



A rising star

Winnipeg cellist wins national award that honours 'outstanding young talent'

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Hey there, time traveller!

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He’s only 21, but Winnipeg-born cellist David Liam Roberts is well on his way to becoming one of Canada’s top emerging musical stars.

That became clear Wednesday night when he was awarded the prestigious Canada Council for the Arts Michael Measures First Prize, which includes a \$25,000 cash award. It was presented during on an online ceremony in partnership with the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

“Immense gratitude,” the humble artist says of his initial response, after hearing he had been given the nod earlier this year by NYO Canada Executive Director Barbara Smith.

Roberts just returned to the city last week after taking part in Slovenia’s annual Ljubljana Festival. Before that, he had two weeks of intensive master classes in Lucca, Italy, at the Virtuoso and Belcanto Festival.

Previous Article

Next Article

2021 Michael Measures Prizes Announcement



“The Michael Measures First Prize has been one of my goals for the past five years and it’s a significant award in Canada. It’s a huge steppingstone for me as I continue to build my performing career, and just makes so many more of my dreams possible,” he says.

Roberts received Second Prize last year, with his back-to-back awards unprecedented in the history of both national arts organizations, bringing his total prize package to a cool, career-building \$40,000.

The Michael Measures Prize, first established in 2011, is given out each year to an emerging artist between 16 and 24 years of age, who has enrolled in the premier summer orchestral training program (Roberts shared duties as the NYO Canada’s principal cellist). The prize is named for its benefactor, Ottawa arts lover/volunteer extraordinaire Michael Measures.

Previous Article

Next Article



"In addition to recognizing outstanding young talent, winning the Canada Council for the Arts Michael Measures Prizes draws attention to the promise and potential for a professional career by these young musicians," CC Director of Arts Promotion Caroline Lussier says via email.

"As well as being an honour and a financial boost, the Michael Measures prizes create opportunities for young musicians to grow professionally, gain visibility and experience community recognition," she adds.

Despite the continuing uncertainty of a global pandemic, Roberts' musical star has continued to rise, and shine. He won First Prize and Grand Award at the 2018 National Music Festival — not to mention being named as one of Canada's "30 Hot Classical Musicians under 30" by CBC in 2019 — and recently shared the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra stage on June 29th with his revered former teacher of eight years, WSO principal cellist Yuri Hooker, in a concert led by Daniel Raiskin.

Local music buffs with even longer memories will recall the then-teenaged player taking home the Winnipeg Music Festival's top instrumental prize, the Aikins Memorial Trophy on his 14th birthday in April 2014, wowing the jury that night with his prodigious talent as chronicled in these pages by this writer.

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"David Liam is more than an exceptionally gifted and ambitious young cellist making his mark. The infectious joy, thoughtfulness, and integrity that he works so hard to cultivate in his playing is merely an extension of his

Previous Article

Next Article

past five years and it's a significant award in Canada." – David Liam Roberts

intrinsic social curiosity," Hooker says of his protégé in an email this week.

"As I've watched him take flight, it's struck me that the thing that makes him really special is that he sees himself not so much as a conqueror, nor even an intrepid explorer, but as someone who eagerly wants to learn from you — whoever you may be — so that you

can share something special together."

Roberts is now brushing up his (yes, carbon fibre) bow as notably one of six finalists for the Brandon-based 44th Eckhardt-Gramatté National Music Competition, and will be performing his nearly 60-minute COVID-19 friendly program via live-stream from Toronto on Saturday, Sept. 18 (Roberts takes the virtual stage at 9 a.m. CDT) that also includes a work composed especially for him, *For the Lost to be Found* (2019) by Ottawa's Nawfel Ojari.

Roberts returns to that same city in early September to complete his four-year BMus (Hons) cello performance degree at the Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory of Music under legendary cellists Hans Jorgen Jensen and Andrés Díaz, after spending this entire last year hunkered down in Winnipeg and glued to a screen for remote lessons and classes in a locked down world.



Further graduate studies are pending — his fingers are crossed for Berlin as one of Europe's cello hotspots — with Roberts taking a little piece of Winnipeg with him wherever he goes. He plays a beloved, 17th century Ruggieri-model cello custom built for him in 2017 by renowned local luthier, Garth Lee.

The deeply thoughtful, soft-spoken artist who began cello lessons through the Suzuki music program at age three, adores philosophy, loves to hike and kayak whenever possible on the Seine River close to his parents, namesake father David, a local tax manager, and pianist mother Sandra's St. Vital home, and once dreamt of competing at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as a seasoned triathlete is fourth of five musical siblings — all of whom play string

instruments.

More recently, he's been exploring his Red River familial roots — his paternal great-grandfather was an amateur Métis fiddler, while his mother comes from a long line of German Lutheran church organists — now proudly billing himself as a Métis Canadian cellist; eager to champion Indigenous artists while equally aware of continuing to build his classical career ostensibly on the backs of those proverbial dead white European composers.

"I definitely want to collaborate with more Métis artists as there are a lot of them in Manitoba, and help amplify their voices," he says. "I have a keen interest in reconnecting with

Previous Article

Next Article

the Métis community here and educating myself. It's been cool learning about it, and life becomes much more rich when you embrace all parts of it. I'd also like to work with younger composers of our day, as well as creators in all different arts sectors."

"David Liam is more than an exceptionally gifted and ambitious young cellist making his mark. The infectious joy, thoughtfulness, and integrity that he works so hard to cultivate in his playing is merely an extension of his intrinsic social curiosity." – WSO principal cellist Yuri Hooker

But there's something else that speaks to his artistic growth that has only continued to flourish since 2014, underpinned by a natural, curious empathy for others and a desire to communicate all aspects of the human condition through his cello playing.

"Lately, I've been finding a lot of inspiration in people, and learning from people's experiences and my conversations with them. I feel that's where I have learned the most, and it connects to being a performer," he states.

"It's important to do a lot of other things in life, and I want to make those deep connections with listeners, and touch their hearts through music in an even larger way," he says before adding one sage, final insight: "Being an artist is a way of life, I guess."

Roberts performs next week during the Rosamunde Festival's *Healing Balm: Schubert's Masterpiece and Everlasting Songs*, being held August 24th and 26th, 7 p.m. at the Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren Church, 1771 Pembina Highway, In-person and live-streamed options will be available. For further details, see: rosamunde.ca.

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Previous Article

Next Article

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Previous Article

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