

Mainstream dreams

Joshua Ehlebracht wants to make the pipe organ an instrument enjoyed by the masses

Joshua Ehlebracht's fingers fly over keys and knobs and his purple shoes dance over the pedalboard of his favourite pipe organ.

On this day inside St. Peter's Lutheran Church in downtown Kitchener, the result is electrifying. John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever," with its thrilling, head-bobbing, marching-band crescendo, almost blows the roof off the church where the gifted 19-year-old organist has spent the summer as music director.

St. Peter's three-manual Hallman pipe organ has about 2,500 pipes and 47 ranks, each of which has a different sound.

This organ is one of his favourites, partly because he grew up with the instrument in this church where his father, Rev. Mark Ehlebracht, is pastor.

He knows all the tricks to make it sing. "It packs quite a punch. Especially when the humidity is up, the sound is loud and ramped up. I love it," Ehlebracht says.

Switching gears, he then begins to play a lush, sombre piece, J.S. Bach's "Come Sweet Death, Come Blessed Rest," arranged by Virgil Fox.

"It's not fast and flashy but when you listen to it, you can see the light at the end of the tunnel," he says. There's a massive buildup, then the sound diminishes, "almost like death coming."

"It's an amazing piece of music that makes you sit in awe. It's heavier and pulls a lot of emotion in me when I'm playing it."

This is Ehlebracht, a friendly, articulate young man capable of coaxing such sweetness and depth from the pipe organ at the same time that he can rock the bench with a piece that makes you want to stand up and cheer.

With short, dark hair and a slim, six-foot-one-inch frame, he's an impressive sight as he lays both hands on the bench while his feet flash across the pedalboard.

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JOSHUA EHLEBRACHT



Catch
Joshua Ehlebracht
in concert Dec. 29
at St. Peter's Lutheran
Church in Kitchener.
Details on page 142.

sounds to the most monstrous roar you can imagine," he says with a grin. "I like the complexity and diversity of sound.

"The other thing that drew me is that I like big and flashy, and the organ can be really loud. You can lay down really big chords and really let it go."

Today, Ehlebracht is wearing a black T-shirt with sparkles on one side, black pants and his eye-catching purple organ shoes.

He's thoughtful, with a quirky sense of humour and a keen desire to bring the organ to life for people who know it only by church hymns.

"People don't understand it's not just designed for church hymns. I see it as an instrument that everyone could love like they love the guitar and piano," he says.

At St. Peter's this summer, where the congregation is accustomed to music director Peter Nikiforuk's exemplary musicianship, Ehlebracht didn't disappoint. They gave him a standing ovation on an August Sunday before he headed back to school.

"This kid just knocked me out," says St. Peter's choir member Kathleen Beattie, who performed throughout Canada and Europe as a bassoon player in the Canadian Forces in the 1970s.

"Every time he performs, he pulls something out of his back pocket. For the last verse of each hymn, he'd blow off something I'd never heard before. He just makes it up. Do you have any idea how extraordinary that is?" says Beattie, a lawyer.

"It's almost like he's inside the organ."

Now in his second year at the demanding Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester in New York – one of the finest music schools in the world – Ehlebracht's dream is to be a concert organist and a teacher who introduces mainstream audiences to an instrument he loves.

He admires the creativity, musicality and daring of Cameron Carpenter, the so-called bad boy of the organ. Carpenter, known for his talent as well as his often unorthodox interpretations of organ music,

flashy clothes and shoes with rhinestones, is performing solo to sold-out audiences around the world.

Ehlebracht is intrigued by Carpenter's "completely wild, out-of-the-park" interpretations of J.S. Bach, one of Ehlebracht's favourite composers.

"Cameron Carpenter is kind of a role model," he says. "He advocates playing the organ to the public.

"I hope in my career to inspire more young people to go into the organ," he says. "One of my reasons is that I really like working with people and introducing and showing off the instrument. The organ is almost like a hidden gem."

Nikiforuk, his first organ teacher, says Ehlebracht has the potential "to have a very, very successful career as an organist.

"He's extremely accomplished and he's playing at a professional level already," says Nikiforuk, a well-known organist with a doctor of musical arts degree from Yale University.

Ehlebracht's personality is a bonus.

"Josh is good at working with people. He has a good level of humility. He's a good kid. He's level-headed and he works hard and he's very gifted. What more could you ask?" Nikiforuk says.

Take a look at YouTube and you'll get the idea. When he was only 17, Ehlebracht arranged a Phantom of the Opera medley for a friend that has garnered almost 80,000 views.

Listen to the classical pieces too, less popular among YouTube listeners but played with equal confidence and energy. You'll understand that this is a musician with a gift, with depth and a sense of fun.

The eldest of three children, Ehlebracht is the whirlwind who rarely sits still.

"He really comes alive with the loud stuff and solos where he's really dripping with sweat when he's done," says his mother, Karen Ehlebracht, a registered nurse. The dry-cleaning bill is higher when

he's home, she says with a laugh.

"They say organists should be good at tap dances because of all the work they do with their feet," Josh says. "It's an interesting experience visually to see an organist play. You look like a wizard with your hands flying across the keyboards."

At this young age, Ehlebracht has served already as music director at two churches, St. Stephen Lutheran Church when he was only 16, and this past summer at St. Peter's Lutheran Church where he was filling in for Nikiforuk, who was on sabbatical.

Ehlebracht was a high school student in 2016 when he won second place in the Royal Canadian College of Organists' Fairclough Competition. A student in a master's degree music program came third.

He has performed in many venues, including St. Patrick's Cathedral, a landmark church in New York City, and at Metropolitan United Church in Toronto, home to the country's largest pipe organ with its five keyboards, "a ton of stops"

(which control the type of sound, like trumpet or flute), 8,333 pipes and about 805 kilometres of wire. The first time he played at Metropolitan, he was 14 years old and performing alongside university students and professors.

"It's more about the music," he says, but "it makes me feel really powerful when you sit down and you're in control of this massive beast of an instrument," he says.

"I'm absolutely in love with that instrument."

He was in New York auditioning for the Juilliard School when students at the famous music school took him and his fellow applicants to St. Patrick's Cathedral where a pipe organ of "unbelievable power with five manuals (keyboards) and a bazillion stops" awaited them.

They were asked if any of them wanted to improvise on the organ. Ehlebracht volunteered.

"I didn't know how to improvise, but I said, 'I'll try.' No one else wanted to do it.

It was nerve-racking because all of them would hear me play. But I just couldn't let that opportunity pass. It was so cool," Ehlebracht says. He played "Tu Es Petra" by French composer Henri Mulet.

"It's big, loud and fast and you cross your hands over. My dad said, 'I've never seen you so excited.'"

He won a place on the waiting list for Juilliard, but chose Eastman to study with Nathan Laube, professor of organ and an international concert organist whom he'd met at a high school camp at Eastman.

"The great thing about Eastman is there is no one way to play music," Ehlebracht says. "You're encouraged to have your own voice. If you copy someone else's voice, it takes away from it."

His family manages the US\$71,000 to \$73,000 annual cost of tuition, food and residence with "blood, sweat and tears," his dad, Mark, says, as well as with help from university scholarships and financial aid, grandparents and Joshua's musical work.

Ehlebracht is helping to provide organ and choral music for worship at Christ Church in Rochester after winning a fellowship for the second year in a row.

Laube, who performed 14 concerts during a European tour this summer, says Ehlebracht is the kind of musician who enjoys pushing the boundaries.

"He's full of enthusiasm and musical panache, so this combination bodes well for the future," Laube says.

Musicians work all their lives to find a good balance "between that sincere, unbridled expression, and an ever clearer and focused manner of delivery through a fine technique," he says, adding "it's a pleasure to help Josh in this journey."

At Eastman, Ehlebracht tries to tease his fellow students into wearing "crazy" shoes like his own.

Typical organ shoes are like black oxfords, but with a metal shank in the middle that holds the arch so the musician can play another line of music with toe and heel.



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Ehlebracht has different styles of organ shoes in purple, red and emerald green, with a few dollar-store rhinestones added for good measure. "It's a little bit over the top but it's one of the things I have fun with," he says.

He and his father saw the talented Carpenter, crazy garb and all, perform a few years ago at a concert in St. Catharines. Some people go to rock concerts; the Ehlebrachts go to organ concerts, Mark says.

"He signed my red shoes across the top. He said, 'Man, those are some crazy shoes,'" Josh says. "It was a pinnacle moment.

"I don't want to copycat Carpenter. I have to find my musical voice and that's something I'm working on. For me, the No. 1 thing is the music, regardless of the shoes. The music has got to be there."

Originally, Ehlebracht wanted to be a commercial pilot or a race-car driver. He and his father, an airplane enthusiast, used to go to the airport and watch the

planes take off. They had a flight simulator on their computer.

The family of five moved to Kitchener from Ottawa in 2009 when he was in Grade 4. Having started piano lessons in Grade 1, he took up the piano again with Nikiforuk, but his heart just wasn't in it.

"I remember every one of his first piano lessons," says Nikiforuk. "His rhythm wasn't great and I gave him a hard time."

He began giving organ lessons to 11-year-old Ehlebracht when it became evident that's where his interest lay.

"It became very clear very, very early that Josh really wanted to play organ," Nikiforuk says. "He worked like a dog on organ stuff."

In elementary school, Ehlebracht's iPod was filled with organ music, particularly compositions by Bach.

"I'm a big Bach fan. I like fugues because they fit together almost mathematically," Ehlebracht says. "I was really exposed to Bach because as a son of a pastor, you were at the church a lot."

He was eager to learn Bach's stirring Toccata and Fugue in D minor. "He could barely reach the pedals," Nikiforuk recalls. (Ehlebracht played the piece again this summer at a Royal Canadian College of Organists concert in Brantford. You can find his performance on YouTube.)

"I'd throw out a challenge in his way. By the time he was 15 or 16, he was playing a professional-level repertoire," Nikiforuk says.

At home, Ehlebracht had a Yamaha Electone, a two-keyboard electronic organ that he "had fun messing around with." At one point, he also had a big, heavy, "cheesy" Baldwin organ that he later gave to a friend. He saved his money at 16 and bought a digital organ that is still in the basement of his Kitchener home.

Ehlebracht played in church for the first time when he was 13. By the time he was 15, he was filling in for church organists when they were away. When he was appointed music director of St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Kitchener, he was a

busy student at Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute where he was in the International Baccalaureate program.

"At one point, it felt like I was living two lives – a church persona and another one with friends because I was a teen," he says. With friends, he spent time at the skate park with his skateboard, bike or freestyle scooter built for jumps. He was always careful not to hurt his hands.

At St. Stephen, it was Ehlebracht's first time directing a choir while also playing for church services, weddings and funerals. He encouraged a rock band made up of congregation members to perform in church. He practised on the church organ before school.

"I'd arrive at eight or 8:15 a.m. and he'd be practising like the masters; incredible organ pieces like I haven't heard play in the longest time," says Rev. Richard Schwass, pastor of St. Stephen Lutheran Church.

At one Sunday service, Ehlebracht was "getting into the hymn" when a flimsy knob

that he'd pulled came loose, flew through the air and bounced on the floor. Unfazed, he played on.

"So much cannot go as planned. Every time you play anything, it's completely new and exciting. My favourite part of the performance is all bets are off. You never know quite what's going to happen."

Ehlebracht enjoyed instructing and learning from the St. Stephen choir. "A lot of people were really happy and excited to see a young person take on the role."

He even won over those who originally grumbled about his youth. A skeptic later became "one of his biggest supporters," Schwass says.

"He just has a wonderful nature. Josh became one of our grandchildren."

It's unusual for a teenager to declare a passion for the pipe organ, but Josh Hill, head of music at Cameron Heights, discovered Ehlebracht was a "really brilliant musician."

Hill says he didn't know how good

Ehlebracht was until the youth invited his high school class to St. Peter's Lutheran Church for a recital so he could introduce them to the organ.

"It's kind of a mysterious instrument for people these days in our culture," Hill says. "He was breathtakingly good." Ehlebracht wowed students during a music banquet when he performed both Bach pieces and the Phantom of the Opera medley on his digital organ that he'd lugged to school.

Hill believes Ehlebracht has the potential to bring the organ into the mainstream, despite the fact "live music is a really tough gig to crack no matter your instrument."

"He's certainly got the chops to mesmerize an audience."

Ehlebracht is characteristically humble about his talents.

"I have some talent with the organ, but mainly I see my gift as having a lot of musicality," Ehlebracht says. "For me, it's in my mind, knowing how to work with the music to make it convey a message." 



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