

‘Even if you’re someone who seems to have done everything, there’s always more’

Collaborations, discoveries and intensive projects are wells of inspiration for James Ehnes. The Canadian violinist talks to **PAULINE HARDING** about interpreting some challenging works, and his fascination with the unknown

SOME MIGHT SAY THAT CLASSICAL MUSIC often falls victim to perfectionism: technique is honed and interpretation polished to the detriment of individualism. To follow the standard road to success one must learn the Tchaikovsky Concerto, the Brahms, the Sibelius – and play them faultlessly. Perhaps, then, it was James Ehnes’s good fortune to develop in a musical world of his own, in a remote town in central Canada: it has helped him to stand out from the crowd. He made his first major concerto debut aged 13, with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, and recorded a CD of Paganini’s Caprices for Telarc while he was still studying at the Juilliard School. Today he is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a member of the Order of Canada and an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Music, with innumerable recordings of wildly varied repertoire to his name, from Bach to Ives, on a host of different CD labels including Analekta, Chandos and Onyx.

‘I grew up in a very musical community,’ Ehnes says of the town of Brandon, where he was born in 1976. ‘But it was small and there weren’t a lot of young people playing at my level to influence me, so I developed my own ideas about music. My teacher from the age of nine, Francis Chaplin, was a huge Heifetz fan and had all the Heifetz records. In my mid to late teens I’d go to his house and listen to all sorts of things.’

It was Chaplin who introduced him to the Walton and the Korngold violin concertos among others; Ehnes has since recorded both and performed them many times. ‘When I was a teenager I heard Chaplin’s recording of Heifetz playing the Walton with the composer conducting,’ says Ehnes. ‘I thought, “This piece is fantastic. It must be one of the great concertos that everybody plays,” and I wanted to learn it. It was only when I went away to Galamian’s summer camp at Meadowmount in New York and I was surrounded by other young violinists that





Celebrating American chamber music: the James Ehnes Quartet

I learnt I had not exactly "unusual" taste, but that pieces they had all learnt were foreign to me, and the pieces I knew weren't on their radar. I couldn't figure out why hardly anyone played the Walton, except that it's monstrously hard for the soloist, the conductor and the orchestra! It's about 30 minutes long, but it takes as much rehearsal as a piece that's 45–50 minutes long, so it isn't easy to programme. Perhaps it suffers because of that, but I still think it's highly underrated.' Any such difficulties were expertly masked in Ehnes's BBC Proms performance this summer, where he played the concerto with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under the baton of friend and conductor Thomas Søndergård.

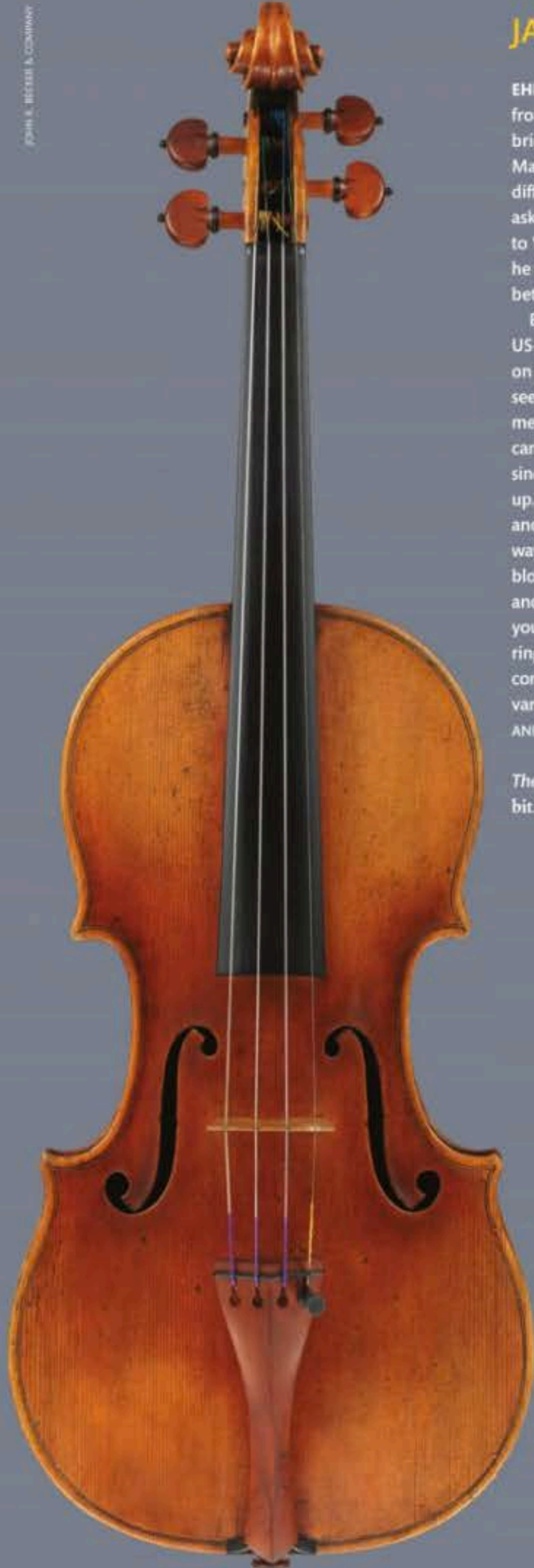
SO JUST HOW DOES IT FEEL, as one tiny performer, to stand on the enormous stage of the Royal Albert Hall, with a 360-degree wall of people scrutinising you from high and low? 'It seems like it should be more daunting than it is,' says Ehnes. 'It looks so cavernous and intimidating, but there's a really great feel in that space and I don't think it's entirely to do with the warm and friendly audience. In any other room that size I think it would be difficult to resist the temptation to plough loudly through the music. It's so big! But somehow it works and I'm not sure why. I love playing at the Proms: there's nowhere else like it.'

And Ehnes should know: last season alone he performed at venues including the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Wigmore Hall in London, the Gewandhaus in Leipzig and, in North America, at Winkler, Southern Manitoba; Waco, Texas; and venues close to his Florida home. He does not discriminate between venues big and small, being intent only on reaching the broadest possible audience. Nor does he suffer from soloistic pride; he even joined the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra violin section for the second half of a concert recently, after playing the Elgar Violin Concerto in the first – just for fun.

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As is the case for any soloist, of course, playing at many different venues means contending with contrasting acoustics. Ehnes is undeterred, perhaps in part because of the complete faith he has in his instrument, the 'Marsick' Stradivari (see box, page 34). 'It is definitely set up to punch through textures when I need it to,' he says. 'If you can create an interesting sound, it is almost immaterial whether your overall volume is loud or soft – so in a sense the size of the hall is immaterial too. And I always remind myself, when I visit a certain hall in a certain city, that the acoustic is what that hall's regular audience is used to. Someone who lives in Campa, Florida, is not going to expect their concert hall to sound like the Musikverein in Vienna. There's no point in getting tied up in knots thinking, "This hall doesn't sound good and I don't sound good in here." What are you going to do about it? Sometimes house managers come up to me after the first rehearsal and say, "Is the hall OK?" I'd love to say, "No. You have to fix this by tonight. Build me a new one."'

ONE OF EHNES'S 2015 HIGHLIGHTS will be his performance of Korngold's Violin Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra and conductor Marin Alsop, at the LSO International ▶



JAMES EHNES'S INSTRUMENT

EHNES PLAYS the 'Marsick' Stradivari of 1715, an outstanding instrument from the peak year of Antonio Stradivari's 'golden period'. The violin briefly belonged to the Belgian violinist and composer Martin Pierre Marsick (1847–1924), who owned it before running into financial difficulties, and it subsequently found its way to Soviet Russia. 'If you ask older Russian violinists,' says Ehnes, 'some will tell you it belonged to Viktor Lieberman [leader of the Leningrad Philharmonic]; others say he definitely never played it. It's unclear who owned the instrument between 1920 and 1990. What's clear is that I fell in love with it.'

Ehnes was introduced to the instrument in November 1996 by the US-based violinist and dealer Alexander Sobolevsky. 'It was a leap of faith on his part,' he recalls. 'I was only 20 at the time, but he felt I needed to see this violin. Peter Biddulph, who was selling the instrument, kindly gave me the time to play on it, show it around and raise some interest.' It finally came into Ehnes's possession in September 1999. 'I've been playing it ever since. It's not an easy fiddle to play, at least not the way I prefer it to be set up. It's a very healthy and stable instrument, but it is extremely sensitive, and the way I like it to be adjusted requires it to be played in a particular way. Strads can be set up to have an easy, quick response and a lovely bloom under the ear, but this can often, in my opinion, limit the projection and tonal variety. When my violin is set up the way I like it, it can fight you if you're not playing well – even slightly out-of-tune chords don't ring, and there's a decent amount of resistance that requires a lot of bow control and would probably be uncomfortable for an amateur. But the tonal variety and range of dynamics that are available are really inspiring.'

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The 'Marsick' Stradivari is featured in *The Strad's 2015 Calendar*: bit.ly/11Qy2or

Violin Festival at the Barbican on 7 June. 'I love to work with the LSO,' he enthuses. 'It is an incredibly nice and inspiring group of people, and it's given me some really special and memorable experiences over the years. I first played for Marin when I was 14; I've been working with her professionally since I was about 20. We have a real musical and personal rapport. It's nice to work with your friends.'

The Korngold was suggested to Ehnes by the orchestra's management. That is how he prefers it. 'There are so many great violin concertos that it's pretty much guaranteed, whatever different orchestras suggest, that I'll get to play a nice rotation of pieces. That makes me work hard and means that I'm always trying to improve.' When asked to make his own repertoire suggestions he confesses that he has in the past, when feeling overworked, signed himself up to play the same concerto he is due to perform the week beforehand. He almost always regrets it: 'Usually when the concert approaches I think it would be nice to be playing something different instead, to keep myself fresh. It's difficult for me to stay inspired if I'm playing the same piece for several weeks in a row. If you play the same repertoire too often you might start thinking, "The concert will probably be fine," and then you'll stop practising.'

Indeed, the Korngold is a piece he is very happy with – one that he first learnt as a teenager. 'Chaplin liked it a lot, and he encouraged me to take a look at it. When it came to playing it with orchestra, which I did for the first time in my mid



Ehnes performing Bruch's Violin Concerto at the Royal Albert Hall for the BBC Proms in 2010

twenties, the learning process became much more involved. It's full of lush and lyrical Romantic themes, and it also has lots of fireworks. But it's the type of piece where you can't just learn the violin part and get up in front of the orchestra and expect it to work. It won't. You'd have a lot of problems, and you'd have a very upset conductor.' It is always a bad idea for soloists to worry only about their own part, Ehnes quickly adds: a good understanding of the orchestral score is the only way to maximise the music's expressive potential. But in the Korngold, a failure to understand this can be particularly destructive: complex rhythms in the orchestral parts, with sometimes unexpected instrumental pairings and harmonies, can derail an unprepared soloist. Korngold's colourful orchestration is composed with meticulous precision to create an improvisatory effect that can easily slide from well-executed beauty into Hollywood-style cheese. 'It's an intricate and tricky piece,' says Ehnes. 'But once you start to understand the way Korngold writes, the message actually becomes very obvious. When it's really finely honed and beautifully crafted, with every detail properly aligned, I think the second movement contains some of the most magical, creative music ever written.'

I ask him if he feels differently about the Korngold now compared to how he felt about it as a teenager. 'That's something people are often curious about,' he replies. 'For me, no, usually my feelings towards a piece don't change. But then I think of some of the pieces that inspired my love of the violin, like the

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Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Does that piece mean more to me now when I was eight? No – it meant the world to me when I was eight. It was just a very different world.'

WHEN HE IS NOT FRANTICALLY TOURING international concert halls and packing more performances, interviews and practice sessions into his days than many of us might think possible, or spending time with his wife and two young children, Ehnes assumes the role of musical explorer. 'One of the nice things about being a violinist and violist is that there's just so much great music,' he says. 'It's not as intimidating as the piano repertoire, where at a certain point you have to make decisions about what you might not ever do. As a violinist I get the sense that I can get my hands around the whole repertoire. I'm always discovering things that I want to learn, or finding out about new things that are being written. Even if >

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES EHNES

I won't be all that concerned about finesse and precision. That saves me time and gets me properly warmed up and ready to go. It also saves me from having to do the scales and etudes that I hate!

Rather than let all of last summer's hard work go to waste, Ehnes and his Seattle colleagues decided to record it for posterity: 'We thought it would be fun to document a few of our projects, so we contacted Onyx to see if they'd be interested in doing a CD that focused on who we are and what we do. And we thought as an American organisation what better repertoire to choose than American chamber music?' The resulting disc, recently released on the Onyx label, contains a varied selection of chamber works

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A major facilitator of his musical adventuring is the Seattle Chamber Music Society, founded in 1982 by cellist Toby Saks. The Society has held winter and summer festivals annually since its inauguration. Ehnes has been artistic director there since 2011, and he hasn't missed a summer festival for 20 years. 'The Society is a big part of my life musically, personally and socially. It's a great place of discovery for me, but it's dangerous, now that I'm the boss,' he confides. 'Yesterday I said to my wife, "I'm really excited, because at next summer's festival I'm going to play this, and this, and this..." She just looked at me and said, "That's a lot of work." And I guess it is. But it's going to be so much fun!'

Much of the repertoire will be entirely new to him: he'll be playing the Enescu String Octet, the string septet version of Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, and beginning a Beethoven cycle with his eponymous quartet, for example. But how, I ask, can he possibly have the time to learn new repertoire in his hectic timetable? 'Usually it makes up the first part of my practice schedule,' he says. 'When I'm just starting to learn something and I'm trying to get a feel for where the notes are and how the piece goes, I'll just slog through it as my warm-up because

by Copland, Bernstein, Barber, Carter and Ives. 'I think that the United States has more to be proud of from a compositional standpoint than a lot of people think,' says Ehnes. 'Barber and Copland were giants of the 21st century, and Charles Ives was a hugely important figure in American music. The most famous track is probably Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, but I think that many people only know it as a string orchestra piece and not as the middle movement of his quartet, so hopefully that will be an interesting discovery for them.'

Ehnes would like to record more CDs with the Society but admits that the process is stressful – partly because it's a summer project and the turnaround is so fast. Nevertheless, he assures me, it's all a part of the thrill of what he does. ■

WIN JAMES EHNES'S AMERICAN CHAMBER MUSIC CD

American Chamber Music, the latest CD by James Ehnes and the Seattle Chamber Music Society, has been released on the Onyx label and we have ten copies to give away. For your chance to win one, send a postcard marked 'Ehnes' to the address on page 105 or submit your details at bit.ly/1nLQMXt Closing date: 31 December 2014

