

For the love of music:

Montreal couple struggles to keep immigrant orchestra alive

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Venus Fu spent her first three years in Canada crying. A concert violinist in an acclaimed Hong Kong orchestra for 15 years, Fu accompanied her husband to Montreal with the belief that music knows no borders and she would find work in her field shortly after immigrating. What followed was three years of absolutely nothing. "I thought: I'm a musician, I can work everywhere, but I was wrong," said Fu. "I really wanted to go back to Hong Kong because that's the place I had my life."

Just when she had given up hope of ever performing with a professional orchestra, a friend told her about a commercial he had seen on a local television station in 2006. A bi-speckled middle-age man with a glistening white mane and facial hair to match, was seeking immigrant musicians for his new orchestra. After some convincing from her husband, Fu auditioned. She has been playing with the Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra ever since.

"I lost my music for three whole years and now I'm back and it's amazing," said Fu who is currently the MWSO's concertmaster - the most important violinist.

The man Fu's friend saw on the screen, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Santa Clause, was established conductor, composer and pianist, Joseph Milo. Originally from Israel, Milo graduated from McGill University with a distinction in conducting, and has held numerous prestigious positions including director of the Montreal Junior Symphony Orchestra under legendary conductor Wilfrid Pelletier.

Like many big ideas, the MWSO got its wings by complete fluke. Milo was talking to his doorman one afternoon in 2005, when the Russian immigrant told him he used to be a cellist with the Moscow Symphony. Like Fu, he had a young child, spoke broken English and couldn't land an orchestra job. Both musicians were denied work because they weren't members of the Québec Musicians' Guild and they didn't have "Canadian" experience. When the pizza delivery guy informed Milo he worked as a conductor in Romania, it was the final straw. Milo's wife, Lucy Ravinsky, thought he was insane when he broke the news to her he wanted to start an orchestra for immigrant musicians.

"He said you have the gift of the gab, and you know how to manage an orchestra and I'll be the conductor and we'll start working on it," said Ravinsky laughing.

Eventually, the Concordia University psychology graduate succumbed, and in January 2006 the couple began placing ads for auditions in foreign-language media.

"We had a lot of arguing, a lot of rage, overwork, and burnout, but it's sheer joy," said Ravinsky who is the MWSO's executive director. "It's the most important thing I've ever done other than raise a child." The MWSO is currently comprised of 50 musicians hailing from 18 different countries. On Oct. 19, they will be playing their 20th symphony at the Pierre Péladeau Centre. The concert is entitled East Meets West: Musical Dialogue for World Peace. Five guest musical groups from India, Africa, China, South America and the Middle East will join the MWSO musicians to perform Anton Dvorak's symphony, The New World.

In an effort to attract audiences from diverse demographics, Milo tries to produce symphonies that integrate classical and popular music. In Bach to Broadway, the conductor mixed the master's work with tunes from well known musicals like West Side Story and Cats. In 2008, the orchestra played music from Fantasia alongside a troupe of young dancers. Determined never to give up on the classics – Handel's Messiah is scheduled for December.

Oct. 6 2009 (13 days before the show)

Ravinsky is ecstatic. She just got off the phone with one of the top news agencies in China and they've told her

they're flying in a correspondent from Vancouver to cover the upcoming performance. They're attending to show their support for the orchestra and its Chinese concertmaster – Fu.

The news couldn't have arrived at a better time for Ravinsky, who says she's been "under the gun trying to sell this concert."

Sitting in the living room of her Côte Saint-Luc apartment, Ravinsky apologizes profusely for the non-stop noise emanating from her phone. Eventually she puts it in her bedroom and locks the door – a band-aid solution given the size of the place.

She explains the orchestra was swarmed with so much media attention at the beginning that they were unable to find time to work on fundraising until the fall of last year. Coincidentally, that's when the stock markets crashed and the financial crisis began.

"I'm in a time of development," said Ravinsky. "Not only has government support been knocked down, but we're in the worst financial crisis of our lives and companies are being tight in how much money they give."

The greatest challenge for Ravinsky and Milo has been paying the musicians – and with 50 members, this is no simple feat. Although they've been paying them less than guild rate for rehearsals, the musicians earn more for performances. Ticket sales, discretionary funds from Quebec government ministries and minor grants from the city have made this possible.

Ravinsky is hoping to break even with this show, and to garner enough media attention so the orchestra will eventually have the funding required to run smoothly. She says the MWSO has been broke since day one, and personally, she has yet to earn a cent.

"It's very hard to give up your income for a few years. There aren't many people who can do what Joseph and I do," she said. "I rent my house up north so I can plausibly do this."

Of course, at the end of the day, Ravinsky and Milo aren't in this for the money, but for the musicians. Aside from giving these professionals the opportunity to do what they love, the MWSO has allowed them to create a network and build a reputation for themselves. Ravinsky says the musicians now play for each other's communities and are getting hired for numerous private gigs. Once miserable and jobless, Fu said she's now working all the time. "I met different musicians; some people know other people and they pass my number. Also from the media, they interview me as a concertmaster and as a Chinese musician. Now they start to contact me when they need a good musician," said Fu.

Fellow violinist, Anna Levitina immigrated to Canada from Belarus with no knowledge of French and limited English. For a few years she sang in the congregation choir, taught music at daycares, and gave private violin and piano lessons. Not only has her involvement with the MWSO led to more work, but she says it's "enriched [her] life in general." Still, she cannot understand why Canada doesn't take more interest in its foreign talent. "We came to Canada for various reasons and circumstances," said Levitina. "And we came with lots of potential to give back to this wonderful land which everyone of us wants to call home."

Ravinsky blames our society's reluctance to create anything new and take on huge cultural endeavours much like this one. She says that while the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and other large orchestras will say their orchestra is multi-cultural, the difference is that the MWSO was created specifically for immigrants. However, Ravinsky remains confident in the future. Just a few weeks ago, the orchestra received an encouraging letter of support from Marcel Tremblay, a member of Montreal's executive committee in charge of citizen services, and the brother of Montreal mayor, Gerald Tremblay. Furthermore, guild members have been so touched by the MWSO's mission, they're offering to perform free of charge.

"These are people who have collectively spent 500 years being trained. We owe it to ourselves to honour them for being here in our city with this great talent," said Ravinsky in regards to the musicians. "I think they're magicians."

To this day, Ravinsky says she still gets chills when she walks into the concert hall and sees musicians who for various political reasons formerly wouldn't speak with one another, sitting together engaged in deep conversation. Over the years, she says the musicians have gone from being colleagues to developing close

friendships and relying on each other for support.

Close to tears, Ravinsky recalls an incident a year and a half ago, where one of the musician's apartments burnt down. The Russian girl lost nearly everything, but because of the MWSO she had people offering her a place to stay and providing her with everything from a toothbrush to clothing. Perhaps what's most fascinating about this story is that prior to the accident, the girl told her roommate if anything were to happen to the apartment, she should get her viola out of the building because it's her most valuable possession. The viola was the only thing to survive the fire.