



PERFORMER CORNER

Mark O'Connor

by Colleen Bertsch

The Minnesota string community has hosted living legend Mark O'Connor at least twice in the 2007 calendar year. In the spring, the gifted fiddler, violinist and composer was invited to Moorhead to present a workshop for Concordia College's High School String Day, and in the fall, returned to the state to work with selected students of the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies. These events were paired with public performances for Concordia's Cultural Event Series and the Minnesota Orchestra's Weekender Pops Series respectively.

Mark O'Connor was born in Seattle WA, and started his musical career at an early age by winning competitions on guitar and mandolin. He credits Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson and French jazz great Stephane Grappelli as his early fiddle mentors. He wrote his first full symphonic work, *Fiddle Concerto No. 1*, when he was thirty-one. The work is being touted as the most performed modern violin concerto with over 150 performances since 1992.

The world famous collaboration between O'Connor, Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer produced two albums, *Appalachia Waltz* and the Grammy Award winning *Appalachian Journey*. The pieces on these albums composed by O'Connor established him as the leader in a new American musical idiom. More collaborations of note include Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Wynton Marsalis, Jon Burr, Frank Vignola and John Williams.

A true proponent of aural traditions, O'Connor has created two summer string camps to help pass along the art form. The Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp near Nashville, Tennessee is held for fiddlers only, while his Strings Conference near San Diego, California is suitable for violin, viola, cello and bass. Teachers at these camps have included Natalie MacMaster, Matt Glaser, Tracy Silverman (a once-upon-a-time Minnesotan), Mark Wood, and Darol Anger.

In truth, I can barely scratch the surface of O'Connor's biography here. His prolific recordings and compositions can be found on his website www.markoconnor.com, some

of which are down-loadable for free. (I downloaded the score for *Fiddle Concerto No. 1*.) The biography section on the website is somewhat impersonal and leaves me wondering more about his classical training, as he obviously has one.

But I can tell you about this past year's experience of O'Connor working with students and performing in Minnesota. Joanne Cohen, violin faculty at Concordia College wrote, "[The O'Connor workshop] was held last April at Concordia College as part of our High School String Day. We had over 200 high school students from Minnesota and North Dakota working with the Concordia string faculty in three large ensembles. As part of this day Mark O'Connor presented a workshop with his trio. They performed and discussed the art of ensemble playing, including practicing and studying, and involved the students with questions and answers. This session was also attended by the college music students. The day concluded with an outstanding concert by the Appalachia Trio as part of Cultural Events. The day was a wonderful musical experience for the Concordia College Music Department."

The fall master class O'Connor gave in Minneapolis was in a more intimate setting. On the fourth floor of the downtown MacPhail Center for Music is a cozy auditorium with hardwood floors and a raised stage. An eight-member ensemble of GTCYS students presented the O'Connor piece *Emily's Reel* to a small audience of (what looked like) around 75 parents and family members. Only months after the Moorhead workshop where O'Connor showcased his Appalachia Trio, the prolific performer used his newly formed Mark O'Connor String Quartet, which included three young, highly talented players. The

quartet's cellist, Eric Jacobsen, was the lively mediator of the master class, offering overall direction and flow to the evening. His active engagement and open personality heightened the intimate nature of their presentation.

The master class was an enlightening and entertaining experience. One aspect of fiddle playing that was discussed was the art of improvisation. Using the tune *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, O'Connor showed ways to improvise or create tune variations. One time through he used neighbor tones only,

next he only used slides, then arpeggios, then changed bow patterns. In doing this, he showed us that learning to improvise is as simple as acquiring just one tool and applying it to any song you already know.

Bowing was another interesting topic of discussion. Max Mandel, the quartet's viola player, pointed out that string players should think more about the horizontal motion of bowing rather than vertical motion that comes with "trying" to produce more sound. Fiddle players from different backgrounds (Cape Breton, Appalachian, Texas Swing) utilize different parts of the bow which distinguishes their style from the next, but the best players of all backgrounds work effortlessly with their right arms.

Another aspect of bowing discussed was the use of ghost bowing. O'Connor, divulging his secret desire to be a drummer, noted that great trap set players can hit on any part of any beat they want. Their trick is to subdivide in the air with their sticks so that they are always physically in the groove. Translated into string playing, it becomes ghost noting. The rhythm and groove of the string player is kept moving like clockwork when the arm is engaged rhythmically but "ghost-like" without committing to an actual note.



© Wally Cunningham, used with permission

The evening concluded with an unexpected treat. For this small audience, the Mark O'Connor String Quartet (which also included the young virtuosic first violinist Jesse Mills) performed O'Connor's new string quartet, sans the third movement. The quartet shows O'Connor's genius in combining the western European classical genre with sounds and ideas that are unequivocally American. Blues and jazz

modes, fiddle licks, and ghost rhythms were all combined into the very familiar and comfortable string quartet mold. How can I describe the effect? It was deeply moving and satisfying to witness a new work of art, which proved that Americans still have plenty to say, and creativity to contribute, to this centuries-old idiom. And Mark O'Connor is our voice.

A former public school string educator in the Twin Cities area, Colleen Bertsch now maintains a private violin studio in northeast Minneapolis. She performs with the Ethnic Dance Theatre and is the fiddle player for Orkestar Bez Ime, an international folk-dance band that specializes in Balkan and eastern European music. You can visit their website at www.rogaria.com. †