

MWSO INTERVIEW

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The Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra, made up entirely of immigrant musicians recently settled in Montréal, was founded by renowned conductor Joseph Milo and his wife Lucy Ravinsky in 2005. The MWSO and a number of smaller ensembles made up of musicians in the orchestra will be performing at this year's Nuit blanche à Montréal event, Griffintown: Developing Culture. The event will take place at New City Gas, the architectural marvel designed by John Ostell and located at the corner of Ann and Wellington Streets, as well as at a number of indoor and outdoor venues along Ottawa Street. It will run from Saturday, February 26 at 3:00 pm until Sunday morning, February 27 at 4:00 am. The following interview was conducted with Joseph and Lucy by e-mail.



Q. Joseph, you have an illustrious conducting career behind you – what is it that led you to this particular project?

J: A casual conversation with my building doorman revealed that he was a newcomer to Canada and that he had been the principal cellist with the Moscow Symphony. A subsequent conversation with a pizza delivery man, who had been a violinist with the Bucharest Opera, prompted me to organize, along with Lucy, my spouse, an orchestra intended to offer a playing opportunity to newly arrived immigrant professional orchestral musicians. This

project not only avails musicians of a practice vehicle, but also allows them to regain their professional dignity, as well as offering some compensation. For me, the project also serves as an exciting addition to a long conducting career in Montreal and the U.S.

Q. The MWSO is an unusual project. Are there other orchestras like it elsewhere in Canada or the world?

L. There are no other orchestras of this kind anywhere in the world to our knowledge, and it is certainly the first in Canada. We hope there will eventually be others with whom we can cooperate and share performances, spreading the message of peace and solidarity that prevails in this group. The orchestra has proven to be an excellent model for integration that would surely be of use elsewhere as well.

Q. The orchestra is made up of more than 50 musicians from 20 different countries. This is undoubtedly a unique situation. What particular challenges does an orchestra composed of people with such diverse backgrounds and experiences pose?

L. At first, it was really interesting. There were people with opposing political views that normally wouldn't be in a room together. The necessity for harmony, so to speak, if they were to play well together, the respect they had for one another's abilities and the need to perform major shows has led to a very close cohesive group of people who are friends, colleagues and, indeed, family away from home.

J. Different study methods and work disciplines – different mentalities, if you will – have posed a challenge. Although the basic theoretical study material is similar, approaches to performance sometimes vary. Interestingly enough, language is not a barrier – in the end, we all share one: MUSIC. Playing levels vary too, though the gap is not one of good or poor playing, but rather, one of good, better and excellent. It is still not a homogenous situation, but I pay serious attention to the equalization of playing standards, and stringent auditions ensure the proper level of skill among the musicians.

Q. Does the fact that the musicians come from such diverse communities influence the kind of concerts and venues the orchestra plays?

J. Musicians are by and large used to playing in all kind of venues. We play in concert halls, in outdoor settings such as parks, at community centres, at churches, at schools and so on.

L. The orchestra also plays for the communities of its various members. To the delight of Montréal audiences, some members have created their own small ensembles. The musicians' diverse backgrounds provide endless opportunities for us to present the music of other countries to the Montréal public. That there are people in the orchestra who are from the various communities in question makes the experience all the more important.

Q. Has orchestra membership remained stable since it was formed in 2005, or has it grown and changed over time?

L. We began rehearsing in January 2006 and the group was ready to perform by March 2006 when the Globe &

Mail ran a full-page article about us. Three quarters of the original musicians have remained, while the others have relocated or moved on to be replaced by newcomers.

J. It's normal to have a turnover in orchestras of all kinds. In ours, the reasons for changes might include a musician's decision to return to his or her country of origin for reasons related to immigration papers, as well as for family visits. However, we generally maintain a stable membership. One must keep in mind that we purposely ensure that about 25% of the musicians in the orchestra are local musicians, from Montreal mainly, which has proved quite successful in facilitating the integration process.

Q. Many of the musicians in the orchestra must find themselves, like many other skilled immigrants, making ends meet with menial jobs. Has working with the orchestra allowed any of the musicians to return to full-time music careers?

J. To elaborate on my response to the previous question, the orchestra has been quite successful as regards integration. We have seen connections created among members of the ensemble that have led to friendships. As a result of the mutual support that has developed among local musicians and newcomers, many of the immigrant musicians get some paying "gigs" here and there, as well as teaching work, either in a school setting or privately.

L. Orchestra musicians have found MUCH more work as a result of the orchestra's existence. It has also given many of them more confidence in our society. For example, Gagik Avigyan, an Armenian trombonist with the orchestra, was working a garbage and maintenance job in the basement of a small downtown hotel, but has since risen to a major management position!

Q. An orchestra of this size must be an expensive undertaking. How is it financed?

J. This question is best directed to Lucy, our general manager and administrative director. In general, as we know regarding the performing arts, an orchestra's financial support sources are government grants, corporate sponsorship, private foundations, donations, ticket sales and program book ads. This may make it sound like there are numerous sources of funding, but you must consider the fact that funds are not always, if ever, readily available in the sums requested. Funding definitely isn't sufficient to support every concert or project. Raising the necessary funds for the orchestra's existence is an unending struggle, given the fact that an orchestra is the most expensive musical instrument.

L. Financing imposes immense difficulty. We worked without being paid for close to four years, or we received very little. The orchestra's mandate ensured that the musicians got paid no matter what – devotion & commitment, sort of like one has with family. Lack of staff raised hurdles to getting grants, finding donors and sponsorships and even selling tickets.

Q. The orchestra's Griffintown: Developing Culture concert will be taking place in a relatively informal setting. What draws you to this sort of event, and what should our readers expect?

L. The Nuit blanche event is attractive in its uniqueness and its informal setting, with all kinds of other artists performing at the same time. And, of course, there's the EXPOSURE. People will get to better know who we are,

and we will have the opportunity to become part of the greater artistic community, one in which our skills will be recognized and hopefully sought out!



ben soo, photographe

J. Although we play anywhere, as I previously mentioned, the Nuit blanche performance venue is truly different than any we have ever performed in. It is an interesting hall, providing an informal atmosphere for the presentation.

We hope to benefit from the exposure to a wide audience of varying musical tastes. Therefore, we are using the opportunity to offer a musical “brochure,” a sampling of different compositional styles so that everyone will find something of interest that he or she can enjoy. This is why this performance is entitled “From Bach to Broadway and All That Jazz.” We will be playing some Bach, some light classical pieces, which we call “party pieces,” as well as some Broadway material, and even a little jazz. We will be featuring our own house soprano, Chantal Parent, who will perform vocal opera and Broadway material, as well as playing with a jazz quartet led by one of our own musicians, Melissa

Pipe.

Q. There will be a lot going on that day, and many interested people might not have the chance to catch your performance. Do you have other concerts lined up in the Montréal area in the near future?

L. Yes, we have a plan for the year, including a concert for a high school as part of a series, a World Concert in the fall, Coffee with the Conductor, hopefully a series of concerts around Montréal and performances of The Messiah. Over the course of the first three months of the year, we will probably be adding others.

J. On the following day, we will be playing a concert entitled “Romantic Arias – music for lovers, opera, operetta and Broadway.” This concert features four singers: Sharon Azrieli, soprano; Jessica Bowes, mezzo-soprano; Hugues St. Gelais, tenor; and Charles Prevost Linton, baritone. The venue is Oscar Peterson Concert Hall, 7141 Sherbrooke St. West. The concert starts at 2:00 p.m.



For tickets or information, contact the orchestra at 514-484-7428, the Concert Hall at 514-848-2424 or Admission. This spring we are doing some special performances for schools as part of our educational series. For concert dates later in the year, I would advise those interested to visit our website: <http://www.musiciansoftheworld.ca/>

The interview was conducted by Michael Ryan. Michael is a Montréal-based translator, copy editor, proof reader and writer. He

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