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Author(s)	B. Ruby Rich Camille J. Cook
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Antonia: A Portrait of a Woman (1974), Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow

**Distributor:
Rocky Mountain
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Documentary filmmakers have been painfully sensitive to two frequent accusations: lack of editorial objectivity and exploitation of the subject. In cases where those two principles might conflict—well, the filmmaker is doubly damned. On one occasion, under attack for the presumed exploitation of a subject, a harried filmmaker was heard to announce that the one way to settle the issue was for people to make films only about subjects they love. *Antonia* is such a film. Few films are made with such a generous outpouring of love. Whether the aim of the documentary form is to convey information about specific social issues or to convey the spirit of a specific person, *Antonia* is a success. The filmmakers not only introduce us to a real woman, but they also allow us the pleasure of learning to know and love her. That the love is so obvious throughout this film is all the more remarkable upon considering that *Antonia* carries a message of angry frustration from a woman who, despite recognized brilliance, was prevented by sex bias from working in the field of her talent. The harmony between co-directors and subject has created a work which is at once a beautiful human document and a powerful feminist tract.

Antonia Brico holds the dubious honor of being history's first woman conductor—dubious, because her historical position doomed her artistic birthright. In 1930, at the age of 28, she conducted the Berlin Philharmonic, the finest orchestra of its time and never, ever, conducted by a woman. The critics and orchestra members came to jeer and stayed to cheer. The force of her talent alone was able to overturn the staunchest preconceptions and prejudices, sweeping her through a triumphant European tour. It seemed as though all the gates would open to her; the battle had been won. Yet the praise was always stained with a foreboding sensationalism. The newspaper clippings that frame the film, charting her career, reveal how brutally she was treated. "Girl Genius" and "Musical Cinderella" were favorite media epithets.

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Destined to be a maestra, Antonia was forced instead to become an oddity.

The extremes of cajoling and scheming to which Antonia Brico had to resort in order to gain even this token recognition are vividly reported. One unspeakable instance of chauvinism is captured by a still photograph of John Charles Thomas. "Can a woman really conduct?" was a regular newspaper theme. And society's answer, thinly disguised by the lip service owed to her artistry, was a resounding No; Antonia found herself in the hideous position of being a conductor without an orchestra, a musician denied her instrument. Determined to prove her contention that "art is sexless" and bent on practicing her art at any cost, she organized the first all-woman symphony orchestra. Still, the disbelief in woman's competency dogged her, most flamboyantly in the case of the winning tympanist. The gala male-vs.-female tympanist competition, a fantasy event, is meticulously chronicled in the film's very funny animation sequence. The fact that this battle of the sexes never really took place in no way diminishes its authenticity.

Antonia Brico has told her story many times throughout her life, and now, at age 73, she knows exactly what anecdotes she wants to tell and what tragedies she'd prefer to forget. She worked her way through college playing string quartets in San Francisco restaurants and doing sheet-music demonstrations in Woolworth's music departments, where customers often returned their music because the arrangements didn't measure up to Antonia's in-store improvisations. Throughout the struggle that became her career Antonia met and found help from some of the greatest men of our time: Albert Schweitzer, whom she visited five times in Africa; Jean Sibelius, whose music she conducted in his presence; Arthur Rubinstein, who tried to secure her an orchestra.

She finally moved to Denver on the promise of a position with their new symphony, but once again politics frustrated her ambitions. The futile struggle had become intolerable. She stayed in Denver, organized a non-profit, semi-professional community orchestra so she could conduct at least occasionally, and began giving piano lessons to aspiring young girls, who were full of the hopes she herself had once had. Judy Collins was her student for six years; she still feels Brico's

Antonia



influence.

An extraordinarily warm and loving woman, Antonia is projected into our consciousness by the film with a seemingly effortless grace. She tells her life in stories, with a humor that belies the pain they so consistently relate. Only once, when Judy prods her into anger, does she momentarily break with her good-natured image and explode against the injustices of her life and the misfortunes of her womanhood. With impeccable respect the filmmakers have selected those moments when Antonia is her strongest in stating her vulnerability.

Surely the labor of love has left its mark on this film, but it is important to emphasize the skill that supports its effort. The film's editing is truly masterful: *Antonia* uses portrait pieces that so often spell anathema to the viewer (stills, newspaper clippings, historical footage) and juxtaposes them provocatively, with such a meaningful rhythm that we never question their importance. The film is suffused with Antonia Brico's music and personality. It is a sign of great strength that the film preserves them intact and fashions itself in their image so perfectly that Antonia and the film seem one. The atmosphere of trust between Judy Collins and Antonia must have made that possible. The camera work makes that apparent. Judy Collins, famous as a singer of folk and popular music, originally conceived the film as a magazine article, then an 8mm film, and finally the 16mm documentary it became. She sought out Jill Godmilow, who had been working in film as an editor since 1967 editing documentaries, TV commercials, and even feature films (*Gerstein's Tales*), but who never before directed. To see the film is to acknowledge the power and significance of this first collaboration.

Antonia, so sincere in its message and so honest in its affection, should become the

classic documentary of the women's movement. It will certainly silence any critics who may still cling to the notion of the movement as the sour grapes of the underserving. Hopefully, too, it may be helpful to Antonia herself. As orchestras have begun to feel the burden of their superstar conductor system, with home orchestras suffering leadership crises as their stars globetrot, many are trying to reverse the trend by hiring conductors willing to stay home and conduct. Perhaps this development will help Antonia, at last, get the chance to conduct again. And perhaps this film, if seen by enough people, will benefit her career as well. Antonia Brico has never considered herself a feminist; she didn't march with the suffragists or involve herself in campaign politics. Her enormous spiritual strength carried her through 43 years of aspiring to become what she already was: a woman conductor. Indeed, she admitted to the filmmakers that she would gladly have traded "that odious distinction" of being a pioneer for having been able to conduct. Her story speaks for her.

*Camille J. Cook
and B. Ruby Rich*

Antonia: A Portrait of a Woman (U.S.A., 58 min.) was co-directed by Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow, photographed by Coulter Watt, edited by Jill Godmilow, and produced by Judy Collins for Rocky Mountain Productions (1775 Broadway, Suite 2418, N.Y. 10019).

Does Chicago need another Polish promoter of film? Was it six years as chairperson of the Magic Lantern Society or the fact that she was marked from birth by being named for Garbo that destined Camille Jarzemska Cook for the role of director of the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago?

Ruby Rich appeared in Boston in 1948 under a pseudonym. She arrived in Chicago in 1973, became assistant director of the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and even a member of the Steering Committee for FILMS BY WOMEN/CHICAGO '74.