

PROFILE | KEN HSIEH

Beethoven, Haydn to open VMO's 10th season

Ken Hsieh grows young orchestra with top-quality mentoring

DAVID GORDON DUKE

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Turnaround time for professional conductors is invariably tight: a jet-set existence means lots of travel and tight schedules as a matter of course. Even so, conductor Ken Hsieh has been particularly under the gun.

Hsieh is recently back in Vancouver after a month on tour in Japan with the Kyushu Symphony Orchestra, and he conducts the first concert of the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra this Sunday afternoon.

"I didn't have a summer at all," he quips, "though at least I get a few days of it here."

Hsieh was born and raised in Edmonton, starting out his life in music on piano, then violin, then percussion.

"My violin playing was quite terrible, but I managed to get through eight years of it."

Conducting came a bit later, unplanned. "It was a complete accident — hurting my finger and getting into conducting as a consequence."

His first break was working at the Pacific Music Festival, an event in Sapporo, Japan — founded by none other than Leonard Bernstein — where Hsieh became assistant to Bernard Haitink and Edo de Waart.

He then became the youngest assistant conductor of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, from 2004 to 2007. Now he's well-embarked on a full international career: conducting in Canada, the U.S., Europe and Asia, working with orchestras from the Tokyo Philharmonic to the Finnish Radio Symphony and L'Orchestre Lamoureux. But he maintains a very special relationship with the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra, which he founded a decade ago.

The Lower Mainland has more than its fair share of orchestral ensembles, but Hsieh's vision for the VMO was a bit different from other groups.



WAYNE LEIDENFROST/ POSTMEDIA NEWS FILES

Ken Hsieh will conduct the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra in Burnaby on Sunday.

From the outset, it was designed to be a training ensemble for advanced players looking forward to professional careers. Its young members are expected to work under circumstances equivalent to those of professional players, with all that entails, including intensive rehearsals — and precious few of them, too.

"I remember the first time Bramwell (Tovey) told me, 'You are going to be conducting the Gershwin Rhapsody in Blue, and I'm going to be playing the piano.' I was used to having five days of rehearsals before a concert, but having not so much time makes it much more exciting, although much more dangerous as well!

Although the VMO's players work under "real world" conditions, there is support and top-quality mentoring.

"It's quite an interesting year. We have several VSO players, including Akira Nagai (Associate Concertmaster Emeritus of the VSO) doing the sectional sessions and coaching

the violins, Kenneth Friedman working the basses and cellos, and horn player Richard Minus — all well-known educators and players."

Over the course of its existence, the Met's complement of players has grown.

"We started as a string-based orchestra, but over 10 years we grew and now we have a full wind section and a full brass section."

A certain focus on strings remains a special priority, though. "It's very strange, in Vancouver there are more winds and brass and percussion than strings. I want to really bring up the strings to the top level."

Although all the details of the Met's year haven't been finalized, Hsieh promises a full season: "Four concerts plus concerto gala concerts, so about seven concerts. Because I've been away so long I really haven't got the whole season programmed," he admits just a bit sheepishly.

Details for Sunday's program are all worked out, however:

Beethoven, Haydn, Mendelssohn, and a work by VMO composer-in-residence Alain Mayrand.

"Sept. 9 is the first concert of the season. I've been cheating a little bit, because I conducted Beethoven's Seventh on tour first. Then, instead of a solo concerto there is Joseph Haydn's Sinfonia Concertante."

Sunday's soloists will be Siu-Fan Yiu (violin), Luke Kim (cello), Emily Yu (oboe), and Tristan Lambert (bassoon).

At a glance

VANCOUVER METROPOLITAN ORCHESTRA 10TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON OPENER

When: Sunday, 2 p.m.

Where: Michael J. Fox Theatre, Burnaby

Tickets: \$25 (general admission) from vmocanada.com