

“I realised at 15 that music was going to be my way of life and I gave up on tennis.”

Written by Administrator

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Present in Romania for the fourth time consecutively, the Johann Strauss Ensemble became a natural element in Romania's concert scenery during the winter holidays. With a simple receipt, that combines quality Viennese music and good mood, the ensemble directed by Russell McGregor managed to gave the audience the feeling that the show was too short and make people wonder when will the players return for a new concert. Russell McGregor talked about the success receipt, the sacrifices he had to make to reach this level and the next concert in Romania, in an exclusive interview for Bucharest Herald readers.

BH: You stated last year that you had to chose between a tour in Asia and one in Romania, and you decided for Romania where you come back for the fourth year in a row. What makes you come back here?

Russell McGregor: The reason I love to come back is very simple. The people! I get such a great response from the audience and we also have so much fun in the concerts and that is what it is all about.

BH: How did you manage to gain your audience considering that there are so many concerts on the market in this period, one each day? Yet your concert hall is always full. What is the secret of this success?

Russell McGregor: I believe it is because we have firstly a first class product, the music, and I try to bring down any barriers between the audience and the musicians and make sure that everyone has a good time as well. Also as I talk to the audience through the concert it creates a totally different feeling compared to a “normal” classical concert. It is real entertainment.

BH: This year you had as special guests in the Bucharest show the soprano Romana Beutel and the barytone Michael Havlicek, a show highly praised by the public. Will you keep collaborating in this formula given the fact that every year you had other guests?

Russell McGregor :Yes we will definitely work together with Romana and Michael again but I am always looking for something new that my audience will really appreciate as well.

BH: One of the most appreciated moments of the show is when, during the concert, you communicate with the audience who accompany the orchestra. Is this moment part of a scenario or is it spontaneous?

Russell McGregor :I usually have certain information that I want to get across to the audience but as a concert is live anything can happen so I am always prepared to improvise and react to what is happening on stage and in the audience and this is really exciting.

BH:Many years ago, you were a tennis player and you managed to be present on the main panel of Australian Open, after which you abandoned the sports and decided for the music. Can you tell us the story of the moment when you started to do music and what determined you to

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make this step?

Russell McGregor : I realised at the age of 15 that music was going to be my way of life so yes I had to give up the tennis training. I didn't know in which direction music would take me and I believe that it is only in the last 10 years that I have found my place in the music business that I am totally satisfied with.

BH: How did you acquire your first violin, I know that you risked everything, you even sold your house in Sydney to buy it?

Russell McGregor : My violin maker in Australia called me just as I was about to go on a national tour with Jose Carreras and said to come and try 2 Italian violins that he had just received. I said no as I had the tour and straight after I was to travel to Europe to try my luck there so I didn't have any money to spend on a new violin. When I played on the first one I said it's nice but let's try the second one. Wow, it was love at first playing. I never thought that I would be able to find a violin that would suit me the first time I played it, it was amazing. I took it on the tour with Carreras and then decided the only way to acquire this violin was to sell my apartment and that's what I did! I have never regretted it for one second as the violin is still getting better and I am still finding new sounds and colors on it all the time.

BH: Has sports training helped you in your musical career? What common features do sports and music have?

Russell McGregor : The mind. It's very similar in the fact that when you have to practise and train everyday for both and that when you are on stage it's like a sport. Your concentration has to be at the highest level and you need to get into a "zone" that nothing can distract you from your performance.

BH: What are the criteria according to which the members of Johann Strauss Ensemble orchestra are selected? Have you co-operated with Romanian artists also over the time? If so, what was your impression on these artists?

Russell McGregor : The members of the Ensemble are firstly some of the finest musicians in Europe and secondly we have to get on well with each other. It is really like a family as you spend so much intense time together and respect is a very important ingredient, musically and personally as well. I have worked with Romanian artists and what I love about them is that they play or sing from the heart. This is important if you want to make an honest performance. I look forward to more collaborations with Romanian artists.

BH: What is the place in Romania you feel most attached to?

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Russell McGregor : Difficult to choose so I would have to say Sibiu and Bucharest as I have not only performed more times in those cities than anywhere else but I have had amazing musical experiences there. For example, last year we performed in the huge Tent that was erected for performances during the cities year as Cultural Capital of Europe. But not only did we have a stage to play on but we performed with ice skaters which was wonderful. And to perform for over 3,000 people in Sala Palatului is an experience that is very hard to beat!

BH: Do you intend to continue in the future the Christmas tour concert tradition in Romania?

Russell McGregor :If Romanians want me to perform here I promise to make every effort to keep this wonderful tradition going!

BH: What message would you like to send to Bucharest Herald readers?

Russell McGregor :If you have been to one of my concerts, thank you so much for the great times and if you have not then I look forward to seeing you in a show sometime soon! Merry Christmas and a Happy 2009 for everyone!