

JANUARY 2023 SPEAKER

DAVID MCPHERSON, MASSEY HALL

From its outset Massey Hall was intended “for people from all walks of life,” David, author of the 2021 history *Massey Hall* (Dundurn Press), published in connection with the hall’s 125th anniversary, told us. “Carnegie Hall to me is more for the upper class in formal attire; people wearing jeans and a T-shirt mingle with people in three-piece suits at Massey Hall. People come up to me and share their experiences there. It’s more than just a building.”

In 1894 business tycoon and philanthropist Hart Massey (1823-1896), then head of Massey Manufacturing (agricultural machinery), paid for the hall’s construction and donated it to the City of Toronto, a gift, he said, “for the people.” David explained: “The business was booming. He’d recently opened a factory on King Street West which employed 1,000 people. He was nearing the end of his life. He wanted to give back. There was only St. Lawrence Hall and it had small seating capacity. Toronto needed a bigger place. And it was a memorial to his eldest son Charles, a music lover, who’d died at 36 (in 1884) from typhoid fever.

“The original name, Massey Music Hall, was shortened to Massey Hall because over the years there was so much more than music.” It was a surprise to learn from David that over the years there’d been suffragette and temperance meetings; religious revivals; talks by luminaries Helen Keller, Winston Churchill about his experience in the Boer War, Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle; boxing and wrestling matches. “A place for the people,” David said.

He regaled us with stories about some of the pantheon of stars who have graced its stage. Enrico Caruso came out on the fire escape to sing to adoring crowds on the street. “The greatest jazz concert ever” took place in 1953, a one-timer bringing together greats Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Max Roach, and Charles Mingus. Bob Dylan was booed because he used an electric, rather than acoustic guitar. “Toronto had a huge folk scene in Yorkville and the folkies objected to Dylan’s plug-in guitar.” Other performers have included: Luciano Pavarotti; Stevie Wonder, when just 13; Neil Young, back- to- back performances 6:30 and 9:30 p.m. because of ticket demand; Rush; Paul Simon; Toronto Symphony Orchestra; Toronto Mendelssohn Choir.

Gordon Lightfoot has performed there more than any other artist (171 times as of 2021), including at the re-opening of the hall in November 2021 after being closed for three years of multi-million-dollar renovations. “I was there; I was in Heaven,” said a member. David titled a chapter “The House of Gord.”

David said the superb acoustics, beloved by performers and audiences, are due to the auditorium being horseshoe shaped. There was an echo, however, which was corrected in the renovations by installing sound-absorbing plaster. The hall’s stained-glass windows portraying classical music composer greats are visible again after being hidden from view for decades, covered by plywood because street sounds penetrated through the glass. The renovation replaced the plywood with noise defensive shades used during performances.

“The hall has weathered troubles -recessions, political turmoil, differences of opinion, and calls for it to be demolished. Fortunately, better heads prevailed,” David said.

Susan Goldenberg