

Symphony tied to concert orchestra

By Harry van Vugt

Star Entertainment Writer

Though the formal history of the Windsor Symphony is usually said to date from 1947, a not-so-distant relative was active even before that.

Details about this harbinger are blurry, but there is agreement the ensemble was a concert orchestra, conducted by Ernest Rennie who ran a local music store.

It played in the Prince Edward Hotel ballroom and then the Tivoli Theatre and members formed the backbone of what was to become Matti Holli's Windsor Symphony.

Matti apparently wasn't a member of the concert orchestra.

Celia Hardcastle, who played cello in both, recalls that the concert orchestra began just before the Second World War.

THE BALLROOM of the since-demolished Prince Edward Hotel was one location for its popular series of concerts, while the Tivoli was another.

Carmon T. Adams, president of the Windsor Federation of Musicians, says it also played briefly at the Palace.

Rex Eve, who played alto saxophone in the concert orchestra, Adams, Celia

Hardcastle and MC Jim Van Kuren all agree the concerts were extremely popular; Celia says there were sometimes line-ups to get in, even in bitter cold.

Radio Station CKLW apparently aired some of the concerts. And Van Kuren recalls having to augment his wardrobe because of the assignment.

"I went out and bought a set of tails for the purpose," he says.

The concert orchestra also contributed to the war effort, raising money for the smokes fund — to buy cigarettes for our boys in the military.

THOUGH THERE is some debate whether this concert orchestra eventually disbanded or evolved without interruption into the Windsor Symphony, many feel it set the stage for it.

Celia Hardcastle, who thinks it never has had the credit it deserves, remembers that Rennie had a back injury and the concert orchestra was then amplified into a symphony.

"What Matti did was augment what was an extremely fine concert orchestra," she says.

Says Rex Eve: "Most of the people who formed the nucleus of the Windsor Symphony came from that orchestra."

Comments Jim Van Kuren: "Matti was smart enough to pick up the pieces and take it over."

Windsor Star
Sept. 19, 1986

1986-87 SEASON

By Harry van Vugt
Entertainment Reporter

THERE'S a fever sweeping through Windsor Symphony Orchestra (WSO) circles these days, but it's the kind that will put people into the Cleary Auditorium instead of in hospital.

The cause is the excitement of launching a new season, heightened by the anticipation of welcoming a new music director and principal conductor, Dwight Bennett.

Bennett, who will be dovetailing his responsibilities in Windsor with duties as music director and conductor of the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra, will be on the podium for all the WSO's main-series concerts, beginning with the opening pair Sept. 27 and 28.

THAT PROGRAM, with Canadian pianist Andre Laplante as soloist, will be repeated at Detroit's Orchestra Hall Sept. 29.

In the past, the WSO has traditionally reserved its Orchestra Hall visit for the tail end of the season, when the orchestra could be expected to be at the top of its form.

Though Bennett knows it's a gamble to visit Detroit right off the bat, it's a risk he's willing to take.

"It's good to see the beginning, to see how we grow together and develop. The only important conductors are the ones who build," maintained the 40-year-old Bennett, who has a two-year contract with the WSO.

WHAT BENNETT hopes the WSO grows into within six years — if the board will go along — is an orchestra with a professional core of 46 musicians, compared to the current 10.

Modelled on the similar-sized National Arts Centre Orchestra of Ottawa, such an ensemble would be tailor-made for touring and might even find a niche in Detroit as a specialist in the Haydn/Mozart tradition.

But of more immediate concern is building up audiences, which lagged at 44 per cent of capacity Saturday nights and 60 per cent Sunday afternoons in the main series during the transitional 1985-86 season.

"I've got two goals in everything. The first goal is to develop a much larger, more diversified audience."

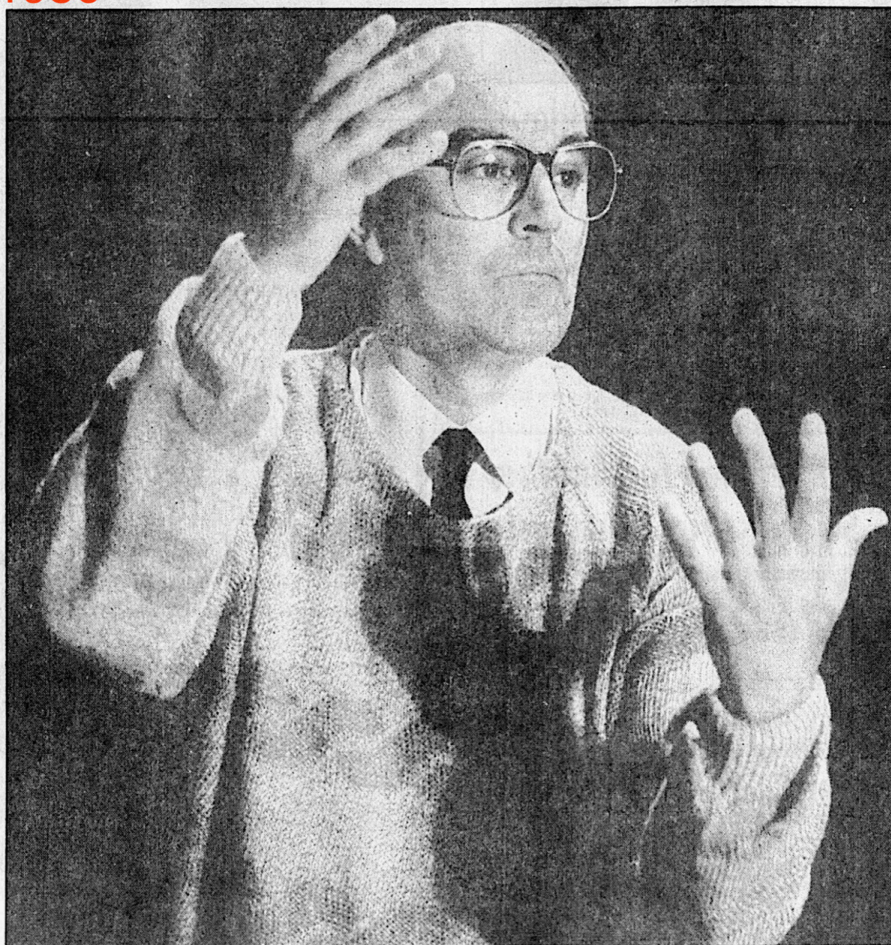
TO THAT END, Bennett has introduced a promenade concert featuring Canadian pianist Arthur Ozolins at the Clociario Club. He's projecting a sellout for the pops series, and predicting a record for the main series.

"Tickets are way ahead of last year. We're going to reach an all-time high."

If the presence of a new music director is one lure, another is an array of compositions audiences can easily relate to in the main series — such as the Brahms Symphony No. 1; Berlioz Symphonie fantastique; Dvorak Symphony No. 9 (From the New World); Shostakovich Symphony No. 5; Beethoven Symphony No. 7; and the Mahler Symphony No. 1 (Titan).

THE CONCERTOS also are sure bets — the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 2, the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor, the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 3, the Brahms Violin Concerto.

If the repertoire is strictly in the mainstream, the musicians can't afford to merely drift along with the current. That's where the second of Bennett's two-pronged goals plugs in.



Star photo/Nick Brancaccio

DWIGHT BENNETT TO OPEN NEW SEASON

By Dwight Bennett
Music director and principal conductor
Windsor Symphony Orchestra

"I AM VERY excited to be in Windsor as part of the Windsor Symphony Society.

"Windsor is a very vigorous city, poised for cultural growth, and the Windsor Symphony Orchestra is ready to lead the way. We have big dreams and exciting plans.

"I have two goals for the orchestra — first, to increase and diversify our audience and, second, to build the finest symphony orchestra in Southwestern Ontario.

"The musicians are getting nervous. They are gathering their music and they should. I wanted to challenge them.

"This really is a difficult season. They don't get that much more difficult."

But Bennett doesn't intend to behave as an ogre imposing his will from

above.

"I DON'T LIKE the conductor mystique," he said. "I don't have it.

"I think I'm a good musician. And I'm Canadian — a person who speaks the language of the country," said Bennett, who was born in Campbellford, near Peterborough.

That Canadianism is reflected in the

rio. We are positive we know we can do it!

"We know the city of Windsor will become even more aware and proud of this orchestra. Music is about people. Our symphony puts people first; elitism is out, people are in.

"The development of a full-time core within the full orchestra has begun; this year's repertoire is by far the most ambitious the Windsor Symphony Orchestra has undertaken and the guest artist roster is of a high and consistent level.

"We intend to leave no stone unturned in our attempt to reach our goals of audience and orchestral growth.

"This is just the beginning. Wait and see what happens next year."

all-Canadian roster of soloists featured in the main series — pianists Robert Silverman and Andre Laplante; soprano Nancy Hermiston; violinist Angele Dubeau; flautist Jean-Francois Rompre; bassoonist Leslie Magowan. Though tendonitis has forced Steven Staryk to take a leave of absence as concertmaster of the Toronto Sympho-

ny, Bennett said his Nov. 29 and 30 appearances with the WSO are still on. "As far as I know, he's playing for us."

THE POPS SERIES is also rich in Canadian content — the Moe Koffman Quartet, tenor Mark DuBois, Don Harron and Catherine McKinnon, Howard Cable and Quintessence.

While he doesn't like to dwell on it,

Bennett had some rocky moments in Thunder Bay. There was a financial crisis the orchestra barely weathered and even Bennett didn't get paid for several months.

But he says morale is high in the Thunder Bay Symphony now. He's on cordial terms and the community has been supportive of, not bitter about, his decision to add a second podium.

If anything, he seems to have come through those trying times a somewhat chastened and humbler human being.

"I FEEL THAT I can handle anything now, although you don't know what's coming next," he said.

Bennett is adamant about battling for his musicians.

"Arts are taking place in Canada on the backs of the artists," he said. "As a musician and as a music director, I want to work very hard toward fair salaries for my musicians. I think that's the key to morale. I think that's a key to justice."

Bennett's also hoping acoustical tinkering at the Cleary Auditorium will do more justice to the Windsor Symphony. "We're in the listening field and I think it's the sound that counts."

ALL THE sound-absorbing material that can be cleared from the Cleary's stage area is being taken down, so the orchestra can get maximum benefit from a new acoustical backdrop of wood panels with spaces.

"The idea is not to force the sound out to the listener. The idea is to develop a resonating chamber onstage," Bennett explained. "Admittedly, to a degree it's a temporary solution."

The acoustical enhancement of the Cleary is a high priority for Bennett, as are improved access and increased seating capacity.

Though he'd prefer to see it go to 1,500 seats from the current 1,194, a more practical figure would be 1,350 to 1,400, he admitted. The WSO needs those extra seats to generate revenue, he argued.

BENNETT'S INFLUENCE can be seen in other ways. Though Canadian music will remain the mainstay of the Largely Canadian Series, it will be blended in with works by such composers as Beethoven, Hindemith, Nielsen, Debussy, Schubert, Villa-Lobos and Brahms.

"I don't like ghettoizing," he said.

In order not to be swamped by the work that goes with dual posts in Windsor and Thunder Bay, Bennett has given up teaching at Lakehead University.

"All I'm thinking about now is the score," he said.

His base in Windsor, for now, is a rented condominium in downtown's Royal Windsor Terrace.

"THAT WAY, it gives us a chance to look around, get to know the community better, find out where we want to live."

While cities like Kitchener, Ottawa and London roll up the sidewalks downtown after 6 p.m., Bennett has noticed Windsor still bustles. For want of a better term, the place is much more "peopled," he suggested.

"I think that is one of Windsor's trump cards."

If he's high on the community, the sky would seem to be the limit as far as the orchestra is concerned.

"The energy in the orchestra right now is absolutely contagious," Bennett said. "They are going to inspire me as much as I inspire them."

Gati — Houdini of the orchestra

By Harry van Vugt

Star Entertainment
Writer

He's survived a Second World War in which he was forced to collect live bombs, the Hungarian Revolution in which he made it to the Yugoslav frontier in a taxi, a plane crash in which three were killed, an auto wreck that he walked away from, though the vehicles were demolished.

If Laszlo Gati, the music director of the Windsor Symphony, hasn't had a charmed life, he at least qualifies as one lucky guy.

"You try to convince yourself there must be some purpose to your life," he says, looking back on those close calls.

And perhaps the greatest miracle of all is that his sense of humor has endured along with him.

"THE MOST important thing to know about Laszlo is that he has a sense of fun," confides a friend.

The zigzagging path that led to the Windsor Symphony podium in 1979 started on Sept. 25, 1925 in Timisoara, western Romania, known as *Temesvar* to Hungarians.

When Gati was born, the city (with a population of about 250,000 today) was under Romanian sovereignty, but it had been part of the Austro-Hungarian nation, dismembered as a result of the First World War; the 1920 Treaty of Trianon meant the capital was now Bucharest.

Timisoara, Gati remembers, was a polyglot community, where one heard Hungarian, Serbian and German, in addition to Romanian, on the streets.

THOUGH HIS mother tongue was Hungarian, he also spoke German, French and Romanian by age five, and later found himself being educated in Latin.

Gati's father was in the pastry/bake shop trade, prospering as the business grew to a chain of 25 outlets.

"He was a brilliant man in his way, way ahead of his time," says Gati, of a man who stayed abreast of the latest



MAESTRO GATI
...today

developments — and ahead of the competition — by attending trade shows in places like Leipzig.

"He was an extremely hard worker. At one time, we had 70 people working in the bake shops."

One of those who helped was mother Vera, who ran the front end of the operation, preparing displays, for instance.

FATHER HOPED the three sons would follow him into the family business; Gati's stepbrother was to be the baker, his brother was to be the pastryman, Gati was to be the engineer running the mill.

"I lasted one whole week," Gati admits, enduring a series of mishaps including instructions to refine, with a knife, flour that was already fine as a practical joke.

"After awhile, I realized they were pulling my leg."

But even as a youngster, Gati had heard the virtuoso violinist Nathan Milstein, and thought: "If I practice, I might be travelling the world like him."

At age 9, he had a brush with the power a conductor feels, when he walked down the aisle during the intermission of a showing of *King Kong*, to the final chords of Liszt's *Les Preludes*.

BUT FIRST there was the small matter of the Second World War to contend with.

Living in a nation that was a

puppet of Nazi Germany, Gati found American bombs exploding around him by day, British ones by night, since Timisoara was a strategic railroad junction.

As a Jew, his life was even more precarious.

"We had our bags packed in the living room for about five years. Many of my friends were taken away and killed."

Among his assignments was gathering unexploded bombs, collecting the incendiary variety, sometimes disarming delay-action types.

Meanwhile, "the soldiers were back at a safe distance with guns."

AIR RAIDS meant digging graves and collecting the dead, but even corpses soon lost their shock value.

"You become so blasé that nothing fazes you any more."

Romania's quislings had other work to be done — digging a channel between two rivers to obstruct the Soviet tanks that were surely on the way.

Work, forced labor actually, began at 4 a.m., often while standing in ice cold water.

"I was in the ditch on D day," he recalls. That was June 6, 1944, when the Allies stormed the beach at Normandy.

In April 1946, Gati went to Budapest, Hungary permanently, becoming an Hungarian citizen when Romania called him up for the army.

FROM 1946 until 1953, he played violin in the Hungarian State Philharmonic, conducting on the side, often on a free-lance basis.

In 1954, he was appointed head of the symphonic and chamber music department of the Hungarian Radio, eventually fostering exchange of programs as a thaw set in.

"Call it socialism with a human face," he says, of the liberalized atmosphere.

Gati had attended a convention of broadcasters in Warsaw just before the revolution, and an invitation had come to conduct in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

After the revolution broke out and the Soviets cracked down, Gati decided to make his move.



A YOUNG GATI AND HIS MOTHER, VERA, ABOUT 1945
...the bakery was not to be his metier

WITH HIS 14-month-old daughter and wife, and the uncertain protection of a passport, Yugoslav visa and Soviet military visa, Gati and family headed for the Yugoslav border by taxi — the only means of transportation available, because of a general strike.

With the help of his brother in Belgrade, a diplomat representing Israel, Gati got clearance to come to Canada, the nation where his parents had arrived in the early 1950s.

But their Yugoslav airliner, destination Vienna, Munich, Paris, went down in a ploughed field 20 miles outside Munich.

While the daughter escaped injury, Gati and his wife spent three months convalescing.

THE PLANE broke in 1,100 pieces. It was a miracle I survived," says Gati, whose fear of flying was cured by a stormy, 11-day crossing on a boat.

"It was a mysterious thing because they didn't find technically anything wrong with the plane."

Even when in Canada, Gati blacked out as a result of the crash, leading to a violent car collision in Montreal when he was an instructor for a driving school.

Fortunately, he had dropped off a student.

Gati's father died in 1980; at the ripe age of 86. His mother, 83, lives in Victoria, where

Gati was music director before coming to Windsor, and his wife, from whom he is legally separated, lives in Victoria, too.

HIS STEPBROTHER died in 1979 at age 64 in Jerusalem, as the result of complications from surgery.

And his brother, 3½ years older than Gati, has left the career in the diplomatic corps and is now in administration with El Al, the Israeli airline.

He has two daughters, Susanne, 27, head of the graphics and design department for a Los Angeles department store, while his 25-year-old daughter Kathleen lives in New York, and hopes for a career in ballet, singing and acting, while working as an accountant to help pay the bills.

As for Gati, he relaxes with his watercolors and yoga at his University Avenue West apartment.

Any vices? "I feel that I don't overeat but somehow the results are there," says Gati, who blames his tummy on the pastry-baking shop heritage.

What he doesn't have any appetite for is rancor. He's just glad to be alive.

"I was prepared for not surviving the war," he admits.

"I kind of grew up as a humanist from the word go. I never developed any guilt pangs about any nation."