Winds of change
Winnipeg-born flutist shaking up the classical music world
with his envelope-pushing ensemble

By: Kevin Prokosh

Garrett Hudson was a fresh-faced, 16-year-old flutist when he made his solo debut with his hometown Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra.

For the single-minded St. Vital teenager, it was a major musical milestone that will be surpassed Tuesday when Hudson's Houston-based woodwind quintet WindSync makes its first appearance at Carnegie Hall, six months before the WSO appears at the fabled New York City concert hall.

The coincidence only adds to his euphoria of attaining at the age of 28 what most musicians consider a crowning achievement of their careers.

"Carnegie Hall is just one of those names everybody knows, even among people unfamiliar with classical music," says Hudson, over the telephone from Maine, where he is on a tour that will culminate next week at one of the world's most famous performing venues.

"You tell them you are playing Carnegie Hall, they understand you're pretty darn good."

WindSync is a rebel chamber ensemble made up of Hudson, fellow Canadian Erin Tsai on oboe, along with the American trio of bassoonist Tracy Jacobson, clarinetist Jack Marquardt and french horn player Anni Hochhalter. All are between 25 and 28 and staunchly dedicated to pushing the boundaries of wind quintet performance with a youthful, pop-rock sensibility.

"We walk around calling ourselves a band more than a chamber ensemble," says Hudson. "We think that says more about our image, more about our personalities. We have our foot in two doors."

The five-year-old act's name is a nod to boy band 'N Sync, whose songs Hudson used to play along to while listening to the radio in Winnipeg. It reflects WindSync's determination to be rock-star classical musicians. The desire to shake up the stuffy classical music esthetic and create a unique niche for themselves drives everything they do.

The five perform exclusively from memory - not common practice -- making it unnecessary to assume the traditional seated position onstage behind music stands arranged in a semi-circle. That frees them to move around and offer a theatricality through choreography, costumes and masks. For instance, in their version of Ravel's Bolero, which WindSync will perform at Carnegie Hall, they pass each other the drumsticks while continuously tapping out its hypnotic beat on the snare drum.
Mixed in among the classical music standards are their original arrangements of standards of jazz, rock and Broadway show tunes. Tuesday's playlist includes the Billy Joel tune And So It Goes with Hudson -- who competed in Canadian Idol in 2005 as a singer -- as lead vocalist.

"We are trying, in a way, to build the classical music audience," says the 2011 graduate of Rice University's Shepherd School of Music in Houston. "We don't necessarily feel that just playing traditional quintet repertoire is going to do that. I think it is appealing to see a young, energetic group really exploring classical music. The younger generation needs to see that to feel they can relate."

And they do. The photogenic Hudson has had Justin Bieber moments, where he is encircled after concerts by a throng of young girls clamouring for him to autograph their WindSync T-shirts.

WindSync has been praised for its musical virtuosity, freshness and DIY entrepreneurial spirit that has made the act one to watch. The five members have been gaining notice -- they recently won a Concert Artists Guild Adventurous Artist Prize.

"We are all wondering every day how far we can take this," says Hudson, whose twin brother is a Winnipeg accountant.

His road to Carnegie Hall started in St. Vital when he joined the band program at âcole Louis-Riel and he was handed a flute to play. There wasn't much thought put into what instrument he would take up.

"I don't believe it mattered what instrument that was put into my hands," he says.

"Whatever it was would propel me. I would excel just because of the love I had for classical music. It was kind of fate."

Soon, Hudson started studying privately with teacher Laurel Ridd, who became an early mentor and first recognized he was a talent on the rise. She remembers watching his first public performance, in which the Grade 9 student played a four-movement Baroque sonata.

"You could see he was something special," says Ridd. "He can really reach an audience."

Ridd organizes the city's annual Syrinx Flute Festival, at which Hudson met three teachers who led him in 2003 to the University of British Columbia, where he earned his undergraduate degree in music performance. He then attended Toronto's Glenn Gould Conservatory for a year before heading to Rice.

It was there five years ago that he met Jacobson, who was assembling a chamber music ensemble that began as an education and outreach ensemble that used its talents to fight bullying and support autism awareness. Last year, WindSync won the Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition, earning the date at Carnegie Hall. It should open doors for the quintet seeking rock 'n' roll stardom in classical music.

"We go to bed every night dreaming that will happen for us," says Hudson. "That is our goal."