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 startlingly 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 Inuvik, William Tagona sings his own country-style song, “Our Land,” in Inuit, 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 all manner of things. Hockey sticks and bags for an important game.

As the musical stuff and opinions are buttonéd up, the excitement builds and the music comes to the fore.

Oh yes, the hockey match comes off — not too well, but tarmac — 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 Kiev” from “Pictures At An Exhibition” and, again, the orchestra is in concert, the audience rapt with some slight swooping and pining-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 seems 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 kisses, and the orchestra beams at the applause.

The charm of this film is endless, the images pass ceaselessly, yet with real feeling and with all these ingredients and with so many different ingredients and with so many different themes, the film continues skillfully to interweave the musicians with the Inuit performers and artists, with the children and with the natural outdoor life, inducing an emb and flow that is quite hypnotic.

A number of glimpses of orchestra members provide interesting little “off-stage” anecdotes. In Fort MacPherson, near Inuvik, obese Frank Murphy is somewhat apprehensive during an interview on the CBC morning show by Neil Collin, a great forthright character who doesn’t hesitate to ask plain un-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.”

Neil Gordon, Mackenzie Delta Fiddle Champion, teams up with violinist Andrea Hansen; double bassist Ruth Budd stays on the other side, Cece McCouley, 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.

Their homeward journey is within the new conservative mainstream, signifying 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 opens Wally Olynyk (Stefan Wodoslawsky), son of a Ukrainian moravian in Cape Breton, is editing video footage in a Los Angeles studio. Now what can be more down-home Canadian than that? In one fell swoop we get the perfect socio-economic and ethnographic snapshot of the multi-cultural media Canadian with carefully cultivated eccentricities. Also, even if the inspiration is genuinely autobiographical, the total stackness of construct.

As the film progresses Wally is called home to deal with his aging, estranged father (Jan 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 from 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 quietly) humanity which, through the use of a set of easily accessible metaphors for death and rebirth, seeks 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’s — even though another kid — becomes the hero of the game.

This feeling of watching a 90’s child or a sacrifice deficiency characterizes the way this film affects the viewer — there is balance everywhere: In the script. In the careful direction. In the tasteful blending of realism, sentiment, low comedy and high intensity. In the two outstanding performances of the film, the very fine acting of Stefan Wodoslawsky and Barry Gilmore.

Still, as the film progresses Wally is called home to deal with his aging, estranged father, slow and low comedy and high intensity. In the two outstanding performances of the film, the very fine acting of Stefan Wodoslawsky and Barry Gilmore.

There is balance too in the way the next echelon of players — the Olynyk family, Ron James and Leronz Zann— provide accomplished accompaniment and the way the rest of the competent cast provide background with a shard of shell. Even the soundtrack strives for balance; for once, the dialogue is up-front and easy to catch.

In fact, all is exemplary in Tom Berry’s and Stefan Wodoslawsky’s screenplay. It has text structure, proportion and development. Perhaps the baseball metaphor, opportunity is as it may have been, is less fitting than a musical one. This is a carefully orchestrated, operatically composed work. So with all these ingredients and with so many
Don Lake and Stephan Wodoslawsky share some of that masculine mystique in Something About Love

qualities invested, why doesn’t this film soar?

The answer is in the very balance that keeps the enterprise afloat. The film lacks tension. The relationships may feel tectonic but never capture in passion. Everything is clear, accessible, up-front, middle-of-the-road.

The good news is that Something About Love is not a loser. But it ain’t a winner, either, up-front, middle-of-the-road.

There is one sequence in this film that shows the potential of glorious excess. It is a small sequence but it is significant. It is a scene where the protagonist is in a car, in the driveway, and is getting out of the car.

He is looking at something that is in the driveway, and this something is a boy. The boy is on a skateboard, and he is doing tricks. The protagonist is watching the boy, and he is impressed. He is also a little bit confused. He doesn’t know what to do next. The boy is a little bit older than him, and he is a little bit more experienced.

In the end, the protagonist decides to get on the skateboard and try to learn how to do the tricks. The boy is very encouraging, and he helps the protagonist. They both have a good time, and they continue to practice.

This sequence is a good example of how the film could have been better. The story is just not engaging enough, and the characters are not developed enough. But this sequence shows that the film has potential, and it is a good example of how the film could have been better.