

A conversation with:



Greater Newburgh Symphony Orchestra music director Russell Ger.

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Music director, Greater Newburgh Symphony Orchestra

STORY BY DEBORAH J. BOTTI + PHOTO BY ERIK GLIEDMAN

Russell Ger, the new music director of the Greater Newburgh Symphony Orchestra, admits he might be a tad too earnest for his own good. But he couldn't be where he is now without that blend of inherent talent, a touch of audacity and passion born of pain. His love of music is so genuine, so deep, that it bubbles up as an irrepressible enthusiasm he describes as infectious in the best possible way. It is how he ignites orchestras and audiences alike. He is the conduit – the root word of “conductor” – between the notes on the page and the musicians as well as the music played and those who listen. It's not acceptable to Ger, then, that the maestro is shrouded in mystique, whose only interaction with the audience is to bow before and after the

performance. He wants to break down that perceived barrier to classical music, and a critical step is communication, including talking to the audience.

Ger toured North America with renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman, drawing an audience of 6,000 in New York and 10,000 in Los Angeles. In 2013, he was one of four finalists for the Second International Chicago Symphony Orchestra Sir Georg Solti Conducting Apprenticeship, and the following year, was the recipient of the Brian Stacey Memorial Trust award for Emerging Australian Conductors, which resulted in his candidacy for the position of assistant conductor with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, as well as an invitation to conduct the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Ger's GNSO appointment was announced in July, after an exhaustive and comprehensive two-year

search that whittled down more than 100 applicants – some even from Europe, says John Bliss, president of its board of directors – to four highly qualified contenders, each of whom was then assigned a specific GNSO concert. Ger's guest appearance was in June.

Bliss says input from the audience, usually between 400 and 800 strong, was taken into consideration:

“Extremely charismatic and really engaged the orchestra and the audience.”

“Ger's enthusiasm and emotion are clearly evident. The orchestra was in sync with him and has never sounded more full, strong and emotive.”

“I have heard all these pieces so often in my life, but tonight's performance was as though I was hearing them for the first time.”

The musicians also weighed in, as did the search committee and the results of 90-minute interviews. Then the decision was made.

"I wasn't surprised, but extremely pleased. After all, this isn't my first rodeo," laughs Ger. "But at the end of the day, it's about chemistry. I'm a good fit with the organization. ... I share its vision about artistic standards, public outreach and fundraising, which are all connected."

What are some of your early musical memories?

I was very young, maybe preschool, sitting on the floor, listening to my mum play guitar. I remember being in awe that she could play any song I requested. She was very musical. Along with teaching music in high school, she studied piano, sang in the choir, taught herself violin, guitar and recorder, although I don't know why she ever taught herself the recorder.

I also remember having dinner in the kitchen with Dad and my sister one evening. Mum was practicing a small passage on the piano, over and over and over again. I was struck by the patience required.

Another vivid memory is when I was about 6, and I sat under the baby grand piano in our home, listening to her play. Most pianists trim their nails; Mum liked to grow hers. I can still hear the sound they made on the keys.

Obviously, she was a huge influence.

Absolutely. There's a family video of me when I was about 2, a tiny tot just learning to speak. In Mum's enthusiastic way, she was encouraging me with a barrage of questions: "What are we going to do today?" "Where will we go?" "What will you eat at dinner?" I could see my little mind racing to keep up with her. That was her way.

I attained a high score on the music test in school. To choose our instrument, the teachers demonstrated them one afternoon. I was drawn to the euphonium, a miniature tuba. Its sound is so beautiful. Then I went on to play the tuba and taught myself trumpet. I took piano lessons for years, but I was so bored. After my mum passed, my father said, "Just let him do what he wants."

How old were you when your mother passed?

11.

So music has also kept her close to you.

It was a formative time in my life. Yes, music was a way of connecting to her, but it was also an outlet for me.

For a while, I was an angry teen. My friends would put on metal, and I'd put on Brahms. Classical music was my rock 'n' roll. Some girlfriends lamented about how disconnected I was from pop music - although if there was a dance party. ...

There's such a wealth of treasures to be learned

from classical music that I don't have time to explore trends. I couldn't do what I do today without that sentiment.

Can you share an early highlight of your career?

I was around 21 or 22 and music director at a synagogue in Sydney, the largest in the Southern Hemisphere and with a most affluent congregation. I was drawn into conversations about some out-of-the-box suggestions for a fundraiser for a particular charity.

A tad self-serving, yes, but I suggested a 120-piece choir and 60-piece professional orchestra. And in 2003, I conducted the finale from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (also known as "Ode to Joy" or the "Song of Brotherhood") at the Sydney Opera House.

I was in no way equipped to do this musically, but we pulled it off with ingenuity and sheer force of will - plus a lot of chutzpah on my part. The first year, we performed for 2,000 people and record donations were received. The next year, the audience was more than 3,000.

So just how did you get from Australia to New York?

It was always my ambition to move to New York City, which I first visited when I was 19.

I lived in Boston first, which is where I earned my master's degree. One day I noted five missed calls from the famous cantor, Yitzchak Meir Helfgot, whom I've kept in touch with after first meeting him in Sydney. He invited me to audition for the position of music director at Park East Synagogue in New York City. I got the job.

Do you currently have any other musical affiliations?

In the tradition of my mum, I also teach. Another gift she gave me was the importance of sharing music. So I am the staff conductor at the Norwalk Youth Symphony. I work with my kids, most of whom are between the ages of 10 and 15, every Sunday. They are so delightful, enthusiastic, sweet and cute. I didn't know I had such a joyful passion for teaching youth. It's become a highlight of my week.

Another passion, of course, is your wife. How did you meet her?

I met her at brunch in the West Village. She's also Australian and was visiting friends who had a connection to one of my friends. I was first struck by how absolutely gorgeous she was, and then we hit it off like wildfire. I've never experienced anything like that before, and we celebrated the fourth anniversary of our first date in early September. We were married in January of 2015.

One of the things we bonded over so quickly was the fact that she also lost her mother at a young age to cancer. She's an interior architect and has a highly

developed artistic sensibility, although not musical. But she's filled with such pride, pleasure and joy watching me perform, and that kind of support has become one of the most important aspects of my life.

We both love to cook, although she's the more talented chef, and I'd describe us as Bohemian romantic. We find great pleasure in food and drink, which pretty much sums up a recent trip to Tuscan. And we make a point to try to go home every year to see family and friends.

What do you envision bringing to GNSO?

My biggest ambition is to grow the audience and develop and refine the artistic standard.

To accomplish this, I need to reach out to the public and be the organization's approachable new face. When it comes to music, I'm a passionate speaker, and I plan to get out into the community, perhaps even guest conducting at schools.

I want to make classical music accessible to everyone and brush off its encrusted serious image that it's the music of the wealthy and elite. That's why I'm adamant about talking to the audience - while avoiding musical language - and explaining what was going on in the composer's life during that period in history. Beethoven, for example, was very anti-establishment.

I'm drawn to the end-of-the-19th-century Vienna. A phrase used by historians, "fin-de-siècle," indicates the end of a cycle characterized by a sense of anxiety about the future and nostalgia for the past. We're very much in that mindset now as evidenced by all the remakes - "Full House," which I grew up with, "Superman," "Batman," - signs of a society that wants reassurance from the past. These parallels can help connect today's audience with music that's more than 100 years old.

Similarly, while notes are symbols on a page that indicate pitch and its duration, musicians need to play the meaning in the note in the context in which it was written. Otherwise, an instrument is no different than a typewriter: hit the key to get the right letter but without any artistic expression. As a conductor, I must incite that passion.

To achieve these goals, including compensating musicians so as to provide a high-quality product, the organization's financial position is critical. Ticket sales only generate about a quarter of the operating budget, so the spring brunch fundraiser, which takes place April 30, is crucial. I have eight months to spread my infectious enthusiasm about GNSO so that come April, people will happily open their wallets.

For more information, including upcoming concerts "Deranged, Delirious, Dauntless" on Nov. 19, and "Into the Woods," on Jan. 21, visit newburghsymphony.org or russellger.com