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concertmaster, Jinwoo Lee helps make the orchestra sing



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"The conductor is the head of the entire orchestra," said Jinwoo Lee, concertmaster of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. "But he's really the only person who doesn't make a single sound."

That's where Lee comes in. As the leader of the violinists, he makes sounds, and in doing so serves as a bridge between the conductor and the rest of the orchestra.

A conductor's gestures might not be interpreted and translated exactly the same by all musicians, Lee noted. But his fellow violinists can see the contact Lee's bow makes with a string.

"They can gauge exactly when to play it and when to come off," he said.

In September, Lee will begin his second season as MSO concertmaster. He came here from Neue Philharmonie Westfalen in Germany, where he also had been a concertmaster. A native of South Korea, he earned bachelor and master's degrees from The Juilliard School, then completed his doctorate at the Manhattan School of Music.

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His hiring and move to Milwaukee took some time, thanks to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. He remembers six rounds of auditions over a 12-hour period, followed by the invitation to play a trial week here. That culminated in performances with the MSO Feb. 22-23, 2020, featuring Mendelssohn's Trumpet Overture and Symphony No. 4 ("Italian"), Gabrieli's Canzoni and Michele Dall'Ongaro's "La primavera."

Lee has been impressed by the professional dedication of his Milwaukee colleagues, while still finding them "relaxed enough to talk to you, joke with you, be with you on a personal level."

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Forging connection with music director Ken-David Masur

As concertmaster, Lee works closely with MSO music director Ken-David Masur. "He's a wonderful musician, not just the conductor," Lee said. "He's also very, very diplomatic. Maybe a tick too kind," which Lee said is far preferable to the dictatorial kind of conductor.

Masur "really makes the orchestra sing. And that's the essence of music, even though we are instrumentalists," Lee said.

Playing the Sibelius 'ice and fire' concerto

Lee will make his featured concerto soloist debut with the MSO Jan. 24 and 25, playing Sibelius' Violin Concerto in D minor. He thinks it may be the greatest work composed by Sibelius. The concerto really sounds like the composer's Finnish background, Lee said.

A listener may associate the Sibelius concerto with the extreme cold of Finland. But, Lee notes, a great violinist once said that this concerto is "ice and fire."

"It's full of shivering and shimmering," Lee said. "At the same time, there's something absolutely burning about it."

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