

Antonia Louisa Brico was born in Rotterdam, Holland in 1902. Little is known about her birth parents, Johannes and Antonia (Shaaken) Brico, who died when she was two. Mr. and Mrs. John Wolthuis (mother's first name unknown) became her foster parents. **In 1907**, she emigrated with them to Oakland, California attending school as Wilhelmina Wolthuis, the name they had given her.

The Wolthuis home was not a happy environment. Antonia later said: "I'd dream about having an automobile accident in front of someone's house just so they'd pick me up and be affectionate."

She began piano lessons at age 10 after a doctor suggested this remedy to overcome her nail biting. Soon she was performing at local churches and club meetings. Her original ambition to become a concert pianist changed when she attended a park concert conducted by Paul Steindorff. Rather than limit herself to one instrument, she decided to become a conductor. She later said: "The orchestra to me is the greatest instrument. It is to the musician what the palette is to a painter."

After her high school graduation in 1919, Mr. and Mrs. Wolthuis revealed for the first time that they were not her birth parents. Antonia immediately moved out and had no further contact with them.

Antonia enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. As luck would have it, Paul Steindorff, who had inspired her conducting ambitions, was director of music and, more importantly, director of the San Francisco Opera. Antonia became his assistant. When she received a B.A. with honors in music in 1923, people advised her to teach; a position awaited her, and conducting was no job for a woman. But her ambition never wavered. She officially reclaimed her birth name, Antonia Brico, moved to New York City and studied piano with Sigismond Stojowski for two years.

In 1926 she moved to Hamburg, Germany, where the legendary Karl Muck, former conductor of the Boston Symphony, led the Hamburg Philharmonic. Armed with a letter of introduction, she persuaded him to become her mentor. She served as his apprentice for four years, the only student he ever accepted. At the same time she attended the conducting master class at the Berlin State Academy of Music, and became its first American graduate in 1927.

In 1930 she made her conducting debut with the Berlin Philharmonic, the first woman ever to lead that orchestra. Of her performance, the *Allgemeine Zeitung* critic said: "Miss Brico displayed unmistakable and outstanding gifts as a conductor. She possesses more ability, cleverness and musicianship than some of her male colleagues who bore us in Berlin."

Later that year, she guest-conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony. Then, after a two-year tour of Europe conducting concerts with orchestras in Germany, Latvia and Poland, she returned to the United States in 1932 and settled in New York City.

In January 1933 Antonia made her NYC conducting debut with the Musicians' Symphony Orchestra at the Metropolitan Opera House. The Pictorial Review critic wrote: "With only three rehearsals Miss Brico made that orchestra play as it had never played before." She was hired to conduct a second concert, but was denied a third when the tenor soloist, John Charles Thomas, refused to perform with a woman conductor, fearing this would take attention away from him.

In 1934 she founded the New York Women's Symphony "... to prove that women could play in any part of the symphony--they can play equally well the trombone, the flute, the oboe or the French horn." With support from Eleanor Roosevelt and New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, they played their first season in 1935, garnering excellent reviews.

Renamed the Brico Symphony Orchestra for its 1938-1939 season, the group added male musicians but disbanded after one season due to financial difficulties.

In 1938 Antonia became the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in a concert at Lewisohn Stadium. The NY Times critic praised her interpretation of the Sibelius Symphony #1, which "... brought one of the most spontaneous and sustained outbursts of approval of the Stadium season." The review went on to praise the "life, color and sanity of her readings [which were] expressed with effective verve and intensity."

Despite such positive reviews, she was unable to obtain a conducting post with an established orchestra. A comment made to her before her NY Philharmonic debut is telling: Mrs. Charles Guggenheimer, doyenne of Lewisohn Stadium, told her: "It's a disgrace that a woman is conducting this venerable orchestra." Arthur Judson, then manager of the NY Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, told her: "All those females in the audience want to see a male conducting. Brico, you were born 50 years too soon."

In 1942 she moved to Denver, taught piano and took whatever guest conducting jobs she was offered. In 1945 she applied for, but was denied, the Denver Civic Orchestra conducting job. Europe was more appreciative of her talents. After WW II ended in 1946, she conducted concerts in Sweden, Austria

and Holland. At Sir Adrian Boult's invitation, she led the London Philharmonic in a Royal Albert Hall concert. Composer Jan Sebelius deemed her "a conductor of flame and fire" and invited her to conduct an all-Sibelius concert in Helsinki, Finland. But a permanent conducting job in the United States continued to elude her.

In 1947 a group of amateur musicians invited her to lead the Denver Businessmen's Orchestra, **the only permanent conducting post she ever held**. From 1947 until 1981, she led the orchestra in five performances each year. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s she toiled in obscurity in Denver. In 1967 the musicians renamed the orchestra the Brico Symphony in her honor.

A turning point came in 1971 when folk singer Judy Collins decided to film a documentary about Antonia. As a teenager in Denver, Collins had studied piano with her and in 1952 performed as piano soloist with Brico's Denver Businessman's Orchestra. Although Collins' later success came in a non-classical area of folk music, the two women remained close.

**"Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman,"** co-produced by Collins and Jill Godmilow, was released in 1974. Critic Marjorie Rosen called it "an extraordinary portrait of an extraordinary woman ... a pioneer female orchestra conductor ... an artist and feminist. ... [The film is] a vision of optimism and courage [that defines] a life of brilliant but thwarted promise. [It] is disturbing because it details brilliance misused; brilliance regarded as novelty. But ultimately it's uplifting because optimism and commitment and courage ... have a way of renewing and intoxicating us."

The film demonstrates Brico's indomitable will, unshakable determination and sense of humor, but in one poignant scene she laments: "I have five performances a year, but I'm strong enough to have five a month! It's like giving a starving person a piece of bread."

The film won critical acclaim and an Academy Award nomination, and briefly revitalized Brico's career. During the 1975-76 season she conducted two concerts at the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York City, some of her only performances preserved on record. She guest-conducted concerts with the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center, the Denver and Seattle symphonies, the American Symphony Orchestra, and concerts in Manila and Halifax. Her last New York appearances were in 1977 with the Brooklyn Philharmonia.

In 1981 Antonia Brico, then 79, retired from conducting, but continued to teach. In 1988 she broke her hip in a fall. She died in a Denver nursing home on 3 August 1989 at age 87.

Antonia Brico was an honorary member of the Bruckner Society of America. In the December, 1935 issue of "Chord and Discord," The Society reported the following:

### **ANTONIA BRICO PERFORMS BRUCKNER'S *ROMANTIC***

Hats off, Brucknerites, to Antonia Brico, gallant conductress of the New York Women's Symphony Orchestra. Of the summer echoes of last season's Bruckner activity those that emanated from the enchanting sway of her baton were not only the most amazing but also the most joyful. Twice in rapid succession, despite the most trying handicaps a conductor ever had to face, Miss Brico "did and dared" for an ideal cause in which she believed implicitly. Concerning the first of her two performances of the *Romantic* with the New York Civic Orchestra at the Museum of Natural History and City College, Mr. Charles C. Fire, who was present, has kindly written us the following report:

*I have just heard a performance of the Bruckner Symphony No. 4, given by the New York Civic Orchestra, Antonia Brico conducting. It received at her hands an eloquent and dramatic reading, and the audience was quick to recognize and respond to the sincere enthusiasm of the conductor or this magnificent work. Having attended the rehearsals I can attest to the many difficulties she encountered in bringing the symphony before the audience of the New York Civic Orchestra.*

*For over a year now she has been endeavoring to overcome this many-sided opposition to the works of Bruckner, for whom she has an especial sympathy and understanding, as she studied conducting for many years in Bayreuth, with Dr. Karl Muck, whose authority on the works of Bruckner need scarcely be mentioned.*

*To achieve in the face of persistent opposition, such a signal success with this work of genius deserves, I think, recognition from those who have at heart the interest of spreading the gospel of Bruckner. Many musicians of taste and discrimination who heard the performance this afternoon share my opinion with me.*