

Violinist Simone Porter, a teenage superstar, to lead Florida Orchestra this weekend



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Simone Porter stood near the edge of an elegant proscenium stage in Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle, and tried not to think about the 2,500 people in the seats.

Years of dedication had led to this debut with the Seattle Symphony. She had been rehearsing Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor* with the other musicians, especially the rapturous finale, her solo. But at this moment, she felt only terror.

This is it.

She was 10 years old. The conductor lifted her baton.

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Today Porter is 19 and on the cusp of international stardom. She will appear this weekend with the Florida Orchestra, performing a familiar piece: Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto*.

In the last few years, she has debuted for the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra and orchestras on other continents. A year ago, she was one of five musicians to win an Avery Fisher Career Grant, which recognizes great potential for solo careers.

In September, she played Barber's *Violin Concerto* for the Houston Symphony, replacing Hilary Hahn, who had canceled engagements to care for a newborn child. That's some pressure. The third movement of the Barber concerto has a reputation for extreme difficulty, and Hahn is one of best violinists in the world.

In a recent phone interview, Porter recalled hearing a CD of Puccini arias as a toddler.

"I found it fascinating and was just totally seduced by the art form," she said. Her parents taught international studies at the University of Utah (and, later, the University of Seattle). Neither had a musical background.

But they noticed that whenever they gave their daughter a choice of music to listen to, she always picked the Puccini.

They took her to concerts.

"I fell in love with the violin," Porter said, "and bugged my parents until they let me start when I was 3 1/2."



From then on, forces combined to get Porter the best training possible. After the family moved to Seattle, she studied with well-known violin teacher Margaret Pressley.

Pressley believes perfecting technique is far more important than melodies, which will come along soon enough. Thus the early years of Porter's training focused exclusively on foundation work, or playing scales.

"Without that foundation you have nothing," Porter said. "You are building a range of expressive technique. Without those years of painstaking work with my teacher, the emotional content of these wonderful pieces would never make it past your heart and your mind. To communicate it, you need to work for years in all these tiny little incremental details."

She doesn't like to be called a prodigy — a term, she has often argued, that implies talents bestowed at birth.

By middle school she was a sensation, appearing on PBS' *From the Top at Carnegie Hall* and *The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies*, a BBC documentary.

At 11, she started studying with renowned violin teacher Robert Lipsett, keeping up with schoolwork while flying between Seattle and the Colburn Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles. Lipsett's students have won important competitions, become Presidential Scholars. Lipsett, who has trained numerous solo artists and concertmasters, holds a distinguished chair at the school named for Jascha Heifetz, whom Itzhak Perlman dubbed the "king of violinists" upon Heifetz's death in 1987.

A \$50,000 scholarship helped make the travel and training possible. But Porter was still a normal kid. She played soccer and read all the Harry Potter books, even started designing her own dresses.

Her parents encouraged her only to work hard, set goals and be intellectually curious. They never pressured her to perform.

"It would have been absolutely fine" if at any point she had said she didn't want to be violinist anymore, or even to play the violin.

"If I said that now — I never would now, but if I did — I think they would absolutely support me," she said.

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Porter lives in downtown Los Angeles, and is in her junior year at the Colburn Conservatory. She still studies with Lipsett, who last year said his longtime student has "nerves of steel."

"It's not pressure the way most people would feel it," Lipsett told the *Seattle Times*. "It's food that nurtures her soul."

She still plays scales every day, on a 1745 G.B. Guadagnini violin.

In her spare time, she reads critically acclaimed fiction with an international flavor. Favorite authors include Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, the Czech-born writer Milan Kundera, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and an unknown novelist who uses the pen name Elena Ferrante.

"Many more!" Porter said in a text message. Most of her sentences end with exclamation points, rather like those crisply confident bow strokes.

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