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Ridgewood's new maestro was orchestral pinch-hitter

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BY JIM BECKERMAN
 THE RECORD
 STAFF WRITER

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Some conductors are reserved. Some conductors are flamboyant. Some conductors — like Jean-Baptiste Lully, who, in 1687, famously drove his baton into his foot, leading to gangrene and death — are a little too flamboyant.



MICHAEL KARAS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Arkady Leytush says he's delighted with the Ridgewood musicians.

IF YOU GO

- WHO:** Arkady Leytush.
- WHAT:** Ridgewood Symphony Orchestra.
- WHEN:** 8 p.m. Friday.
- WHERE:** Benjamin Franklin Middle School auditorium, 335 N. Van Dien Ave., Ridgewood.
- HOW MUCH:** \$20 in advance, \$23 day of show; seniors \$15 in advance, \$18 day of show; students \$10 in advance, \$13 day of show; ridgewoodsymphony.org.

who in many ways literally call the tune.

"I was surprised how nice the board was," Leytush says. "The orchestra has a very strong organization because of the board."

For his first outing with his new orchestra, celebrating its 70th birthday this year, he's doing a mostly German program: the Brahms "Academic Festival Overture," the Mendelssohn Concerto for Violin (Kurt Nikkanen, soloist), and orchestral selections from Wagner operas, featuring soprano soloist Anya Fidelia.

Arkady Leytush plans to steer the sensible middle course, he says.

"I'm not a showman," says Leytush, who is the new artistic director and conductor of the Ridgewood Symphony Orchestra.

"My teacher [Mark Paverman] used to say, there are only two conductors," Leytush says. "One kind is a conductor for the audience. A showman. And another kind is the conductor for the orchestra. The conductor for the audience, we don't know how much he gives to the orchestra. And the man who is just for the orchestra, the audience doesn't know how good he is, because they cannot understand. It's two opposite ways ... we have to balance it."

Leytush is, without question, a conductor for the orchestra. Certainly, for this orchestra.

He was brought in to pinch hit at a Ridgewood Symphony rehearsal in February; the result was so spectacular that he was invited, after then-conductor Diane Whitty decided to move on, to take the post permanently.

"That rehearsal was so successful," says Leytush, who lives in Queens with his wife. "This community orchestra demonstrated the maximum attention, and the greatest result, which I didn't expect. ... The rehearsal was so successful, they gave me applause twice, which shocked me."

Though Leytush now divides his time among four major orchestras, including the New Jersey Symphony (he's a substitute conductor and must attend all rehearsals), he says he's delighted with the Ridgewood musicians. Perhaps equally important for a conductor, he's delighted with the Ridgewood board of trustees —

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There is also a contemporary work on the bill: "Paradisum Fanfare" by Arthur Gottschalk.

The German-heavy program might seem surprising for a conductor who is Russian.

Leytush was born in Perm, about a thousand kilometers northwest of Moscow, and was associated with several U.S.S.R. orchestras before coming to the U.S. in 1989, just as the Soviet Union was breaking up.

But he points out that Friday's program was in place long before he was. And in any case, he says, music is music. "Composers belong to the whole world," he says. "I was born in Russia, but I know the German basics in classical music."

Leytush began his career as a conductor just as the U.S.S.R. was ending its career as a political entity.

In those waning days of the Soviet Union, he didn't suffer the worst of the repressions that haunted an earlier generation of Soviet artists. His career in Russia, mostly as a conductor of opera, was comparatively blissful, he says.

"When you just come into an opera house, you forget everything that happens outside of this building," he says. "I was not a political man. What is today? 'Rigoletto.' Wow! What is tomorrow? 'Traviata.' Great! That was my life."

Even so, he got a few unpleasant whiffs of the old censorship. One of his dreams, he says, was to conduct the opera "Samson et Dalila" by Camille Saint-Saens. But the libretto, based on the Old Testament story, was not considered "appropriate." "It was an anti-Semitic kind of thing," Leytush says. "Nobody conducted it. Someone from the government thought it was not our material, not for us."

Though Leytush insists that a good conductor can conduct anything, he'll contend that a Russian can understand a Russian work like no one else.

"When I conducted the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, I conducted Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," he says. "This Fifth Symphony is not just music. It's history. It's part of a very tragic history. I know what it's all about. Not from books. Not from movies. From my life."

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