

20-year-old to bow at Herbst

Violinist Schmidt, called a prodigy, hits recital trail

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Giora Schmidt began studying violin at age 4 and played the Bruch Violin Concerto with the Pottstown Symphony, near his hometown of Philadelphia, at 14.

He'd been called a prodigy, but Schmidt didn't really get serious about music until he found himself at New York's Juilliard School at 16, in the precollege program, taking a lesson from Itzhak Perlman and the esteemed violin teacher Dorothy DeLay.

"Not only are you playing for one of the greatest violinists alive, but you're playing for one of the greatest violin teachers, who has heard everybody. That got me to work," said Schmidt, who recently turned 20. "I said to myself, 'This is the real deal. If the forces are giving me this opportunity, this ain't the time to fool around.' "

He got down to business. Now, after four years of study with Perlman, who's helping to guide his career, Schmidt is playing recitals and symphonic dates around the country. Tonight he makes his San Francisco debut at Herbst Theatre, playing sonatas by Brahms, Mozart and Debussy with pianist Rohan de Silva. It's San Francisco Performances' annual Gift Concert, a showcase for up-and- comers.

The music world has seen plenty of fiddling prodigies, some of whose careers flourished, others that fizzled. The late Yehudi Menuhin made his debut with his hometown San Francisco Symphony at age 9; Midori played with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic when she was 11.

There were times when Schmidt felt he was ready to fly, but Perlman and Schmidt's parents, both professional musicians, urged him to wait a little longer.

"They said, 'Your time will come, just keep working,' " said Schmidt, on the phone from his dorm room at Juilliard, where he's a sophomore. "I feel it's time. I feel like I'm producing the results, because I'm putting in the work. I've had some life

experience. I feel like I've earned it now. You spend time woodshedding and you want to share your musical insights."

Perlman became aware of Schmidt's talent eight years ago, when the kid first attended the summer music program Perlman and his wife run on Long Island. Last year, Perlman brought him to the attention of New York's Colbert Artists Management. The firm signed him and, with the goal of nurturing his "long-term career development," as Colbert's Christine Putnam put it, is booking Schmidt for recitals and concerts with smaller orchestras. Next month, he makes his debut with the Chicago Symphony at the Ravinia Festival, playing the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, with Perlman conducting.

Musical messenger

"He obviously has all the virtuosity and skill to play the instrument, but what I was taken with was that he had something to say musically," said San Francisco Performances director Ruth Felt, who heard Schmidt play in New York last summer.

Practicing three to four hours a day, Schmidt strives for the technical mastery that will let the music speak naturally.

"I'm trying to present it in the most sincere way possible," he said. "It doesn't matter if it's a serious Brahms or Beethoven sonata or a piece of musical candy by Kreisler or Sarasate. I feel that as artists, we're the messenger of the music. You're not coming to hear me, you're coming to hear what Beethoven and Mozart wrote 250 years ago. We should present it in the best way possible."

That means playing in tune -- "intonation for string players is a never-ending challenge," Schmidt said -- and, as DeLay taught him, "finding the simplicity of the music" and getting to its core. Perlman teaches the same values, stressing the singing quality of the musical line.

"The violin is like the human voice, and he wants to heighten that, to have no kinks in your playing so that the melody and line stay pure," said Schmidt, who performs in a trio with Perlman's pianist daughter, Navah, and cellist Zuill Bailey. "For me, it's all about sound and color. When I look at a piece of music, I hear in my head what I want it to sound like." Playing a rare 1743 Guarneri Del Gesu, loaned by Juilliard, gives him access to a rich range of color.

Schmidt and Perlman have such good rapport that during lessons, the master need only snap his fingers and say, "Do it again," and I know what's wrong," said Schmidt. "His ears are like satellite dishes. He hears everything."

Schmidt heard music from day one. His father, Dov, is a violinist, and his mother,

Michal, plays piano and cello. His parents moved from Israel to Philadelphia in 1978, when his mother was accepted at the Curtis Institute of Music. Both his younger sisters play instruments. "Music was the family value, " he said.

Schmidt has encountered the prodigy syndrome at Juilliard, where "you see these stage mothers at work, like sharks, talking about what their kid's doing. " His folks never pushed. "The dinner table discussion was never about, 'You gotta get a record contract,' or 'You gotta play 100 concerts a year.' It was about playing your best at all times."

Strong influences

Schmidt's musical influences include the great German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the two living fiddlers whose playing has most fueled his own: Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman. He loves Perlman's mix of "intensity and lyricism" and speaks of Zukerman's "robust, dark sound and the incredible strength and power of his playing."

He shared the stage with both of them and the Israel Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall a few years ago, playing Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins. "To be onstage with those two guys, you can't help but play better," said Schmidt, who plays football with other Juilliard students when he's not practicing or listening to Beethoven or bebop with his roommate, a jazz trumpeter.

"It's a real honor to come play in San Francisco, which has such a great tradition of music," he said. "I'm going to give you some good old-fashioned fiddle playing in a town that is no stranger to it."

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