The National Arts Centre has named Alexander Shelley to replace Pinchas Zukerman as conductor of the orchestra. Shelley is currently music director of the Nuremberg Symphony in Germany.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — The seventh Music Director in the storied history of the National Arts Centre Orchestra will also be its youngest ever. Alexander (Alex) Shelley, a handsome, intense 34-year-old originally from London, England, has been chosen to replace conductor Pinchas Zukerman.

Shelley is currently the music director of the Nuremberg Symphony in Germany and, despite his youth, he has led orchestras across Europe, in North America, Asia, Australia and South America.

Shelley, who is married with no children, will take the helm of the NACO at the beginning of the 2015-16 season. He follows Zukerman to head what has become, in Shelley’s words, “a world-class orchestra.”

In an interview, Shelley was fulsome in his praise for Zukerman, whom he described as “a living legend. I grew up listening to his recordings and loving his recordings.”

Zukerman will depart after 15 years on the job. During his tenure the orchestra has toured extensively, including a triumphant tour of China earlier this month; has commissioned and performed many new works by Canadian composers; and has established a tradition of music education that is drawing praise for the institution far beyond Canada’s borders.

Shelley has already conducted the NACO five times, and is back for performances Oct. 31 and Nov. 1.

“I feel like I have very much my own relationship with the orchestra,” he said. “We are very different people and we come from very different musical backgrounds. He (Zukerman) is a violinist/violist, I am a string player (cello) but I have a completely different history. I feel neither like I would want to nor need to fill his shoes.”

Shelley said he wanted the NAC post for three reasons:

“First, from the very beginning when I met the orchestra, the chemistry was right. Chemistry in any walk of life is important, but in music and especially in the job I do. ... That chemistry from the beginning was right and it’s developed every time I’ve been here.”

“Second, the administration, the vibe and the ambition of the institution within NACO and within the NAC overall.

“Thirdly, the fact that it is a national institution is very exciting. I believe very much that music has a local relevance. But also ... music is a very strong force. Any art form channelled in the right way is a strong force for good, and for helping people develop and helping create cohesion in communities.

“It’s about the doors that it opens and the worlds it opens up and what that does for education and engaging young people in arts.”

Shelley also comes to the position with some specific goals in mind.

“First and foremost, to maintain and further develop the wonderful artistic standards that have been created because it really is a world-class
NAC Orchestra’s new conductor is the youngest ever in the job

Second, he is keen to maintain and develop the educational outreach done by the NAC, including the annual Summer Music Institute.

And finally, “how to fulfil this idea of a national role. The role of an institution like ours really needs to be offering a forum for Canadian talent. Also it should be a place where composers and artists can feel safe to experiment. A key part of this is taking this message of what music can do to the whole country, and again to those places that don’t have the benefit of having a great local orchestra.”

Shelley says he wants to hit the road with NACO. He expects to tour the country but also wants to continue to develop the media platforms the centre has developed to reach the country more deeply.

“Digital platforms offer you the opportunity to reach new places, but you (also) have to physically be there.

“One of my first wishes is to get out there and engage with people. I would say in my professional persona, one of the things that I thrive on is a sense of collaboration and not just with other musicians, but with audiences.

“I find the experience of being in a concert hall is about sharing. It’s not for no reason that there is a similarity in the scale between concert halls and churches. People go there not just to hear the music but to have a shared experience. You can read liturgy at home, people do, people pray at home. But it’s very important for it to be shared.”

Shelley says that when he conducts, he can sense whether the audience is on the same page. So don’t be surprised if he speaks directly to the audience from his perch in Southam Hall.

In Nuremberg, on a field where the Nazis used to hold mass rallies, he presents an outdoor concert every year to a crowd of about 70,000. The Klassik Open Air is Europe’s largest annual classical music concert.

“I moderate the whole thing and I conduct the whole thing.”

He says he has always been prepared to speak about the music he is conducting.

“That’s something I’ve done since I was 15. Not in every context. It’s not always what the piece requires or what the audience requires. It’s horses for courses.”

His comment indicates the kind of care Shelley takes in putting together a musical season.

As a student, he started a chamber orchestra called the Schumann Camerata with which he created “440Hz”, an innovative series of concerts involving prominent German television, stage and musical personalities, conceived to attract young adults to the concert hall.

“I tried to create something that I’d really want to go to. Even though I love music, on a Friday, as a student, I’d probably have gone to the pub.”

He was not afraid to program performances by jazz players or even DJs. But he would pair this music with similar “sound worlds” from classical music. Very often the sound world connected to very new music or very old music.

Shelley seems very focused on putting together the right concert, and he’s unafraid to step outside the box.

“The stereotypical concert experience was created in Victorian times. It’s very rigid.

“It serves certain music brilliantly. Mahler, for example, but there is a lot of other areas of music that aren’t served particularly well by being performed in big concert halls, including a lot of new music and experimental music.” So maybe the NAC will find a different place than the staid and stuffy confines of Southam Hall to display this kind of concert under Shelley.

“It’s nice for people to be in a different frame of mind,” he says. “If you are at home listening to a CD, you wouldn’t likely sit on a chair in the middle of a room for two hours. You’d be more likely to get a glass of wine and sit on a chair, lean back and turn down the lights a little bit.

“I think this is happening all over the world. There is nothing wrong with getting away from the Victorian concept of concerts, including in how we react to music. We are so used to, in a jazz concert or a rock concert, clapping after a solo. In the classical period audiences used to clap if there was a great idea in a symphony or the composer did something cheeky in a development section.

“What I love most about that is that the people were thinking with the music.”

When asked about Canadian composers, he mentions a few, including Malcolm Forsyth, the late father of NACO’s principal cellist Amanda Forsyth, R. Murray Schaeffer and Scott Good. But he admits he has much to learn.

“I’ve started to do more research. I think it’s going to be an interesting area of my work at the NAC.

“Ideally I’d like one of the first things I do here (in September, 2015) to be a new commission. It’s something I have a track record for in Nuremburg. Every year I would commission a regional work.”

Shelley has signed a four-year contract with a renewal clause, says NACO general director Christopher Deacon.

The rigorous search for a new music director lasted about two years. The search committee was made up of senior management; three members of the orchestra — bassoonist Chris Millard (who co-chaired the committee), Yosuke Kawasaki, NACO concertmaster, and Jessica Linnenbuch,
the assistant concertmaster; two members of the NAC board and two members of the community.

A long list was created and conductors paraded through Southam Hall.

Many of the names on the list were Canadian, Deacon said, but at the end of the day, he said, Shelley was the unanimous choice of the committee.

He said age was not a factor in the choice. The NAC was looking for artistic excellence and inspiration from the podium.

Also the centre wanted a music director committed to new work, because that is something that will be of increasing importance for the NAC, Deacon said.

Shelley’s other attributes include a track record of engaging with communities and audiences; an ability to communicate, programming skills; leadership, artistic and administrative skills, he said.

“We feel that Alexander Shelley is the best of classical music’s future.

“There are some terrific Canadian conductors out there. They all offered a lot of positives, but we were looking for a particular set of skills and he was the one that matched that most closely.

“From our point of view, we are trying to serve Canadian artists and Canadian audiences. We want someone who is going to bring the NACO to its next level of development. We want someone who is going to tour across Canada. We want someone who is going to help Canadian composers deliver great new repertoire.

“The passport that they have in their pocket is significant, but more significant to us was how our next music director would advance the cause of classical music in Canada.”

And Shelley is a man who makes his own mark.

At 15, he won a prestigious conducting competition in Britain and he went from there to school in Dusseldorf, Germany, where he was an active leader.

NACO music directors

Jean-Marie Beaudet (1969-1971) Canadian
Mario Bernardi (1971-1982) Canadian
Franco Mannino (1982-1987) Italian
Gabriel Chmura (1987-1990) Polish
Pinchas Zukerman (1999—2015) Israeli

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