



Ken Hsieh, assistant conductor of VSO, leads the orchestra in front of about 6,000 people at Deer Lake Park in Burnaby.

FILE PHOTO BY STUART DAVIS, VANCOUVER SUN

Fields are alive with the sound of music

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE

■ **OUTDOOR CONCERT** One of Vancouver's greatest summer traditions: Pack a blanket and relax at the Symphony Orchestra's free performance this Sunday at Deer Lake Park

Vancouver summers were alive with music at the turn of the last century: every neighbourhood of any pretension boasted its own bandstand as a focus for casual summer evenings. Today our rich sequence of festivals offers a rather different type of summer music. Just one unmistakable descendent of the open air tradition survives — the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's annual free outdoor concert.

VSO assistant conductor Ken Hsieh leads the orchestra in a smorgasbord of favourites Sunday evening at 7:30 p.m.

This VSO tradition goes way back. In the '20s, Los Angeles music lovers could listen to music under the stars in their brand new Hollywood Bowl. Ever watching for the latest thing from California, Vancouver got its two-thirds actual size knock-off — the Malkin Bowl — in 1934, courtesy of the largesse of for-

mer mayor H. E. Malkin (whose daughter Ursula was a concert pianist of professional note). The idea was to bring quality classical music to Stanley Park, and the new venue proved just the thing for the recently revived Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

According to chronicler John Becker: "On July 8, 1934 [Alard] de Ridder conducted the VSO at the opening of the Malkin Bowl. The summer concerts in the park soon became a popular Vancouver institution, sometimes with audiences of over ten thousand people."

This year the VSO concert will be at Deer Lake Park in Burnaby — lots of room, attractive scenery and a reasonably quiet environment, yet still close to the freeway and public transport. From the ensemble's perspective, the free concerts make

good sense. Today, orchestras recognize they're a part of the community; they don't see their mission as performing just for a small "elite" audience. Besides, there's always the hope that some of the summer crowds will follow the orchestra back indoors in the fall.

As Hsieh notes, "I often find people who are new to classical music extremely intimidated by the word 'classical.' Usually after they attend these outdoor events, they are less apprehensive and start attending regular VSO concerts."

"Many become regular subscribers to the Musically Speaking series, because it is very similar to the Deer Lake concert — the conductor gives an informal talk before each piece, relaxing the intimidation factor."

Yet playing out-of-doors has its

inherent risks. Expensive instruments (seen the price of a decent violin these days?) don't like changes in humidity; gusts of wind can play havoc with music, and there's always the threat of active weather. Hsieh has played Deer Lake before, and while he likes the venue, "The stage is traditionally set close to the lake, and of course, we are faced with the problems of insects."

Last year, I recall our principal violist Neil Miskey pulling off of me a large green bug that kept climbing up my back while I was talking. Thanks goodness, nothing else went wrong."

Good summer programming must be breezy, light but not insipid. Hsieh has come up with a something-for-everyone program that includes two first rate overtures (by Johann

Strauss Jr. and Rossini), a smattering of pops favourites, and Richard Strauss's *First Horn Concerto*, featuring up-and-coming young Burnaby-born Jonathan Blackman. The evening will end with a real blockbuster: Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.

"Last year, music director Bramwell Tovey did the *1812 Overture* as the finale for the Stanley Park concert," says Hsieh.

Sunday will be his first time conducting this noisy extravaganza, which Hsieh enthuses will be "a great ending to an outdoor concert!"

The VSO's free outdoor concert at Deer Lake Park begins at 7:30 p.m. July 23, but get there early for a good spot on the lawn. For directions and parking information, check www.vancouversymphony.ca.

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