

Next lesson for Simone Porter, 17: solo debut with L.A. Philharmonic



Simone Porter, a 17-year-old violin prodigy, at the Colburn School in downtown Los Angeles. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

By **JESSICA GELT**

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Don't call her a prodigy.

Seventeen-year-old Simone Porter will make her solo debut with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl on Sept. 4, but she doesn't think she's preternaturally gifted.

"The word 'prodigy' brings to mind some kid who just came into the world with all the tools they need to have a successful career and be amazing at whatever their craft is," says the dark-eyed Seattle native, smiling brightly. "I don't think it ever happens like that."

The term ignores two important factors, Porter says: the unflagging support and efforts of parents, teachers and other musicians as well as her own dedication and passion.

"It implies, like, a performing seal," she says, laughing a bit breathlessly.

A sophomore in the elite Conservatory of Music program at the equally elite Colburn School in downtown Los Angeles, Porter began playing the violin when she was 3½.

When she was 2, she became "infatuated" with a Puccini aria that her parents — both professors of international studies at the University of Washington — had in their CD collection. They took note of the child's interest and encouraged it by taking her to concerts and ballets. "I just fell in love with the violin and kept asking to play it," Porter says. "Apparently I was a very persistent 2-year-old and kept dogging them until they got me one."

Porter cuts a striking figure in the refined world of classical music. During an interview at the Colburn School, she wears a black V-neck shirt, a puffy pink mesh skirt and super-high black heels. Her hair is long and black, framing her round face and highlighting the cool ivory of her skin. Her smile is easy, her manner warm and her conversation erudite.

It's these qualities, rare in the awkward teen years, that have contributed to her success, says her longtime teacher, violin instructor Robert Lipsett. People who meet her don't forget her, "plus her work ethic and day-to-day discipline are tremendous. Where others coast, she soars," says Lipsett from his classroom, the reconstructed Lloyd Wright-designed studio of violin legend Jascha Heifetz.

After Heifetz's death in 1987, actor James Woods bought the place and decided to rebuild on the land, so the studio was dismantled and put in storage until, in 1999, it was reconstructed inside of the Colburn School.



It's here where Porter practices for her many upcoming shows, including the one at the Hollywood Bowl, where she will play the Barber Violin Concerto. Her performances are known for being bold and dramatic, her body seemingly at one with her instrument, her technical skill and timing carefully honed.

Still, she is a young artist and has much more to learn, Lipsett says. How far can she go?

"That's a little bit like asking, 'How high is up?'" he says.

Porter puts it another way. "It's simultaneously heartbreaking but also inspiring that we're always working toward this technical perfection and musical enlightenment and we're never going to get there," she says. "And I kind of love that. You have a lifelong education with an incredible partner."

She calls her appearance with the L.A. Phil the highlight of her career, which also includes debuts with the New York Philharmonic and the Pasadena, Pacific, Albany, Nashville, Utah and Corpus Christi symphonies as well as a repeat performance at the Aspen Music Festival.

She says she would not be nearly so busy if it weren't for the efforts of her manager, Laura Liepins, who works for the Colburn School as part of a program to help students achieve professional success.

Liepins started running the school's in-house management program, called "Colburn Artists," three years ago, after working with ICM, which became Opus 3 Artists. She is particularly excited about Porter, whom she calls "humble and joyful," and is hard at work arranging Porter's schedule for the 2015-16 season.

Out of nearly 130 students enrolled in the conservatory, Liepins says, only a few have a shot at a major career. These exceptional students tend to self-identify and have already been recognized in a professional capacity outside of school before she starts working with them.

Porter, for example, made her solo debut with the Seattle Symphony at age 10 and her international debut with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London at 13.

It was the girl's single-minded devotion to the violin that resulted in her mother's decision to fly with her once a week for three years from Seattle to L.A. to work with Lipsett. When she was 14, that exhausting commute came to an end. That year the Colburn School opened its Music Academy for pre-college-age students and Porter enrolled, moving permanently into the dorms, which are across the street from Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Although she often attends concerts there, never did she think she'd find herself auditioning for its world-famous conductor, Gustavo Dudamel. "I knew I was going to have an audition, but I didn't know that maestro Dudamel was going to be there until I walked onstage and saw him and his hair," she jokes.

Colburn President Sel Kardan says Porter will be the first conservatory student to solo with the L.A. Phil.

"This is a very proud moment in our history," he says of the conservatory program, which opened in 2003. "We're delighted that Gustavo Dudamel is supporting one of our great L.A. talents."

For her part, Porter just wants to continue to spread the gospel of classical music.

"I think a lot of people who consider it obsolete have very limited exposure. They don't understand how varied, how emotional classical music is," she says, sitting beside her 1745 J.B. Guadagnini violin. "Classical music can be scary, it can be sexy, it can be romantic, it can be desperately sad — all these shades of emotion and expressive possibilities, that's where its power lies."

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