

IN

Wheeling

magazine

FALL 2008

CITY OF ART

The Comeback Kids
There's No Place Like Home

Centre Market
In the Centre of it All

Jeweled Out In Wheeling
From simple elegance to complex intricacy.

Exclusive Interview:

Maestro André Raphel Smith



OUR MAESTRO

A discussion with André Raphel Smith, his philosophy on symphony and his attraction to Wheeling.

>> By Laura Stewart Photography courtesy of Don Feenerty

For the past five years the Wheeling Symphony has enjoyed the vigorous, creative leadership of Maestro André Raphel Smith, the eighth Music Director to guide the orchestra in its nearly eighty year history. Along with a distinguished resumé which includes positions as assistant conductor with the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Saint Louis Symphony, Smith also counts numerous guest conducting appearances with noted American and international orchestras among his list of accomplishments.

In light of his esteemed credentials, Smith's decision to accept the position of Music Director for the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra might seem anti-climactic. However, when pressed for an explanation of his choice, he shared that for some time he had been "keen on finding a place where the orchestra had great potential," and that "Wheeling's openness and friendliness" quickly "captivated" him. He continues to find it to be a "very endearing place," and enjoys reaching out to the community, both locally and statewide, to connect with people who appreciate live performances.

Maestro Smith's musical training began at the age of eleven, during his childhood years in Durham, North Carolina. He received his Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Miami. He went on to study at Yale University where he earned his Master's Degree. While at Yale, Mr. Smith began conducting studies with Otto-Werner Mueller. He continued studies with Mueller at The Curtis Institute of Music, where he earned a Diploma in conducting, and at The Juilliard School, where he was awarded the Bruno Walter Memorial Scholarship and received an Advanced Certificate in orchestral conducting. André, his wife Jenifer and their four children currently live in Pennsylvania.

In Wheeling, Smith presides over the Symphony which offers five Masterworks (classical) and three Pops concerts, and two free outdoor concerts that have become summertime staples in the community. He expressed genuine fondness for the annual Labor Day "Music Under the Stars" concert which is held at the Anne Kuchinka Amphitheatre at Oglebay Resort. But one of Smith's favorite memories since accepting the position in Wheeling occurred during his first July Fourth concert at the Heritage Port waterfront amphitheatre. While accustomed to the informality found in most outdoor concert settings, Smith was completely unprepared for the spontaneous eruption of line dancing and audience participation that broke out during the latter part of the performance! "The level of audience participation was so unexpected and entertaining—it was a wonderful introduction to Wheeling and its residents!" According to Smith, audiences in Wheeling are much like those he has found in other cities-- composed of a broad canvas of personalities and levels of familiarity with the Symphony's selections. The Masterworks concerts are typically more

"The most prominent influences on me today are living composers. Conductors and composers generally share very close relationships. For me, one big influence is the composer Richard Danielpour. He has a tremendous musical intellect and a keen sense of how to relate to people. Since I began as Music Director, we've commissioned two works by Danielpour and in November we'll play his Violin Concerto. My friendship with Richard has stimulated me to think differently about traditional composers and the messages within their music. It has been quite a fascinating experience, and has actually reshaped the way I think of some works by Beethoven and Shostakovich."

- André Raphael Smith

heavily attended by season ticket holders and long-time listeners, where the Pops programs often attract a younger, more family oriented crowd.

Smith's primary goal when crafting the programming for the Symphony is to cultivate a balance of growth opportunities for both the performers and the orchestra-goers. He believes it is vital to offer today's music enthusiasts the chance to experience both mainstream orchestral choices, as well as more obscure selections. "In this era of digital devices and electronic formats, it is critical to offer a package of captivating performances that combines a wide variety of artists and works," Smith said.

An audience sector that Smith has particularly targeted is youth and young adult. In a time when many young people are unaccustomed to attending live symphony performances, Smith has taken steps to see that young people in the Wheeling area are actively engaged at all levels of the orchestra's development. School groups have been invited to dress rehearsals, pre-concert lectures and young people's concerts, and the season schedule has purposefully included a selection of younger artists. For several years the Symphony has also offered the Wheeling

Symphony Youth Orchestra, a tuition free venue for upcoming local musicians to refine their skills and benefit from contact with professional performers in concert settings. "One of the pivotal influences that guided me towards a life in music was my experience playing in the Duke Youth Orchestra. This program was based at Duke University, and I discovered it quite by accident while in high school. It really opened up the entire world of classical music to me! Perhaps that experience more than any other, made me decide that I had to become a musician."

Maestro Smith proudly acknowledged that his position with the Wheeling Symphony is his primary conducting engagement. And while he continues to accept guest conducting invitations from around the world, his fondness for Wheeling, its symphony orchestra, and its people fuels his passion for creating the best slate of performances possible each season. His ability to select distinctive music compositions which "uplift and let (concert goers) experience music that they might not otherwise be exposed to," is a treasure that area residents are more than lucky to possess.

