

Traverse Symphony Orchestra Conductor Kevin Rhodes



Photo by Todd Zawistowski

By **JOHN FLESHER** on February 28, 2014

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Traverse Symphony Orchestra conductor Kevin Rhodes had led a life not unlike a sonata: a path full of twists and turns, yet one that has had structure despite occasional discordance. From a chaotic childhood in an Indiana truckstop to the world stage of symphony, John Slesher recounts how classical music saved the TSO conductor in the following essay, which was originally published in the December 2013 edition of Traverse, Northern Michigan's Magazine.

Before a rapt audience in a darkened Lars Hockstad Auditorium, the maestro works his magic.

It's been two-plus hours since the Traverse Symphony Orchestra concert opened with a rousing rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Now, conductor Kevin Rhodes leads the way toward the conclusion of Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, one of the most beloved classical works, by turns playful, haunting and majestic. It's a journey through musical peaks and valleys that can reduce a listener to tears or inspire shouts of ecstasy. His back is to the crowd, yet the intensity is palpable as Rhodes pauses between movements to wipe the sweat from his face and head with a handkerchief.

He seems to have reached almost supernatural harmony with the orchestra, swishing and flicking his baton as though casting a spell. He jabs and jumps. His arms sweep in graceful arcs, at times urging the musicians forward, at others reining them in like a cowboy astride a bronco. As the final chord fades, the conductor is rooted in place, outstretched right hand grasping the baton with the delicacy of a child cradling a butterfly, as though a magnificent edifice he has constructed will collapse into a heap with the slightest false move. The moment passes, and the listeners erupt into thunderous applause. A beaming

Rhodes turns, bows repeatedly, warmly embraces first violinist and concertmaster Paul Sonner, acknowledges each section of the orchestra and leaves the stage, only to return by popular demand for another round of cheers and clapping.

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[content/uploads/2014/02/TVM1213_KEVINRHODES_thumb2.jpg](http://mynorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TVM1213_KEVINRHODES_thumb2.jpg)) The ritual is familiar. Yet somehow, Rhodes appears not to be simply going through the motions; he seems genuinely moved. In a subsequent Facebook posting, he acknowledges the occasion brought him to tears “for probably the first time in my life after a performance.”

“The TSO today went to a new level of artistry,” he writes. “A great performance with an orchestra that is great on its own long before you showed up is super ... (but) working with a community and dedicated group of musicians to arrive where we did today is actual nourishment for the soul. I could not be more proud and happy. I guess I’ll stay with this music thing.”

His exuberance is not that of a novice basking in the spotlight’s glow. Rhodes is 49 years old and has been directing musical ensembles since he was a teenager. He’s been at the helm of dozens of orchestras in Europe and the United States, from the Vienna Philharmonic to the Orchestra of the Paris Opera to the Houston Symphony. He has worked extensively with ballet companies in Berlin, Amsterdam, Verona and elsewhere and has collaborated with luminaries such as classical pianists Andre Watts and Peter Serkin, and pop stars including Art Garfunkel and the Kingston Trio. Yet it’s here, in small-town Traverse City, that a performance by one of his orchestras strikes the deepest emotional chord?

A skeptic might suspect otherwise: surely Rhodes has had equally moving experiences elsewhere. But the more you learn about this charismatic, driven and immensely gifted artist, the more sense his comment makes. He offers clues during a break from rehearsing

the day before the concert, explaining his decision 12 years ago to seek the posts of principal conductor and music director of the Traverse Symphony Orchestra and the Springfield Symphony Orchestra in Massachusetts after a decade overseas.

“I wanted part of my life’s work to be something that I felt made an impact, made a difference in some small way,” he says over a lunch of grilled chicken pizza and iced tea at North Peak Brewing Company. His European run was successful, but “didn’t change anybody’s life.” And besides, the orchestras he conducted there were already major leaguers. The Traverse City and Springfield gigs offered greater opportunities to nurture growth, to make a lasting mark.

That’s the professional explanation. But for Rhodes, it’s also deeply personal. Music is not just his job or an outlet for artistic expression. It’s a balm for treating wounds from a difficult and sometimes painful childhood in a home with two alcoholic parents who died during his teen years. Music is a tool that enabled him to survive and flourish. Beneath Rhodes’s cheery exterior is the toughness of a street fighter, a gritty determination to leave the world a better place than he found it. “I guess I’m just lucky that somehow I had the quality which made me say, ‘OK, none of this is going to hold me down. I’m going to rise above it and then some,’” he says, adding later, “I had so many people that were such a negative influence on me when I was younger. It’s a real gas to feel like I’m perhaps being a positive influence.”

His wife of 26 years, Jane, notes that Rhodes is a gifted pianist but always seems happiest when collaborating with others rather than cloistering himself for long periods of practice or study. “The longer he does this, and the more years he puts into it, the more deeply touching it has become to him—to have these special moments with the people on stage, his beloved musicians, but also the audience behind him,” she says. “He does feel the energy coming from behind as well as from up front. It’s like we’re all needed here to complete the experience.”

Rhodes’s life began in an unlikely setting: a working-class household in the Ohio River city of Evansville, Indiana, where Rhodes’s parents ran a 24-hour truck-stop diner called Dusty’s Breakfast House. “It was absolutely something out of a film—little cinder-block building with knotty pine paneling on the inside and waitresses named Corrine and Melba and Willie and Rosie,” he recalls. The only musical exposure Dusty’s provided was Loretta Lynn, Conway Twitty and Johnny Cash on the jukebox.

Although uncomfortable with the label “child prodigy,” at least in his own case, Rhodes acknowledges there was something extraordinary in the way he became a musician. As a kindergartener, he heard a teacher play the piano and was captivated. He nagged his parents for two years, and finally they found an old piano and a teenage girl to give him

lessons. He credits public schools with introducing him to the classical masters, whose works he'd never hear at home. "When I was a little kid, I'd be practicing Chopin or Beethoven. I remember my dad sticking his head in the living room and going, 'When are you going to learn a normal song, boy?'"

"This is one reason why I feel it's such a tragedy how expendable arts education is viewed in America," Rhodes adds. "If it hadn't existed then, I'd be trying to run my dad's diner right now. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but it's probably not the most useful place in the world for me."

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[content/uploads/2014/02/TVM1213_KEVINRHODES_Opener.jpg](http://mynorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TVM1213_KEVINRHODES_Opener.jpg)) Young Kevin hooked up with a traveling children's talent show organized by the city parks and recreation department that performed dozens of shows every summer. He also accompanied the school choir, which led to jobs as rehearsal pianist for community theatrical productions. Around that time, he was becoming acquainted with orchestral music. "I wore out my Star Wars original soundtrack," he says. "I kept listening to it, tried to figure out what instruments were playing. When I heard classical, symphonic, opera, I said, 'Wow, I want to do this. But I don't sing like that, I don't play an orchestra instrument. So the only thing left to do is conduct it.'" By age 16, he was directing the community theater ensembles.

He also met Leon Gregorian, conductor of a symphony orchestra across the river in Owensboro, Kentucky, who took an interest in the precocious teen and began teaching

him. They spent long hours together, and Rhodes often attended the orchestra's rehearsals and concerts. The maestro was struck by his student's passion and the depth of his knowledge. "He had insights into things you don't expect someone 15, 16 years old to have," Gregorian recalls. "He had a great love for music, and he was always thirsty to learn more."

Rhodes had another motive, as well. Even as a child, Rhodes says, he saw music as a way to escape the turmoil of a home where both parents were enslaved by alcohol. His father made no secret of his drinking, while his mother tried to hide her addiction and wouldn't imbibe in front of others. "Part of the responsibility I had as a kid was trying to be around my mother from about 2 in the afternoon on, so she would be sober enough to drive me to the shows at night ... because a car ride with my mother when she was really plastered, that wasn't particularly fun. Not to mention the embarrassment of how she would behave when we would get someplace." She died when Rhodes was 14, as did his father four years later.

Despite his interest in conducting, Rhodes planned to major in piano performance in college. Gregorian suggested he attend Michigan State University and study under Ralph Votapek, who had won the first Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Rhodes did so. Midway through his undergraduate years, he tipped off Gregorian about an opening on the MSU faculty, and soon mentor and student were united once more. Rhodes became Gregorian's assistant and conducted the orchestra for the theater department's musicals. During one of them, "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris," he met Jane, who was auditioning for a role. "He graciously and benevolently cast me in the show," Jane says. They married after graduating in 1987, and Rhodes headed to the University of Illinois to earn a master's degree in orchestral conducting.

After a couple of years in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the couple headed to Europe, where Rhodes led more than 700 performances as guest conductor of 20 orchestras during a dizzying decade. He began with the Basel Stadttheater in Switzerland, and in 1995 debuted with the Vienna State Opera, becoming principal ballet conductor. Among other engagements: the Berlin Staatskappelle, La Scala in Milan, the Zagreb Philharmonic, the Dusseldorf Symphony, the Duisburg Philharmonic, the Swiss Chamber Philharmonic and the Symphony Orchestra of Madrid. Jane did musical theater work and taught English as a second language. It was fun and fulfilling, but they eventually decided to return home. Just as Rhodes was negotiating to lead the Springfield Symphony in Massachusetts, he got a call from his in-laws. They'd moved from Saginaw to Traverse City and heard that its local orchestra was looking for a new music director. Rhodes had vacationed in the area and was acquainted with its charms. "I didn't know quite where the orchestra was at that point, but definitely thought a lot of the elements were there one could build from. So I did apply, and as it turned out I got both positions and we moved back to the States."

The Traverse Symphony Orchestra, originally known as the Northwestern Michigan Symphony Orchestra, got its start in 1951, spearheaded by community leader Elnora Milliken. It has grown from a fledgling patchwork of local volunteers to a 60-member paid ensemble with a \$725,000 annual budget. When Rhodes came on the scene in 2001, the orchestra was at a crossroads. Under previous leader David Holland, an accomplished musician and instructor at Interlochen Center for the Arts who shortly will retire as principal violist with the TSO, it had become a solid community orchestra, with most of its members living nearby—a testament to the Grand Traverse region’s musical vibrancy. But the board wanted to raise the bar, to reach the level of regional professional orchestra. That, Rhodes explained, would require enough money to attract highly talented musicians from around the state and beyond. “I told them that what we don’t want is an orchestra that is necessarily of Traverse City, but we want an orchestra that is for Traverse City,” he said.

Nowadays, while some members are still from this area and predate Rhodes’s arrival, others hail from Detroit, Grand Rapids and elsewhere in Michigan—and as far away as Colorado and Nevada. Rhodes also has added a more challenging repertoire and instilled rigorous work habits. While in the old days the TSO might rehearse once a week for six weeks prior to a concert, it now prepares and performs an entire program over the course of a weekend—a rehearsal Friday, two on Saturday, another Sunday and the performance also on Sunday—which requires that the musicians prepare extensively ahead of time. He also demands a high level of artistry. “I came here with a very clear idea of just how good an orchestra can be,” Rhodes says. “At the time I was doing like 40 performances a year with the State Opera in Vienna. Now, I’m not saying that I’m such a super guy. It’s no great talent to stand in front of a great orchestra and do a great show—that’s like saying I can make a Maserati go 100 miles an hour. But I learned, just by being with these guys, what they do to play great. I’ve tried to bring that here.”

A rehearsal the day before the Dvorak concert earlier this fall offers a case study in Rhodes’s modus operandi. Promptly at 11 a.m., concertmaster Sonner silences the warm-up cacophony with a snappy wave of his hand. Rhodes, dressed in a rumpled white shirt and dark trousers with one set of glasses on his nose and another perched atop his mostly bald head, turns immediately to the final movement of Symphony No. 9, which hurtles forward like the churning rush of a locomotive. “Let’s just take our time and make it good,” he says before attacking the opening notes, conducting with vigor and intensity.

He frequently interrupts the music for rapid-fire comments or suggestions, illustrating his points with onomatopoeic jargon: “It has to be like a gunshot—BEE-ditta-dotta, BEE-ditta-dotta.” ... Sustain, don’t push—TEE-ta-ta, TEE-ta-ta!” His instructions vary from technical fine points of violin bow strokes to pop-culture imagery to capture a mood: “Think of the throne room scene at the end of Star Wars.” He’s a perfectionist, ordering the players to refine troublesome sections again and again until he’s satisfied. Yet his attitude is positive,

upbeat, leavened with humor that eases the sting of occasional criticism. “There are those who analyze me and say that since I grew up in such chaos, I like putting order to things,” he says with a chuckle. “I think to a certain extent, sure. But what I really love most is the honest-to-god connection with people I’m working with ... sometimes just a little passage that’s been difficult, and you deal with it, you sort it out, do-do-do-da, and finally it works. That’s a really special kind of bond and communication with other human beings, and I love that.”

It’s an approach that the musicians appreciate. “I’ve been a professional violinist for a very long time, and his rehearsal technique is among the finest I’ve ever been part of,” says Sonner, a member of the orchestra for about 15 years. “He’s incredibly friendly, gregarious, high-energy. He’s able to inspire the musicians to do their very best. His attitude is driven and his standards are very high. ... I think it’s remarkable that Kevin has been here for so many years and his admiration and respect from the orchestra is growing, not diminishing. That’s pretty unique.”

Another fan is Jeffrey Cobb, choral director at Northwestern Michigan College, whose ensembles sometimes collaborate with the TSO. (They’re teaming up for a “Home for the Holidays” concert in December.) “Singers have all had horror stories of working with some conductors who don’t pay attention to the choruses in rehearsals or performances; they’re solely focused on the orchestra,” Cobb says. “It’s very rewarding to our folks that Kevin helps singers feel we’re part of the greater body. It’s a win-win for both of our organizations. It’s an incredible opportunity for us to work with a top-notch orchestra right here in our own community.”

How long will the happy marriage between the TSO and its maestro last? Conductors tend to move on at some point, and Rhodes is in demand. He still makes frequent guest appearances in Europe, and this season he’s debuting with the New York City Ballet and leading some Tacoma Symphony concerts in Washington state. Still, no one seems eager to end the local relationship. Rhodes and the orchestra’s management are negotiating a new contract, which board president Thomas Haase hopes will be wrapped up soon. “We definitely want to have Kevin Rhodes stay in Traverse City,” he says.

Haase believes the benefits of having an orchestra of the TSO’s caliber extend well beyond pleasing classical music buffs. It’s part of a thriving arts and culture scene that boosts the quality of life and the regional economy. “Look at what the film festival brings to the table, the National Writers Series, the foreign affairs speakers at NMC, and so on. It really makes Traverse City feel more like a university town than a lot of other places our size. The arts are essential to attracting the sort of blooming retiree crowd we have here.” Of course, they’re a magnet for young adults as well.

For his part, Rhodes says he still enjoys Traverse City and its orchestra and has plenty of ideas for improvements. “There aren’t words to describe the progress that’s gone on in the past 12 years that I’ve been here. It still does not cease to amaze me. It’s really, really, reeeeeally gratifying, and at this point it’s just onward and upward.”

If a dark cloud hangs on the horizon, it may be the precarious state of American symphony orchestras in general. The past decade has not been kind. Orchestras have sought bankruptcy protection in Philadelphia, Tampa, San Jose, Louisville, Syracuse, Albuquerque and Honolulu. Ticket sales are down in many places, and state and federal funding has been slashed. Some commentators wonder if the American orchestra as we know it is an endangered species.

As Rhodes sees it, the problem is multi-layered. Government support here is a joke compared to Europe. Some orchestras, particularly larger ones, have bloated staffs. The economic downturn has been a body blow; when times are bad, live entertainment is one of the first casualties in the family budget. Musical tastes and the manner in which people experience the arts have evolved dramatically. “We have a fairly loud society in general,” Rhodes says. “Americans don’t like to go someplace and be quiet. They want to yell! They want to get up anytime they want and go over to their neighbor.” Sitting quietly in an auditorium listening to music for a couple of hours, he says, “seems to get a little further and further from the mainstream of what people do.”

Yet Rhodes is relentlessly optimistic, insisting there’s still a healthy appetite for classical music, noting that doomsayers have been warning of its demise for much of the past century—yet it’s still here. He’s sensed the enthusiasm of the Traverse City audiences. He’s seen the excited faces of elementary school kids whose classes have been bused to concert halls to hear orchestras—often for the first time—and it inspires him. Perhaps it calls to mind his own childhood, when that kindergarten teacher planted a seed with her piano playing that would blossom into a passion, a career, a savior.

That was a long time ago, but Gregorian, his longtime friend and something of a father figure, is certain that Rhodes is still motivated by those tough early days, still fired with determination to prove himself the way he knows best—by making great music. “He’s never forgotten his roots,” Gregorian says. “It’s not the most pleasant part of his life, yet he doesn’t forget those things. It’s made him a stronger person, and a better musician.”

Rhodes puts it more succinctly: “I guess in more ways than one, I’m a survivor.” As long as he’s in charge, it seems a safe bet that the Traverse Symphony Orchestra will survive, too.

