

Famous musical name with a common touch

Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony welcomes conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau

Who says orchestras lack a sense of drama? When the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra ended a two-year search for a new maestro, it kept secret the name of the winning candidate until the very night of the official announcement. As a packed house in Kitchener's Centre-in-the-Square fidgeted expectantly in its seats last June, out in front of the orchestra walked a handsome figure in his late 40s, with one of the most distinguished musical names of the past half-century: Fischer-Dieskau.

No, it wasn't the famous German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, although he, too, has lifted a baton from time to time. It was his son Martin, who had topped a list of 125 applicants for the job and arrived with the experience of having conducted more than 50 orchestras worldwide, among them the Berlin Philharmonic, the Royal Philharmonic, the Czech Philharmonic and the New Japan Philharmonic.

How is it that a community of less than half a million in faraway Canada can attract a European musician with such a pedigree? He plans to show us March 8 and 9, when he leads his first full-length concerts at the Centre-in-the-Square as successor to the orchestra's previous maestro, Japan's Chosei Komatsu.

The night of the announcement, he conducted only a short, glad-to-be-here program, but like the 14 other shortlisted candidates, he had already led full evenings of music with the players.

Only those baton-wavers who had pleased a majority of them made the final cut of six finalists. Among them, according to executive director Michael Duschenes, "Martin stood out above the rest for this orchestra and this community."

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Duschenes' words were carefully chosen. At a time when many orchestral institutions are in deep financial trouble, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra has posted its second budget surplus in a row and achieved record subscription sales for the 2001-2002 season. The wrong conductorial appointment could easily jeopardize this bounty.

"We have gone for the idea of a principal conductor rather than a music director," Duschenes explained in a restaurant interview the other day. "We believe in leading by empowerment and not dictatorship. We wanted someone with a dynamic view of the orchestra of the next century, and Martin fits the bill."

Oh, oh — artistic leadership by committee? Not exactly, Duschenes responded, insisting that Fischer-Dieskau would still be responsible for such crucial matters as hiring and firing: "He is the bottom line for artistic quality." But decision-making in programming and the choice of artists will be shared, with the members of the orchestra participating in all committees, as well as being looked to for ideas on how to get the orchestra even



MARTIN FISCHER-DIESKAU

WILLIAM LITTLER



more involved in the community.

Already one of Ontario's more community-conscious orchestras, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony sees itself as a servant of its region as well as its immediate population. It obviously doesn't see itself as a hierarchical institution with a dictator conductor.

"We think we have a model for the future," suggested Duschenes, "based on giving empowerment to more people. And with more than 10,000 subscribers, we feel we are already deep into our community."

So where does this leave the maestro? How does he lead if his authority has to be shared?

"I feel part of the orchestra," Fischer-Dieskau responded. "In my life I have given much thought to what a conductor does. I teach conducting at the university in Bremen (Germany), and I have always had a problem with dictating. My duties are to show the way, but in the end it should be like the birds in the sky. There is a leader, but you don't know who it is."

"When I first heard this orchestra, it was love at first measure, as I told the audience. Musicians want a strong hand in rehearsal. There they expect me to lead. But there are players in this orchestra who could be in any orchestra in the world." With such players you obviously collaborate.

Not the words one might expect of an old-world German conductor, born in Berlin. But Fischer-Dieskau is, after all, one of the sons of one of the great collaborative singers of the post-World War II generation. There may be something to genetic inheritance, after all.

Not that his father, aware of the difficulties that could lie ahead, wanted him to be a conductor, or even a musician. "But when I was a naive child of 9, I was taken to the opera in Berlin, where my father was rehearsing *Don*

Giovanni. My brother watched what was going on onstage, and he has become a designer, and I watched what was going on in the pit."

Following musical studies in the conservatories in Berlin, Vienna and Siena, Martin won a series of prizes and scholarships (including the Leonard Bernstein Fellowship at Tanglewood) and set out his shingle, serving as chief conductor or associate music director in such German cities as Augsburg, Aachen and Hagen, as well as the Swiss city of Bern.

"But when your name is Fischer-Dieskau," he smiled, ruefully, "it can be difficult being accepted on your own. I have been approached by people who said, 'Wasn't your father a tenor?' That makes me happy. I am very proud of my family. My grandfather composed operas and wanted to be a conductor, and so did my father."

"But I am the first Fischer-Dieskau to be a music director. And here (in Canada), maybe I can breathe more freely."