



--- MUSIC December 6, 2017 ■ John Thomason

Q&A: Conductor Gerard Schwarz on his Boca Symphonia Birthday Bash

Conductor Gerard Schwarz injects a bit of himself into all of his performances, but his season-opening appearance behind the baton this coming Sunday with the Boca Symphonia is especially personal.

The Emmy-winning conductor of the All-Star Orchestra turned 70 this year, and the Symphonia contacted him about selecting a special program to honor this milestone. As a result, as he explains from the comfort of the Boca Raton Resort & Club—just a few days before the performance, and the day he flew into the Palm Beaches—all four pieces have personal resonance.

These include Torelli's "Sonata in Trumpet D," Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme," Beethoven's second symphony and the premiere of Schwarz's own "In Memoriam," a composition for cello and orchestra written for his son, master cellist Julian, who will perform it with him.

It always amazes me how little time you need to rehearse. You fly in, and a few days later is the concert.

Me too! The less rehearsal time, the more the orchestra has to prepare in advance. Which is an interesting concept—you always hear stories of musicians wanting to rehearse less. But it's especially tricky this weekend, because we're doing a new piece. The rest of the repertoire everybody knows, they've played it before.

The new piece is your own composition. Tell me about your inspiration behind it.

I wrote a piece for cello, piano and strings—two versions—called “In Memoriam.” It was the first piece I wrote that got me back into composing again; this was around 2005. I stopped composing [after Juilliard] because I really wanted to be a trumpet player, and then after that I really wanted to be a conductor. Not only didn’t I have the time, I didn’t have the inclination to isolate myself and write music, because that’s how you do it. Then when I got back into it about 12 years ago, I found it to be extremely satisfying.

This piece, “In Memoriam”—I’ve always had a vision of this being of being part of a bigger piece. So when the Boca Symphonia said they wanted to celebrate my birthday and have Julian come down, I suggested, why don’t I write something for Julian? Now, Julian is my son—I love him, I respect him tremendously. I think he’s a great, great artist. And he recorded “In Memoriam” when he was 16. He was a very gifted artist. I’d been wanting to write a concerto for him, but I just haven’t had the time. So I thought to myself, with Julian here, I can write something to him that will be a rhapsody. A rhapsody means it is full of ideas. It’s not a single gesture, but it’s many gestures. I thought about the gifts he has, both technically and musically. Then I just began.

And I began with a conversation between the cello and the orchestra. In a way it’s between me and my son. I say something, and he responds with a gesture. Then I say something else, and he responds with another gesture. Then what happens, this conversation that he and I have had becomes the essence of the piece.

For me, it’s always a combination of something that’s emotionally anchored—what’s it saying harmonically? What’s it saying melodically? How’s it going to reach the audience? At the same time, because this is a first-movement kind of piece, it needs to have energy and excitement. I’ve tried to combine a beautiful, lyrical writing with some real energy. The culmination is a cadenza for Julian. It’s very hard—I wrote the piece, and I thought, he’s so good, I’ll play something that’s tricky. And I did! I really haven’t heard the piece except in my head. I’m excited to hear it with the orchestra for the first time.

I love the idea of communicating with someone on that personal level through music, because music does communicate things that words don’t.

That’s so true. And when you hear Julian play the cello, it sounds like it’s a language or a voice. I’ve always found that about his playing, since he matured. That’s why I think of it as a conversation between my personality as a composer and his voice as a cellist.

Is it unusual for Julian to be playing on something that you're conducting, let alone composing?

Yes. He's very successful now; he's playing with 16 professional orchestras. Twice during the year we get to work together, which is a thrill for me. I try, once or twice, to somehow work a way for us to work together. This one is especially important, because we haven't done a piece of mine since he was 14, back in 2005.



Gerard and Julian

You're conducting pieces by Torelli, Tchaikovsky and Beethoven as well in this program. Are there themes or similarities that these works share, and is that something you consider when putting together a program?

Yes—certainly we do think about how the pieces work together, whether it's thematic or simply musical. For example, if you're going to do a difficult modern work, and you precede it with some Mozart, it can be difficult, because the audience's ear is conditioned to those kinds of traditional harmonies and melodies. Then you come up with something that's very modern, and it's a real jolt. On the other hand, if you play something by Debussy or Ravel, and then go into a more modern piece, your ear is used to that more adventuresome harmonic language.

So yes, we always consider those things. In this case, because when the Symphonia asked me to do something in honor of my 70th birthday—which is a big deal; I’m happy to say I have a 70th birthday!—I thought that I would do things that were special to me. For example, Jeff Kaye, a phenomenal trumpet player, is going to play this Torelli sonata. It’s a piece I played a lot when I was a trumpet player 40 years ago. It’s a piece I recorded, and edited. It was part of the fabric of what I did as a trumpet soloist.

Both Tchaikovsky and Beethoven were important composers to me, and so much of my early life was conducting those two composers. It gives me an advantage, then, because I was writing a piece for Julian, to do the “Rococo” Tchaikovsky, a great vehicle for him. Another consideration is it’s not very long. It’s only 17 minutes. If you add my 10-minute piece to that 17 minutes, that’s 27 minutes of the solo cello, which is about what a normal concerto would be.

And Beethoven—my parents are from Austria, and I grew up listening to Beethoven symphonies with my father. Every Sunday we’d go to the basement of our house, and he’d play me a Beethoven symphony. My father was a doctor, so he wasn’t around much. He worked all the time. And these were those moments I would have with my father. Beethoven was the third person in our conversation.

As you say, you’ve conducted these pieces many times in the past. Does playing them become muscle memory for you?

Never, I’m happy to say. If you just had it by rote, then it would certainly make life easier. But I re-study the piece. I re-studied it on the airplane coming down, trying to see new things, trying to reconcile Beethoven’s metronome marks, trying to understand what the composer wants, what I’m going to add to it or not.

The muscle memory does come, and that’s the conducting part. When I was younger, I had to think, how do I do the cutoff, how do I do the upbeat, all these technical things. Then as time went on, everything became automatic.

I’ve done the second symphony 50 times, probably—I know what could possibly go wrong, I know when the orchestra really needs me to be there for them. In other words, orchestras can play by themselves. But there are two things that I can help with. One is when there’s a little retard, a little slowing down, a little more accent, a little louder, a little softer—or something that’s different in terms of expression. Because you’ve done a piece a lot, you can then feel free to do those things to make it hopefully special.

If one person in the string section is one beat behind, or slightly off, you’ll hear it, right?

Absolutely. I can hear how fast people are drawing the bow, what kind of vibrato they’re using. I can hear how much pressure they’re using on the bow. Part of it is a gift, a talent for it, but you can train your ear to hear these things. When I started out, there was no way I could hear that.

So nowadays, if you go see a musical as a patron, are you able to turn that part off and enjoy the show, or do you nitpick the orchestra?

It's both. I like to go to concerts, and I love music, so I try to enjoy it. I notice things, and it doesn't matter much. Where I get into trouble is if someone doesn't interpret a work. It's just playing the notes, beating the time, getting through it. That upsets me, and I do see it more often than I would like. I look around and I think to myself, why are we here? Why did we come to this concert, if they aren't going to be making a real effort to do something special? I find that quite frankly to be the only really discouraging thing I see.

As far as I'm concerned, the audience, next to the music itself, is the most important element. My job is to make it exciting, to make it touching, to communicate in some way with that audience through the composer.

When you first transitioned to the baton, did you miss performing?

I do perform, but I don't make the sound myself. Yes, I did miss it, I do miss it. I haven't played the trumpet in 40 years, but I dream about it. When I was becoming a conductor, it wasn't possible to do both. Playing the trumpet is very hard, with a lot of practice necessary. Different people have different issues. For some, they don't have to practice that much to sustain their ability. I did. I had to practice probably an hour a day just to maintain my playing—forget about getting better. Forget about learning new repertoire.

I started conducting full-time at age 28 or 29, and in a sense, I was a little bit behind. All the kids I went to school with had been conducting for 10 years already. Now, all these years later, I *could* spend an hour a day now playing the trumpet. But I don't.

You published a memoir this year called *Behind the Baton*. Is there a story from that book that might surprise people?

There's so many stories in the book. It's a memoir, yes, so it's about my life, but it's also about all those experiences I had. I do it by ensemble: I do a little autobiography of myself, then I touch each orchestra—the New York Chamber Symphony, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Mostly Mozart. Among the most interesting stories was when Lincoln Center wanted to eliminate the Mostly Mozart festival, and how I worked with a number of board members and donors to save it. You feel a certain pride in fighting for what was right.

At 70, you could be retired and living a life of golf, and the beach, and mystery novels. What continues to motivate you about your chosen field?

I have a passionate love for music, and for performing it. I love conducting, I love being part of a group of highly intelligent, highly gifted people, to make something happen together. It's thrilling to be not only part of it but leading that charge.

I've also gotten to enjoy the solitude of writing music. All of those things prevent me from retiring. And the most important thing of all: I care deeply about the future of music, and the future only comes through exposure and education. I have become more focused on education and, through my television series, exposing people to great music.

The "Honoring Gerard Schwarz" concert will be at 3 p.m. Sunday at the Roberts Theater at Saint Andrew's School, 3900 Jog Road, Boca Raton. Tickets cost \$50-\$84. Call 866/687-4201 or visit thesymphonia.org.