

Moment to savour for conductor Kenneth Woods

May 21 2010 By Christopher Morley

*Kenneth Woods will live out a childhood dream when he conducts the Orchestra of the Swan in Stratford. **Christopher Morley** reports.*

The new principal guest conductor of Orchestra of the Swan is to make his debut at the Spring Sounds Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon over the Bank Holiday weekend.

Kenneth Woods, a cellist, who has rapidly built a reputation as a conductor in Cincinnati and Oregon in the US, said links with various other orchestras had led him to work with OOTS.

“Well, it was a long and random chain of connections between various orchestras – I conduct a band and a player from that band plays for another band that David Curtis (OOTS’ principal conductor and artistic director) conducts and so on,” he explains.

“I think eventually, we all were destined to be on each other’s radar. Since I moved to the UK a few years back, Orchestra of the Swan has stood out as one of the most innovative and fastest developing orchestras in the country.

“Conversely, I think David gradually became aware of what I was doing musically in the UK and what I was doing with my own orchestra in America. Hopefully, there was a mutual respect for balancing creativity and quality.

“Eventually, we found an opportunity for me to work with the orchestra last summer, and I was just blown away with not only the standard but also the attitude of the musicians. There is a real sense of community.”

Both Woods and Curtis have studied with the great Finnish conducting coach Jorma Panula (who can number Sakari Oramo and Esa-Pekka Salonen among his star pupils).

“I had the chance to spend a summer with Panula at Aspen,” says Kenneth. “His teaching sort of defies description. Perhaps it is just his nature, perhaps it is something he understands about the inherent stubbornness of most conductors – either way, he never tells you what to do when you are conducting, just what not to do.

He stands back and lets you conduct, and when you do something he doesn’t like, he unleashes a rather crazed-sounding multilingual outburst. If you do a slightly sentimental slow up in a Tchaikovsky symphony, as I once did, he just howls and says, “No Hollywood!”.

"That summer went by fast. He liked my conducting and I found his outbursts both humorous and helpful, probably because I was lucky enough to suffer fairly few of them," he adds.

Kenneth Woods makes his public debut with the Orchestra of the Swan at Compton Verney on Monday, May 31. The programme features the soprano Sarah Leonard, and includes the world premiere of Joanna Lee's *The Chronicles of Archy*, and a performance of Walton's *Facade*, and poetry by Dame Edith Sitwell.

Walton, and his home on the paradisiacal island of Ischia, seem to figure large in Kenneth's life. He has even named a chamber music group with which he performs after the extinct volcano, Mount Epomeo, which glowers over the area and enriches its soil.

"Indeed, it is a coincidence," he says. "I've always loved Walton's music. He and Elgar have held a special place in the pantheon for me since I was very young.

"I doubt you would find many people who listened to the Walton Cello Concerto (composed in Ischia) more times between the ages of 14 and 18 than I did. When my cello teacher finally told me he would work with me on it, I was overjoyed.

"The only tragedy with Walton is that there isn't a huge output, and most of the works are both very difficult and written for quite a large orchestra. That makes his music a tough sell in America, where he's not well known.

"Still, I adore the three concertos, the First Symphony is an absolute masterpiece, and so are the Variations on a Theme of Hindemith, which I'm conducting for the first time this summer. I've been trying to programme that piece for 15 years," Kenneth adds.

"*Facade* really stands apart from the rest of his output because of the extremely witty and colourful poems, which he sets with incredible sharpness and fantasy. You wouldn't expect the man who wrote the last movement of the Cello Concerto to be so good at comedy, but genius is like that.

"It's a pity he didn't get more commissions that would have pointed him towards other unexpected paths during his life – he was one of those rare talents who could just compose whatever a situation demands.

"Ischia is certainly one of my favourite pieces. I only went there for the first time two years ago, and that's where the trio, Ensemble Epomeo, came together. Chamber music is my other great love in life, and I played in rewarding piano trios and string quartets for many years before conducting really got in the way." This is comparable with David Curtis, and his previous career as violist with the Coull String Quartet.

Kenneth Woods has a glittering CV, and has travelled the world taking up engagements.

Yet this year, alongside professional engagements, he is generously conducting many amateur ensembles in this country. Is this a means of getting himself better-known this side of the pond?

"It's more an accident of scheduling than anything else," he replies.

“I left my post in Oregon at the end of last season, so I could say yes to a few things like that here that in past years I've been unable to.

“The amateur scene in Britain is quite unique in the world – in America there is kind of an assumption that amateur groups can be fun to play in, but never to listen to.

“Here, where a community in Germany might have a very well-subsidised professional orchestra, you have a local amateur orchestra that can muster completely convincing performances of Mahler and Shostakovich symphonies.

“I'm not sure how much working with groups like that can make a name for a conductor, but you can learn a great deal of repertoire, and experience is the greatest asset any conductor can have.”

*** Orchestra of the Swan's Spring Sounds Festival runs from May 28-31. Details on 01789 207100**