

The conduct of an anti-maestro

What the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra didn't want was an autocratic leader, **ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN** writes. That's why Martin Fischer-Dieskau seemed like a good fit

KITCHENER, ONT.

They say that those who are born in Berlin never leave," said Martin Fischer-Dieskau, who has more reason than most to know that it's true. Even when he took a job across the ocean, he ended up in another Berlin — Kitchener, which till the First World War had the same name as his home town.

The German past of this Ontario city, where Oktoberfest is still a big deal, was something Fischer-Dieskau only discovered after becoming principal conductor of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra last year. The place is still offering up surprises, of the kind Canadian cities and their orchestras reserve for conductors accustomed to European ways.

Like Andrey Boreyko in Winnipeg and Hans Graf in Calgary, Fischer-Dieskau had to learn how tentative the symphony orchestra's position in our cultural fabric can be. Unlike them, however, he hasn't had to watch his ensemble flirt with bankruptcy.

For many observers of the orchestral scene, recent history at the KWSO looks like the way of the future for everyone else. The orchestra has developed a participatory structure that seems to have focused its energies and drawn it closer to its community. Players are involved in virtually every aspect of the operation. Education and outreach are seen as more pressing goals than building a mystique around the podium, as the Montreal Symphony Orchestra



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did with Charles Dutoit.

The KWSO didn't want an autocratic leader, or even a traditional music director with full authority over the creative side of the business. It wanted someone suited to sharing control with others, which is how it came around to Fischer-Dieskau.

In terms of the maestro tradition represented by Herbert von Karajan, who ruled the Berlin Philharmonic while Fischer-Dieskau was a student, the new man at the KWSO is an anomaly. He's a conductor who hates being the only centre of authority.

"The system we have here suits my personality, because it means we have more democracy and teamwork," he said. "I like to share responsibility. I don't think I would have the strength to fight this through if everything were my sole, lonely responsibility. I find that so old-fashioned."

That doesn't mean turning rehearsals into open seminars on style and phrasing. It does mean accepting a system in which programming decisions are made by a committee of which he is only a member.

Autocracy is a personal issue with Fischer-Dieskau, who had

daily experience of it while growing up. His father is renowned baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who had a Prussian upbringing and a Prussian view of how things ought to be run.

"He was a very strong father, and he was always the boss," he said. Like many sons, he rebelled not by battling his father on his own terms, but by rejecting his authoritarian example.

And yet, he wanted to be a conductor. He conducted his first opera (Haydn's *Il Mondo della Luna*) in the late seventies, when he was 19. Few people then saw anything wrong with the dictatorial methods of a Karajan or a George Szell. An excess of congeniality may have got in the young conductor's way. Before the KWSO job came along, he was a perennial guest conductor who had never had his own orchestra.

"My life as a conductor begins in Canada," he said. "It's the first time I'm in charge, and the first time I feel I'm understood."

But the notion of "in charge" is still under construction in Kitchener. Much as the orchestra abhorred the idea of putting a martinet on the podium, it hasn't uniformly embraced the principal

conductor's laid-back style.

"I have already had my little problems here," he admitted. "Some people want me to show more strength. They think you're never supposed to ask an orchestra any questions, and I do. And because of that, they say I have a leadership problem, if not now, then in two years' time if I don't

change. I will change, in small ways, and so will they...."

"With the music, there is no problem. It has been very rewarding, and as long as I can be convincing on the podium everything will be good."

He's still amazed that an orchestra as good as the KWSO exists in a town of this size. In Germany,

he said, it would be comparable to a radio orchestra in one of the principal cities.

He's also proud of his success in getting a hearing in Kitchener recently for orchestral music by Boris Blacher and Hans Zender (including the latter's arrangement of Schubert's song cycle, *Die Winterreise*, a major piece in the repertoire of Fischer-Dieskau senior), and would like to do works by Bruckner, Webern and Berthold Goldschmidt, whose music he helped rediscover in Germany after it had mostly been forgotten. He would like to play up the Kitchener-Berlin connection musically during the 2004-2005 season, which coincides with the opening of a new Canadian embassy in Berlin, designed by the same architects who built Kitchener's city hall.

But there are many discussions to be had before such a plan could show up in the programs. Fischer-Dieskau intimated that his own contribution to the coming season was muted, not so much by the committee system as by a shortage of funds.

His home is still Berlin, where he lives with his wife, a cellist. He sets up in a hotel near the KWSO headquarters during the 18 weeks or more that he spends each year in Kitchener. The image of a conductor who strolls to work seems appropriate for this easy-going man, for whom art and power will always be uneasy partners.

Martin Fischer-Dieskau conducts the KWSO tonight and tomorrow at Kitchener's Centre in the Square.