toronto at the turn of the century, the big churches all hired a quartet of professional soloists – a soprano, a contralto, a tenor and a baritone – to front their choirs. Bertha started at the Erskine Presbyterian Church in 1905 when she was 18, and then sang at the Sherbourne Street Methodist Church in 1906, and finally the Metropolitan Methodist Church from 1907 to 1910. Bertha also sang in many recitals and charitable events. When charitable or social organizations were holding an event, it was very common to hire a singer to provide the entertainment. She also sang in recitals of classical music and modern ‘art songs’- poetry set to classical-style music. When she was 20 in 1906 she got her first taste for musical theatre in an amateur production of the Gilbert and Sullivan’s the *Pirates of Penzance*.

Following concert tours through the regional press.

I read in the January 1907 *Globe* that Bertha left with a party of three other artists – a reader, a violinist and an accompanist – for a three month tour of the southern United States. I found references to a few of these concerts in newspapers digitized by the Library of Congress and Google News. The *New Enterprise* found her singing “splendid and rich” when she passed through Madison, Florida, in February 1907. *Musical Canada* told me that in the winters of 1909-1910 and 1910-1911 she toured Western Canada from

Winnipeg to Victoria and back with a prominent Toronto baritone, H. Ruthven MacDonald and his wife. I traced these concert tours through notices and reviews in heritage newspapers in free provincial databases in Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan and British Columbia. I also accessed some newspapers on commercial web sites. In 1909 the *Manitoba Free Press* said Bertha “was the bright star of the evening. While but quite young, she has a fairly powerful voice with a big compass, her upper notes being as clear as a lark’s”.

Exploring her childhood on microfilm.

To backtrack to Bertha’s childhood, I had to order microfilm copies of her home-town newspaper, the *Elmvale Lance*, from the Simcoe County Archives. Bertha had been singing in public since 1895 when she was 8 years old, initially singing duets with her older sister. By the time she was 15, the *Lance* was writing that Bertha had “a strong, clear, flexible voice and takes the highest notes with apparent ease”. Her father was choirmaster at the Presbyterian Church and played clarinet with the Elmvale Brass Band – the most common form of instrumental music in rural Ontario around the turn of the century.

Building a family tree.

I re-constructed Bertha’s family tree using census records and birth, marriage and death records from on-line genealogical resources. It turns out that three of her grandparents were Scottish and the fourth was from Pennsylvania Quaker stock. I worked out that many of the members of the Elmvale Band were her mother’s cousins. Music was a family affair for the Crawfords. Following her family tree downwards, I located her six great nieces and nephews who are her only living descendants, and live across Canada and the US.

The trail crosses the Atlantic.

On-line passenger records showed me that in 1911 when she was 24, Bertha left Toronto



Мисс Берта Кроуфорд.

Image from the 1915 Petrograd concert program

for England where she began the studies which would take her onto the opera stage two years later. English newspapers digitized by the British National Library turned up a few concert dates in England and the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* has a French music directory with a detailed biography of Bertha's beloved London voice-production teacher, Olga de Nevosky. After less than a year of lessons with de Nevosky, Bertha confessed in a letter to her family in Toronto, "Dear Madame so inspires me that I feel I must sing, if only for her sake".

A recording session!

But you may appreciate that one of my most exciting moments – temporarily – was when I found the on-line CHARM discography

produced by King's College London, and learned that records at the EMI Trust Archive show that on August 26, 1912, a 'Miss B. Crawford' made two test recordings for the HMV label at the London studio of the Gramophone Company. I was on the phone to EMI within the hour and was fortunate enough to catch an archivist on her way 'down to the vault'. I got an answer quite quickly – yes, there is a paper record of her session with the pioneer recording engineer, Will Gaisberg. But no – while EMI does have about 18,000 Berliners which Will and his brother Fred recorded all over the world, they no longer have the matrices for these two Crawford recordings. I don't know what happened to them, but I speculate that she may have made the recordings to send to prospective Italian singing teachers, rather than for broader distribution. She certainly did go on to study and tour briefly in Italy in 1913, before she got a contract to sing in Warsaw, Poland.

Chasing archival sources in Europe.

For me, a bonus of this research was the excuse to travel to Europe. Part of the attraction of Bertha's story is that it takes us to foreign lands in our imaginations – both Poland and Russia. I took ten days in Warsaw and a month in St. Petersburg, to dig through libraries and archives and to fill in the information about her 20 years in Eastern Europe between 1914 and 1934. In dusty newspapers in the National Library of Russia I found that between December 1913 and March 1914 Bertha appeared in Warsaw in six performances as Gilda in Verdi's Italian opera *Rigoletto* and as Juliette in Gounod's French opera *Romeo and Juliette*. The *Warsaw Daily* lauded her "artistic interpretation of the task, the soft femininity of her expression and, in general, her serious preparation for the part". However, in August 1914 the First World War broke out and when the fighting closed in on Warsaw, Bertha evacuated deeper into Russia. She ended up in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in the spring of 1915.



MISS BERTA CRAWFORD, noted opera star, assisting artist at the Promenade Symphony Concert in Varsity Arena, Thursday, August 22nd.

A hot trail goes cold

. I was surprised to find that this unknown artist from Canada, who arrived in Russia as a refugee, initially made quite a splash. Newspaper reviews, theatre journal notices and theatre posters from Petrograd reveal that over an intense three month period in the spring of 1915 Bertha, dubbed 'The Canadian Nightingale', appeared in eleven opera performances and at least nine charity concerts alongside the biggest stars of the day in opera, theatre and ballet. Petrograd's *Theatre Reviews* said Berta had earned the audience's approval with her "voice, amazing

in its clearness and ripeness ... rare trillos and florituras and sustained breath". An entry in the diary of a contemporary opera fan hints at some background – Bertha was somehow involved with the Director of the People's House Theatre, a man with power and influence in Petrograd music circles. But he dropped out of the picture after only a few months. More Russian newspapers report concerts in Petrograd and Moscow later in 1915 and early 1916, and prove that Bertha toured the Caucasus in May 1916. There are suggestions that she even toured as far east as Vladivostok, but when and where I could not find out. The trail runs completely cold for 1917 and 1918 when Russia was torn apart by revolution and a civil war. The mystery of how Bertha survived these turbulent times will probably never be solved, but survive she did.

Finding the star in Poland.

I found references in on-line Polish newspapers and journals, and in books in Warsaw that show how Bertha made a career as a singer in Poland for 15 years from 1919 to 1934. Bertha first re-emerged after the war in a concert with the Warsaw Philharmonic, celebrating the support of the Allies for the newly independent Poland. She settled in Warsaw and went on to appear to generous accolades in recitals and opera in cities around Poland. She had a particularly good run of appearances with the opera company in Poznan in 1921 and 1922. The *Poznan Courier* was impressed with her "extraordinary lightness in vocal production, ... exemplary breathing technique and extraordinary fluency, and ... a nobly developed sense of music and feeling for beauty". The *Warsaw Courier* said "Miss Crawford touches with her song the chords of deeper feeling in the bosom of the audience".

Back to Toronto. Bertha's descendants showed me a scrapbook full of clippings about the three winters in 1921, 1922 and 1923 when Bertha came back to Toronto. She performed across Ontario during the winter and returned to sing

in Poland each summer. But initial excitement to see Bertha back in Canada wore off by the third year. In January 1923 Bertha made a guest appearance with a semi-professional opera company in Washington, and in November she made her debut in New York, but she could not make a dent in the highly competitive American market. She returned to Poland early in 1924 where she stayed for the next ten years.

A Polish household name

. In the on-line Polish journals I found Bertha mentioned often in the radio schedule from 1926 into the early 1930s. Just as her career was waning in her early 40s, Bertha got an unexpected boost from the arrival of this new technology in Poland, and she became a frequent guest singer on Polish radio. The radio broadcasts reached the whole of Poland and raised her status to a well-loved household name. But with the onset of the world-wide depression in the 1930s, and her increasing age, her ability to get work dried up and she returned to Toronto in 1934. A librarian at the Theatre and Performing Arts section of the Toronto Reference Library found me the program and reviews from her last appearance at a Toronto Promenade Concert in 1935. That brought me full circle to that first obituary which told how she caught pneumonia and died suddenly in 1937.

Bertha's story – when I had reconstructed it through these many sources - reveals an adventurous Canadian woman, now completely forgotten, who had a lengthy musical career and was considered one of the best Canadian sopranos of her time. I found it is possible to put the pieces of the puzzle back together and bring to life her part in the history of Canadian music. Many of her contemporaries had equally interesting lives and deserve as much. Maybe you can take on one?...

If you have anything to add about Bertha's career, please contact me at <<r.a.coon@bell.net>>.

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