

Violinist James Ehnes always strives for ‘a little more’

Manitoba native who has dazzled audiences around the world comes back to Canada in May

J.R. PATTERSON

The leaves whipped through the streets of Birmingham, England, and the Brummies crossing Centenary Square before the Symphony Hall were bent double to fight the clutch of their bilious winter. Nearby, Canadian violinist James Ehnes entered the Hyatt Regency Hotel lobby wrapped in a dark peacoat, which he removed to reveal a smart navy blazer over a white-and-black checkered shirt.

Slung on Ehnes's shoulder was his blue leather-trimmed violin case, inside his 1715 “Marsick” Stradivarius violin. The next day, he would perform Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35*, with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under conductor Kazuki Yamada; that evening, he had come from teaching a master class to local students, one of many opportunities that he doesn't seek out so much as they “tend to happen.”

“I can usually remember players more than faces,” he said, settling into a deep bucket armchair. “I'll see someone, and say, ‘I know you. ... Oh, right. You're the guy with the good octaves, or whatever.’”

Though teaching is now an official part of his commitments (since mid-2024, Ehnes has been a professor of violin at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music), he finds it adds yet another layer of immersion to each place he visits. “This is going to sound more negative than it's meant to, but there's a certain mercenary element to what I do. I'm a hired gun who comes in, does the job and leaves. And that's fine. It's a luxury. But, it's nice for there to be a little bit more.”

That spirit of generosity and lust for connection is realized in his easy smile, his powerfully warm playing style and his comfort and eagerness to speak with insight about his craft. At the age of 49, he brims with youthfulness; a mischievous glint, and the boyish cowlick on his forehead. But it's a virtuoso's dilemma for youth and adulthood to be forever muddled.

Ehnes has been in high demand since the age of 12, when he first played for then-Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra conductor Bramwell Tovey in the back rooms of Centennial Concert Hall. At 13, he made his orchestral debut with the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal. Then came Juilliard, and a lifetime of globe-trotting performances.

This year marks yet another year of heavy touring, with performances in Europe, the United States and Canada. After Birmingham would come London, then a weeks-long tour of Oceania and



James Ehnes, centre, performs in March at Hamer Hall in Melbourne, Australia. He says playing defensively cheats the audience out of a worthwhile performance. PHOTOS BY LOUIS TRERISE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



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Asia as the artist in residence with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. “I'm always moving, and when I stop, it takes me a little while to make that transition,” he said. “I have one friend who refers to coming home after a tour as ‘re-entry.’ There's a certain inertia that every person has, and we get used to what is familiar.”

He now lives in Florida, and we briefly talked of the differences between his life there – alligators, everglades, beach buggies – with his upbringing in Brandon – wheat fields, the muddy Assiniboine, pick-up trucks. “One of the sad things for someone who enjoys nature and countryside is that my job is not required in empty landscapes. I get my inspiration from nature – it might be a national park, or somebody's flower box.”

Ehnes has said of Brandon that there was “nowhere else where I could have received that kind of incredible attention from so many wonderful musicians. It's worth celebrating that, in Canada, you can thrive in these unusual areas.”

The arts scene in Canada is often connected with the national funding apparatus, and I wondered what he thought of the os-

tensible threats that loom over those programs. He was characteristically optimistic. “Art music has always been a slightly precarious art form. I have so much gratitude towards the Canadian arts scene and certain institutions like the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council, the Musical Instrument Bank of the Canada Council.”

Ehnes recognized, however, that public funding alone has never been enough. “There needs to be a particular shout-out to the incredible Canadian philanthropy that supports the arts organizations and keeps them going.”

Naturally, there is a difference between fostering an art form and fostering appreciation for it. As a performer, Ehnes faces pressure to conform to well-liked and standard repertoire. As an artist, he seeks to explore the boundaries of what audiences will accept.

His role as director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society has given him leeway in slipping the somewhat constricting bonds and formalized expectations of “classical” music to explore more modern or experimental work. “I know the challenge of saying to someone, ‘This might be your favourite concert of the year, or you

might hate it.’ It's human nature that we would rather have something predictable than the opportunity of something great. As a programmer, I always want to put a program together where I cannot promise you'll like it, but rather you'll be glad you heard it. If you have an experience you didn't like, but it broadened your understanding of things, that's a victory.”

Despite his fruitfulness (around 60 records since 1996, the most recent of which is a collection of concertos by Edouard Lalo, Camille Saint-Saëns and Pablo de Sarasate recorded with the BBC Philharmonic), his relationship between performance and recording is conflicted. Transferring the energy and mystique of a live recital to a record is difficult without an audience to play off. He likens his work in close parallel to stand-up comedy. “A comedian has their routines, but it's not effective if they give the impression of telling a story for the millionth time. It has to seem spontaneous, effortless, conversational, personal. And the way you tell a joke to your sibling, your teacher and your friend is a little different.”

High-level performance is aided in some part by the equipment one uses. Ehnes likens the “Marsick,” the violin that has been in his possession since 2014, to a “work of art that produces works of art,” that gives him “the sense of pushing the limits of one's self.” But he surprised me with ideas that were more enigmatic: that technical proficiency is immeasurable, that striving for perfection limits the capability of art, that playing defensively cheats the audience out of a worthwhile performance.

In his mind, performance is a methodical process, a never-ending cascade of practice and internalization to find that luminous edge where surprises can be cherished. “In a concert, the most amazing moments are when you

feel like you can be really flexible and really communicative, and the relationship with the audience becomes very spontaneous. Audience members don't always recognize how much the experience has to do with them. They put it all on the performer, but it's like, ‘What are you receptive to?’ There's a danger of wasting our opportunities because we think we can always have everything all the time.”

Ehnes denies any magic quality to his ability, and he is emphatic about the balance of labour and luck. “There's a compulsion to think that the reason you've had success at something is because you've worked a little harder, you've loved it a little more, you've wanted it a little more, you've made more sacrifices. But, if you open your eyes and be honest, the world's a big place. Even in something as niche as playing the violin, so many people who I've known have wanted to have what I have. It would be an insult to these other people if I didn't feel like practising, didn't feel like working, didn't feel like striving for a little more.”

The next day, I attended the preconcert rehearsal at Symphony Hall. To the squall of the orchestra rehearsing Dmitri Shostakovich's *Festival Overture*, Ehnes appeared backstage in a grey sweater and cream slacks, looking relaxed if a little distant. We shook left hands, his fingers lithe and muscular, as the “Marsick” was deftly hooked in his right. I asked if all his travelling had affected his sleep. “I had the weirdest dream last night,” he said. “My wife was trying to call me, but she couldn't get through. I woke up at 2 a.m. and immediately texted her. Everything was fine, but I was wide awake. And then I watched two episodes of *Severance*.”

When he joined the rehearsal, the orchestra accepted him without pomp; he was an old friend, and the talent and celebrity of a friend is taken in stride. Two hours later, with the audience spilling in, the hall was filled with an electric brume of anticipation. Ehnes, now in a tailed tuxedo, took to the stage, and gave a light yet ferocious performance of Tchaikovsky, building tension that released with each swirling coil of note-heavy runs.

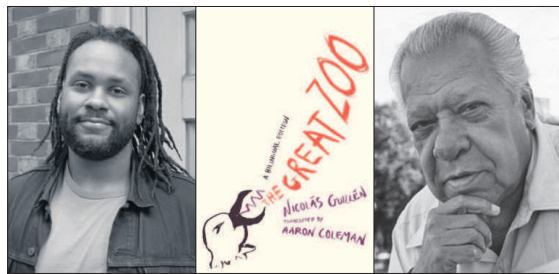
After a six-minute ovation, he returned to perform the Largo from Bach's *Sonata No. 3 in C Major*. He spun a solenoid of sound, pulling the audience through Bach's rippling double counterpoint. I sensed neither the anxiety of his dream, or the restlessness of his night in his playing. Like the rest of those listening, I was somewhere else, transported by this Prairie boy to places faraway and surprising.

Special to The Globe and Mail

James Ehnes will play at the FirstOntario Concert Hall in Hamilton on May 3 and at Toronto's Koerner Hall on May 11.

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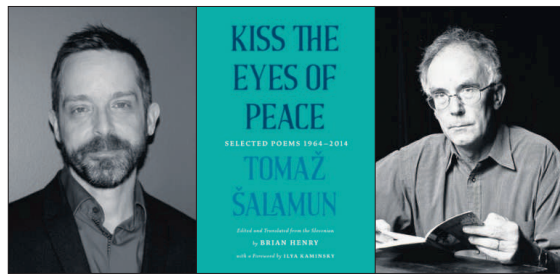
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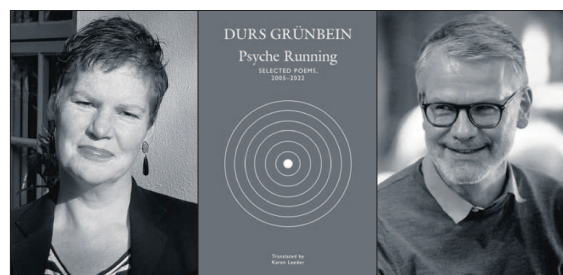
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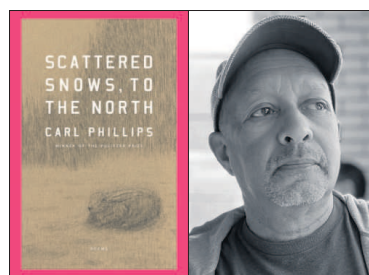
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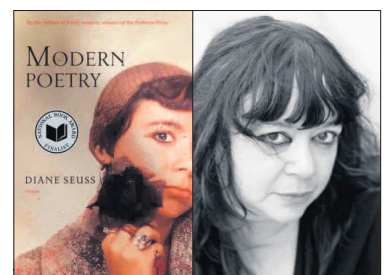
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