

Rich Canadian tapestry unfolds in Cultural Centre's performing arts season

A pause on in-person performing arts was not wasted time for the Aurora Cultural Centre. Instead, it was a time to reflect on what they wanted to deliver to local audiences.

It was a time to look not only at what they presented to the community, but also how and why.

The result is a cross section of new artists and returning favourites that present a wide array of Canadian voices that form our cultural tapestry.

"This is our first full-fledged season since the pandemic sort of shut everything down and we wanted to reflect the changes that have happened over the last couple of years," says Kalaisan Kalaichelvan, Performing Arts Producer for the Aurora Cultural Centre. "The community landscape of Aurora has changed dramatically. The cultural landscape of the arts has changed dramatically in just the last two years alone. It was very important our programming reflected that" and I think we have assembled a really exciting panel of artists that reflect that."

The Cultural Centre's in-person performing arts kicks off on Friday, March 11, with acclaimed musician Sarah Hagen with her comedic show, "Perk Up, pianist!", which will take place under the beamed ceilings of Trinity Anglican Church.

Hagen's show, which has been compared to the work of Victor Borge, combines classical piano with the narrative of a professional pianist navigating troubled times all the while striving to maintain her optimism.

"Sarah is a classical concert pianist and a brilliant performer, but the show she does is a really fantastic way of opening up classical repertoire to broader audiences," says Kalaichelvan. "She ties [these classical pieces] with these hilarious anecdotes, really opening the historical and cultural context of all these different pieces. It is like a music theatre piece we're really excited to bring to Aurora."

Modernity meets tradition on April 7 as the Centre hosts Leela Gilday at the Aurora Armoury as part of their Signature Series.

Born and raised in the Northwest Territories, Gilday and her four-piece band bring to life songs she's written about the people and the land that created her.

"Confessing her stories to her audiences with a gutsy voice and open stage presence, Gilday weaves her experiences as a northerner, a member of the Dene Nation, and a traveller, into a beautiful world that transports the listener," says the Centre. "If you're from the north, Leela's music is home. If you've never been, it will take you there."

It is a journey Kalaichelvan says he's excited to embark on with local audiences as well.

"She just has this very strong stage presence and powerful voice in her music and you can tell there is something very conscious in the way she thinks about her music," he says. "We're really excited to program her into our season. She brings a colour that is not often seen in communities like Aurora."

"Conversations [with our First Nations] have become more and more [prominent] in Aurora and everywhere else, so it is important that we reflect that. Coming back to these themes of Truth & Reconciliation, how we acknowledge the role the Indigenous community plays culturally and politically in our arts" even musicians and artists from the Indigenous community are not a monolith. They are incredibly diverse musicians from that community and have many different styles and offerings. Leela is a great example of someone who has found their own sound that is contemporary but also pulls on the traditional roots of her upbringing. She pulls on R&B but also incorporates some of those cultures and traditions she grew up with, especially being in the north, and also weaving in her idea of storytelling, which is very important to Leela Gilday and a common thread in many Indigenous forms of music."

R&B is a thread that binds Gilday with the next performer in the Signature Series: TiKA.

According to the Cultural Centre, TiKA, a Montreal-based artist with Jamaican roots, offers 'ethereal sounds that wrap around you, reminding you of other memories.'

'TiKA is such an exciting artist,' says Kalaichelvan of the performer who will be hosted on Friday, May 10, at St. Andrew's College. 'She's very hot in the industry. Any up-and-coming musician knows the role that TiKA has in the music industry. Her sound draws from her Jamaican roots, from R&B and soul, and that has this fantastic fusion. Her music sounds deeply personal and raw, but at the same time, it is something you can definitely 'bop' to. We're excited to bring her here because she is one of those voices that is really on the rise and we're glad to get her before she skyrockets!'

The pendulum swings back to more classical fare on Saturday, May 28, with 'Crozman & Chiu, cello & piano,' the next installment of the Great Artist Music Series, which will take place at Trinity.

Both acclaimed Canadian chamber musicians, they have crafted a program with a Spanish flare.

'They are bringing us back again to the tradition of what the Great Artist Series does,' says Kalaichelvan. 'Looking at repertoire, especially in Spanish classical music, that colour of European traditions is really fitting. They are both such top-of-the-industry virtuosic musicians and to hear that calibre of musicians back again is something we are really excited about.'

With many new and up-and-coming musicians in the program, John Sheard, a perennial favourite with the Aurora Cultural Centre rounds out the program with two shows: The Legends of Canadian Folk on May 6 and Homeward Bound: A Tribute to Simon & Garfunkel on June 11.

'John is a huge cultural partner and collaborator to the Aurora Cultural Centre and he's an audience favourite,' says Kalaichelvan. 'When we did our holiday concerts in 2021, the first question I got is, 'When is John Sheard coming back?' We opened up our box office and the tickets have been flying through the roof. There is such an appetite for him to come back and he is such a generous and creative collaborator.'

'He is going to celebrate what we're really looking forward to this season, which is the reunion of community celebrating performing arts.'

For more on Aurora Cultural Centre programming, including tickets, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter