



Maestro of Comedy

There's something very likeable about Magnus Mårtensson. Although tall and impressive under a mop of curly blond hair, he radiates joviality. He is funny, too. Perhaps funny adds a certain likeable charm. When Mårtensson performed his Victor Borgesque act at New York's Swedish Seamen's Church some months ago, the entire room tilted over and fell into his lap: The audience loved him.

"I wrote my own comedies up to 9th grade," says Mårtensson as I catch up with him at Scandinavia House in New York. "After that, I focused on music only."

Like most Swedish school children, Mårtensson began playing the mandatory recorder at age seven, and later graduated to other instruments. Unlike most children, however, he never found practice boring or painful.

"Not at all, I liked it. My parents aren't musicians but even though my family is musically inclined, nobody ever forced me. I played

because I wanted to."

Mårtensson studied piano, voice, conducting and composition at Malmö Musikhögskola, and founded the Malmö Chamber Orchestra. He continued his studies in conducting at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he also served as the conductor of the Contemporary Music Ensemble. He has, since 1996, been the conductor of University of Buffalo's Slee Sinfonietta and the UB Symphony, as well as an instructor in conducting and viola performance. He also conducts the Scandinavian Chamber Orchestra.

It was during a concert with pianist Per Tengstrand at Scandinavia House two years ago that Mårtensson re-connected with his comedic past.

"We were playing in the Victor Borge Hall, I did a little skit on Borge and his daughter was in the audience and she was very encouraging. I admired Borge, I was fourteen when I first sneaked in to see one of his concerts in

Malmö. There must be something in the air around the Öresund strait, we were born not too far away from each other."

The marketing possibilities are of course not lost on Mårtensson

"Classical music today has problems asserting itself in the huge supply of music that's out there. We who are performers of classic music have to start thinking in different ways how to reach a new audience."

Hence *Magnus Mårtensson and Friends*—Mårtensson's upcoming series of concerts at Scandinavia House next spring. Among the friends are soprano Madeleine Kristoffersson and pianist Nils Vigeland.

"The idea is that we do the first half together, me and the guest, with classical music, an intermission and then I do my music with comedy. So it's a little bit of everything really."

Mårtensson, who has composed incidental music for theater plays, songs, and chamber music including a chamber opera, *Before the*

PHOTO: BO ZAUNDERS



QUICK LOOK AT: Magnus Mårtensson

Title: Conductor (among others)
Hails from: Malmö
Lives in: New York
Listens to: Josquin and Radiohead
Likes to conduct: Mozart and Brahms
Enjoys: Table tennis
Reads: Just finished Hermann Hesse's *Knulp*, now reading *The Elegant Universe* by Brian Greene
Why conducting: "Because as a conductor it's all about your own interpretation of a piece. To be a good conductor you have to be able to communicate your ideas without too many words, rather with your body language and your eyes."

For more information:
www.MaestroMartensson.com,
www.scandinavianhouse.org

Law, sees similarities in writing comedy.

"Writing comedy is very much like writing music," he explains. "You start out with a situation or a motif... You develop it, you work it over, keep some, throw some out. Instead of playing it, you read it out loud."

Comedy, however, demands a completely different way of communicating with the audience.

"You're allowed to improvise with comedy, as a matter of fact, you *have* to improvise. If you don't get any response from the audience you have to make changes. Comedy is, in that aspect, more like jazz. With classical music you must never improvise! And you're never really sure whether or not the audience likes what you're doing when you play classical music. People used to boo or throw tomatoes, today classical music audiences are very polite."

And where, one wonders, does he get his inspiration for comedy?

"I take something meant to be serious, and put the spotlight on the funny aspect of it." Spoken like a true comedian. ■■