

Appassionata - Character Biographies

Sonia Eckhardt-Gramatté

Sophie-Carmen's life was nomadic and unconventional. She was born in Moscow where her mother, a piano student of Anton and Nicholas Rubinstein, worked as governess in the Tolstoy household. After several years at a commune in England, Sophie-Carmen was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of eight, where she majored in piano and violin. By age eleven she had given her first concerts in Paris, Geneva, and Berlin, playing both instruments on the same program.

Her marriage to Walter Gramatté in 1920 brought the freedom to devote herself full-time to composing and to giving recitals. Following Walter's untimely death in 1929, Sonia premiered her first piano and violin concertos in an American debut under the batons of Leopold Stokowski and Frederick Stock. Upon her return to Berlin, the young widow abandoned her performing career and devoted herself completely to composition.

In 1939, five years after her marriage to Ferdinand Eckhardt, the couple moved to Vienna where Sophie-Carmen continued to compose, receiving prestigious commissions and recognition for her work. The last twenty-one years of Sonia's life were spent in Winnipeg, breaking new ground as a composer and pedagogue on the Canadian prairies. Her work catalogue of over 175 compositions (symphonic, chamber, violin, and piano) attests to the fiery, dynamic spirit of an artist, steeped in the romantic tradition, carving a path for herself in the remarkable musical terrain of the twentieth century.

Walter Gramatté

Walter Gramatté served in the German army during World War I. After his discharge in 1918, he concentrated on his art in Berlin where he formed friendships with several of the important German Expressionists, notably Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Throughout their marriage both Walter and Sonia worked towards achieving their individual artistic goals in an atmosphere of increasing mutual dependency. Walter died in 1929 at the age of thirty-two. A memorial exhibition opened at the Art Association in Hamburg in 1932, travelling for thirteen months to nine other cities in Germany before it was closed prematurely by the Nazi regime. Gramatté's works were declared "degenerate" in 1933 and were not shown again until after World War II.

Throughout the twenties, Gramatté produced graphic works, watercolors and oils. He was particularly interested in experimentation with etchings, woodcuts, lithographs (sometimes coloured) and dry points, the graphic media favoured in German Expressionism. His subject matter was wide-ranging, but he had a special affinity for portraiture; he produced around 200 self-portraits and around 120 studies of his wife. Deeply sensitive to his and Sonia's personalities, and contemplative and introspective by nature, Gramatté through his art reveals his gift for observations and analysis. After meeting her, his works included landscapes and flower studies as well.

Summing up Gramatté's career, Ferdinand Eckhardt wrote:

“Unlike some artists, who sooner or later arrive at a style by which they are immediately recognized, Gramatté evolved for each work, or at least each group of works, a style all its own. For him the statement seems the essential thing: a thought, an idea, an expression for which he must find the appropriate technique. And so before he proceeds to a new work he tries to find an adequate means of expression. Thus his work is multiform, always demanding a new adaptation on the part of the spectator.”

Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt

Dr Ferdinand Anton Ludwig Eckhardt was born on 28 April, 1902 in Vienna, Austria and he died 25 December, 1995 in Winnipeg, MB, Canada. He studied art history at the University of Vienna, where he obtained his PhD in 1927.

During the late twenties Ferdinand Eckhardt moved to Berlin as a freelance art critic for various local and foreign newspapers, art magazines and journals. For his research for the article "Berlin Graphic Artists of Post-War Berlin", published 1931, he was referred to the widow of Berlin artist Walter Gramatté. This meeting was a doubly fated one, since he would get to know two people, two artists and their art, more intensely than he could ever have imagined: Walter Gramatté, a passionate human being, late-expressionist painter and graphic artist, and his no less passionate widow, Sophie-Carmen (Sonia) Gramatté, not only a virtuoso violinist and pianist, but also a composer. Making the works of Walter Gramatté accessible to the public became one of his missions in life. In 1934 Sonia and Ferdinand married and lived in the Berlin apartment in which she and Walter had lived in.

In 1953 Ferdinand Eckhardt took a leap of faith and uprooted himself and Sonia from the secure tradition, rich art world and Viennese music scene where Sonia had recently become a founding member of the International Society for Contemporary Music, and emigrated to Winnipeg, Canada as the newly appointed director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In 1982, to fulfill the two great missions in his life, he established the Eckhardt-Gramatté Foundation in honor of Walter and Sonia, for the advancement of public appreciation and understanding and knowledge of the music and artistic works of these two individuals.

Dr Eckhardt's cultural contributions were recognized with The Order of Canada in 1976, honorary degrees from the University of Manitoba and Brandon University, honorary memberships and numerous community service awards.

Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt's narration is based upon his biography of Sonia called *Music from Within* and his unpublished writings held by the Eckhardt-Gramatté Foundation.