

Putting on a Student Concert at the National Arts Centre By Boris Brott

Programming, writing and arranging a concert for the National Arts Centre's Student Matinee concert series is a bit like preparing dinner for 5, 000 kids with picky appetites! I enjoy the challenge, especially when you enjoy the concerts!

First comes the selection of the featured composer. We look for a composer who is a musician of stature, someone who has written a lot of music that has stood the test of time. He or she must also have led an interesting life, and have been the subject of a great deal of writing.

With almost a thousand years of musical history to draw upon, the choice is never easy. Once the featured composer has been chosen, our research begins, I read books, letters and stories about the composer, look at the composer's scores (the orchestra music read by the conductor), listen to recordings and watch films about the composer's life and times.

We then select a program of music that fits the budget. The NAC Orchestra generally has about 46 players, so the pieces we choose must be written or rearranged for the combination of instruments in the Orchestra. I look for variety, choosing works that offer a musical contrast (loud, fast, slow, quiet, etc.). After all, the chosen works must captivate you the entire time we are together at the National Arts Centre.

Some of the selections are easy to make. Generally, I look for pieces that demonstrate some special quality that the composer (actor) can talk about on stage.

Choosing soloists is also important in achieving variety. It is also a chance to demonstrate the accomplishments of young people who live in the area. Again, making the selection is never easy. I audition young musicians suggested by some of the best local music teachers.

Writing the script is done as the music is being selected. One of the challenges in writing the dialogue is to keep the composer interesting

and believable. The exchanges on stage between the composer and the conductor must sound like a natural conversation.

The idea is for you to get a real sense of the composer's emotions, his humour, sadness, treachery, genius, sorrow – all in the space of only 15 minutes of dialogue!

Once the script is written, there is still a lot of work to do. For example, Claire Speed, the co-ordinator of youth programming for NAC Orchestra, engages the soloists and co-ordinates with the orchestra librarian and personnel manager the music to be performed at the concert, and the number of musicians needed to perform. Claire also hires the actor who brings the composer to life on stage.

Once all of the artistic elements are in place, a "plot plan" is sent to the National Arts Centre. This includes everything the stagehands need to set up the stage for rehearsals and the performances, from lighting and sound equipment to the Orchestra's seating arrangements.

After all that, we are finally ready to rehearse. Our one-hour performance must be perfected on only two hours of rehearsal time. This means everyone must know his or her individual part before our first rehearsal together.

As conductor and host, I have to prepare the parts and know the music intimately. At the rehearsals, I act like the director of a play. I adjust the pacing, volume and timing, the dynamics (loud, soft, etc.) and the spirit of the piece. I also have to prepare my exchange with the actor composer and make it seem as natural as possible.

Showtime!

Curtain time is the most exciting moment! We never know whether the whole thing will work, whether or not you will be involved and enthralled by what you see and hear, until we do it for the first time.

If we succeed, you will go away having thoroughly enjoyed what you have heard and seen. We, the musicians, soloists, administrators, stage hands, directors, lighting personnel, conductor and actor will have enjoyed bringing each composer's music and life story to you.