

Welsh cellist Paul Watkins takes the reins in Detroit



By Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer 10:22 a.m. EDT June 8, 2015



(Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

CHICAGO – The Welsh-born cellist Paul Watkins was named artistic director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival last year, but his first steps toward Detroit were taken in July 1992 in the idyllic setting of rural Vermont.

At 22, Watkins was among the gifted young musicians apprenticing at the prestigious Marlboro Music Festival. He had just started dating a woman working in the office named Jennifer Laredo, the daughter of Ruth Laredo, a major American pianist and force of nature from Detroit. A year later the couple married.

Watkins didn't know it, but the die was cast for his future in more ways than one. And no one in Detroit knew that more than 20 years later, a world-class cellist and chamber musician would take the reins of a festival that had grown into one of the region's premiere cultural events.

Watkins' new mother-in-law was like a sister to James Tocco, the Detroit-born pianist who would become the founding artistic director of the Great Lakes festival in 1994. Laredo performed at the festival annually until her death in 2005. As the successor to a retiring Tocco, Watkins extends a familial connection embedded within the festival DNA from the start.



(Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell Detroit Free Press)

Cellist Paul Watkins, right, goes over his musical score with violinist Philip Setzer, both of the Emerson String Quartet, before their performance at the Harris Theater in Chicago last month.

"I think Ruth would be very pleased and very proud," Watkins said. "I know I am."

The 22nd annual Great Lakes festival, the first under Watkins' care, opens Saturday. Twenty concerts throughout metro Detroit are scheduled through June 28. The 2015 theme, "New Beginnings: Making Music in America," promises an exploration of standard and contemporary repertoire by homegrown composers or those who were born overseas and journeyed here, finding themselves inspired by America's culture and ethos.

The parallel with the arc of the 45-year-old Watkins' personal and professional lives is by design. One of the leading chamber musicians of his generation, Watkins, who is also a proven conductor

and fine pianist, moved his wife and two children from London to New York two years ago to join the Emerson String Quartet, one of the world's most venerated chamber ensembles.

In addition to the quartet, Watkins has now planted roots in Detroit. He's ready to stamp his personality on a festival that has earned a national reputation for its artists and creative programming. Still, the festival hasn't gotten the attention its champions believe it deserves, and it remains totally unknown overseas.

"As big as Paul's career has been in Europe and with the Emerson quartet, we think there are a whole lot more great things to come that we can't even envision yet," said Great Lakes executive director Maury Okun.

"In addition to great contacts in Europe, he's now tied into the American scene. We've had frank conversations with him about taking us to a new, international level. The board has committed to raising the money to take on bigger projects and make his artistic vision part of our fabric."

Strong musical background

Watkins traveled to Chicago in May to perform with the Emerson quartet. Before heading to the concert hall, he spoke about his life, career and the festival while sitting in a sleek but otherwise empty bar at the palatial Hyatt Regency.

Watkins is of medium height with a boyish face, fleshy cheeks, brown hair fading to gray, glasses and an everyman, slightly doughy physique. He wore tan slacks, an untucked blue shirt and dark jacket and answered questions in a sing-song accent with the friendly earnestness and grins of a regular bloke at the pub. Well, a regular bloke who happens to be a world-class cellist.

"I've never worked with anybody who was easier to deal with," said Emerson violinist Philip Setzer. "That doesn't mean that he doesn't have ideas or doesn't put his foot down if he doesn't think something is good. He's not weak. There's a big difference between a lack of insecurity and ego."

As a cellist Watkins marries a keen musical intelligence with a virtuoso technique and a large menu of tonal colors and shadings that get beyond the notes into where the emotions live. But he also sees the bigger picture beyond the score at hand.

"Paul knows a *lot* of music and that's important for any artistic director," said Setzer. "He also knows a lot about different aspects of art and literature, and he's very sure about what he likes and what he doesn't like. He won't put anything in front of people that he doesn't endorse himself."

Setzer, a longtime friend of Okun's, was the matchmaker, recommending Watkins to the festival and vice versa. Watkins was apprehensive given the intensity of the quartet's schedule and other

commitments, but his wife Jennifer encouraged him to take the job, and they approach the festival as a team; she works on business, logistical and organizational issues.

The 2015 festival includes several examples of Watkins' nascent ideas. Opening night is built around the Emerson quartet whole and deconstructed in smaller groups, and the players will stay through the first week to play with other artists.

Contemporary composers are in strong supply, from distinguished veterans like George Crumb, Steve Reich and John Adams to young voices like Andrew Norman. Watkins (like Tocco) has a bent for smart juxtapositions of old and new music and for thematic ideas. And he's particularly excited to introduce English violinist Stephanie Gonley, a connoisseur's favorite in the United Kingdom but unknown to American audiences.

"There are so many wonderful musicians that I've met over the last 25 years, and I want to gather them together and show the public what my taste is — whom I love to work with, why I think they're great, the composers I think have something important to say," Watkins said. "The festival is really paying me for my taste."

Watkins will also appear as a conductor and pianist, which suggests a story Okun tells about a musician friend who calls Watkins "annoying." The friend told Okun: "He's an unbelievably great cellist. Then I heard him play piano and he was almost as good a pianist as a cellist. Then I saw a video of him conducting, and he conducts about as well as he plays.

"I can't find anything to not like about him, and that's annoying."

Emerson quartet beckons

Watkins grew up in southeast Wales in a musical family. His father is a fine amateur violinist and violist and a maker of string instruments; his mother is a retired music teacher who plays piano and sings. His younger brother, Huw, is a composer whose works will be heard at the 2016 Great Lakes festival as part of a focus on British music.

Watkins started playing the piano at 3, taking lessons from his grandmother, a church organist. He gravitated to cello at age 7, influenced by a family friend who played the instrument and was the coolest — he wore shades and a leather jacket and smoked — of those who regularly played string quartets at the house.

Watkins left home at 13 for the Yehudi Menuhin School, a small boarding school in Surrey for exceptional young musicians, where students take an academic curriculum alongside a musical one. At 18 he won the BBC Young Musician of the Year award, a major prize.

Meanwhile, the conducting bug bit, and he spent a year studying the discipline at Cambridge University, before winning the principal cellist post at the BBC Symphony at age 20. The job cast him as a rising star, but the pace and required professionalism were eye-openers.

"It was a helluva education," he said. "A swift kick in the back of the pants."

Along the way, Watkins won another top British prize, the 2002 Leeds Conducting Competition, which opened new doors. He left the BBC Symphony in 2008, transitioning into a chamber musician, soloist and conductor.

He wasn't actively seeking to move to America, and when he was invited to audition for the Emerson quartet his first inclination was to politely decline. He was enjoying a nice life in London as a member of the Nash Ensemble, playing concertos with top orchestras and spreading his wings as a conductor, including a post as principal guest conductor of the Ulster Orchestra in 2009-12. He was also recording cello concerto and recital CDs for the Chandos label (and still does).

But his wife insisted he take the audition held at violinist Eugene Drucker's New York apartment. The chemistry struck like lightning. After 10 minutes of playing Beethoven's first string quartet, Watkins was mad for the job.

"There was an incredible clarity of purpose in the way they played, but I also felt I could bring something to the group," said Watkins.

The quartet takes up the largest chunk of Watkins professional life, but second largest is now the Great Lakes festival. Watkins said he's thinking about the festival all the time, mulling ideas, programs, artists, composers. He's been on the job less than year, but he already talks about nurturing and growing the festival as if it were a child. Somewhere, his mother-in-law is smiling.

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22nd annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Saturday through June 28

Venues: Seligman Performing Arts Center (Beverly Hills); Temple Beth El, Kirk in the Hills and St. Hugo's (all Bloomfield Hills); Christ Church Grosse Pointe; Kerrytown Concert House (Ann Arbor); Detroit Institute of Arts' Capital Theatre (Windsor).

Complete schedule: www.greatlakeschambermusic.org

Subscriptions: \$94.50-\$292.50. Single tickets, \$15-\$60, \$10 students. 248-559-2097. www.greatlakeschambermusic.org.

Five best-bet concerts

June 13: Opening night features artistic director Paul Watkins' day-job band — the Emerson String Quartet — deconstructed into smaller units for music by Europeans influenced by America (Martinu, Dvorak, Bloch), before the whole quartet convenes for Dvorak's "American Quartet" and Samuel Barber's famous "Adagio." (8 p.m., Seligman Performing Arts Center)

June 18-19: Making her festival debut in 2015, English violinist Stephanie Gonley joins Alessio Bax in Debussy's Violin Sonata in G minor, while Watkins conducts a starry septet in John Adams minimalist classic "Shaker Loops." (7:30 p.m. June 18 and 10:45 a.m. June 19, Kirk in the Hills)

June 19: The festival inaugurates a new venue in downtown Detroit with contemporary fare including Steve Reich's deeply moving masterpiece "Different Trains" played by the Excelsa Quartet (8 p.m., Ladder Company 12)

June 20: Watkins conducts the Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings in Copland's "Appalachian Spring Suite" on a program including Bach's Concerto for Two Violins with soloists Jaime Laredo and Gonley, Barber's "Summer Music" for woodwind quintet and Dvorak's Serenade for Strings. (8 p.m., Seligman Performing Arts Center).

June 27: An ambitious, evening-length performance by the Eighth Blackbird sextet featuring the world premiere commission of "Hand Eye," six works by the noted Sleeping Giant collective of young American composers — Timo Andres, Andrew Norman, Jacob Cooper, Christopher Cerrone, Robert Honstein, Ted Hearne. (8 p.m., Seligman Performing Arts Center)