



FEW RELATIONSHIPS ARE as potentially life altering as a student-and-teacher pairing. In the best cases, the union can spark a student's metamorphosis from protégé to successor. Fortunately, that describes the education of **Ken Hsieh**, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's award-winning assistant conductor.

Born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1980, and raised in the Lower Mainland, Hsieh has been dubbed "dramatic," and "one to watch," by critics who've seen the young artist in action. Indeed, his journey to the podium is noteworthy for the enthusiasm with which Hsieh has grabbed the baton, and for the speed with which he's reached the podium.

Hsieh has enjoyed an impressive level of success for a 26-year-old maestro. He won the 2005 Heinz Unger Prize Award in conducting, and is now in his second season with the VSO, as its Conductor-in-Residence and Assistant Conductor. An advocate for young musicians, Hsieh is also the Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra.

He's well regarded for the maturity and musicality he exudes while holding the baton and for bringing a great vibrancy to the stage. Not bad for a man that just six years ago showed up for an early class in

Japan wearing shorts, sunglasses and the slouch of young Canadian hockey fan.

"It was a bit of culture shock," he recalls. Still, Hsieh's mentor **Morihiro Okabe** was drawn to the young artist. "Prof. Okabe and I have a very unique relationship. He's such a [wonderful] human being. And in my life, it's the only relationship that really put my life together, aside from my parents. He's been a mentor and like a grandfather who watches over [me]," Hsieh says of the conductor, famed for his work with the Toho Gakuen School of Music in Japan.

Initially, Hsieh was pursuing music studies in piano and percussion at the University of British Columbia, when in 2000, a sports injury halted his dreams of becoming a concert pianist. He broke two fingers playing handball, digits that are still bent after six years.

"I was very curious about conducting," he recalls, inspired by the image of Japanese conductor **Seiji Ozawa**, one of Asia's best-known maestros.

Hsieh, pondering his future, contacted Okabe during a visit to Japan, and asked if they could meet. Hsieh had a year of study left at U.B.C., but during that fateful meeting Okabe, then 81, advised that if Hsieh wanted to study with him, he'd

have to start immediately.

"Our 15-minute chat became a three-hour meeting," Hsieh recalls. And it changed both of their lives. Hsieh decided to study with Okabe in Japan. He graduated U.B.C by correspondence.

"I was the only student he (Okabe) had then, so he watched every move." Initially, the pair had to overcome a language barrier. Hsieh didn't speak Japanese and the maestro struggled with English. They grew to understand one another.

I owe it to (Maestro) Okabe that my foundational conducting was very strong. I had to work even harder to prove myself in Japan," he says. His work with Okabe led to studies with **Kazuyoshi Akiyama** at Japan's Senzoku College of Music, on full scholarship. Coincidentally, Hsieh's parents enjoyed their first date together in Vancouver about three decades ago attending a concert led by Akiyama. Hsieh also continued his studies with **Yuji Yuasa** and **Jorma Panula**.

After leaving Japan, Hsieh established a steady pace of achievement. He worked with the Pacific Music Festival Orchestra, the National Academy Orchestra and the Vancouver Sinfonietta Orchestra. Hsieh has also served as guest conductor with orchestras in Europe, Finland and Taiwan – his parents' birthplace.

Through it all, he's been inspired by his love of music and his commitment to learning. Surprisingly, he still thinks of himself as an apprentice.

"Conducting is learned from experience, not at school," says Hsieh. "I'm still learning. I'll always be learning."

Apparently, he's a quick study.

by Alison Cunningham