

Raffi Armenian

When Raffi Armenian studied engineering for three years in England he learned how to extract metal from ore. When he arrived in Waterloo Region several years later, he used his knowledge of metallurgy to mine musical gold here.

The world-renowned conductor and long-time leader of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony actually dreamed of becoming an engineer as a young man.



It wasn't until he studied engineering that he realized he would sacrifice an integral part of himself if he pursued such a vocation. Armenian did not take his career choice lightly. During his time with the local symphony Armenian said:

“My job is my life. It's part of my being.”

Armenian, who lived in Waterloo for many years while conducting the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony between 1971 and 1993, was born in Cairo, Egypt. He was forced to put off his engineering studies because England had barred Egyptians from entering the country due to the Suez Crisis.

As a second choice he studied piano in Vienna for several years, waiting for a break in diplomatic relations between Egypt and England. When relations softened he went to engineering school in London before returning to Vienna for more musical education.

In the fall of 1969, Armenian got a job as the assistant conductor of the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In 1971 he came to Kitchener-Waterloo as the musical director of the Symphony.

For Armenian, who grew up in a home filled with music as the child of two amateur musicians, music is a potent way of expressing oneself. He saw music as a way of bringing Canadians together. “Music is a language that's common to everyone. Music can be how we speak to each other as Quebecois or as Ontarians.”

In the mid-1980s, Armenian and local musicians collected sheet music and other teaching tools for impoverished music students in South America. Armenian explained that poor people need the tools to express themselves almost as much as they need food and shelter.

“Given a way to communicate with each other, people gain security”, he said once.

When Armenian took over the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra it was comprised of a small group of amateur musicians and 400 subscribers. By the time he left in 1993, it was a professional group with 8,000 subscribers. During his time here, Armenian also founded the 16-member Canadian Chamber Ensemble, an award-winning group that increased its profile through regular recordings, CBC broadcasts and international tours.

Armenian also played a pivotal role in promoting the building of the Centre in the Square which opened in 1980. The facility's Raffi Armenian Theatre is considered one of the best performance spaces in Canada.

Reflecting on the year it opened, Armenian said recently that he vividly recalls the first rehearsal. "We realized that we had great acoustics. Acoustics are never completely foolproof and to really hit the top was quite exciting."

Armenian, who was awarded the Order of Canada in 1986, left the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony to pursue other musical endeavors which have included composing and teaching in Montreal and Toronto.