



# Following Benny's lead

K-W Symphony concertmaster grows into her role as the conductor's second-in-command

BY ANDREW VOWLES

**W**hen Bénédicte Lauzière arrived in Kitchener in January 2015, violin in hand, she was among the youngest musicians in the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony.

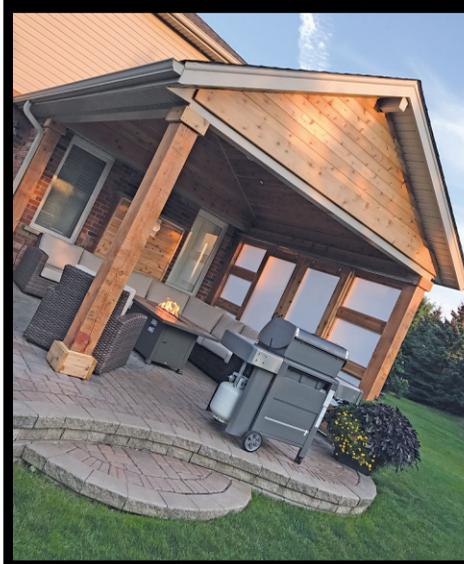
But her new gig was more than that. After an international search, the symphony had named her concertmaster, basically the instrumentalist boss of the musicians and the conductor's second-in-command. Expectations were high, and Lauzière recognized the challenges ahead. After all, she was still finishing her studies at New York's Juilliard School when she auditioned for the post.

"I never had the experience of leading when I came in," she said in an interview this past fall. "It's been a steep learning curve."

Being true to herself and in the moment has helped Bénédicte Lauzière, whom people call 'Benny,' settle into a comfort zone as a leader with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony.

PHOTO BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

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Seated in the downtown home she shares with her husband, Ian Roberts, 30, and their “violin-hating” cat, Albus, Lauzière explained in lightly accented English that she’s had to grow into her concertmaster role, and so have other symphony musicians.

“Some people thought I was really young. Most were supportive. Others had to respond.”

Early on, she decided the best strategy was to stick to what got her hired in the first place. “I gave myself the right to be myself right from the start. That made it easier. Maybe it was harder for others to see someone younger being authoritative.”

Her working mantra: “Treat people with respect and honesty – that’s the best way to lead.”

These days, the 27-year-old, whom people call “Benny,” continues to impress her orchestra mates and symphony audiences with her musicality and her leadership.

Since last spring’s announcement of Andrei Feher, then 26, as the orchestra’s new music director – his four-year term will begin in mid-2018 – there’s a new buzz on stage and in the audience about the youthful edge in the No. 1 and No. 2 positions.

“We have an embarrassment of riches with her and Andrei,” longtime symphony violinist Roxolana Toews says. “I don’t know how we got so lucky.”

Lauzière’s arrival in Kitchener resulted from a bit of impulse.

“When I saw the post opening, I knew some of the musicians,” she says. “I thought, why not try? Like rolling dice.”

The Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony wasn’t entirely new to her; she had appeared as a soloist in the 2012-13 season. Also in 2013, CBC had named her among its 30 hot Canadian classical musicians under 30. But at the time of the search for concertmaster, in 2014, the 24-year-old Quebecker was still finishing a two-year master’s program at New York’s Juilliard School on scholarship with violinist Masao Kawasaki.

The orchestra had already conducted a national search for concertmaster and

selected three finalists, none of whom got the job. Now they had moved on to an international call. Lauzière was chosen from four top candidates.

Her impulsive streak showed up again in September 2016, when she and Roberts – a double bass player whom she met during their undergraduate days in McGill University’s music program – decided to get married. “We went to (Kitchener) City Hall and grabbed two strangers off the street as witnesses,” Lauzière says. “It was nothing special, but it felt right.”

Call it being in the moment – something she has had to learn in the concertmaster’s chair, and something that hasn’t always come easily for what Feher calls a “healthy perfectionist.”

“She knows when to push, but she knows it can’t always be perfect,” he noted.

Lauzière says she has had to learn about gaining and staying in that moment. “What’s great about live music is that at any moment, something can go wrong. That keeps people engaged. There is something to not being perfect that just makes it more engaging and beautiful” – and not just for the audience but for herself.

As a measure of that, she says, her best solo moments are often the performances she can’t recall. “As a soloist, I know I did well when I don’t remember a thing after. I remember walking out, but I don’t remember anything else.”

Roberts describes another level of her performance.

Recalling their McGill days, he says, “Some people learn the mechanics. They know where the notes are, but it doesn’t sound like music. I’m a very good technician with the double bass, but I don’t seem to have much to say when playing.

“She’s trying to say something. It’s storytelling.”

As concertmaster, Lauzière plays a key leadership role within the orchestra, both behind the scenes and on stage.

During rehearsals, she serves as a go-between to work out interpretation, fix trouble spots and try out new ideas.

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*“She helps to create a sense of unity.  
Camaraderie within an orchestra is really important.”*

JIM MASON, PRINCIPAL OBOIST

The concertmaster also belongs to the orchestra’s artistic advisory committee. For two seasons, she helped plan programming with conductor Edwin Outwater, whose 10-year term as music director ended last year. Pointing to Outwater’s focus on community outreach and innovative programming, she says, “He has left the orchestra in good shape. The symphony is involved in aspects of the community.”

On stage, Lauzière is responsible for tuning the instruments before a performance and for co-ordinating the bowing in the string section. More important, she’s the conduit between the conductor

and the musicians. Referring to Feher’s Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony debut in early November with Brahms’s second symphony, she says, “He gives the impulse, and it’s my job to read that impulse and cue the orchestra to play together.”

That means the concertmaster needs eyes and ears everywhere, using her body to move the music along and making frequent eye contact with both the conductor and the players.

“I’m not only playing myself, but I’m listening to the whole sound. Everything is going on at once. You have to shift focus to different things. I don’t know any profes-

sion like it,” she says. “You need people skills and playing skills.”

Principal oboist Jim Mason, who served on the concertmaster hiring committee, says, “She helps to create a sense of unity. Camaraderie within an orchestra is really important. There was a sense implicit to a lot of us that she would become an excellent concertmaster. She is always respectful and prepared, always has a smile on her face.”

Adds violinist Toews: “To find somebody today so unaffected and innocent, full of enthusiasm and life: she’s very special. She really, passionately loves music. You get the

sense that she plays because she loves it.”

The concertmaster role also includes solo work, although Lauzière says she was never interested in pursuing a solo career, describing a soloist’s life as a lonely one. Toews says Lauzière is “amazingly musical. You feel it’s the way it’s meant to be played. When somebody is musical, and they play beautifully, it gives you shivers.”

Lauzière began playing violin at age five while growing up just outside Montreal. She’d started taking lessons after her two older brothers began learning the instrument, although neither became a musician.

She was nine when she joined the Conservatoire de musique de Montreal alongside her regular school classes, working with violinist Helmut Lipsky.

She spent 10 years at the Conservatoire, including a couple of years studying and playing alongside Feher, whose family had immigrated to Montreal from Romania.

Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony executive director Andrew Bennett figures their early collegial training helped the pair forge a bond that might not have formed a few years later in a more competitive university program.

“They understand each other musically and are still able to enjoy music-making,” Bennett says.

Lauzière served on the search committee for a new conductor after Outwater’s departure was announced. Although she gave each of the candidates a fair hearing, she says she was rooting for Feher; she had recommended him initially to the group.

During his conducting debut with the

symphony last fall – a pair of concerts that featured Brahms’s second symphony – the orchestra earned standing ovations. In his welcome remarks to the crowd, Feher spoke of sensing a kind of chemistry with the players. That feeling flowed both ways, Lauzière says.

“It’s great to know that my friend is up there,” she says. “The support for Andrei makes the whole orchestra sound different. Every musician is a blade of grass, and the wind is the conductor who moves the whole thing.”

In turn, Feher says, the “second conductor” interprets the messages and ideas transmitted through his hands, body and eyes.

“It’s crucial for me and her to be connected,” he says. “She understands what I want. She knows where I’m going.”

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Referring to the musicians, he adds, “I try to be flexible enough that they don’t know what is about to happen. It keeps it alive in the moment.”

During an encore for the Brahms concerts, in a moment of unrehearsed inspiration, he held a pause for twice the usual length. “No one was quite expecting that. I’m looking at her – wait, wait, wait, then go. You have to be aware.”

Feher says Lauzière has figured out how to balance the necessary emotion with mental toughness – not to mention that “she can do anything on her violin.”

That’s all echoed by Bennett: “She’s not afraid to show emotion in a controlled way. She can appear demure, almost reticent and self-effacing, and then give her a violin and put her in front of an orchestra and you realize you were completely wrong. She has nerves of steel.”

A month after Feher’s debut last fall, another Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony concert brought to the Centre in the Square another of Lauzière’s former musical influences.

Even before her Conservatoire days, she and her family had begun attending the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, where her dreams of leading a symphony were sparked by watching various conductors and soloists.

Among those performers was violinist Jonathan Crow, who was appointed as Montreal’s concertmaster in 2002 at age 25. At the time, he was the youngest person to hold such a position with a major North American orchestra. Says Lauzière: “It was very impressive seeing him walk out on stage, tall, young.”

After finishing at the Conservatoire, she began degree studies at McGill University,

where Crow was teaching. Now concertmaster with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Crow recalls the young but not-so-young student: “Even at that point, she seemed like a seasoned pro.”

Lauzière confides she wasn’t necessarily feeling that way inside. “I wasn’t serious about orchestra,” she says. With Crow, she learned that “fun is important, but to make a career you need to be consistent. People are paying. They want a great performance, and you don’t want to flop on stage.” From him, she also learned about interpreting a composer’s intentions and about balancing intensity with control.

The two reconnected this past fall in Kitchener during his solo appearance to play Beethoven’s concerto for violin and orchestra. She counts Crow among her favourite violinists, along with Jascha Heifetz.

“It’s the great intensity and sound,” Lauzière says. “They’re able to make the violin sing. When I learn something new, the first recording I reach for is Heifetz. He sets the bar for me.”

Lauzière’s current violin is a Sanctus Seraphin, made in Italy in 1735. Crow lent her the instrument two years ago, after she learned he had borrowed another violin. She says this violin’s sounds range from a powerful voice that reaches the back of the concert hall to light, angelic tones. “When you change your instrument, you try new things, new sounds,” she says. “It has helped me grow.”

She unpacks the instrument to demonstrate a few bars from memory in an upstairs practice room of their house – now their former home – in downtown Kitchener. In December, she and Roberts planned to move to a century home just



Part of Bénédicte Lauzière’s job as concertmaster is to read what the conductor wants and then translate that to the rest of the orchestra. PHOTO BY BEN LARIMERE

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a few blocks away, still within walking distance of the Centre in the Square and the Conrad Centre, as well as Victoria Park and favourite restaurants.

“At some point, I would like to design my own house,” she says. Last year, she began an online, three-year program in interior design through the RCC Institute of Technology. “This course will give me the skills to do that.”

She smiles when asked what music she just chose to demonstrate the instrument. That was the opening of her favourite piece, the violin concerto by the late Austrian composer and conductor Erich Korngold. He moved to California in 1934 to write music for films starring such greats as Errol Flynn, she explains.

Lauzière performed Korngold’s violin concerto with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony in the fall of 2016. “It’s so romantic. It’s sparkling, old Hollywood glam,” she says, allowing that she’s not a great fan of much contemporary music written for the symphony.

In April, Lauzière will be in the Centre in the Square spotlight again, this time playing the Barber violin concerto.

For all the talk of the necessary chemistry among conductor, concertmaster and players, Lauzière says often the most important collaborator is the original storyteller.

“It’s about the composer,” she says. “You’re given this material, but you have to interpret it in the way you’re feeling. It’s never the same twice.

“The orchestra has so many components, you create something different each time. The feeling changes from night to night. That’s why the audience likes to come. It’s almost like magic.” 

Bénédicte Lauzière says playing this Sanctus Seraphin violin, made in Italy in 1735 and on loan from former teacher and mentor Jonathan Crow, has helped her grow as a musician.

PHOTO BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

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