

# A small town with a big musical treasure



The Charles W. Stockey Centre has helped turn Festival of the Sound into a summer destination.

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PARRY SOUND — Now that the Festival of the Sound has packed up its bags for the summer, Parry Sound can begin its slow retreat back to a tiny winter population of 6,500.

Not that it is yet over for music lovers in Ontario and British Columbia, who can watch their local newspapers for announcements of a forthcoming tour by the festival ensemble.

The fact that one of Ontario's, indeed one of Canada's major music festivals takes place in such a small community is a tribute both to the spirit of the community and to the quality of the festival, which takes place each summer primarily in what visiting artists have come to recognize as one of the finest small concert halls in the country, the 480-seat Charles W. Stockey Centre for the Performing Arts.

“Were it not for this hall. I doubt the festival would exist today,” asserts clarinetist James Campbell, its artistic director since 1985. Campbell should know. He was among the first artists invited by the 31-year-old festival's founder, pianist Anton Kuerti, to perform in its former home, the gymnasium of the local high school, a venue promising plastic chairs, tropical temperatures and music-making punctuated by whistles from passing freight trains.

During the last season in the high school, t-shirts were produced bearing the slogan “I survived Festival Hall,” the name being an ironic euphemism for high-school reality. Campbell nevertheless argues that the taxing conditions developed a toughness and loyalty in the audience that have stood him in good stead when programming each of the past six seasons in the new hall.

Designed by Keith Loeffler with acoustics by ARTEC, the air-conditioned facility's construction was made possible in part by a seven-figure gift from a former Toronto Star executive, the late Charles W. Stockey. With its rusticated stone interior walls and high peaked ceiling, it constitutes an inspired architectural cross between a cathedral and a country cottage.

But if Campbell attributes the festival's survival and growth to its flight to the waterfront, he might equally credit his own work in putting together a 66-event season on a tight, three-quarter-million-dollar budget.

A visitor quickly discovers how obviously this is a festival built on ongoing relationships. Musicians clearly enjoy returning and Campbell often teams them up in different ensemble combinations to keep the music-making fresh and stimulating for players and listeners alike.

This summer, for example, the talented 15-year-old Polish-Canadian pianist Jan Lisiecki gave his first performance anywhere of Brahms's *G minor Piano Quartet*, in the company of three Parry Sound veterans, violinist Marc Fewer, violist (and future Toronto Summer Music Festival director) Douglas McNabney and cellist Marc Johnson, with electrifying results.

**Campbell himself appeared with five colleagues, old and new, in a warmly received program titled *Spirit 20: The Jazz Age*, in which authentic period pieces by the likes of Milhaud, Martinu and Ravel were juxtaposed with recent compositions in a similar style by John Novacek, a brilliant ragtime/classical pianist from New York, and Alan Gilliland, a Canadian composer whose *Spirit 20* (receiving its world premiere) turned out to be a terrific evocation of classic rags. This is the program, by the way, scheduled to tour through Ontario and British Columbia during the coming season.**

Another program deserving of a tour, especially to schools, turned out to be a noon-hour presentation titled *Painted Sound: Legends and Tales*, with First Nations storyteller John Rice teaming up with Fewer, Novacek, bassoonist James McKay, percussionist Beverley Johnson and the Festival Ensemble to perform musical settings of native stories, including Canadian composer Richard Mascal's *Ojibway Tale*, based on the story of Nanabush and the Giant Beaver, with artwork by local school children projected on an overhead screen.

Festivals should, at least in part, be about what we do not readily encounter during the regular concert season, hence the appearance of Joel Quarrington, Canada's foremost exponent of his instrument, in a rare double bass recital, and the presentation of an informal jazz concert at a waterside golf course.

Granted, the Festival of the Sound requires a two-hour-plus drive from Toronto, but I would happily have travelled even farther to hear these concerts as well as to have the opportunity to encounter Canada's pre-eminent keyboard duo, Anagnoson and Kinton, playing *Rachmaninov's Suite for Two Pianos*. Music-making at their level can give any festival a good name.