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Violinist Simone Porter steps into the spotlight

By Colin Eatock | September 21, 2015

It's an ill wind, they say, that blows no good.

And it might have felt like a chilly breeze when superstar violinist Hilary Hahn announced in July that she was canceling all her engagements for a few months to look after her newborn child.

The beneficiary of this situation is a young violinist named Simone Porter. Although she's just past her 19th birthday, the Portland, Ore., native is turning heads in the classical-music world.

Last year, the Los Angeles Times described her as "a future star," following a performance at the Hollywood Bowl.

"Wait," the critic added, "let's strike the word 'future.' She sounds ready. Now."

It was to Porter that the Houston Symphony turned to replace Hahn. Porter will play Samuel Barber's "Violin Concerto" with the orchestra. Although she's never been to Houston, Porter has pursued her musical studies at the Colburn School in Los Angeles with financial help from Houston's Dorothy Richard Starling Foundation.

Q: Did you always want to be a violinist?

A: It was my dream before I realized it was my dream. I started at 3 because I loved the instrument. After a while it became a passion, and then a vocation, and it has been ever since.

Q: You've been performing with orchestras since you were 10. What have been your most memorable engagements?

A: There have been so many! Last summer, I had the chance to the play the Barber "Violin Concerto" with the L.A. Philharmonic. It was an absolutely exhilarating experience to share the stage with so many incredible musicians. It was unforgettable.

Q: Did you have a busy summer this year?

A: I played in South America for the first time, with Maestro Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Orchestra, in Venezuela, and also in Rio de Janeiro. I also played at the Aspen Music Festival and at a festival in Amsterdam. And I played in Seattle, my hometown.

Q: Is there anything you don't like about being a professional violinist?

A: Of course, there are little annoyances. But I have to say I really do love the whole process.

Q: Have you played the Barber concerto often? And is it a challenging piece?

A: I first played it a year and a half ago. It's something that I'm doing more and more. I'm feeling more familiar and comfortable with it. I love playing it.

It's definitely challenging, and it's unique. The first movement is contemplative, and at times incredibly dramatic and sensual. The second movement is the heart of the piece; it's

definitely my favorite movement. It has some of the most gorgeous melodies in the repertoire. And the third movement just never stops - it's high energy from start to finish.

Q: How does it feel to be stepping in for Hilary Hahn?

A: It's a huge honor and also terrifying! Hilary Hahn represents the highest standards that are possible for any violinist. Her playing doesn't seem to exist in this universe; it belongs in the realm of Platonic ideals.

Q: What are your short-term, and also your long-term, goals as an artist?

A: The short-term is about balancing my career and my education. I'm a junior at Colburne, and I view every professional engagement as an educational opportunity.

In the longer term, I want my career to involve a lot of outreach, taking the music out of the concert hall and introducing it to audiences who aren't traditionally exposed to classical music. I love music in the concert hall, but it belongs in other arenas. All of us who play it are aware that it has an incredible transformative, transcendent power. But not everyone knows that.

Q: Do you have any non-musical interests?

A: I'm a huge reader. It's something I absolutely adore. My parents aren't musicians, they're professors of international studies, and they never pushed me about the violin or

practising. But they did emphasize the importance of intellectual curiosity, and for that I am grateful.

I also enjoy exploring LA - and trying to get around the city with a car!