

KINDRED SPIRITS ORCHESTRA

FINDING SYMPHONIC STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

by ARTHUR KAPTAINIS



Sometimes a luxury is also a necessity. “Typically, we allocate eight, sometimes nine rehearsals to prepare a concert,” says Kristian Alexander, founding music director of the Kindred Spirits Orchestra. “I know this is a ‘luxury,’ but it also allows us to prepare pieces that are more difficult and sophisticated.”

Pieces like Rachmaninoff’s Third Symphony, which he conducts Feb. 4 at the Flato Markham Theatre, one of two venues regularly used by this ensemble based in the thriving York region north of Toronto. Or Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra, the main item on a March 20 program at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts.

The Kindred Spirits list of connoisseur delights is extraordinary. Alexander has programmed Prokofiev’s Symphonies Nos. 2, 3 and 4 – most orchestras settle for Symphony No. 1 “Classical” and Symphony No. 5 – as well as Shostakovich’s seldom-heard Symphony No. 6. “Musicians like to be challenged and enjoy working on a complex repertoire,” Alexander explains.

The 2019–20 season reaches something of a climax of sophistication on May 8 in Richmond Hill with Shostakovich’s valedictory Symphony No. 15, an allusive score of 1971 that runs longer than 40 minutes. Matched, it should be said, with Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 4, a work for left hand alone that is almost never performed by established major orchestras. (Dong Xu, a native of Beijing who has a flair for southpaw repertoire, is the soloist.)

“Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 15 has a complex structure and multi-layered texture but it is also entertaining in style, filled with humorous quotations from Rossini, Glinka, Rachmaninoff and even Mahler and Wagner,” Alexander observes. Point taken.

Not that subscribers to the eight-concert Kindred Spirits season need to be seduced. “Our audience is sophisticated and appreciates the opportunity to hear something different, to learn and explore,” Alexander says.

Still, there is room for standards like Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony on June 26 (Richmond Hill) and 27 (the Glenn Gould Studio in downtown Toronto). On July 1, Kindred Spirits perform a little of the light programming that most orchestras rely on for their very survival. The Broadway-and-cinema-oriented Canada Day celebration (a concert outside the subscription series) takes place in the Unionville Millennium Theatre under the Kindred Spirits associate conductor, Michael Berec, who also serves as host in some of the subscription concerts. There was also a Chinese New Year celebration in January at the Markham Civic Centre.

The conductor is an advocate of new and Canadian music. Last year he conducted Wing-Wah Chan’s Symphony No. 9 for orchestra, soloists, two choirs and traditional Chinese instruments. This was a Kindred Spirits Orchestra commission. Brian Current, Gary Kulesha and Larysa Kuzmenko are some of the established Canadians whose music has been performed on Kindred Spirits programs.

As in all symphony orchestras, the musician count rises and falls according to need. The Kindred Spirits Orchestra grows to a maximum of 70 – a limit imposed partly by stage capacity. Slimmer repertoire will be heard on June 6 in Cornell Hall in Markham in a program combining Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* with a new Violin Concerto for chamber orchestra by Werner Chan, a Hong Kong composer living in Markham.

The soloist is Sarah Davidson-Gurney, the former Kindred Spirits principal second violin, whose interesting credits include a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto and a victory in the talent segment of the 2010 Miss World Canada Beauty Pageant. This concert is part of the Markham Contemporary Music Festival that Alexander inaugurated in 2011.

MELDING DIVERSE SPIRITS

The mix of national backgrounds in the Kindred Spirits Orchestra is wide, reflecting both its name and the famously multicultural character of the Greater Toronto Area. Its website is available in French, Chinese and Russian as well as English.

While the Kindred Spirits players live up to their name in their common love of music, their diversity does pose certain challenges for a conductor. Instruments are played differently in different countries. Bowing styles diverge.

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“The cultural identity of the musicians is reflected in the sound they produce and may vary substantially from one country to another,” Alexander says. “As a result, we have to work a lot towards achieving a unified sound concept that conveys the right colours and style.”

It helps that the principals are professionals. Alexander Gangurean, the concertmaster, was born in Moldova. Most of the violinists are of Asian or Eastern European descent. Unlike most community orchestras, the Kindred Spirits Orchestra also engages professionals for many of the section positions.

“There are many wonderful musicians from Canada, Eastern Europe, Italy, Russia, Armenia, Moldova, Asia,” Alexander says. “Canada welcomes people from all cultures so it has become a norm for many orchestras in the large urban centres to work with diverse communities.”

Such communities sometimes pack a box-office punch. In 2017, the Kindred Spirits Orchestra accompanied the Indian composer A.R. Rahman in a sellout performance at the 3,200-seat Sony Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto (now called Meridian Hall). In the following year, it filled the Isabel Bader Theatre at Victoria College for a concert in Toronto celebrating the centennial of the foundation of Romania.

THE WORKS OF A POLYMATH

Alexander himself was born in Bulgaria in 1969 and earned his master's degree from the National Academy of Music in Sofia. As well as music he has studied anthropology, computer science and theology, earning a second master's in the last discipline from the Université de Montréal. His dissertation concerned symbolism in the *Magnificat* settings of Schütz, Bach and Mozart.

That Alexander is a man of many parts is made clear by his fluency in English, French and Russian as well as Bulgarian, to which he adds a working knowledge of Czech, German, Italian, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He has served on the board of the Virginia-based Conductors Guild, which happens to be meeting in Montreal in February.

As a conductor and orchestra-builder, Alexander made his mark as early as 1990 by founding the Mozarteum Orchestra of Sofia, earning an award from the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg for his service on behalf of Mozart.

His current work includes overseas engagements. In May he travels to Hong Kong to lead the Hong Kong Oratorio Society in Verdi's *Requiem*. The concert will be recorded for television broadcast. It is a return engagement, following a televised concert two years ago that included Bruckner's *Te Deum* and Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang* (Symphony No. 2). Other coming engagements are a debut with the Sofia



Philharmonic and another debut with the state symphony orchestra of Changsha, the capital of Hunan province in central China.

Given his wide learning (including postgraduate training in arts management) it is not surprising that Alexander is an advocate of music education. He is the founding director of the International Music Academy, a private music school with branches in Markham (Mozart House) and Stouffville, Ontario (Beethoven House).

The school lays claim to about 400 students and 30 teachers specializing in orchestral instruments as well as piano, voice, music theory and history. “It is a training ground for many young musicians,” Alexander says. “It also supports the mission of the Kindred Spirits Orchestra to make live classical music accessible to the younger generation.”

Another recent Alexander initiative with an outreach component is the International Music Festival and Competition. The plan is to opportunities to aspiring musicians to work with professors from the University of Toronto, York University and the Royal Conservatory of Music, as well as musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Canadian Opera Company and the National Ballet of Canada. “The organizations work together to ensure a great tradition of classical music continues to inspire, uplift and educate,” Alexander says. **LSM**

For information on Kindred Spirits Orchestra concerts, go to www.ksorchestra.ca.

For information on educational initiatives, go to

www.internationalmusicacademy.ca/index.html and www.intermusic.ca.