

Mackenzie returns to NBSO to spread from holiday warmth

Thursday

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By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

Planting 700 trees - "with 1000 to go."

Maintaining the avocados, bananas, papayas, macadamias and low-chill apples.

Harvesting the coffee.

Repairing the swales after 12 inches of rain.

These are the projects that David MacKenzie tackles these days on his 20-acre farm near Hilo, Hawaii. It's a long way from settling on a tempo for Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. But while the former music director of the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra may be preparing a market garden rather than preparing for a concert these days, thoughts about conducting are not far removed.

"I'm in a strange place," he says. "Forty years of experience that I'm not using. It's a little weird."

MacKenzie has hardly retired from the podium. In fact, he'll be back in New Bedford Dec. 17, braving a New England winter to lead his former orchestra in the annual Family Holiday Pops concerts at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. The New Bedford Youth Symphony and the Showstoppers, the young Mattapoisett-based vocal troupe, will join in the program.

But MacKenzie has been taking an extended break since his last performance with the NBSO back in May. The farm, which he and his wife Ka-Lea purchased three years ago, was largely grassland when they bought it. Turning the 11 farmable acres - the rest sit in a gully, with a flowing river and waterfall ("it's pretty amazing," he says), takes a lot of work.

"Since May I've devoted most of my time to the farm," he says. "I'm adapting to a schedule that's much freer in some ways, but also more demanding. It took me three months to get used to. I kept forgetting that I wasn't supposed to be doing a concert."

He's kept abreast of the NBSO's ongoing search to replace him as music director. "I am pleased that the orchestra is going through this," he says. "It's really the first time in a quarter-century that they've had an open search. It's good for everyone; it cleans the pipes."

MacKenzie is not ruling out another music directorship, and he will continue to guest conduct.

"In some ways I feel like I'm hitting my stride as a conductor," he admits. "That's the nature of the profession."

He's maintained his contacts with the Orquestas Sinfónica Nacional in Peru and Colombia, where he has guested for years. He'll be on the podium at some point in the near future - bet on it.

But for now he'll work hard on the overlapping coffee-harvest and market-garden seasons, along with getting ready to take the long trip - a red-eye to Los Angeles, and then a cross-country flight to New England - for the Family Holiday Pops concerts. He says the concert will "follow the model we've used in the past few years," and he's hoping the annual event can raise some spirits.

"We've treated each other with such nastiness in the past few months," he says. "I'm hoping that it will be comforting. We've done collaborations in the past with the Youth Orchestra and the Showstoppers, and I've come to rely on some really good arrangement of the holiday classics, some arrangements that film composers have done that are really cinematic. I'm hoping to feature things that will help people remember the warmth."

The NBSO's Family Holiday Pops concerts, with guest conductor David MacKenzie, will be Saturday, Dec. 17 at 3:30 and 7:00 p.m. in the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. For information and tickets visit www.nbsymphony.org or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.

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