

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Community orchestra takes Kitchissippi to the movies

BY ZENITH WOLFE

A cacophony of instruments dies down as John Kraus, baton in hand, steps onto a raised platform at the front of the room. He looks out at the semicircle of around 50 local musicians gathered in Parkdale United Church's basement hall. They range in age from 16-70, but they all share the same enthusiasm as they ready themselves for another rehearsal.

In less than a month, Kraus will debut as the Parkdale United Church Orchestra's conductor and music director, and he couldn't be more excited.

"The opportunity to work with a group that draws from a population the size of the national capital region is very enticing," he said. "Most of the groups I've worked with in the past have been very small."

Kraus has worked with community music groups for over 25 years. He founded the Durham Chamber Orchestra in 1996 and stayed on as their conductor until 2007. He has also been the director of the Northumberland Orchestra Choir since 2013.

While the Parkdale Orchestra is also community-oriented, Kraus said its greater size and outreach allow him to put on larger shows with romantic music.

He's already capitalizing on this in his upcoming show, "A Night at the Movies." On Nov. 19, the orchestra will perform classical music from famous films like Lord of the Rings, Les Misérables and 2001: A Space Odyssey, among others.

Kraus said the show is part of his vision to give everyone – musicians and listeners alike – a chance to be part of the music.

"It's a common goal with anybody who works in community music," he said.

Liane Luton is the president of the orchestra and one of its cellists. She said the theme will help draw listeners back after their hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're hoping that the movie music theme will be a popular theme," Luton

said. "It's something families can enjoy as well."

The 77-year-old orchestra survived on its reserve funds, but the musicians were unable to rehearse or perform for around two years. When they finally returned to the church, they were rusty, Luton said, and they had around half their pre-pandemic audience.

She stressed that they operate on a \$20,000 yearly budget, so the lack of income has been concerning.

"This past season, for the first time in, I think, the entire history of the orchestra, we lost money. Normally we do make some money," Luton said.

Member dues are one of the main ways the group stays afloat. Most of its musicians are local amateurs who pay around \$5 per rehearsal, like tuba player Javor Frajkor.

According to the Westboro resident, the Parkdale Orchestra is one of the province's few resources for amateur musicians to perform orchestral music.

"There's really only one professional, full-time paid orchestra in town. It's the National Arts Centre (NAC)," Frajkor said. "To have these others is great because the orchestral repertoire is so different from (that of a) band or chamber ensemble."

Members benefit from the mentorship of hired professionals like Kraus, who is also a retired music teacher of 30 years.

The conductor said it's difficult to find music that is at the same time challenging, inspiring, and entertaining for amateur musicians to play, but watching them improve over time is worth it.

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"Seeing people progress and learn about something that I am very passionate about (is rewarding)," Kraus said.

The group is also a good resource for casual listeners in the community. French horn player and member Kathryn Gauthier said listeners find the Parkdale Orchestra more accessible and affordable than the NAC.

"For a lot of people, this is just another world, going to the NAC. They just might not do it, and I think the community orchestra is less intimidating (because) it's in the neighbourhood. Many people know someone who plays," Gauthier said.

In addition to being one of the orchestra's violinists, Nathalie van Galen knows two other members from her own home: her oboist husband Yvo de Jong, and her bassoonist son Thomas de Jong, 16.

The couple first met at the Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands as board members of the university's student orchestra. After they started dating, they decided to move to Ottawa where they both found jobs as engineers. They now live in the Civic Hospital neighbourhood.

Van Galen joined the Parkdale Orchestra in 2003 and became its president soon after Thomas was born in 2005.

"I was on maternity leave, and I was bored out of my skull," van Galen said. "Then the (president) position came open and I was like 'Yeah, I'm doing it.'"

That same year, Yvo joined after a woodwind position opened. Though van Galen stepped down as president in 2009, she and Yvo have played together in the orchestra ever since.

Thomas has also been playing with the orchestra for two years. He is currently its youngest musician, but Yvo said that may change when they invite their younger son Edwin, 11, to play the cello.

"As a parent, it makes you very proud to see your son in the orchestra," Yvo said. "(Edwin) hasn't joined the orchestra yet, but I'm looking forward to that moment."

Van Galen said Edwin could join in a few years, when rehearsals "don't interfere with his bedtime."

As Kraus rounds out the first half of the rehearsal, he looks at a small digital clock plugged into the wall behind him. It's 8:45 p.m. and he's gone on for 15 minutes longer than intended, lost in the fun of conducting. Though it's likely too late for Edwin, the night is still young for the orchestra's musicians, who are all alert and lively.

The conductor steps off his platform to take his break, optimistic about how the program is coming together.

"Being a part of a team, working on a common goal and working together to produce a beautiful program – that's sort of my goal and my role as music director," Kraus said.

Attendees can buy tickets for the Nov. 19 show at the Parkdale Orchestra's website. Tickets are \$10-15 in advance and \$20 at the door.



The Parkdale United Church Orchestra prepares for their upcoming show being held on Nov. 19. ALL PHOTOS BY ZENITH WOLFE



Top left: John Kraus conducts the orchestra rehearsal. Middle: Joshua Ramich and Don Weber play the violin. Bottom left: John Brockway plays a bass clarinet. Bottom side: Thomas Forsey plays the oboe.

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