

Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman

By Diane Worthey



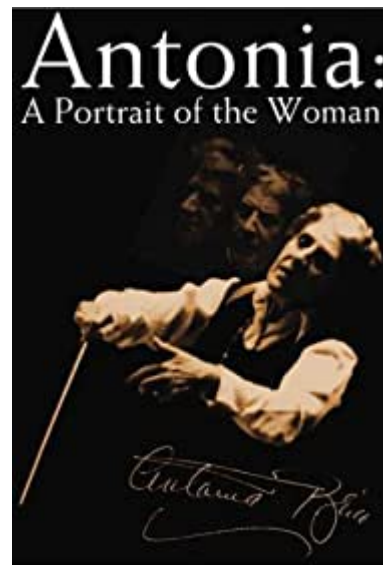
“Antonia Brico really knew how to live.”

~Jill Godmilow

Maestra Antonia Brico, the virtuoso conductor who broke barriers for women on the orchestral podium, is the subject of the 1974 Academy Award nominated film, “Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman.” Co-directed by Jill Godmilow and Grammy Award winning folk singer, Judy Collins, the film is an eloquent and luminous glimpse into the soul of a stellar conductor.

Brico was the first American to graduate from the Master School of Conducting in Berlin under Karl Muck, and the first woman conductor ever to step upon the podium of the New York Philharmonic, yet her talents went unrecognized by the condescending sexist bigotry of the day. Out of necessity, Brico spent the majority of her career teaching piano and conducting a semi-professional ensemble in Denver, Colorado. Although she was a trailblazer for women, surprisingly, she never recognized herself as such. Instead, as this documentary reveals, she defined herself simply an artist whose sole passion was to conduct.

This edgy, captivating film endures because of the fortuitous chemistry between the filmmakers and their subject, Collins’ longstanding affection for Antonia, Godmilow’s innovative film technique, and of course the extraordinary character of Brico herself.



From the Library of Congress collection

Released at the height of the 1970s Feminist Movement in America, the film enjoyed immediate blockbuster success. Nearly every major film festival screened the documentary, including the American Film Festival, London Film Festival and Berlin Film Festival. There were national television broadcasts in the United States, Australia, Sweden and France. In 2003, the

Library of Congress added “Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman” to the National Film Registry for its “cultural, historical and/or aesthetic significance,” and deems the film worthy for preservation.

The film briefly revitalized Antonia’s conducting career with invitations to guest conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic and other prominent orchestras. But by 1981, when I played under her baton as a fifteen-year-old violinist in the Brico Symphony, I had no idea I was playing under a legend! The glow of limelight had faded and the red carpet at the 1974 Oscars where Antonia rubbed shoulders with Hollywood celebrities had long ago been rolled up. She never talked about the film, flaunted her past or wallowed in self-pity. Although no one told me then of her greatness, I sensed it. I remember only her passion for great orchestral repertoire.

Decades before I arrived on Brico’s stage, Judy Collins discovered Antonia’s incredible story. A promising young pianist, Judy stayed late after lessons to sort and file memorabilia from Antonia’s early career as a conductor. Astounded by what she learned about her teacher, she decided to someday make a movie about Antonia. In 1973, now a star herself, Collins’ Rocky Mountain Productions funded the film. Judy serendipitously chose the ideal filmmaker to co-direct the film: the young, up- and- coming filmmaker, Jill Godmilow.



Judy Collins with Antonia Brico. (1973) Still photo from the Library of Congress collection.

The personal relationship between Antonia and Judy Collins formed the foundation for the film. Without this endearing bond (which lasted a lifetime) the film likely would not be as tender. Yet the unpretentious rapport which developed between Brico, Collins and Godmilow during the filming of the documentary made the film sparkle.

Godmilow filmed the entire footage of the documentary at Antonia’s house and rehearsal hall which reveals a window into weekly rehearsals with Brico’s orchestra and soloists. When watching the film (although we rarely see them on camera)

you feel as though Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow are Antonia’s intimate friends who love nothing more than to reminisce about great musicians and classical music over dinner and Brico’s signature lemon water.

In 1974, shortly after the release of the film, Louis “Studs” Terkel, the 1985 Pulitzer Prize winning American writer, historian and broadcaster interviewed Jill Godmilow on the 98.7 WFMT Chicago radio show, *The Studs Terkel Program*. The genius of the film, he observed, lies in the director’s multidimensional approach. Unlike standard documentaries which focus on one-dimensional facts, “Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman” tells not only of Antonia Brico’s journey, but more importantly, seamlessly weaves together emotions of the subject, the film maker and the audience. In the Terkel interview, Godmilow elaborates:

For me, the process is where it's really at. It's the key. What you discover about yourself [while] trying to take the pieces of someone else's life and fit them together — make them meaningful — it's really a process of discovering what your own feelings are about the subject and then finding a way to make them clear in film form. The really successful documentary does that. It's not about facts. It's not about information. It's never about that kind of detail.

In the 1970s, Godmilow bashed against her own glass ceiling as a woman filmmaker in a male-dominated field and struggled with the confines of the standard documentary practice. After hearing Antonia speak about the Spanish conductor José Iturbi who boasted that his male timpani players were better than the women timpani players in Antonia's New York Women's Philharmonic, Godmilow made documentary history by inserting an animated scene which portrays a hypothetical competition between the sexes. No documentary maker had ever been so creative in expanding the boundaries of typical documentary practice.

Godmilow also resonated deeply with her subject, capturing on film (in Antonia's kitchen) the innermost feelings Brico preferred to keep hidden from the camera.

Collins and Godmilow prodded Antonia before the camera began to roll. "But you were a pioneer! You were a legend!"

After multiple repetitions of this phrase, Antonia exploded with unbridled frustration.

I don't talk about it every day! I don't let everybody know my heartbreak! The people closest to me don't understand! It's a perpetual heartbreak!

Ultimately, Brico's deeply private thoughts, brought to the surface by a gifted film maker and a former student, makes Antonia Brico *real* to us. We want to hug and comfort her. But mostly, we admire her grit. A revealing portrait of the extraordinary conductor I once knew, Antonia's story teaches us to be true to ourselves, even when we struggle. She refused to consider herself a failure even when the sexism of the time fast-tracked men to success and left gifted women behind. She stood in front her orchestra as if it were the finest in the world, and put every bit of her boundless energy into it.



Portrait drawing of Antonia Brico (1930) by Peggy Bacon from the Library of Congress collection

The film ends with the three women around Brico's piano, as Collins and Godmilow tease Antonia about hamburgers, complete with onions, that they had just finished eating. (Antonia was a strict vegetarian.) In this light-hearted scene, we see a different side of Antonia as she lets loose at the piano, singing and playing ragtime pieces of her youth. From there, Godmilow immediately transitions to the last scene. Rapturous applause from a gifted student's performance of the Schumann Piano Concerto in A Minor fills the screen. Godmilow captures

Brico's beaming smile and lowers the camera. In the editing room, Godmilow decides to include the darkened shot as it falls away from the limelight — a subtle metaphor for Brico's stifled career.

Why does this film touch us on so many levels? Jill Godmilow states it best in her 1974 Studs Terkel interview:

Her sense of life! The sense of dedication to what is good is very reconfirming for individuals who see the film.

After the making of the film, Judy Collins continued to tour the world well into her eighties as an iconic American folk singer. Jill Godmilow carved out a career as a leading documentary maker and theorist with her 1984 radical and groundbreaking film "Far From Poland." With more than 25 films to her credit and more than 20 years teaching film at different universities, "Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman" remains as one of Godmilow's most important achievements.



Jill Godmilow, Eugenia Morrison, Judy Collins and Antonia Brico. Photo from the Library of Congress.

Diane Worthey is the author of "In One Ear & Out the Other: Antonia Brico & Her Amazingly Musical Life," (Penny Candy Books, 2020) and "Rise Up With A Song: The True Story of Ethel Smyth, Suffragette Composer" (illus by Helena Perez Garcia, Bushel & Peck Books Oct 2022). She teaches violin and viola for the University of Idaho Preparatory Division and performs in the Washington-Idaho Symphony. In her music studio in Pullman, Washington, Antonia's portrait hangs on the wall, encouraging her to live an authentic life.

Sources

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"Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman" (1974) was inducted into the National Film Registry in 2003. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the Library of Congress.