Barbara Willis Sweete's
Music In
the Midnight Sun

In the fall of 1987, The Toronto Symphony embarked on its most ambitious tour to date. Over one hundred musicians travelled to the Canadian Arctic — further north than any major orchestra had ever been before. (Opening titles to the film)

These simple sentences are a prelude to a stunningly photographed and intelligently organized record of a unique undertaking by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) all enhanced by simply beautiful sound and a generous helping of wit and humour.

Under the opening credits we see the Inuit people in traditional performance, singing and drumming. On the radio in Inukiv, William Tagoma sings his own country-style song, “Our Land,” in Inuk, and the announcer reminds everyone that the Toronto Symphony will be in town next week.

In Toronto, the TSO rehearses at Roy Thomson Hall. Members of the orchestra look forward to the first trip to the North; the tour manager worries if sleeping bags are required; and the stage manager starts loading the aircraft with, among other things, hockey sticks and sticks for an important game. As the non-musical stuff and opinions are battened down, the excitement builds and the music comes to the fore.

Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” in rehearsal is melded with the tour aircraft being readied, the cargo being stowed, and hand signals from airport workers synchronise with the music. The plane lifts into the air as a map appears and the line of flight creeps across Canada to Edmonton, then north to Yellowknife and on to Inukiv. The orchestra is greeted by local dignitaries. The Valkyries continue to ride on, and the musicians are now playing a first concert, transformed from rehearsal to formal clothes, and music director Andrew Davis is giving his all before an entranced audience.

After this invigorating sequence, the film continues skillfully to intervene with the musicians with the Inuit performers and artists, with the children and with the natural outdoor life, inducing an ember and flow that is quite hypnotic. A number of glimpses of orchestra members provide interesting little “off-stage” anecdotes. In Fort MacPherson, near Inuvik, oboist Frank Collin, a great forthright character who doesn’t hesitate to ask plain up-front questions, but lets his attention wander somewhat when Frank talks about classical music. Neil also removes his headphones smartly at the loud bits of brass in a TSO recording, and returns quickly to his own style with “Wednesday Waltz.” Willie Gordon, Mackenzie Delta Fiddle Champion, teams up with violinist Andrea Hansen; double bassist Ruth Budd stays with another woman, Cece McCleary, chief of the Dene Nation; Andrew Davis chats up a woman preparing fish for the smokehouse; a special fashion show is staged for men and women — and so the exchanges go.

Oh yes, the hockey match comes off — not on ice, but on the ice, and the Symphony struggles gamely against the Inuvik All-Stars, losing 5-0. “It’s agonizing,” says a TSO player, “to lose again. If we’d been on ice we’d have beaten them....

The swelling strains of Mussorgsky start at the hockey match and the film draws to a close with “The Great Gate of Kievan” from “Pictures At An Exhibition” and, again, the orchestra is in concert, the audience rapt with some slight swaying and toe-tapping. The images of the North (which must be ingrained in the minds of orchestra members) slide by as in a dream. A flock of white birds seen from the air, land and water merge into a dazzling abstract painting, and one comes down to earth as the concert ends and Andrew Davis bows and blows kises, and the orchestra beams at the applause.

The charm of this film is endless, the images pass seamlessly, yet with real feeling and relationships. The story culminates during Easter with the arrival of L. A. of Wally’s pregnant girlfriend, his reconciliation with his father and his father’s ultimate act of generosity: he commits suicide by driving his hearse off the cliffs into the sea.

Here we have a story based on common (albeit quickly) humanity which, through the use of a set of easily accessible metaphors for death and rebirth, attempts to ascend to the mythical. One of the central anecdotes in the film concerns memories of a childhood baseball game in which the young Wally is characterized as a great player who saves his team even though another kid becomes the hero of the game.

This feeling of watching a fielder’s choice or a sacrifice fly characterizes the way the film affects the viewer — there is balance everywhere: in the script, in the careful direction. The tasteful blending of realism, sentiment, low comedy and high intensity. In the two outstanding performances of the film, the very fine acting of Wally’s father and his father’s ultimate act of generosity; the total smacks of realism, sentiment, low comedy and high intensity.

Their homeward journey is within the new conservative mainstream, signalling a turning-away from experimentation and risk-taking and a return to traditional values. The film Something About Love is very much in that mainstream too.

As the film progresses Wally is called home to deal with his aging, estranged father (Ian Rubes), an opera-loving patriarch who begins to display symptoms of what is ultimately diagnosed as Alzheimer’s disease. Wally, at first ill at ease with his family, old friends and the love of his youth (Jennifer Dale), gradually becomes heavily involved with his roots, duties and relationships. The story culminates during Easter with the arrival of L. A. of Wally’s pregnant girlfriend, his reconciliation with his father and his father’s ultimate act of generosity: he commits suicide by driving his hearse off the cliffs into the sea. This feeling of watching a fielder’s choice or a sacrifice fly characterizes the way the film affects the viewer — there is balance everywhere: in the script, in the careful direction. The tasteful blending of realism, sentiment, low comedy and high intensity. In the two outstanding performances of the film, the very fine acting of Wally’s father and his father’s ultimate act of generosity; the total smacks of realism, sentiment, low comedy and high intensity.