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PROFILE

Classical values

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Special to The Examiner

For maestro Michael Newnham, even the act of making a cup of coffee is a big production.

It's not enough to dump a tablespoon of Nescafé in a cup of hot water and stir. Newnham, the conductor of the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra, has a cappuccino maker worthy of any coffee bar in the kitchen of his north-end house. While the machine makes it own music of hums and whirrrs, Newnham, 46, recalls the Roman coffee bars where he hung out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was studying and working in Warsaw, Poland at the time. He liked taking side-trips to Rome, where the coffee was good and the barristas were pros.

In Rome, they select only the best coffee beans, grind them and tamp it down just so in the fancy cappuccino makers, Newnham says. It takes time and care.

"So when you get a great cup of coffee, it's like performance," he says. "You feel God has smiled upon you."

Some might say God has smiled upon this city, bringing Newnham here to conduct the PSO. He speaks perfect Polish, and also knows Italian and German. With his cellist wife, Zuzanna, he's raising two daughters, aged three and six. And he speaks with equal authority about Shostakovich and John Lennon.

"I'm a big Beatles fan from way back," he says. (The PSO's first pops concert is tonight, and it features Beatles music.)

Among Canada's community orchestra conductors, clearly, Newnham is unusual. In Warsaw, he earned a master's degree in symphonic and operatic conducting, and then worked there for professional orchestras and operas.

When he was first hired in Peterborough, in 2001, Newnham's friend Ben Bell thought he was too good to stay here for more than five years.

"He's far more qualified than Peterborough deserves," Bell said. "I fully expect him to graduate to the next level, fairly soon."

Bell makes professional bassoons in his studio near Lakefield, and is a classmate of Newnham's from undergraduate days at the University of Toronto. He says Newnham has the skill and talent to work for a professional orchestra a larger market, such as Symphony Nova Scotia.

In fact, he'd probably still be working for a professional orchestra if he'd stayed in Europe, Bell says.

Instead, Newnham has come here and used his talents to kick-start an orchestra of volunteer musicians, and the people running the PSO seem to feel it's a ridiculously lucky break. PSO board president Claire Hogenkamp says Newnham is not only hugely capable, but also charming and urbane.

"He's beautiful inside and out," she says. "And he's inspired our musicians. God, please let him stay in Peterborough until his children are 30. He's just that good."

Certainly, Newnham has worked in far-flung locales. He moved to Warsaw in 1988, where he met his wife and worked for the Warsaw Chamber Opera.

By 1996, Newnham saw that the Chamber Opera – a professional company with two orchestras – was repeating a lot of the same operas. He wanted a change.

So when contract jobs were offered to both Newnham and his wife in South Korea, they said yes. In 1996 they moved there; for a year he conducted and she taught cello.

By the time the contract was over, in 1997, an Asian financial crisis was brewing and Newnham and his wife had had their fill of Korea. Then Newnham was invited to guest conduct a concert of the Hamilton Philharmonic, his hometown orchestra. The couple had always been interested in moving to Canada, and the time seemed right.

On the other hand, there was no promise of a permanent job for either Newnham or Zuzanna in Canada. Still, they took a chance

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PSO board president Claire Hogenkamp sings the praises of conductor Michael Newnham



Clifford Skarstedt, Examiner

and moved to Hamilton in 1998. "It was a complete leap of faith," Newnham says.

And, for a while, he regretted it. He came here to find the arts in Canada poorly funded. There seemed to be very few job openings. There were far fewer orchestras in Canada than in Europe, and Canadian orchestras don't perform nearly as much as they do overseas.

Of course, Newnham was keen to look beyond Hamilton for work. He took a gig conducting the Niagara

Youth Orchestra, which he still does now (although he must commute to rehearsals).

In 2001 the opening came up at the PSO. He got that job, and then a year later founded the Kawartha Youth Orchestra, a group of young

players that he still conducts.

In addition, he spends two weeks every summer conducting a youth orchestra for gifted young musicians from Canada, the U.S. and abroad in Port Milford, Ontario.

He might have stayed in Hamilton, and continued to commute to Peterborough and his other gigs. But by 2003, he was tired of the driving and charmed enough by Peterborough to move his family here.

"This is not exactly your typical small town," he says.

Take, for instance, Newnham's summer job. Last month he was the music director for The Enchanted Forest, a musical production set in the woods of Haliburton.

The music was written by the internationally-acclaimed Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, a resident of Indian River. More than half the artists involved in the production are from this area, Newnham says.

"That says a lot about Peterborough."

Schafer, meanwhile, says Newnham has superb conducting ability and a gentle way with musicians. "He coaxes them – never bullies," Schafer says. "I liked him. I'd have him back anytime."

If Newnham is an urbane and learned musician, it's a little because of his grandfather back home in Hamilton. Born to an insurance salesman Dad and a teacher Mom, Newnham was the oldest of four sons. His maternal grandfather was Dr. Percy Williams, one of the first pediatricians in town.

At age 10, Newnham was visiting his grandparents when he had an

epiphany. Fresh from a trip to Rome, Dr. Williams was showing his grandson a book filled with photos of Italian art.

One photo in particular struck the young Newnham: It showed the amber window behind the altar at St. Peter's Basilica, in which a holy dove spreads its wings. At that moment they were listening to records – St. Matthew's Passion was playing, the majestic Bach composition for solo voices, double choir and double orchestra.

Newnham was powerfully inspired. "At that point in time, I knew I was supposed to be a musician."

He then became a "classical music geek," sneaking regularly into the Palace Theatre in Hamilton to spy on the Hamilton Philharmonic's rehearsals.

At the time he had been taking piano lessons, but had his eye on a different instrument. His neighbour was 20, hip, cool, and played cello. That sounded good to Newnham, but it wasn't meant to be.

Shortly before he was to start cello lessons at music camp one summer, the young Newnham was out roughhousing with friends and broke his left wrist. If you're a cellist, you need your left fingers to run up and down the fingerboard, impossible if your wrist is broken.

A music teacher handed him a slide trombone instead, reasoning that his left hand would have to do no more than hold the instrument to his face.

He was far from a natural-born trombone player. "I squawked away," he says, laughing. But perhaps he simply needed to hear a master. In his first lesson with Eugene Watts, a member of the Canadian Brass band, Newnham heard how fine a trombone can sound. It was robust and gorgeous, Newnham says. "You wanted to eat it, it sounded so beautiful."

His love affair with the trombone took Newnham to the University of Toronto, where he would study trombone performance in the late 1970s. In the early '80s he went on to Indiana University in Bloomington to continue his trombone studies.

There, Newnham transformed himself into a hipster, playing in a jazz band called the Lettermen. It was his part-time job, a gig he took to put himself through school. He was good enough that he had a shot

at joining the Glenn Miller orchestra in New York City. He was packing his bags for the Big Apple when the opportunity to join the band fell through.

That was lucky, Newnham says. He knew it wasn't his destiny to play jazz. Unlike his Dad back in Hamilton who was a big fan of Dave Brubeck, Newnham wasn't passionate about the genre.

Orchestral music was his calling, and he went back to Ontario and took freelance gigs playing for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra.

But maybe he was always meant to stand at the front of the orchestra, rather than sitting in the very back in the trombone section. As soon as Newnham heard that the Royal Conservatory Orchestra in Toronto was looking for an apprentice conductor in 1983, he applied.

He was accepted, and found his true vocation. He loved it so much he wanted to get a master's degree in conducting.

But such programs were only offered abroad at the time. Poland had a good conducting program – and also 22 orchestras willing to have students conduct. Someone suggested to Newnham that he go to Warsaw.

"I thought, 'This is an absolutely nuts suggestion,'" Newnham says.

Then again, he had a long-standing fascination with slavic culture. And a musical hero of his, Chopin, was a Pole living in Paris. "Every

note of his music is imbued with Polishness," Newnham says.

It was 1988 – near the end of the Communist regime – when Newnham moved to Warsaw. He arrived to find that newspapers were censored. He couldn't buy toilet paper, and found that Bibles were available only on the black market.

It was all pretty rough. Only love could make it tolerable – love for music, and love for a woman. He likes to tell of the moment he first saw his wife, Zuzanna. It was his first day conducting the Polish Radio Orchestra, and the piece in question was Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. Newnham was coaxing a particularly lush passage from the oboes when it was time for the cellos to come in. He turned and saw a beautiful blonde cellist.

Newnham pretends to conduct, remembering the moment. "I just turned to the cellos, and it was

Q&A

Do you have a favourite book?

My favourite book of all time was from a Polish Romantic novelist, Adam Mickiewicz. His masterpiece was Pan Tadeusz. It's a beautiful romantic book about life on an estate in Eastern Poland around the time of the Napoleonic Wars. It's all about the appreciation of all the things in life: people, food, coffee – there's a wonderful section on the making of coffee.

What kind of music do you like to listen to?

I'm not going to say that I don't listen to classical music – I do. But I listen to all kinds of stuff: I like jazz and folk music. I'm a Joni Mitchell fan. I like the Beatles, too. I like the new release from the Pat Metheny Group, The Way Up. I also love the symphonies of Shostakovich. I just can't stop listening to the music of Shostakovich. It doesn't leave me alone – ever.

If you could have any meal prepared for you, what would it be?

The meal at Polish Christmas Eve. Traditionally, it's a meatless meal, and it's 12 courses. It usually begins with red borscht, with dumplings inside. Then there are many fish dishes – usually carp or herring. Toward the end of the meal, one thing my wife always makes is called kutja. That's a special, sweet dish for Christmas that some people in Poland eat. It's made from poppy seeds, honey, wheat germ and nuts. Raisins are in there sometimes, too.

If you could spend an hour talking with anyone, who would it be?

My grandfather. His name was Dr. Percy Williams, and he was one of the first pediatricians in Hamilton. He was a very important person in my life – and it's important to talk to people who have something to do with your past.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

They were married a year and a half later in Poland. It was 1991, and the bride wore a frothy pink dress. Now she plays cello for the PSO.

The PSO is extraordinarily lucky to have Newnham, says Tori Owen, the orchestra's general manager and a professional oboe player. She says Newnham demands the same level of focus and attention from the local musicians that one would expect from professionals.

It's made a difference. Before Newnham, Owen says, the PSO was decidedly a community orchestra. "Now you'd be hard-put to tell whether it's professional or not."

It's also made a difference at the box office. At PSO performances, Owen says 70 per cent of the 600-odd seats at Showplace Peterborough are filled with subscribers. Most orchestras – professional or community – aim for 60 per cent.

"It's a good sign," Owen says.

Divas also love Newnham. The acclaimed mezzo-soprano Eleanor James left a busy opera career in Munich two years ago to come live with her partner, Schafer. Since then, she's worked twice with Newnham.

She describes him as a vocally-sensitive conductor, meaning that he never lets the orchestra get loud enough to swamp the singer. "It's extremely helpful, knowing the conductor is on your side," she says.

If Newnham is so determined to make a go of it in Canada these days, it's perhaps because he was so discouraged to see professional artists and musicians struggling when he first moved back to Hamilton.

Back then, Newnham and his wife were discouraged. "We were considering going back (to Europe), a little bit," he says.

And what if he was offered a job in Europe tomorrow? He thinks about it for a moment. "I'd have to say no," he says. "I couldn't live with that."

He couldn't live with leaving the orchestra at this particular moment. Nor would he want to uproot his family.

His daughter Gabrysia, 6, is taking violin lessons here while Alina, 3, is slowly adding English words to her Polish vocabulary. Zuzanna, meanwhile, has taken on cello students.

And in his free time, Newnham likes working out at the YMCA, where he often meets sweaty patrons of the arts who, as they lift weights, like to talk music.

As long as he stays, says James, she and other musicians will be glad.

"We're all cheering for him."