

Interview with conductor Petar Dundjerski *by Isis Tse*



Petar Dundjerski is the conductor of the University of Alberta Symphony Orchestra. He was the Assistant Conductor in Residence of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra 2006-2008, under the mentorship of Music Director William Eddins. Petar Dundjerski has also performed flute professionally on numerous occasions across the city, including the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, and has 16 years of experience teaching.

Photo by Selena Phillips-Boyle, The Gateway

How did you become interested in classical music?

My mom took me to the concerts, back in Belgrade. I'd been hearing classical music since I was born – my mom played records at home and classical music on the radio all the time. When I started going to concerts, I liked the bigger stuff – orchestras, choirs, string quartets. I started playing the flute when I was 9, and was horrible at it until I was 16, until I decided I really want to use it as a profession. Conducting – well, apparently I conducted the radio when I was too tiny to remember. I got interested in conducting when I was in university; and when I thought I would pursue it as a career choice was in university, when I was around twenty.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

It's the synergy. When we're all on the same page, when people know their parts so well that they're free. That's the most important thing – that they're free to phrase and play at the top level. They can play the stuff that isn't in the music. It can only be the result of mastering everything on the page. My job is to give the right energy without getting in the way – add more to the understanding of energy, and helping with clarity – not where 1 and 2 are, but how they are to be played. It's so difficult to get to that point, but when it does happen, it is the most inexplicably beautiful feeling. I don't get that from anything else in my life. I like the process of getting there, but sometimes it can be scary and frustrating especially close to the concert, but that's okay.

What advice can you give to young musicians - aspiring professionals as well as amateurs?

I'll start with those who want to pursue it professionally. It is a very difficult profession. My advice is to be completely and fully committed; it's the same advice that any person who is good at what they do is going to say. Without a full commitment, it's

impossible, I think, almost impossible, to do it well. So what is a young person to do? You have to practice like there's no tomorrow; hours a day. You have to understand your mental approach to not burning out, but you have to practice a lot, spending the time to learning about other arts to understand the impulse of art, and finally, you have to be an artist. Go to summer festivals to be exposed to people who are just as good as you are, or better, and fail. And learn from failure to improve. You also need to have your mind as an artist. Cut down on television; go out with people who think alike, so you can develop that frame of mind; and surround yourself with people who understand art. The more you know about art and the world, the richer person you will be and the more you will be able to relate to it.

One part of it is your spirituality, and also the technical mastery of art. On your stand: metronome and tuner. Develop your inner sense of your pulse so that it is so strong that you will feel it most of the time. You also need to be in tune – the center of the pitch. Finally, learn how to practice. If you get a folder with a bunch of music, you might get thirty or forty pages of music; like I say in orchestra rehearsals all the time, you put an X before the line that's really difficult so you know to practice. No one can keep all that music perfectly in their head, so you need to just brush up and refreshen the memory before rehearsal. And go listen to all the pieces you are playing. For amateurs, the same thing - you should listen, play along with your part, again, put the X at the difficult parts, and then practice those slowly. A daily commitment is still important, not 3 hours, maybe just half an hour, but it's important to keep malleability is a player. Go listen to music, watch a movie, and read a book.


What is the biggest myth about being a conductor?

The biggest myth is that it's easy. It's not easy at all, especially for people who respect

this art. Even professionals can end up in positions where they don't have enough time to learn the score and just get by, in what they call "jet-set conducting". Most orchestras will read those conductors very quickly. Until you start doing it, you realize it's not that easy. The other myth is that anybody can do it. Ensembles and good musicians are sometimes subjected to people who are not very good conductors, and everything suffers – the goodwill of the player – and the final product.

What is the future of classical music?

The future of classical music in Edmonton may be different from rural Alberta, which is different from any point on Earth. I don't think it will die away, but it will if people keep doing the same things that they have been for the last 30 years. Perhaps it is human nature to be complacent, but not to the point of when survival will suffer. Some lovely ideas are being applied throughout the classical music world, and the ones that don't fly just die away, which is the way of everything.

I think the future is going to be very different, but I don't know exactly what it is, if I can be vague as that. For most people, when they go to live performances, it's different than on the radio, but if you have the old school approach, your program notes are seven pages long and everybody dresses a certain way. If you don't make new people feel welcome, they will not come back; that is not the way. There's nothing that can shut out people from this world except for people who are part of this world already. I don't feel pessimistic about the future. I think I understand human nature, and that human nature will find a way. 

Pictured below: Petar Dundjerski directing the U of A Symphony Orchestra.

