

From Turkey Creek to Tschaikovsky

The candor of Eugene Fodor

by Lawrence Toppman
DTH Critic

Eugene Fodor was sitting in the Union lounge, brushing unwanted butter cookies from his lap with an empty wine glass and trying to concentrate on a question about his boyhood while smiling at the women who walked by and tossing his wavy, brown hair from a pale, high forehead covered with perspiration.

Tired but gracious, the disarmingly easygoing young violinist answered inquiries about everything from his home in Turkey Creek, Colo., to his top-honor victories in

the International Paganini Competition in 1972 and last year's Tschaikovsky Competition (where he was awarded a silver medal when no gold medal was given).

The 25-year-old virtuoso had come to the state for three concerts with the North Carolina Symphony and was casing UNC before his concert here with the symphony in January.

Besieged all day by friendly critics and eager reporters, Fodor had already lectured two classes on the intricacies of the violin and his accomplishments last July in Moscow. Now, surrounded by a gaggle of well-wishers, awed fans and noisy celebrants of his visit, the budding superstar of classical music toyed with the tape recorder and slowly relaxed into the most informal of interviews.

"I've been on tour since the end of September, and I'll continue till Christmas," he sighed. "It's pretty extensive, but it's important to keep touring if you're going to record. People have to get to know you."

Public awareness is Fodor's smallest problem right now. Often compared to Van Cliburn as a talented and handsome heartthrob, he has the good fortune to be both a brilliant musician and extraordinary

Middle-American success story.

"I pestered my parents to let me play the violin after I listened to my older brother — who's also a professional — practice for five years," Fodor recalled with a quick, shy smile. "Finally I coaxed them into it, but when I realized how difficult it was I would rather have played baseball or football all that time."

"I was a downhill racer in high school, and I've logged over 200 hours of scuba diving," Fodor said, failing to mention his bareback escapades on thoroughbred horses or speeding motorcycles (a machine he has given up at the behest of his former teacher, Jascha Heifetz) on his spacious Colorado ranch.

Seemingly able to balance his joy in the outdoors with the necessary dedication to his work, Fodor insisted the "important thing about practicing is just to concentrate, to keep your mind on what you're doing. Think about bad habits, remember they're waiting to creep into your technique."

Someone asked him if he was right-handed. "I only know of one successful left-handed violinist," he chuckled, "because in order to play the violin backwards — I can't think of any other way to describe it — you'd have to change the bridge, put the strings on in reverse order, and put the sound post and bass bar on opposite sides inside the instrument."

"It not only helps to be right-handed, it helps to have a passable physical shape," he said with a wry glance down at his own slightly built body and a gesture to the place

where his 1860 Jean Baptiste Vuillaume violin rests under his square jaw.

A bystander noticed a text on dynamics under Fodor's elbow and engaged him in a serious discussion on sound dispersion.

"I don't know much about acoustical principles, but I'm terribly interested in them," Fodor said with a swift intent look at the book. "You can't perceive sound with anything but your ear, but some things are so loud that it's amazing you can't see or touch them."

The newcomer launched into a complex discussion of the way the ear works, but Fodor had caught the eye of a young woman behind him and whirled to ask her if she'd ever heard of the book. "It says on the cover that it's 'Bound to Please,'" he punned, arcing his head back to see that he'd caught the aural technician unawares.

"Musical talent demands a good ear," he observed, falling again into a serious tone. "It's very much something you're born with; you have to be cut out for music."

"When you first start, it's a monumental task to make a decent sound. It almost seems impossible."

Fodor delicately brushed aside questions about the conflict between emotional coloration and precision in his playing. "Well, of course you stick to what's in front of you when you're playing," he said finally. "But you're free to interpret any work's tone or dynamics or speed."

Though he became famous playing staples from the Romantic era — concertos by Tschaikovsky, Sibelius, Paganini — Fodor



Renowned violinist Eugene Fodor relaxes in the Union lounge Monday afternoon before joining the North Carolina Symphony for an evening concert in Raleigh. Fodor returns to town Jan. 18 as a guest artist in the Chapel Hill Concert Series.

denied that his concert repertoire is narrow. "I'll play anything from Baroque music, which I find intellectually satisfying, to works from the 60s," he said a bit heatedly. "For instance, I just played some Ernest Bloch, which was written in the 1920s, and some (Krzysztof) Penderecki."

Hesitating for a moment, he asked, "You like Bloch? Me too." He frowned. "Penderecki, though, he's too way out."

Expressing slight dissatisfaction with violin music written in the 70s, he refused to guess future directions the music for his instrument might take. Fodor admitted that pieces had been written specifically for him, but "I haven't as yet found anything I'm really keen on."

Fodor immediately dismissed the idea of composing for himself, saying with a grin, "That's an entirely different field — I'm not into that; I'm into performing."

"There's a tremendous amount of repertoire, of great pieces, already waiting for the violin. We're not exactly bleeding for more violin concertos."

Someone else asked him why the violin had achieved such prominence above its companions in the string section.

"The violin is capable of a more varied range of expression — no, that's really not right," he said, catching himself as he frequently does to avoid anything that might be construed as an unpleasantry.

"The cello is basically the same as a violin, except for the tonal range, but it's more gratifying for a composer to write for the violin because of its projection qualities. You can achieve more prodigious feats on it, it has a unique ability to tower over a full orchestra."

Fodor himself has towered over some of the great orchestras of the world, but he dispels attempts to make him a legend in the mold of the mysterious Paganini or the contemplative Heifetz.

He quotes Toscanini to close his argument: "Musicians play the way they look." I think musicians might appreciate that statement more than non-musicians, but it's miraculously true.

So saying he strode off, confident and serious, calmly aware that the world would like nothing more than for him to be the next genius/sex symbol of classical music, looking every inch a virtuoso.

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Eugene Fodor is a 24-year-old violinist from Colorado. He's also the first American winner of Russia's famed Tschaikovsky Violin Competition. He'll make two concert appearances in the Triangle area this week. Then he's coming to the Downtown Chapel Hill Record Bar on Henderson Street. Plan to be there Friday, November 14, at 3 p.m. This is your chance to meet Eugene Fodor.

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