

Fireworks at 40: Ottawa's Thirteen Strings celebrates four decades

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On a November night in 1976 at Christ Church Cathedral, Ottawa audiences heard the first concert of a new professional orchestra.

It was called Thirteen Strings, and it was organized by a few players from the National Arts Centre Orchestra and conductor Brian Law to present music the larger NACO wouldn't usually perform: small-scale pieces by Handel, Bach, Vivaldi and other Baroque composers. The new group performed the music in intimate churches suited to the repertoire.

Longtime NACO violist Peter Webster, who helped found Thirteen Strings and was one of the players on opening night, says the goal was to present a few concerts and see how they went.

"We loved this repertoire and knew there was so much beautiful music that would not overlap with anything the NACO did. We hoped it would be as rewarding for the audience as it was for musicians," he recalled recently.

In the four decades since, the group has made an enormous contribution to Ottawa's music scene. Though it presents just six concerts each season, the group offers a rich range of music. Starting in its early years, the ensemble went beyond Baroque repertoire to include 20th century and contemporary music.

It has commissioned pieces by more than 100 Canadian composers.

Thirteen Strings has presented early operas and performs a candlelight Christmas concert every year that's become a tradition for many music lovers. It has mentored a generation of students through the Junior Thirteen Strings, a high-school-age student ensemble that joins the professionals for a few concerts each season, coached by the players and conductor to learn what's involved in a professional concert. One former student player, cellist Thaddeus Morden, is now a member of Thirteen Strings.

Webster, the only original player still with the group, will be there when the orchestra opens its 40th anniversary season Friday, Oct. 2 at Dominion-Chalmers Church. He's looking forward to the occasion.

"It's been very gratifying to be part of it," he says.

Violist Guylaine Lemaire, a member since 1991, echoes Webster's comments.

"I love the clarity and quick response of a small string ensemble. It's almost like chamber music," says Lemaire, who can also thank Thirteen Strings for meeting her future husband, cellist Julian Armour, a longtime member of the ensemble.

Featuring 12 extra players to help celebrate the 40th anniversary, Thirteen Strings' opening concert will include Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, conducted by Kevin Mallon, music director since 2010.

Mallon, a violinist and former concertmaster with Les Arts Florissants, conducted the Handel works with Toronto's Aradia Ensemble for a recording that was a big seller for the Naxos label.

Thirteen Strings has much to celebrate in its anniversary season.

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson will be at the concert to declare Oct. 2 Thirteen Strings Day in the city. The concert will also launch Thirteen Strings' new



Thirteen Strings is celebrating 40 years. PAUL COUVRETTE

recording for Naxos, of symphonies by German composer Franz Beck.

The recording has been receiving enthusiastic reviews. A German radio station recently named it recording of the week, offering extensive air time and interviews with Mallon.

Mallon wanted the first concert "to have a sense of occasion and celebration with the Water Music and the Music for the Royal Fireworks. But we really see the whole season as the anniversary celebration, with a lot of exciting music," he said over breakfast near his Toronto home.

In a nod to the roots of Thirteen Strings, the six-concert season at Dominion-Chalmers Church will include a lot of baroque repertoire, including a Bach Christmas Cantata at the Christmas concert Dec. 8, Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Cellos* Feb. 28 (with cellists Paul Marleyn and Julian Armour) and a Baroque Easter concert on Good Friday, March 25.

In a tribute to the first season, when the ensemble performed all of Handel's *Concerti Grossi*, Op. 6, Mallon and the orchestra will present three of the pieces (Feb. 28, March 25 and April 22), and the Feb. 28 concert will include a new piece by Ottawa composer Andrew Ager inspired by the Handel pieces.

The season will see the first presentation of an annual composition prize Thirteen Strings will present to a student composer at the University of Ottawa's School of Music.

Students will write a short piece. In January the ensemble will visit the university to read through the works, and a panel will choose the winning entry. It will be performed at the April 22 concert, and the winning student will receive a \$1,300 prize. That concert will also include violinist Yi-Jia Susanne Hou as soloist in music by composer John Corigliano from the film *The Red Violin*.

"The prize is a way of supporting young composers, and the chance to hear their music performed is important," Mallon says.

Mallon is also excited about presenting Haydn's opera *L'isola Disabitata* to close the season, May 27 to 29. The project is a co-presentation with Opera Lyra Ottawa. Mallon served as interim

artistic director for Opera Lyra last season and helped plan the project.

The opera, about two women and two men on a deserted island, will be sung by members of Opera Lyra's training program for young artists. Mallon says the intimate piece is perfectly suited to the intimate church venue.

"I wanted something for Opera Lyra to do outside of their big-scale productions at the NAC, so it made sense for us to collaborate and to provide the orchestra. It's a great opportunity for young singers, and I think it will be a beautiful way to end our season. It's good for us, for Opera Lyra and for audiences."

Mallon says he's proud of the work he and the orchestra have done since his appointment in 2010, and he speaks highly of the musicians' "hard work and dedication. We are aiming for beautiful and stylish playing, and I think the response to the CD has been encouraging. You hear an integrated, cohesive sound, a cultured sound."

The musicians also speak highly of Mallon, praising his expertise and enthusiasm for music from many eras.

Violist Lemaire says Mallon "has brought a lot of energy and enthusiasm. He is well known for his incredible sense of style for Baroque music. He is also a passionate advocate for new music."

Peter Webster agrees.

"Kevin has high expectations, and we really admire him and enjoy making music with him. I'm not sure how long I'll continue to play, but it's good to know that Thirteen Strings is in good hands."

Thirteen Strings

Performing: Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*

Where and When: Friday Oct. 2, 8 p.m., Dominion-Chalmers United Church

Tickets: \$40 general; \$35 seniors; \$10 students.

Full season and ticket information: thirteen-strings.ca; 613-738-7888