SIGNATURE

ROBERT RIVAL
Meet our new Composer in Residence

RACHMANINOFF’S THIRD
Returns to the Masters

LIGHTER CLASSICS ON ICE
Figure Skating’s Greatest Hits

WISH LISZT
Liszt at Late Night, the Masters & Sunday Showcase
It took about two years of waiting, deciding and organizing, but Robert Rival has been selected as this season’s (and next’s) ESO Composer in Residence. He hasn’t wasted any time either since starting in July 2011. The ESO premiered his Scherzo late in September and his new arrangement of “Silent Night” was played at a recent orchestra Christmas Concert.

Rival has also taken advantage of his new-found ability to attend ESO rehearsals especially when it’s not his work being played. He says if he has a score in hand and listens to the piece play out, it’s a tremendous learning experience because live music is so different than recorded music. He explains, generally the harp is a quiet instrument in a live, orchestral setting without microphones, but in a Hollywood recorded film score its sound can be heard above all other instruments. He writes for live performances therefore, he needs to understand how live, un-tampered instruments sound. He hopes to take it one step further when needed, and consult with musicians about what parts they feel work well for their particular instruments.

His main duty is to compose, and he does much of that in his home with the ESO’s precise expectation of his work in mind: to write one long and one short piece per year, in addition to works for the education concerts and arrangements. He has a two-year contract with the chance of it being extended. (Former Composers in Residence, John Estacio and Allan Gilliland, filled the role for at least five years each.) Rival also is encouraged to sift through
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- Robert Rival

Rival acknowledges the resident position gives him a rare structure to work in that he hopes to grow and build on in his future pieces. Gilliland says the position changed his life and hopes the same will happen for Rival. Eddins helped select Rival and likes the program because Composers in Residence are not afraid of looking forward when classical music tends to look backwards. “I think Robert was chosen because of a combination of voice and craft,” says Eddins. “Voice in that he didn’t sound like anyone else. He sounded like himself. And craft in that he had the ability to write music in a way that sounded like himself, rather than anyone else.”

Rival says he studies a lot of musical repertoire that might influence him somehow. And although, he says, his music does not sound like Mozart’s, he admires the great composer’s work for its simplicity, grace and sophistication. “On one hand, I want to make music that anyone can listen to and hopefully find accessible and interesting, and then on the other hand, they find there are layers that warrant repeated listening so every time you listen to it, there’s more to discover.”

MUSICAL MUSE: Robert Rival with his son, Raphaël

compositions sent to the orchestra by other composers. “If there’s something interesting in that pile, he gets to point it out to me and suggest I take a look at it,” Bill Eddins, ESO Music Director and Conductor, says. “It is always useful to have another artistic viewpoint when we are programming.”

Other aspects of the job are quite flexible. Rival says the ESO expects each Composer in Residence to approach the role differently and build on his or her own strengths. He’s done that by creating a few podcasts of interviews with composers and posted them on the ESO website (see sidebar) in addition to speaking to other composers on stage preceding ESO performances for the audience in attendance to listen in. “The way I see my role is to be somewhat of a proponent of contemporary music and of living composers.”

At the time of this article’s interview, Rival had yet to select a winner of the Young Composer’s Project or begin mentoring him or her — another set of duties incorporated into his resident role. The Project is an annual competition open to local high school students interested in composing. It was established in 1995 by the first ESO Composer in Residence (Estacio) and then carried forward by Gilliland. “I was always impressed by each year’s composer … and their good orchestration instincts. I know I wouldn’t have been able to do that when I was in high school,” says Gilliland.

Expect to hear a piece by this season’s Young Composer’s Project winner at Symphony Under the Sky on Labour Day weekend in 2012. Rival says, “It’s a very special and tremendous opportunity for a high school student to get music played by a professional orchestra and get the coaching along the way.”

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