



## PERFORMER CORNER

### Lea Foli, Retired Concertmaster of Minnesota Orchestra

by Annette Caruthers

As this column is focused on performers and how they established their careers, I became interested in talking with Lea Foli, whom I had not seen in many years. Foli was quite gracious when I called asking for an interview and welcomed me to his home near the border of Chanhassen and Excelsior, to the west of the Twin Cities. I found him to be very open when reminiscing about his life and career, people with whom he had played or studied, and the chance encounters or remarks that can shape someone's career. These notes were taken from our conversation and a bit of extra research I was interested in doing.

Lea was born in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. While he lived there, Kelowna was a small town of about 5000 people (it now is a metropolitan area of close to 150,000) and musical opportunities were somewhat limited.

When Lea was 5 years old, a door-to-door salesman came to his parents' home trying to sign young students up for music lessons. He carried photos of various instruments that were available for study, and Foli's father told him to choose one. He chose violin from looking at the photos and soon began lessons with a small class of students, with teacher William Gratch. In a short time he progressed to private lessons with the same teacher.

When Lea was 11 years old his family moved to Vancouver, B.C., where he began studying with Gregori Garbovitzsky. Garbovitzsky had been born in Russia and studied violin at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with Leopold Auer (at the same time as Kathleen Parlow and Jascha Heifetz) and composition with Alexander Glazunov. Garbovitzsky had many gifted students, among them Gordon Staples, who went on to become Concertmaster of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Lea really looked up to his older friend Staples, and was very motivated to improve by hearing Staples play the Tchaikovsky and Beethoven concertos, and by playing in a string quartet with him. (Foli and Staples maintained a

friendship for life!)

When he was about 15, an older student recommended Foli study with Clifford Evens. (Evens had been a student of Josef Gingold in Cleveland.) The switch to Evens was difficult because Evens made him re-do right hand technique and re-learn the Kreutzer *Etudes*. Several months of serious reworking was involved, and the transition was discouraging. During a tran-



sition period or plateau, Foli found himself almost unable to play anything demanding, but eventually did adapt his technique and benefited from the work.

While Foli was studying with Evens, Douglas Kent, a horn player who had been studying with Marcel Tabuteau at Curtis, returned to Vancouver. Tabuteau, an oboist, was one of the founders of the Curtis Institute, and was famous for his concepts of phrasing, which he taught to students of all instruments. Kent introduced Lea to these musical concepts and recommended that he study at Curtis, which he did not do because his father thought he should learn to tune pianos to have a safer career. Lea went to Chicago to learn piano tuning and did not touch his violin for a whole year at age 18–19.

After about a year Foli returned to playing in a small orchestra founded and conducted by the Concertmaster of the Vancouver Symphony, Jean de Rimanoczy, and studying at the University of British Columbia, thinking he'd become a physician. Rimanoczy had been educated at the Academy of Music in Budapest under Jenő Hubay, Bartok, Kodály, and Leo Weiner, and had emigrated in 1925 to Canada, where he was a noted soloist and conductor. Rimanoczy heard about Lea's plans and university studies and told Lea he really should be a violinist, and encouraged him to audition for the Vancouver Symphony. Foli did audition and became Principal Second Violin of the Vancouver Symphony at age 21 and literally learned on the job. It was a bit tough for him at first, as there was so much repertoire to master and prepare ahead of rehearsals, but he held the position for five years, and then spent one year in the first violins.

During the years from 1954–1960 Lea participated in the Vancouver International Festival. He worked under such famous conductors as Herbert von Karajan, Bruno Walter, William Steinberg, etc. A violist, Gerald Stanick, came to the Festival from Winnipeg. Lea became friends with Stanick and joined him in Winnipeg as Concertmaster of the Winnipeg orchestra in 1960.

Often Canadian musicians would study privately rather than going to a conservatory and during his years with the Vancouver Symphony Lea would study with noted teachers whenever possible. One early teacher was Oscar Shumsky, with whom he studied in New York one summer. It was a very hot summer, and even with no air conditioning, Lea worked very hard; but when he returned to Vancouver the conductor there, Irwin Hoffman, was unhappy with the results of his work. Hoffman wanted Lea to study with Hoffman's wife, Esther Glazer, which he did for several years. Glazer had studied with Ivan Galamian, and her mentoring freed him up a great deal. A few years later Lea was able to study

with Galamian himself, at Meadowmount, which he enjoyed greatly. Galamian did not try to show off, but instead inspired students to really solve problems logically, simply, and work at it. Lea enjoyed the work and was complimented at the end of the summer. A compliment from Galamian was high praise!!

The years Foli spent as Concertmaster in Winnipeg were especially busy and varied. Foli, Stanick, and Claude Kenneson formed the Corydon String Trio, taking the name from a street sign they could see from their rehearsal space. Foli loved the demands of trio playing, and enjoyed having such great colleagues to work with. They played many CBC broadcasts, recitals, etc.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s Foli also played in CBC Orchestra broadcasts. This was during the time when major broadcasters had live orchestras in their studios, and the music spanned the full spectrum of repertoire. By 1966 when he came to Minnesota he had enough experience playing anything and everything with CBC and Vancouver Symphonies, contemporary chamber orchestras, on-air recitals, Trio in

Winnipeg, solos with Winnipeg Symphony, etc. to be prepared for the bigger orchestra.

Foli saw advertising for the Minnesota Orchestra when Norman Carol left the orchestra for Philadelphia, and a friend encouraged him to audition. He auditioned twice, and was offered a position on the outside of the second stand of the first violins, which he held for three years before becoming Concertmaster in 1969. From 1966 until 1976 Foli was also Concertmaster of the Aspen Festival Orchestra.

Lea held the Minnesota Orchestra Concertmaster position until 1988, when he moved back to a section chair. As a kid he always wanted to be concertmaster, and he was! Moving to the back of the orchestra was another education: how important/unimportant the concertmaster can be.

Foli retired in 2001 and put away his violin, having played professionally for about 50 years. He considers himself very fortunate: "I never felt I was owed a living as a musician... I felt I was being paid to learn how to play the fiddle. If you keep your eyes and ears open, you can learn something all the time."

Asked if he had any advice for students, he answered: "You only live once, so live your dream; but understand that you're in it for different reasons than most people are in their work for. If you make a living at it, you are lucky. Musicians are not doing it for power, to make a lot of money; they are intrigued by trying to master something. Making a living at it is a long shot. First learn your instrument... maybe the other stuff will come." and "You have to have curiosity to be a musician."

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