



## *Maestro prepares for final bow*

*Orchestra will miss Edwin Outwater's flair for pushing boundaries of what classical music can be*

Edwin Outwater's final concert with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony will be in May.

BY ANDREW VOWLES  
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

“Who here has heard a pedal steel guitar?” Edwin Outwater’s question during his pre-concert talk draws only a few raised hands from the patrons seated in the main hall of Kitchener’s Centre in the Square.

It’s the opening evening of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony’s Signature Series of concerts for the season. Tonight the orchestra will lean on the Russian pragmatists: Rachmaninoff’s “Concerto No. 3 in D Minor,” with its alternate swooning and thunderous passages for piano and orchestra, and what Outwater calls the “tender, elegant moments” and

the “immense depth” of Tchaikovsky’s “Symphony No. 4 in F Minor.”

Both selections are no doubt meat and potatoes for the classical music lovers in the audience, all of whom can likely distinguish between a violin and a viola with one ear closed. But a pedal steel guitar?

The symphony’s music director has asked a trick question, of course. Tonight’s concert opener will be “Mothership” for orchestra and electronica by American composer Mason Bates.

Perched onstage with microphone in hand, Outwater explains that the work was premiered in 2011 by the YouTube Symphony, the first-ever online collaborative orchestra. For his chat, he has invited





Edwin Outwater, who was Grand's cover feature in September 2007, has been praised by audiences and musicians alike for his leadership.



this evening's trio of guest musicians to provide a sonic taste. First, the Toronto electronic kLoX duo – tabla player Gurpreet Chana and electric violinist Robert Mason – demonstrate the recursive sound layering of electroacoustic looping. Then Outwater asks Bob Egan, former pedal steel player with Blue Rodeo and owner of Bob's Guitar Service in Kitchener, to play a few licks on his instrument.

Its distinctive Hawaiian and country-style strains, redolent of Herb Remington and Hank Williams, instantly draw murmurs from the audience. Then Outwater repeats his original question. His wide smile at the nearly unanimous show of hands combines impish "I-told-you-so" satisfaction with a teacher's delight at the shared "aha" moment for his listeners.

Over the past decade, Outwater has made a career out of introducing his regional audience to new sounds – and surprising listeners with old sounds made new again. This spring, he will finish his run with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony and step down as music director.

Outwater has established a reputation as a visionary willing to push through boundaries.

Jim Mason, an oboist with the orchestra for 37 years, describes Outwater as "the most multifaceted conductor we have had."

"He has an amazing ability to engage with all audiences. He has innovative ideas about how to put the orchestra into the community."

During that Signature Series pre-concert talk last September, Outwater drew appreciative laughter from patrons with his line: "It's my final season and people are saying nice things to me."

A decade ago, there nearly wasn't an orchestra for him to lead. In 2005, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony marked its 60th anniversary. By late 2006, the orchestra issued an SOS: "Save Our Symphony." The musicians were openly divided, and the orchestra board had issued an ultimatum: unless the symphony raised the necessary funds, it would have to declare bankruptcy.

A year made all the difference. The SOS fundraising campaign netted more than \$2 million and – following a two-year international search – the board announced the appointment of a new conductor.

A relative unknown in Canada, Outwater, then 35, was charged with bringing together the players, attracting a wider audience and forging stronger connections between the orchestra and other groups in the region.

**S**eated in the boardroom at the Conrad Centre for the Performing Arts in downtown Kitchener one day last

spring, Outwater looks as comfortable as if he's been here forever. It's his 45th birthday. He plans to have a quiet dinner with his husband, Tom Ho, a consultant with Deloitte. Married since 2013, their home is in Chicago, although Outwater spends more time on the road, particularly in Kitchener and San Francisco.

Recalling his guest conductor stints during the orchestra's search more than a decade ago, he says, "I didn't know where Kitchener-Waterloo was." But he thought: "OK, let's give it a try. They cared about making music. 'Another day at the office' is not the case here."

He also liked the diversity in southern Ontario compared to California, where he had led the San Francisco Symphony since 2001. Contrasting the "melting pot" of his home state with Kitchener, he says, "It felt way more comfortable here."

Outwater grew up in Santa Monica, the oldest of four boys. Their dad was a recording engineer for Warner Bros., and their mother was a schoolteacher.

His earliest musical memories involve his paternal grandmother, Mary Jane Outwater. A former model and performer with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer during the 1940s and '50s, she became a record company executive in Los Angeles. She was personal manager for Ella Fitzgerald for 40 years and knew a string

of musical greats, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Oscar Peterson.

"I was exposed to a lot of live music in Los Angeles and New York," Outwater says. He also got used to a common refrain when he was introduced to people in the music business: "Are you Mary Jane's grandson?"

Outwater thrived in what he calls an excellent public school music program. At 14, he picked up the double bass. He played in the junior high school orchestra and attended the Idyllwild summer music camp in California.

He remains a strong advocate of musical education for children. In California, he also led the San Francisco Symphony youth orchestra; the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony youth orchestra turned 50 in 2016.

"You start to feel you can play. It blows your mind, like reading an epic novel for the first time," he says.

Encountering classical music was like being struck by lightning, he says. Raised Catholic, he calls himself spiritual today, and much of that spirituality is fed by his muse.

"Music is a skill, but it's also a gateway to inspiration and creativity," he says. "Great art has an element of mystery to it."

Outwater studied English literature at Harvard University. There, he was music director of the Bach Society Orchestra, led an a cappella group called Harvard Din and Tonics, and wrote music for the 145th anniversary production of "Hasty Pudding Theatricals."

He completed a master's degree in conducting at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "Putting the pieces together was really appealing to me."

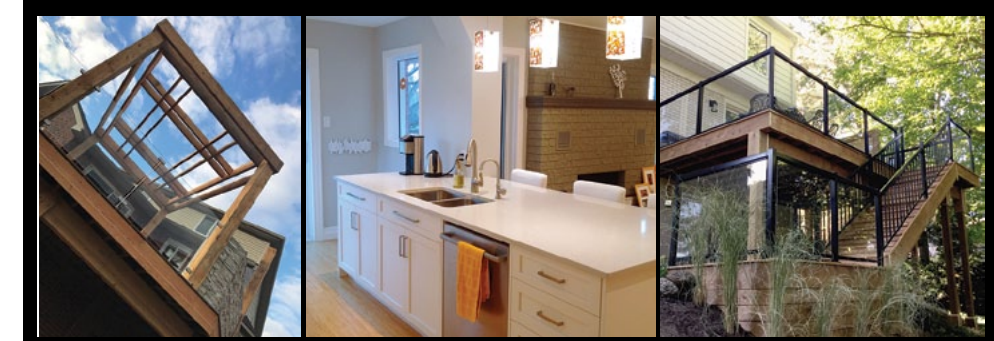
He's also driven to lead rather than to follow. He confesses that there's a megalomaniacal aspect to conducting, although he prefers to think of his place centre stage as a privilege rather than a right. On the podium, he doesn't use a baton, eschewing bar-by-bar fussiness in favour of sculpting passages with his hands and his body language.

Says Michael Macaulay, who plays bassoon: "He has a very physical, visceral sort of musicianship. He draws a clear

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powerful sound out of the orchestra. He's not big on a thousand tiny nuances like many old-school conductors."

What's it like for Outwater to direct 50-odd moving parts? "It's an amazing feeling, a big rush, to feel the orchestra respond. I try to build up trust, try to be selfless. As potentially egocentric as a conductor can be, I try to be the opposite. I'm more interested in giving attention to others."

For all his physical performance in the concert hall, he says what's more important is what he feels inside. "It's like a gymnastics routine. It's like a flow state. You're outside of yourself. Things are happening automatically. You're not self-conscious, not thinking or criticizing. I believe in Zen principles, being in the moment, being aware."

**F**resh off its fundraising drive a decade ago, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony board was looking for someone who

could attract a wider audience and take the orchestra in new directions. Those goals resonated with Outwater: "They could see my eyes light up."

The interest was mutual.

Current board chair Catherine Copp recalls first seeing and hearing Outwater after she returned to Kitchener from Toronto a number of years ago – an encounter that led her to attend symphony concerts and, ultimately, to join the board.

"This interesting guy was doing a lunch presentation for the Chamber of Commerce at the Conrad Centre. He talked about the place of music in our lives. He was one of the most articulate people I've ever met in speaking about the beauty and interest of music. He seemed so energetic, full of ideas."

Outwater set about widening the orchestra's audience. The symphony has long teamed up with the Grand Philharmonic Choir. In fact, Glenn Kruspe formed the orchestra in 1945 to accompany a concert

by this choir. But Outwater didn't stop with the classical music community. "I am known as someone who can speak many different musical languages," he notes.

In a TEDx talk, he asserts that today's "rebel music" is not the rock music of his teen years but classical music, a kind of new-old subculture for the early 21st century.

During the past decade, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony has performed with folksinger Basia Bulat, indie musician Owen Pallett and Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq. In 2012, they commissioned Triple Concerto for Power Trio and Orchestra, based on themes from the Canadian progressive rock trio Rush.

The orchestra's 2011 album, "From Here On Out" – its first recording in a decade – included collaborations with Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood and Arcade Fire's Richard Reed Parry.

The Tagaq concert was a favourite of Mark Vuorinen, artistic director of the Grand Philharmonic Choir since 2010. He says

varied programming is Outwater's greatest legacy here.

"He has programmed in innovative, interesting ways of combining varieties of music you wouldn't necessarily think would work that well together," says Vuorinen. "You see both the differences and the similarities that music shares."

Ian Whitman, principal bassist, says, "The programming he comes up with is very modern in the sense that he's trying to invite different audiences in who wouldn't normally consider the symphony as something for them – bringing in different artists who wouldn't consider it possible to be working for an orchestra."

Outwater has pushed technology – podcasts, video, YouTube – to reach out to different audience members. "He has tried to create the impression that everybody belongs in the concert hall," says Whitman, "that we're there for the community, not just an elite group."

Says Andrew Bennett, the orchestra's

executive director, "What stands out with Edwin compared to any other conductor is that he thinks instinctively outside the proverbial box. Younger artistic leaders these days don't feel hemmed in by conventional wisdom about boundaries."

Laurie Castello, the orchestra's director of operations, says, "He's not afraid to try new things. From an operations view, sometimes I think, 'Really, how are we going to do that?' Inevitably, others go along. They catch his spirit and energy."

**O**utwater's collaborations with non-traditional partners have lent him a reputation for innovativeness.

Ask people about their most memorable recent concerts, and most mention the Intersection series exploring connections between music and other disciplines, including geometry, food and literature.

One Beethoven program brought Daniel Levitin, author of the book "This Is Your Brain on Music," to connect music and

neuroscience. As Outwater noted in an interview: "There are a lot of people who are very curious about science and literature and politics who would be more curious about music if we invited them in."

During a "Hack the Orchestra" event, programmers used computers to translate music into geometric images. Another popular concert, run with Words Worth Books in Waterloo, brought in writers Miriam Toews and Wayne Grady to discuss words and music with Outwater.

One Intersections concert paired modernist music with quantum physics through a partnership with the Institute for Quantum Computing in Waterloo. Arts and science run in parallel, with plenty of overlap, says Outwater. From Einstein's "spooky action at a distance" to describe the non-intuitive quantum world to Schoenberg's atonal compositional experiments, he says, "I think the breakdown of Newtonian physics and tonal harmony in the early 1900s was not coincidental."

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For exploring art-science connections, circumstance brought him to the right place a decade ago, giving him access to researchers at the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, the Institute for Quantum Computing and the University of Waterloo, as well as experts at, say, Google and Communitech. Such collaborations might intimidate audience members – unfamiliar music and science in one concert? – but the goal is to make both fields more accessible.

“Audience members or the general public often feel that they don’t know about music,” Outwater says. “It’s all about patterns. That was the hidden message. They felt empowered: ‘OK, I do understand this music.’”

Working with those experts also resonates for the music director. Scientists talk about STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Outwater says it should be “STEAM,” to include art.

“Music is a skill, but it’s also a gateway to inspiration and creativity.” With any of those disciplines, there are plenty of unknowns. From art to science, he says, “I’m more interested in the questions than the answers.”

A decade after that SOS fundraiser, the orchestra has an accumulated deficit of just under \$1 million. That’s close to 20 per cent of revenue, a ratio that raises red flags for the Canada Council for the Arts and other granting agencies, says Copp, the board chair.

The orchestra did report a surplus of \$178,000 for 2015-16, thanks to cost-cutting, including staff reductions. But that came after a deficit of \$174,000 for 2014-15.

“Orchestras go up and down in financial health,” Copp says. “Our commitment to get rid of that accumulated deficit is firm. Edwin doesn’t fight back. He has looked for ways to ensure the artistic budget is controlled. He has always been right there with everyone else.”

Outwater says the orchestra board and management have pulled together during his tenure. Referring to public and private

funding, he says, “The arts could always be supported more. That’s the biggest struggle. We have all shared the vision of moving the orchestra forward together.”

During his tenure, audience attendance has risen by 40 per cent – and the average age of regular patrons has dropped some.

Board members haven’t revealed much about their plans for Outwater’s successor. One thing is clear, says Bennett, the orchestra’s executive director: “He has redefined the organization and what it feels like to be part of it.”

A search committee has been struck and the orchestra is working with various guest conductors, but Bennett says there is no drop-dead date for a successor to be appointed.

From the beginning of the search for the new director, there was a question: “Is anybody interested in going back (to a more conventional conductor)?,” Bennett says. “There was almost a classic rolling of eyes: ‘Why would we want to go back there?’”

Referring to the Intersections series, bassoonist Macaulay says, “Few conductors could so fundamentally change the culture of the organization. He has worked hard to create a culture of collaboration and to ensure we feel our voices are heard.”

The conductor wasn’t sure about his own plans beyond the spring farewell. “I learned long ago to give up control. I’ve been surprised so many times,” says Outwater, recipient of both city and regional arts awards. He has directed summer concerts for the San Francisco Symphony and is a regular guest conductor with the Chicago and New World symphonies.

Two farewell concerts, May 26 and 27, will combine the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony with the Grand Philharmonic Choir and Toronto’s Amadeus Choir – about 200 voices in all – to perform “Harmonium,” a challenging setting of Emily Dickinson’s poetry by American composer John Adams.

Says Vuorinen, “It’s a great way to end Edwin’s tenure.” Beyond Outwater’s departure, he says, “We’re all interested to see what the orchestra is going to do. Who will be next?”

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