

## A master of amazing music

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By William Dart



James Ehnes enjoys practising in front of television with the sound off.

Two weeks ago, James Ehnes was playing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. This Thursday he picks up the concerto again with the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and reveals just what it takes to be one of the world's most sought-after violinists. Ehnes is a man who admits to toning up his technique while watching sports television with the sound off, and says he enjoyed the Olympics while he was in Australia. "Any country you watch them in has its own spin on it and I learned a lot about Australia," he laughs, adding that his national pride in his homeland, Canada, gradually swelled as its medal tally crept up to 18.

Canada figures prominently in Ehnes' life.

When his recording of Korngold and Barber Concertos won a Grammy this year, it was "nice to see a Canadian production with a Canadian orchestra and conductor making an impact on the international scene". Ehnes puts great store on "getting out there" and an extensive catalogue of recordings from Bach to Dallapiccola takes his music to audiences unable to experience him in concert.

Not surprisingly, he deplores the cuts announced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "The CBC has an incredible history of supporting classical music, traditional and contemporary. With the country's huge geographic area, a lot of people are only able to receive classical music via the radio. "Cutting back means an entire generation will be deprived of classical music completely." He is cheered when he hears his Auckland performance will be relayed throughout the country by Radio New Zealand Concert.

Talking CDs, he describes his recent Onyx disc of the Elgar Concerto as "perfection". Conductor Andrew Davis was a fabulous accompanist and recording the work after a series of concerts with the Philharmonia Orchestra gave him "the opportunity to really figure it out ... there are so many recording situations where you don't know each other's names at the beginning of the day and start from there". Most importantly, he stresses, there should be a sense of occasion on a CD, with the performance coming across as an important event.

"Music is such a transitory thing, an infinite, indivisible collection of moments but, at the same time, it must be one event, one unit. With some recordings today, there is such a quest for dotting all the `i's and crossing all the 't's, there's a danger of not seeing the forest for the trees." While the Elgar Concerto was relatively new to the 32-year-old violinist, Ehnes first tackled the Tchaikovsky as a teenager. I am gently chided when the word "warhorse" passes my lips.

"It kind of makes me mad," Ehnes says, "when people say they have heard it a million times. Even in the major cities of the world, is it possible to hear the Tchaikovsky more than two or three times? And when I play it maybe dozens of times on a tour, I certainly don't get sick of it. It worries me what kind of performance these people are hearing. "I try to play it the way I feel it needs to be. I have to worry about every little detail and drive myself crazy practising, but I try not to lose sight of the fact that the ultimate goal is to bring it across as an amazing piece of music.

"It's a gamble but you put yourself on the line. Some people will respond, some won't. You just hope that more people do than don't."