

Life On Ellis Island

Prince George's Philharmonic Conductor Charles Ellis May Travel The World and Inspire Arts Lovers around the Nation, But He Makes Beautiful Music in the County

By Archana Pyati

As we descend to the basement of his Baltimore row house, Charles Ellis asks if I like roller coasters. "Do you like visceral, physical thrills?" he wonders before pushing "play" on the stereo. What comes next is a churning vortex of sound, haunted music that speaks of trauma and fear. It starts with a sense of urgency and the precision of marching soldiers readying for war; it ends with a crescendo into chaos.

We're listening to the second movement of Dmitri Shostakovich's 10th symphony played by the Prince George's Philharmonic. Ellis has just explained what the piece is about: the composer's experience of living under the terror of Joseph Stalin's purges of artists and intellectuals in early 20th century Russia.

"There he is, Stalin himself," he says into the silence created by the piece's dizzying conclusion.

"How are you supposed to wrap your brain around a piece of music like that if you don't know what it represents?"

What I've just experienced is a classic Charles Ellis moment, where a brief history lesson enlivens a piece of music beyond a technical discussion of its notes. He is famous for his pre-performance chats with the audience, offering them a heads-up on what they're about to hear. As the philharmonic's music director for more than a decade, Ellis spends his time getting inside the minds of geniuses to elicit the best performance from his all-volunteer orchestra.

It's a fine balancing act for Ellis – presenting his players with challenging works that keep them interested while understanding they have full-time jobs outside the rehearsal room. What he loves is the absence of cut-throat politics and ego, not uncommon in professional symphonies: "It's all about the music... These are amateurs in the purest and best sense of the word. They love making music."

Yet he is loathe to dumbing down the classical repertoire, performing works like Antonín Dvoák's "Othello" even before the National Symphony Orchestra gets to them. "It's been very successful because he recognizes that everyone isn't a professional musician," says concertmaster Judith Shapiro, who credits Ellis for his tightly-run rehearsals. "He's terrific at it, and that's why it's gone on for so long and why it's improved. We're here to make music as best as we can."

Ellis is on a mission to make classical music more accessible, taking on the stereotype of the classical music lover as the "effete arrogant snob that everyone hates." Under his leadership, the orchestra has expanded its outreach among young musicians in the county, and at \$20 per show, tickets are among the best deals in town. Ellis seeks out a diverse group of soloists to perform with the philharmonic each year, conveying the message that "we are of all people, of all nationalities, of all colors... and classical music represents that," says Board President Mary Ann White.

Life would've turned out differently if Ellis had followed his original impulse to be a band director. Twice, he passed up on jobs his mentors had lined up for him – first, at a high school upon graduating from Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music, and second, at a college campus after he was discharged from the United States Army in the early 1970's.

Ironically, it was his touring experience as a euphonium player with the U.S. Army Field Band that pushed him towards the riskier and more artistically rewarding conductor's life.

On bus rides crisscrossing the country, Ellis immersed himself in the repertoire, pouring over Beethoven and Mozart scores and conducting informal ensembles in his spare time. After breaking the news to his parents that

he was opting for graduate school in conducting instead of settling into a job, they were afraid at first.

He proved them wrong by diving head first into the world of freelance conducting upon graduating in 1975, and never stopping since. "I had gone into this to see where it was going to lead me, and I figured the least I owed myself was to take a flying leap at it," he says.

As he reminisces, the edgy humor and salty speech of his native Boston comes through: "I must have looked like I had just gotten out of a space ship from 'Maahz' with my short hair," he says of his arrival at the New England Conservatory, where hippie counter-culture was the norm. "Here I come with my crew cut and little mustache that I'm just starting to grow, and I've been in this weird-a-bell jar on wheels riding round playing promotional concerts for the Army."

Neither rich nor famous, Ellis seems happy for the life he has built with Anna, his wife of nine years. The two led parallel lives before they ever met, residing one street away from each other in identical row houses in Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood. They met at the opening of a mutual friend's yoga studio. "Our lives changed the day before everyone else's because it was September 10, 2001," he recalls.

A year and a half later, the two married. Ellis calls Anna his soul mate, and they seem to have a symbiotic relationship. A software developer for Deutsche Bank, she's the breadwinner, and he's the cook, making sure dinner is ready when she returns from the office, "except on rehearsal night." He's the artist, and Anna is his No. 1 fan, working the box office for each philharmonic performance.

**Philharmonic Season
Schedule on Page 86**

