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New chamber music ensemble offers classical music outreach through Canadian-heavy repertoire

By Chris Montanini, Londoner

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Magisterra Soloists. (Photo submitted)

A two-week, six-city tour that brought Canadian classical music to Brazil during the 2016 Rio Olympics has helped establish the mandate of a new professional, nonprofit chamber music ensemble in London.

Formed last fall by Western University professor Annette-Barbara Vogel, Magisterra Soloists embarked on an international tour across South America's largest city in August, bringing with them a program that featured brand new work by Canadian composer Emily Doolittle. The adventure included a stop at Sao Paulo's famed Instituto Bacarelli in the former low-income suburb of Heliopolis, where the ensemble's musicians played for a group of 1,200 young apprentices intending to pursue higher education in the arts.

"Nobody believed it would happen," Vogel said with a smile.

After all, her fledgling ensemble was active for less than eight months at the time and had no funding besides a few donations from private sponsors. But the experience was positive and an important example of the kind of musical outreach work Vogel hopes Magisterra can continue by promoting London, southwestern Ontario, and Canada.

The tour wrapped up with an evening concert in Rio de Janeiro supported by the Canadian Consulate General in Rio.

"Canada is usually not on (the classical music) map," Vogel said. "I think from that point of view, it's important to be present outside the country in order to serve what's happening inside this country."

Vogel, originally from Germany, has been teaching in London for the past 12 years. She's familiar with Brazil, too, having performed there over a dozen times during her career as a chamber musician and soloist. Now she's hoping her grassroots ensemble in London can inspire a new generation of classical musicians at home and elsewhere while providing an avenue for professional players looking to turn their passion into a career.

"If you look in the Canadian landscape ... there are the big orchestras and a few ad hoc ensembles or not so quite ad hoc ensembles, but all of which are either affiliated with universities or big orchestra members," Vogel said, adding that Magisterra is trying to fill a gap for musicians struggling to find an orchestra job to keep their classical music career alive. "We're trying to be diverse with a very incredibly professional understanding of the chamber music ensemble; it's not a pick up group."

The ensemble features a flexible configuration of eight to 12 members, all of whom are Canadian postgraduate students or recent graduates. Magisterra also includes some undergraduate students as "Magisterra fellows," Vogel said.

"Basically (they're) learning on the job," she explained. "Playing the same program six times and keeping that level, getting better with each (performance), that was something you never learned (in school). And again, every time you travel outside (home), it opens your mind."

Having already introduced classical music to young students in London through in-school performances over the past year, Magisterra is planning to do more local outreach now that they're back in Canada. A grant from TD Canada Trust is allowing them to get started, but a fundraising concert in downtown London November 5 will also help bolster Magisterra's coffers.

Their first annual gala — From Rio with Love — will feature music from this past summer's South American journey.

“(It’s) really important for us,” Vogel said. “What we try to do at the fundraiser is showcase what we’ve done over the year. We also want to talk about ... who we are, what we intend to do, what we aim to stand for (and) what we hope to succeed in.”

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IF YOU GO

What: Magisterra Soloists’ first annual fundraising concert and silent auction

Where: Hassan Law Community Gallery, 142 Dundas Street

When: Saturday, November 5 at 7 p.m.

Tickets: eventbrite.ca



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