

## cover story



# GROWING UP IN THE ASPEN MUSIC FESTIVAL & SCHOOL

**Prodigies and professionals share the stage all summer**

By Andrew Travers, Time Out Writer

**S**imone Porter has earned international acclaim as a passionate, precise violinist, winning some of the most coveted fellowships and prizes in classical music, and sharing stages with the world's best.

Oh, and she's 15 — a prodigy with the eyes of the classical music world upon her as she matures into a professional.

But Porter is just as comfortable eating too much ice cream with friends and fellow musicians outside Aspen's Paradise Bakery, or hiking up Aspen Mountain, as she is in the practice room or concert hall.

This summer is Porter's sixth at the Aspen Music Festival and School, which is now underway and runs through Aug. 19.

"People think we just sit in cold rooms underground and practice," Porter told me after her first orchestra rehearsal of the season. "But in Aspen in the summer I laugh more than any other time in the year. ... Our relationships are formed on our common passion for music, but over the years it's gone far beyond that."

Violin prodigies don't have a reputation as the most laid back kids in the world — you may think of them as over-pressured, intense, impersonal.

Porter, though, remains very much a 15-year-old girl — and she's proud of it.

"I can't ever say that I lost my childhood or anything, because my experience here has been so rich," she says.

She is poised to become one of those rare chamber music talents who crosses over into the consciousness of non-classical music fanatics. That's due to her outsized musical gift, but also to her well-adjusted personality. Porter was recently featured as a guest on NPR's popular "From the Top" with Christopher O'Riley. She was first a guest on the show at 11.

She played with the Seattle Symphony at 10, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London at 13, and in May made her professional recital debut at Miami's "Prodigies and Masters of Tomorrow" series.

On Thursday she performs Vivaldi's Concerto for Two Violins in D Major, with Adele Anthony. Nicholas McGegan conducts. It's her Aspen debut as a featured artist, rather than as a student.

The transition into the spotlight, from student to the world stage, and playing alongside her heroes like Anthony, has the gifted musician sounding as giddy as, well, a teenage girl.

"I've grown up in Aspen," Porter says. "Going

from watching and being inspired by these artists to collaborating with them — it's really a dream."

Porter, the daughter of two University of Washington professors, belies the stereotype of a violin prodigy forced into the art by domineering parents. Her passion for classical music was self-directed, playing her parents' "one opera CD" repeatedly as a toddler, and quoting Tosca just as she was learning to speak. Before she was 3, she asked to pick up the violin.

"They said, 'Honey that would be great when you're older,'" she laughs.

Once they relented, her talent was self-evident and she was soon in Aspen with the best and brightest of the world's young musicians. Last year, she moved out of her Seattle home to study violin full-time at the Coburn School in Los Angeles, with the renowned Robert Lipsett.

But Aspen, she says, is very much her musical home.

"Aspen has nurtured and cultivated me on so many different levels," she says.

There are 650 music students in Aspen for the summer season, culled from upwards of 2,000 applicants. Their average age is 22, but about 80 of them are under 18 years old — and some are as young as 7.





*Pupils and pros on stage*



*Students playing outside Paradise*



*Simone Porter*



*Listeners on the lawn at the Benedict tent*

Nurturing such prodigies, like Porter, is a point of pride for the school, says its president and CEO Alan Fletcher.

Their performance-oriented program is demanding, but the faculty takes care to mentor students thoughtfully. One teacher will typically handle a student over multiple years and guide the upward trajectory of their artistic progression.

"We have a philosophy of performance opportunity," Fletcher told me in his office, his two dogs scrambling around his feet, "but we're also not going to push them. ... One really bad experience — one memory lapse on stage or one big lack of rapport with a conductor — can truly hurt them."

While the Aspen Music Festival is among the most vaunted presenting classical festivals on earth, alongside the likes of the Hollywood Bowl and Ravinia, the school aspect makes it unique.

"That's really the heart of what we do," Fletcher says. "That's what sets us apart."

With prodigies like Porter, he says, the faculty has to take care to prepare kids for stardom along with honing their technical skills and studies.

"She is a remarkable talent but she has this other thing one looks for," Fletcher explains. "She has this self-possession that shows she's going to be OK. Some people you worry whether they are going to be able to handle this, et cetera. With Simone, you go, 'Yeah, she'll be all right.'"

The efforts of the faculty at the school — two dozen of whom have been here for 25 years or more — are frequently rewarded, as those precocious youngsters go on to win the world's most prestigious classical music prizes and positions.

Conrad Tao, 18, the pianist who helped opened

the festival Thursday with a George Gershwin program, came here at age 7 and immediately beat out graduate students to play violin in the orchestra. This year he was named a Gilmore Foundation Young Artist, among the most rarefied honors in classical piano. Pianist Joyce Yang, now 26, also came as a kid and returns to play Beethoven and Mahler on July 23.

Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland, addressing the students' convocation on June 25, urged them to meet locals and tourists in Aspen, to help demystify classical music and its place in Aspen.

"We do see you as a little different, but we do like you," he told the students. "Let us get to know you."

The music school's dean, Jennifer Johnston, urged new students to take advantage of the mountains and Aspen life, along with their music studies.

"It will be life-changing," she promised.

At the convocation, the festival's new music director, Robert Spano, stressed the diversity of students' disciplines and backgrounds. And he related them back to this year's program theme — "Made in America" — and the long tradition of classical music in Aspen.

"It's a little hard to define what that tradition is," he said of the storied music school, "because we are not a school of a particular brand of flute playing or piano playing or composition. We are a school of tradition, but we aren't promoting any one thing. We're diverse and come from all traditions. That's also very American."

This year's students come from 40 states and 36 different countries.

Along with doses of Gershwin and other Americans, the season's program is peppered with work produced in America by foreigners, and ample helpings of Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms and Bartok. July 4 includes a free Independence Day concert in the Benedict Music Tent.

This Sunday's offerings in the tent include Rachmaninoff's booming Piano Concerto No. 3.

"There may not be fireworks on the mountain," Fletcher teases, referring Aspen's drought-induced ban on Fourth of July pyrotechnics, "but there will be fireworks in the tent with Rachmaninoff."

Highlights of the summers' eight week season also include opera productions of "The Great Gatsby" starting Aug. 16, "Sweeney Todd" beginning July 30 and "The Magic Flute," starting July 12, at the Wheeler Opera House.

On Aug. 9, the festival hosts Messiaen's "From the Canyons to the Stars." It was inspired, Fletcher notes, during one of the composer's many stays in Aspen through the 1950s and '60s, when he took a trip from here to Bryce and Zion canyons in Utah.

"It's an evocation of starlight in the canyons," Fletcher explains.

Familiar stars of the festival return this year, with the likes of five-time Grammy nominee and trumpeter Chris Botti playing jazz fusion on July 7 and violinist Joshua Bell (an Aspen alum) and bassist Edgar Meyer collaborating on July 13.

The season closes on Aug. 19 with Gustav Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand," with three choruses, an expanded orchestra and eight soloists.

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