

He's 19. His violin? Pushing 300

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Ottawa violinist Kerson Leong will take to the stage at Dominion-Chalmers Church Friday with a precious piece of history in his hands: A gleaming, warm-toned instrument crafted in Italy nearly 300 years ago.

Leong is only 19, but he's been performing internationally since winning the junior division of the Menuhin Competition in 2010, when he was just 13. For the past year, thanks to a loan from the instrument collection of Quebec industrial firm Canimex, Inc., he's been making music on a sumptuous-voiced Guarneri del Gesu, a violin crafted in Cremona about 1729 by Giuseppe Guarneri.

His surviving instruments are highly prized, and with a value in seven figures, they're not something you order from Amazon. Leong acquired his in August of 2015 from Canimex, whose president, Roger Dubois, collects instruments and offers them on loan to Canadian musicians.

Leong has been using instruments from the Dubois collection since 2011, and had been performing on a Strad for a year when the Guarneri became available.

"Both instruments had a wonderful, rich palette of colours, but the del Gesu was more balanced overall in terms of sound across all the strings, and it was more versatile for a wide range of music, from Bach and Mozart to the big romantic concertos, which need heft and power," Leong said from Belgium, where he is in his second year of study with violinist Augustin Dumay.

"The del Gesu had a raw, gutsy feel to it at its low end while the Strad was more like an aristocrat, ever so polite and refined. I've

tried many del Gesus and Strads, and this violin is up there with the best in its overall sound and versatility."

Leong says he's thankful to Dubois and his wife Huguette for their support and generosity.

At the Ottawa concert with Thirteen Strings and conductor Kevin Mallon, Leong will be soloist in Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla's *Four Seasons* of Buenos Aires, four tango pieces from the late 1960s. The arrangement for violin and orchestra includes some musical nods to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

"I find it very interesting and fun, and I enjoy how it evokes the moods and sound, which Piazzolla is so famous for," says Leong, whose current concert season included his debut with the Montreal Symphony last month and two performances coming in January with the Toronto Symphony and conductor Peter Oundjian.

Music lovers at Friday's concert will be able to buy the new CD featuring Leong as soloist, in British composer John Rutter's *Visions for Solo Violin, Choir and String Orchestra*. Rutter created the piece for Leong at the request of the Menuhin Competition, and worked closely with Leong for the premiere in Britain six months ago. Rutter then invited Leong to record it and also invited him to perform it in Australia. Leong performs it next summer in Hong Kong.

"It was an honour to have John Rutter write his first piece for solo violin for me, and that I was able to interact with him while he was writing it, as well as to work closely with him in the first rehearsals of the piece," Leong says.



He praises it as "a very effective combination of voice and strings," with "a very lyrical and intimate role he created for the violin, which let me explore the more sensitive and nuanced aspects of violin sound."

In addition to the Piazzolla piece, Friday's concert will include music by Villa Lobos, Cuban composer Leo Brouwer and Salvadoran-Canadian classical guitarist Ramses Calderon, who will be soloist in a new concerto he's composed.

It's the first of six programs Thirteen Strings is presenting this season.

Others include Handel's *Messiah* (Dec. 17 and 18); a peace-themed concert Jan. 27 with music by Barber and Ravel and a new piece featuring a choir of immigrant children; a performance on Good Friday of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (April 14); and a concert May 12 with mezzo-soprano Marion Newman featuring baroque music and a piece inspired by the aboriginal Thunderbird legend.

The season concludes June 16 with music written by Mozart and Mendelssohn when the composers were in their teens, and a piece by Peter-Anthony Togni featuring bass clarinetist Jeff Reilly.