



So you want to start a Festival do you?

By Denis Brott

So you want to start a Festival do you? Why on earth would you want to do that? A glutton for punishment? Perhaps. Looking for an excuse not to practice? Maybe. Wanting to find an opportunity to get your friends and colleagues together for the joy of making music together? That's more like it.

Back in my Hometown

One year after leaving the Orford Quartet late in 1988, I accepted a position as professor at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal. My wife was terrified about moving to Quebec, with all the political instability and the fact that she didn't speak French, so we decided to stay in Toronto. This necessitated spending one year commuting between three teaching positions: Oberlin Conservatory Monday through Wednesday morning, Montreal Wednesday night through Friday and back home to Toronto's Royal Conservatory for Saturday. I knew the flight times between those cities like I know the Dvorak Concerto. After a year of that ridiculous schedule, we finally uprooted from the big TO, four children and all, to brave the New World in "New France."

Linguistic considerations being a huge impediment, my wife and children were frightened about what might await them. Being a Montrealer by birth, I had no such apprehensions. My greatest worry was what it might be like to return "home" and try to function professionally in an independent way from my parents, who had a prestigious musical profile in "their" city. For a few seasons, I was a good son and helped out by playing first cello of the McGill Chamber Orchestra, my parents' "cri de coeur" since the '40's. As I began to acclimatize myself to Montreal, my wife and children becoming completely enchanted by the city's charm and energy, I suddenly came to the realization that what this "City of Festivals", which Montreal prides itself on being, didn't have was a chamber music festival.

Having performed in many festivals around the musical world, I knew their attraction. Most chamber music festivals I'd experienced seemed to be organized by musicians for musicians. I became very excited about the concept and began asking my colleagues what they felt made for a good festival.

Coincidentally, within weeks of the germination of this idea, I got a call from my friend, clarinetist James Campbell, who was looking to take a summer off as Artistic Director of the Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound. He asked, "Would you be able and willing to replace me?" I was certainly willing. Able? Well, time would tell. It all turned out wonderfully. I had a very encouraging success running the 1991 Festival of the Sound and even managed to stay within budget! Bitten by the bug, I now felt determined to give birth one day to a festival of my own in my hometown.

A chance encounter with the Mayor of Montreal, Pierre Bourque, sealed my fate. At a cocktail party in early 1995, I spoke with him about my dream of seeing a chamber music festival born in Montreal. He immediately invited me to see him.

I will never forget the day, Saturday April 1st, 1995. As I approached the entrance to City Hall, I was told to enter via the garage. Once there, I was escorted to the second floor and left in a waitingroom. Within minutes, a door opened and a smiling Mayor Bourque ushered me into his sun-filled "blooming" office. Being a horticulturist, his office was a showcase of floral majesty - magnificent orchids graced every corner of the room. I talked briefly about my vision, recounted my youth in Montreal, concerts atop Mt. Royal, in the center of the city, throngs of people enjoying the splendors of this wonderful park, escaping urban congestion to a mountain-top site of tranquillity and grandeur. I spoke of revitalizing the Chalet de la Montagne at the summit of Mt. Royal. Opened in 1932 and designed by A. Beaugrand-Champagne, this historic building, whose walls are decorated with paintings including many by famous painters tracing the history of Montreal, offers a unique panoramic view of the downtown core. The park, designed by Frederick Olmsted of Central Park (New York) fame in 1872, adhered to his principle that nature was a source of spiritual food. How perfect!

As I waxed eloquent about the universal language of music, about the intimacy of chamber music in particular, about my esteemed colleagues who get together at festivals all over the world to share their friendship and mutual love of the repertoire, he suddenly stopped me and said "VENDU — SOLD!" Thus was born the Montreal Chamber Music Festival.

As it turned out, that was the easy part. I had no idea how to create an administrative structure. I had no idea how to raise funds, reserve concert halls, deal with publicists, hire personnel. What was I doing? The idea that seemed so idyllic suddenly took on fear-inducing proportions. As the ad for Toyota says, "You asked for it, you got it!" I had myself a Festival whether I liked it or not.

The Mayor was truly committed, gracious, and supportive. He put the significant services of the city at my disposition to help me make a concert hall out of what is essentially an architecturally-beautiful, rectangular space with almost nothing in it. The Chateau du Belvedere, known as the Chalet de la Montagne, presented huge logistical challenges. For one thing, public access is not permitted by car and the nearest parking area is about 1 kilometer downhill from the building. The only way to get there is on foot. Can you imagine elegant ladies in high heels arriving at the concerts to find they have to trek a kilometer over a stone and dirt road to get to the Chalet? Impossible. We trucked everything up there, from chairs and table lamps to two 9-foot Steinway grand pianos, and for the public, we arranged shuttle buses.

At my side throughout this folly was my wife, Julie. Patient beyond reproach with all my hare-brained ideas, she became an invaluable ally in beginning the process of creating an administrative structure. Having worked for the Ontario Arts Council, she contributed many ideas. In our spare time, between teaching, practicing, and raising four young children, we began the job - usually late at night and out of a spare room turned office - of creating a Festival. We were a classic case of the blind leading the blind. We had the support of the Mayor but not a cent to pay all the costs: artists, travel, publicity, publicists, the list seemed endless. The beginning of our financial support structure was to come from a chance encounter.

One day traveling back to Montreal on a late-night flight from New York, my cello and I were bumped into Business Class - tough but somebody had to do it. (Yes, I got to enjoy the cello's meal and drinks - that is, if you call airline food enjoyable.) Sitting next to me was an elegantly-attired businessman who seemed to get quite a charge out of seeing a cello getting a seat and meal. We struck up a conversation and it quickly turned to the topic of my preoccupation of getting a festival started. After I enthusiastically sounded off about it, he told me, "I am the CEO of Peerless Carpet and I am sure we can help you." "Yes," I said to myself, "there is a God!" And so began my first successful fundraising effort. Within a few weeks, and thanks to the CEO David Arditi and Peerless Carpet, I had one major sponsor who believed in my dream and was willing to put money behind it.

He took me under his wing, in the business sense, and taught me a great deal in a very short time. I quickly learned that, in the world of fundraising, getting to the "right" people is everything. Cold calls mean certain death. With my first important contact in my pocket, I began spinning what has turned out to be a web of support. Somehow I managed, through various contacts, to open corporate coffers ever so slightly and in our first year raised over half the start-up budget from corporate donors. Strangely, there is start-up money from government to start a business, but no such money exists for the arts. In fact, all government support is unattainable unless an artistic endeavor has been viable for three consecutive years. Only then will they even look at you. They are very smart. They figure that, by that time, you're either broke, have given up, or are truly worthy of their support.

Now, heading into our sixth Montreal Chamber Music Festival, we have grown from our initial five concerts, a \$25,000 deficit, and a half-dozen performers to 24 concerts, a balanced budget and some 69 performers. Our numbers are impressive. We enjoyed sold-out attendance at almost all our concerts this past year. We have a strong network of corporate, governmental and private support. 75% of our talent is Canadian. 25% of our budget comes from pro bono services. All our artists are housed in elegant Montreal homes, thanks to an energized and committed Housing Committee headed by Cornelia Nihon, wife of the real estate developer, Alexis Nihon. Through comprehensive surveys, we have found that our public is composed of a remarkable mix of people running the gamut in age and income level and almost equally representative of the French and English publics in Montreal. It astounded me to realize that, because of our approach to programming, many in the audience were discovering chamber music as a new experience, one they had previously thought of as elitist and rather inaccessible as an art form.

The Art of Programming

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together to create a concert has often been likened to a chef devising a meal and being concerned about both taste and health (never mind the critics), balancing food groups, temperatures, textures, spices, etc. Through the Festival, I have made a concerted effort to demystify chamber music by linking it with other more familiar and complementary art forms. One year, I dedicated an entire Festival to the spoken word, under the title "Words & Music", taking Richard Strauss's concern as expressed in his opera, *Capriccio*, "Which is more effective in communicating human emotion, the spoken word or music?" and setting it in a chamber music context. Tenor Jon Vickers and pianist Marc-André Hamelin performed Strauss's *Enoch Arden*. We took Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* and had pianist/actor Jean Marchand read both Messiaen's own text and descriptions of his World War II internment nightmares and read Revelations from the New Testament, thereby clearly showing how the composers religious convictions shaped his delirium and his artistic output. In each case, works like these, which are rather challenging for the public, were not only demystified through on-stage description and anecdotal enlightenment by the performers, they were also surrounded on the same program by very accessible standard repertoire beloved by all.

Another year, our Festival theme was "Music & Dance". We focused on movement and rhythm, showing how, through their shared pulse, rhythm was elemental in the heartbeat of human life. In so doing we rendered accessible both chamber music and dance. World premiere choreography by the likes of Margie Gillis marked a new excursion into chamber music for our public. Again, dance elements we surrounded by well-loved standard repertoire.

Last year, our fifth anniversary and millennium edition, was our most adventurous yet. Entitled "Le Bonheur de Vivre - The Joy of Life", we linked music with a visual stimulus by suspending three giant screens as a concert shell around the stage and projected renowned paintings selected to intertwine with a musical theme chosen for each evening. Working in concert with Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts and their exquisite visiting exhibit from the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, the concert public viewed 81 masterworks, the originals of which were then on exhibit at the Museum, while listening to a specific repertoire chosen to relate to the painting. For example, we linked Renoir and Monet with Debussy and Franck, Picasso with Stravinsky, Rousseau with Bartok, and so on. The effect was mesmerizing. The complexity was a huge challenge but, with the use of three computer terminals and digital imaging systems, we projected paintings in such a way as to allow the music to be enhanced by the image. I made sure that the images only changed between movements and that the repertoire somehow had some relationship to the painting. That Festival proved uniquely successful.

For 2001, the Festival, to be entitled "The Virtuoso Violin — Music and Film" will have repertoire chosen to help celebrate the centenary of the 20th century's greatest violinist, Jascha Heifetz. From chamber works like the Saint-Saens Sonata and the Chausson Concerto, to virtuoso violin knuckle-breakers, as well as via many transcriptions of Heifetz, such as the Hora Staccato and Devil's Trill Sonata, we will marry live performances with film excerpts featuring Heifetz. For example, on one program, we will show film excerpts of Heifetz, Rubinstein and Piatigorsky, the "Million Dollar Trio", rehearsing Schubert's B-flat trio in Heifetz's living room, and then perform the entire trio on stage at the Chalet. Complete performances of Jascha Heifetz on film will also be integrated into the live concerts, connecting the two in unusual ways. All this will be tied in with the first-ever exhibit of Heifetz memorabilia on a special one-time loan to the Festival from the United States Library of Congress. During the entire Festival, the Chateau Ramezay Museum will house this exhibit displaying Heifetz manuscripts, letters, photos and documents, some of which have never before been seen by the general public.

The Festival has truly become a feast for the eyes and the ears. The historic location of the Chalet de la montagne has been a springboard for new Festival initiatives. Festival 2001 inaugurates a new series entitled "BaroqueQuebec" dedicated to baroque music and performed on original instruments. These concerts will be presented in another historic and exquisite site, the Chapelle Notre Dame de Bon Secours, in the heart of Old Montreal.

Animating historic locations has become an integral part of the Festival through the establishment of an ongoing year-round series of chamber music presentations in historic homes. Entitled "Musique et Manoirs - Music and Mansions" and with the invaluable initiative of our newly-formed Junior Committee, headed by Concordia University's noted art historian Clarence Epstein, we are presenting concerts in some of Montreal's unique historic sites, such as Shaughnessy House, the former Dorchester mansion, Baumgarten House, the Mt. Stephen Club, and others. A short, enlightening architectural history about the site in which the concert takes place precedes each concert.

There is more to the Festival. "Concerts dans les Rues" are free noon-hour chamber concerts featuring performances in high-traffic locations in the center core of Montreal. These lunch-time events help make people aware of the Festival by putting chamber music in their midst. The results are amazing and quite encouraging.

I am especially proud of the fact that, since the beginning of the Festival, we have made a point of encouraging deserving young artists. By incorporating a brilliant young performer within a group of seasoned professionals, the musical result is astounding. As a by-product, often this performance opportunity becomes a professional introduction for the young artist and often results in future engagements and significant career opportunities.

Two years ago, the Festival embraced a program founded some 15 years ago by my parents, Lotte and Alexander Brott. "Les Jeunes Virtuoses" (Young Virtuosi) is a youth employment training program funded by Human Resources Development Canada. For twenty weeks, a group of 15 string players, all graduates from major music performance schools across the country, selected by national audition, is assembled for rehearsals and concerts culminating in performances at the Montreal Chamber Music Festival. This year, I am integrating them into the Festival by arranging a well-loved string octet into a kind of concerto grosso format. Festival artists, the likes of Los Angeles Philharmonic concertmaster Martin Chalifour, violinists James Ehnes, Moshe Hammer and Jonathan Crow, violists Atar Arad and Douglas McNabney and cellists Julie Albers, and I, will join these 15 young artists in what promises to be an unusual and special performance of Mendelssohn's Octet, a work written when the composer was a youngster of 16.

Youth is our future and an investment in it is not only delightful for the public and performer alike, it is an essential evolutionary force. Much of what music is can be taught in studio lessons but no learning experience replaces performing shoulder to shoulder with the seasoned professional.

All this is just the beginning. My ideas are not in the least bit exhausted. However, the biggest challenge to ensuring a future for the Montreal Chamber Music Festival is financial. When Mayor Bourque gave us a helping hand in 1995, I promised him we would reduce our financial involvement with the city by ten percent annually. I have been true to my word and our involvement with the city is now comparable to other Festivals in terms of services and assistance. Without Bourque's and the Ville de Montreal's helping hand, we would never have gotten off the ground. Perhaps the foresight of our Mayor will encourage other government officials to be equally inspired.

Music has always been a servant of some kind. It has always been a mirror of its time. In this age of the impersonal e-mail, digital messaging, and cell phones, we are more and more estranged from each other in our virtual cocoons. Ironically, it is precisely this set of circumstances that creates a need for chamber music. Through all this technology, we are being robbed of our interpersonal communication, of the intimate of life's human experience. Chamber music, like no other music, offers the listener an intimate experience. Traced back to its roots, chamber music was an interactive entertainment in someone's living room after dinner — a much more attractive past time compared to today's passive TV experience.

I am proud of what we have done to popularize chamber music through our efforts at the Montreal Chamber Music Festival. Others have taken notice. We have been recognized nationally and internationally for our artistic excellence and unique programming. Aside from laudatory articles in *Strad Magazine* out of London, England and *Strings Magazine* in the United States, here in Quebec the Quebec Music Council has awarded us their highest distinction. For two consecutive years now, we have been recognized both as Producer of the Year (1999) and Concert of the Year (2000), in competition against the "big guys" such as the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

Ours is a story of The Little Engine That Could. Through sheer determination and more, the Festival team has made a musical difference here in Montreal. Ultimately, though, my deepest gratitude goes to the artists who have joined me annually, giving of their artistry, reputation, time and have accepted limited performance fees, to allow the Festival to grow from infant to young adult. Time will tell whether we can continue to pull musical rabbits out of our Festival hat, but we will keep on trying, that I can assure you.

As good old William Shakespeare said, "If music be the food of life, play on". We plan to!

Denis Brott

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