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Nova Scotia's music man

Wijeratne shares his passion for performing, composing with young people

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN

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NOVA SCOTIA Youth Orchestra conductor Dinuk Wijeratne fitted a day of adjudication for the Nova Scotia Kiwanis Music Festival into his busy schedule last week.

He's in the midst of preparing the NSYO for its season finale concerts on April 24 in Wolfville (Atlantic Theatre Festival) and April 25 in Halifax (St. Andrew's United Church).

He recently returned from an appearance of his improvisation duo with Syrian clarinetist Kinan Azmeh in the Berlin Philharmonie at the invitation of Daniel Barenboim. He hopes that come May he will have three months to compose.

It's a busy life but not without its surprises.

For instance, Wijeratne did not know 12-year-old pianist-composer Owen Maitzen when he took up his station at the adjudicator's desk in The Music Room for Class 4003 Original Composition-Open at the Nova Scotia Kiwanis Music Festival.

He does now. And he is unlikely to forget him.

Owen sat down at the piano and Wijeratne reported later, "It was ridiculous, like my jaw was on the floor. He just blew my mind.

"He played his own composition. It had the maturity of an early university student. He played with a technique that would have left other performers in the performance category in the shade. Clearly a child prodigy. I asked him to play it again."

Adjudicators who spend hours listening to one young performer after another don't often yield to this kind of enthusiasm. But Wijeratne is himself a creative talent of a very high order. Perhaps it takes one to know one.

Born in Sri Lanka, Wijeratne grew up in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and then attended the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, U.K., where professional commissions began to come his way after the college premiere of his Concerto for Percussion in 2000.

A year later, he went to New York when American composer John Corigliano invited him to join his studio at New York's Juilliard School of Music. In 2003, his Chamber Concerto About Sankhara, commissioned by the New Juilliard Ensemble, became the first work by a Sri Lankan composer to be performed at Lincoln Center.

Two years later, Wijeratne came to Nova Scotia as Symphony Nova Scotia's conductor-in-residence, where he conducted pops concerts and school concerts. In 2008, when the Canada Council residency grant ran out, he left the orchestra, but decided to stay in Halifax for awhile.

"I'm really comfortable in this province," he said in an interview this week. "I love living here and I'm trying to strike the right balance between travelling for work and staying here."

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The Azmeh-Wijeratne Duo has some dates in the U.S. and a tour of France is in the works.

"The Berlin was wonderful. I played for Barenboim. That was very intense, nerve-racking.

"I don't mind playing for anyone else, it's just that when you play for a pianist at that level you get the feeling that he is judging every millimetre of pedal that you're using, and how much legato you have.

"But he was very supportive and he gave us a huge opportunity, and it paid off."

There were 1,600 people in the audience for the concert in the foyer of the Philharmonie. "When you walk in the architecture of the building is pretty spectacular, and you don't think the acoustic will work.

"Then you start playing and people are so quiet there, even the babies don't make any noise. The piano was spectacular; every pianissimo was really going right to the end."

Last May, the Duo toured the Middle East, playing in Syria, Jordan, Cairo and Beirut. Wijeratne was impressed by the opera house in Syria.

"I think it is one of the best venues in the Arab world," he said. "You don't expect to see it. It has six grand pianos and I played on a nine-foot Bosendorfer."

Wijeratne teaches conducting at Dalhousie University in Halifax and world music in the Nova Scotia Community College. His musical passion is improvisation, which he thinks, as far as classical music is concerned, is a lost art, even though composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt were famous improvisers.

"In the Kiwanis Popular-Jazz classes, the students had licence to improvise a little bit, and what is curious is that none of them did. The challenge is to add stuff in the character of the piece. I seemed to be making the same comments over and over again to each class."

"There is a lot they can do stylistically, even if they are playing verbatim off the page. It takes a lot to really feel liberated from the score."

Wijeratne is happy in Halifax, though the ups and downs of the freelance life are nerve-racking. But he turns down lucrative invitations to conduct in order to focus on composing and improvising.

Meanwhile, he is stepping up his work in the province as an educator: the youth orchestra, his classes at Dalhousie and the Nova Scotia Community College and his work at Kiwanis.

"I would just like to interact more with young people here," he said.

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Stephen Pedersen is a freelance arts writer who lives in Halifax. Visit his blog at stephenpedersen.wordpress.com.

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