

# JOSEPH MILO

by Wah Keung Chan & Lilian I. Liganor

Two years ago, a chance encounter with a doorman changed conductor Joseph Milo's life, and in the process, changed the lives of fifty other musicians. Milo was surprised to discover that the doorman was a trained musician but had been unable to find work in an orchestra since immigrating to Canada. Realizing that there were many experienced immigrant musicians in Montreal lacking the opportunity to ply their craft, Milo founded the Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra (MWSO).

Reaction from both musicians and audiences has since been swift and enthusiastic. Recruitment was largely promoted through word-of-mouth and the media which hungered for such a feel-good story. A *Globe and Mail* article led to a CBC documentary of the group's preparation for its inaugural concert at Concordia University's Oscar Peterson Hall. Tickets quickly sold out and the orchestra gained national attention. Meanwhile, the city of Cote St-Luc, where Milo and his wife reside, offered support by giving the orchestra free rehearsal space. Initially, the Milos operated from home, Joseph auditioning musicians while his wife, Lucy Ravinsky, dealt with administration. More recently, Montreal has provided the MWSO with an office located in the multi-ethnic Cote-des-Neiges area. Nevertheless, the orchestra still scrambles for funding. Though the musicians receive an honorarium for each concert, the Milos remain unpaid.

For Milo, starting the MWSO brings him full circle. After graduating from the Israeli Academy of Music under renowned conductor Michael Taube, he moved to New York to study with Eugene Ormandy and William Smith. Following a period of tutelage under Franco Ferrara in Italy, Milo went to Montreal to finish his studies at McGill University with Alexander Brott. Since then, he has held various positions including musical director of the Montreal Junior Symphony Orchestra and the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts. Opportunities to conduct in Montreal weren't always abundant and with a young family, Milo rejected contract offers to travel as a conductor. Instead, he turned to another one of his interests for his livelihood - finance. Starting with insurance at Metropolitan Life in 1990 Milo eventually made his way to Investors Group where he has been a financial consultant for the past twelve years.

Milo has come to realize that his roles as musician and financial consultant are not so different. "Both areas need analytical skills and one

enhances the other. You get to think broadly about major areas such as planning. There's also seeing people in a broader sense, feeling people and knowing what makes them tick," he observes. Milo notes that the business community has, in one way or another, been supportive of the MWSO and in turn, he has found that his financial planning skills are valued by the musicians. Despite these benefits, and for years, Milo was mindful to separate his musical life from his career in finance to avoid possible conflicts. However, with the orchestra's exposure resulting from the CBC documentary, his colleagues at Investors Group got wind of his other life leading to the orchestra's first corporate-sponsored concert, *From Bach to Broadway*. Colleagues and invited clients alike were bowled over by the orchestra's performance and musical program, so much so that plans are underway for future concerts. Hydro Quebec has also come onboard as a sponsor, a trend that the Milos certainly plan to build upon.

One of the challenges facing any orchestra is turnover and for the MWSO, it is currently below 15%. Often, the orchestra's turnover is due to musicians resuming their music studies, some returning periodically as their schedules allow. "Turnover is something that is unpredictable. It could be that you work for a time without any changes and then all of a sudden five to eight people are moving around and you need to replace them," says Milo. This was the case just prior to the MWSO's inaugural concert last year when five viola players pulled out causing "so much grief." Luckily, other local musicians came to the rescue. On the positive side, the quality of referrals for new members is improving and many of these referrals originate from orchestra members. "It's important to always have a bank of musicians to draw from," Milo remarks.

With Milo and his musicians holding day jobs, and Milo also conducting the Kinor Choir, scheduling rehearsals to maximize attendance is another challenge. Out of the fifty or so members, thirty regularly show up for rehearsals. "This core group is very used to working with



each other. You can see an enormous cohesion and affection that has developed between them," Lucy proudly relates. Part of Milo's approach in conducting a multi-cultural orchestra is to dwell on things that bond the group together. He praises their positive attitude and says, "When they are on stage, you see that the musicians enjoy what they do, they smile often enough. After they finish playing you see that they feel good and they show it to you."

In sharing his overall philosophy as a conductor, Milo says, "Music is the bridge between the soul and the intellect. It has the power to be the cohesive element that connects us all and helps us advance to a higher level of spirituality in a world filled with worries and calamities." His goal is to constantly aim for quality regardless of limitations. Of course, given the opportunity of having a larger orchestra and access to a large choir and a soloist or two, he would love to conduct specific works by composers such as Mahler, Bruckner and his favorite, Stravinsky ("perhaps *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*"). Musing further he adds, "What I would really like to do next year is to have a beautiful evening of Beethoven including the 9th *Symphony*, something grandiose with a major choir." Already slated for the MWSO in 2008 are Disney's *Fantasia* and a Viennese celebration. In the meantime, Joseph Milo and his orchestra can dare to dream big. ■

On June 7th, the MWSO will hold a gala concert entitled *The Music We Love* at Concordia's Oscar Peterson Hall. For more information, call (514) 484-7428. ■

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