



## PERFORMER CORNER

### Steven Copes

by Mary Sorlie

So what is the quickest way to Carnegie Hall? If you talk to violinist Steven Copes, “practice, practice, practice” truly is a big part of that answer. As concertmaster of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Steven Copes has performed numerous times with the orchestra as soloist and conductor. He has performed at festivals in this country as well as abroad. He received his Bachelor of Music at the Curtis Institute and his Master of Music at the Juilliard School. He joined the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra in 1998 as their concertmaster. His playing has been described as “flashing, often exhilarating vigor.” This past year, he premiered a violin concerto by George Tsontakis, which was commissioned by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Steven began violin lessons at age six and a half. The teachers who have had the greatest influence on him include Robert Lipsett in Los Angeles, Aaron Rosand at Curtis Institute and Robert Mann at the Juilliard School. Steven considers Robert Lipsett a great influence in terms of his focused, disciplined teaching method. Steven saw that Lipsett had a tremendous amount of dedication to all of his students, whether it was a child prodigy preparing for a solo orchestral performance, or an older student perhaps struggling with some basics.

It was when Steven was around the age of 12 that he became more aware that music and the violin were what he wanted to do with his life. It was Lipsett who brought Steven to the ENCORE School for Strings in Ohio. It was here that he was immersed into a five-hour-a-day practice regimen. As with most students, he hated practicing and probably would have preferred to play soccer! He attended the ENCORE school from ages 13-19. He also attended the Music Academy of the West one summer. He was encouraged to go to every violin recital or performance he could. He never missed a Perlman or Zukerman recital that came through Los Angeles when he was growing up.

Steven says that the “best part of my job is that it’s almost shameful to call it a job (99% of the time...)” He loves the excitement on stage when everyone is really listening and focused on the same things. He says that it is exhilarating to be a part of a living work of art. He has been able to conduct the orchestra as well as perform solo repertoire with them. For him, playing solo is a bit more freeing. To play and direct involves a lot of multi-tasking and planning of rehearsals to make a great concert. He says that it is “tricky sometimes to focus on your solo when you have a few other difficult pieces on the program to lead.” He believes that the smaller size of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra allows those musicians to do more interesting combinations of pieces with different timbres or numbers of players, as opposed to a larger symphony. He feels lucky enough to perform a healthy bit of solo and chamber music in addition



to the normal orchestral repertoire.

And yes, even his practice routine includes Flesch scales. He prefers not to stick to a rigid routine and let his mind get soggy. Sometimes he will play through one or two movements of unaccompanied Bach to let his mind and body go, and not think too much about specific technical things. He often does this at intervals in the practice session. He tries not to go more

than two hours at a time, and then take a big break and return for an hour or two later in the day. When the orchestra season starts, he has to plan more and conserve his energies to make everything fit in the day (and to sound good at concerts!). Among his favorite pieces are the Bach *Sonatas* and *Partitas*. Some of the performers he would still love to perform with include Gidon Kremer, Radu Lupu or Murry Perahia.

As with most students and performers, he recalls some performance memories of those stage jitters most musicians have experienced. He remembers his knees shaking so much for some performances that he thought he would fall off the stage. And the advice he would offer to musicians today? “Be focused and patient, but also just enjoy being young and curious. Absorb all the influences you can, whether they be from great musicians, or from kids your own age who are more talented than you are. Have confidence that if you truly love music, even if you can’t verbally explain it, that you can succeed in your goals even when being occasionally burdened with frustration, tedium and lots of hard work. Those sometimes brief, thrilling moments on stage, or simply just immersing yourself in all of the great music out there can make being a musician a real joy.”

*Mary Sorlie is active as a free-lance violinist in the Twin Cities. She has played with the Minnesota Opera, Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, 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 has been on the conducting staff of the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies and is currently the conductor for the MacPhail Suzuki Chamber Orchestra. Mary was on the faculty of Northwestern College for 18 years where she taught violin, string methods and founded and directed the Northwestern College Orchestra. She serves on the MNSOTA board as secretary. ‡*