

AUSTRALIAN CONDUCTOR CAROLYN WATSON NAVIGATING THE WOODS OF INTERLOCHEN

Some two years ago I had just returned home to Sydney after five months away on an extended Churchill Fellowship. This trip encompassed the 2012 Emmerich Kálmán International Operetta and Musical Conducting Competition in Budapest, a stint in Hannover at the Staatsoper, a period in London, a choral conference and festival in Sweden, language studies in Rome and an inspiring month in New York at The Metropolitan Opera.

It was a phenomenal experience, but also a deeply unsettling one in many ways. The sheer volume and variety of musical and artistic offerings afforded by Europe and the US left me wanting. Having straddled life and work in Australia with professional development in Europe over the previous five or so years, I felt somewhat at a crossroads. Hopefully browsing international conducting postings, one name stood out – Interlochen.

Interlochen is like no other place on earth. Originally founded as a summer orchestra camp by Joseph Maddy in 1928, Interlochen has been a rite of passage for a generation of American musicians, scholars and teachers. Notable faculty has included Percy Grainger and Aaron Copland, Kabalevsky and Kodály were also guests.

The Interlochen Center for the Arts now encompasses the Interlochen Summer Camp – an intensive six-week musical experience serving some 2,500 students, Interlochen Arts Academy – a year-round fine arts boarding school, Interlochen College of Creative Arts offering continuing education courses, an annual Arts Festival and Interlochen Public Radio. The institution has been awarded the National Medal of Arts, the nation's highest honour bestowed by the President of the United States.

In the words of Professor Karl Kramer, Dean of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music: "The Interlochen Center for the Arts is Michigan's largest arts education, presenting, and broadcasting organisation. It is without a doubt the most prestigious and comprehensive pre-tertiary diploma granting arts education institution in the United States and has a long list of distinguished alumni in all art forms".

The Arts Academy is a year-round artistically selective boarding school attracting young artists from all continents. The majority of the school's five hundred students are music majors, this being the traditional discipline offered.



Carolyn Watson conducting the Interlochen Arts Academy Orchestra in Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*

However there are also students majoring in dance, theatre, musical theatre, creative writers, visual artists and more recently, motion picture artists. The time-honored cohort of classical and jazz musicians has in recent years been augmented by a number of singer-songwriters, this contemporary focus now available for intensive study as a performance major. Indeed, Jewel, Norah Jones and Rufus Wainwright are products of Interlochen. Among the classical discipline feature such high profile alumni as Ida Kavafian, Lorin Maazel and Jessye Norman.

Academy Orchestra beckons

The job posting which caught my eye was that of the position of conductor of the Arts Academy Orchestra. According to the description: "The 90-member Academy orchestra is considered by many to be the nation's finest high school orchestra, performing at a level equal to and above many conservatory, university or regional symphonies. A demanding rehearsal and performance cycle prepares students with a wide range of classical and contemporary literature of the highest caliber. The Orchestra has toured nationally to rave reviews and enjoys strong support from Michigan audiences".

Sure, that got my attention but just where exactly is this place called Interlochen, about which I'd heard so much? Google told me the nearest airport was Traverse City. Excellent, never heard of it. A closer inspection of the map revealed it to be further north than Toronto, due to the US/Canada border somehow following the Great Lakes rather than any land-defined lines.

And as I learned over the course of the last two winters, it is cold, very, very cold. Like minus 32 degrees Celsius cold.

Still, for the chance to lead an internationally recognised young orchestra at one of the world's most renowned pre-professional arts institutions it seemed the purchase of a decent winter coat (or two) was a worthwhile investment.

The Arts Academy Orchestra presents a full season of some 15 performances including eight major concert appearances and as the orchestra for the ballet production, in 2014, Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*. Highlights of the last two seasons include Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*, Stravinsky *Pulcinella* and *Firebird Suites*, Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Elgar *Enigma Variations* and Ravel *La Valse* to name a few.

Following a successful audition this year, the Academy Orchestra has been invited to perform as part of the 2016 New York Philharmonic biennial in Avery Fisher Hall, arguably the orchestra's biggest gig yet.

A highlight of a very different kind has been living in a log cabin on one of the lakes which frames the Interlochen campus. My waterfront yard has also proved very popular with the locals whose ranks include bears, foxes, squirrels, chipmunks, deer, rabbits, raccoons, porcupines, turtles, wild turkeys and a veritable aviary of birds - quite a change from my former life in suburban Sydney.

- Carolyn Watson