

Cellist Paul Watkins named artistic director of Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

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Welsh-born cellist Paul Watkins, 44, one of the leading chamber musicians of his generation, has been named artistic director of the annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival.



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The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival has gone outside of the Detroit family to find its new artistic leader — sort of.

Welsh-born cellist Paul Watkins, 44, one of the leading chamber musicians of his generation, has been named artistic director of the annual metro Detroit festival, which is held each June. He succeeds festival founding artistic director James Tocco, a Detroit-born pianist who at age 70 has decided the time has come to pass the torch.

Well-known in Europe as a soloist, conductor and former member of the London-based Nash Ensemble, Watkins' profile in America started to soar after he joined the vaunted Emerson String Quartet last year and relocated to New York. Landing Watkins is a coup for the 20-year-old festival, one of region's signature cultural events. His arrival unites a gifted musician with a festival with both in periods of transition: Each is selling what the other is buying in terms of artistic priorities and leadership.

Given Watkins' gifts as a cellist, musical thinker and genial personality, it's likely that another American festival would have snapped him up in short order. But the Great Lakes festival had fate and family on its side. Watkins is the son-in-law of the late Detroit-born pianist Ruth Laredo, who was as close to Tocco as a sister and a Great Lakes festival stalwart until her death in 2005.

“When Ruth was alive, she always mentioned how wonderful the festival was, but the dates never lined up for me to go,” said Watkins. “I knew I would eventually perform here because there were just too many artistic and family reasons. Sometimes fate can play a part in these things. When the stars are aligned, it’s generally a good idea to go with them.”

The two-week Great Lakes festival offers about 20 concerts in venues across the region, though most performances are in Bloomfield Hills and Beverly Hills. With an annual budget of about \$500,000, the festival has earned a national reputation for its A-list artists, commitment to contemporary music and Tocco’s creative thematic programming, which marries old and new and familiar and unfamiliar music. On another front, the festival’s education arm, the Shouse Institute, has helped propel a striking number of young ensembles to major careers, among them Eighth Blackbird, the Pacifica and Jasper string quartets and the Claremont Trio.

The marriage of big-city talent and small-town familial warmth also has been key to the festival’s unique personality. Detroit-bred artists like sisters Ida and Ani Kavafian have played central roles, while Tocco’s brother, the Rev. Msgr. Anthony Tocco, pastor of St. Hugo of the Hills in Bloomfield Hills, was crucial to getting the event off the ground. Three major religious institutions in Bloomfield Hills representing Jewish, Protestant and Catholic faiths sponsor the festival.

Tocco is thrilled with his successor. “It’s the best possible thing that could have happened,” he said.

“He’s ideally situated with one of the finest quartets in the world. He was part of the Nash Ensemble, whose history includes 250 world premieres, so he’s not afraid of reaching out to new repertoire. He’s got one foot in London and one in New York — and he’s got a connection to Ruth.”

Tocco, who has had a notable career as a pianist and who continues to teach at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory, has been mulling stepping down from his festival artistic post for several years. He says he has reached an age that makes it difficult to keep up with new players and composers. At the same time, there are health issues: Tocco’s hearing and eyesight have deteriorated, and he can no longer always command the nuanced listening and sight-reading skills necessary to play chamber music at the highest level.

The 2014 festival, an exploration of Bach and his influence, will be Tocco's last as artistic director. He'll perform in ensemble and solo capacities and is expected to continue to appear as a solo performer at future festivals.

Watkins, who makes his festival debut in June, emerged as a leading candidate after he joined the Emerson quartet, whose violinist Phil Setzer is a close friend of Great Lakes executive director Maury Okun. Setzer raved about Watkins to Okun, and he raved about the festival to Watkins. Meetings were arranged and the deal was done.

Watkins says he was impressed with everything about the Great Lakes festival, from its artistic achievements to Okun's administrative gifts to the passion of its supporters. He hopes to build on Tocco's legacy, perhaps broadening the notion of thematic programming to include literary and other influences. His past connections in Europe and now New York will bring a new wave of artists to the festival. He also wants to find ways to link the festival to Detroit at this unique point in the city's history.

"As a Brit and a Welshman, I'm used to seeing industrial towns crumble and then regenerate," he said.

Okun noted that Watkins promises to elevate the festival to another level of ambition and notoriety. Audience should expect new ideas, bigger projects, new artists. "We don't want to keep doing just what we've been doing," Okun said. "We hired a top-line chamber musician, and we want to help seed his imagination."

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