



PERFORMER CORNER

Introducing Richard Marshall co-principal violist of the Minnesota Orchestra

by Mary Sorlie

Like many violists, Richard Marshall began musical studies on the violin. He began lessons when he was nine years old. His family was close to an aunt and uncle who played violin and piano sonatas together for fun. He was enthralled and told his parents he wanted to play. His parents were not musicians, but made arrangements for him to start lessons and took him to concerts. It was soon after he began lessons that he wanted to be a musician.

As a violinist, he received a degree from Brooklyn College, studying with Itzhak Perlman and his assistant, Ora Shiran. He also attended the Aspen Music Festival for ten summers, studying with Dorothy Delay. He then began study at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. It was here that he was in a post graduate arts program, performing in a string quartet called the Norquay Quartet. This was one of two student quartets studying with Zoltan Sekely (one of Bartok's closest friends) at the Banff Centre.

The Norquay Quartet broke up after a year of studying and concertizing. The other student quartet was leaving the Banff Centre to become graduate assistants to the Vermeer Quartet at Northern Illinois University. Their violist wanted to leave after one semester, so they were trying to find someone to replace her. At this point, Richard had virtually no experience playing the viola, but was becoming "interested" in maintaining a social relationship with the second violinist of the group. He accepted the challenge, mostly because "I was madly in love by this time." He was given a viola to borrow by the school and has been primarily a violist since.

He has since been a member of the Minnesota Orchestra for 18 years. His very first subscription concert was in September of 1984. The orchestra was starting the concert with *Symphony No. 40* of Mozart. The viola section begins by themselves for a couple of measures before the famous tune begins. The conductor had a habit of giving

preparatory beats at twice the tempo before settling back to the appropriate beat pattern. He didn't do it on this day. He began conducting twice as fast rather than half as fast. Needless to say, it was a train wreck from the start before the concertmaster came in with the tune by himself and the orchestra all followed until the conductor got back on track and continued like nothing happened. It certainly wasn't the funniest or most memorable moment in Richard's career but he says, "it was a great way to ease the stress of a new player trying to be perfect."

He looks forward to great conductors and great soloists. "It is a blessing to find a new perspective to an old masterpiece when inspired by the likes of a Tennstedt," he says. He only got to play one week with him, but is grateful to have had that week. A famous concertmaster remarked to a colleague of his that this was a career where some weeks you might feel as if you are not paid enough as you follow conductors who have little to say and seem to make music a chore. Other weeks you feel you don't need to be paid. Richard believes, "The joy of music making and the spiritual element inherent in the process pay dividends far beyond any monetary compensation. It can be a job on occasion but I feel grateful to feel mostly content and give something I was given. It is a responsibility to be a musician, but it is more a privilege."

Richard prepares for orchestra rehearsals differently now than when he began. He has played most of the traditional symphonic repertoire. When he comes back to a piece now, he knows where the hard passages are and can spend the appropriate time relearning it. He doesn't have to look at the whole piece, except for new or contemporary works that are unfamiliar. On those occasions, he will get the parts early and look closely at tempos and relationships. As an inside player, he scouts the page turns. He practices the difficult places and hopes that he is ready for the first rehearsal. As for solo music, he prepares that a little dif-

ferently. He will look at solo parts months before a performance and begin to break it down into practice sections that need the most work. He will try many fingerings or phrasing options and then write in choices to learn a month or so before playing. He likes to be ready several weeks before a performance and allow for creative musical experiments to happen naturally. He likes the "live" aspect of a performance. For him, that is the most exciting element. He can never be sure that he won't try a gutsy fingering or phrasing in a concert. He likes those challenges. "I try to feel the moment and trust the past work I have done to get me to that point," he says.



Richard Marshall (Photo by James Flint)

What about his daily practice routine? He tries to practice every day, aside from the hours he spends on duties for his job. He will practice scales, shifting exercises, and finger pattern exercises before he does any repertoire. He feels that the basics are essential to maintain at the highest level. As an orchestra player, he feels it is important *not* to get by with being good enough. He continues to challenge himself to play more in tune, with more ease. He does now take several weeks a year away from the viola.

He used to take it with him on vacation until his wife threatened to disown him if he continued doing this. He believes it is important to rest physically and mentally for periods each year.

And who hasn't heard the long list of viola jokes! Richard loves them. He once had a colleague who played the viola and was deeply offended by all such jokes. Richard always tells people that when Mozart, perhaps one of the best violinists of his day, played quartets, he would frequently choose the viola part. The viola line was the middle voice of the harmony and therefore played

the most significant role, even though seldom the melodic line. One of his favorite viola jokes: Why do you take an instant dislike to a violist? It saves time.

As for his advice to students, they should consider the real options for careers in music performance. It is increasingly difficult to make a living in the music business. However, he says, if it is in your blood, if you need music every day like you need food, go for it. Practice hard and long now because the time one has later is a premium. In his house, the rule with his three children is, "We practice on all days

we brush our teeth."

Mary Sorlie is a free-lance violinist in the Twin Cities. She has played with the Minnesota Opera, Lyra Concert, Bach Society and Minnesota Sinfonia as well as in concert with Harry Connick, Jr., Luciano Pavarotti, and Vince Gill. Mary is a frequent guest conductor and string clinician in the Midwest. She conducts for the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies and teaches violin, string methods and chamber music at Northwestern College. †