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Friday, Jan 30, 2004

# Georgia Rowe

Posted on Fri, Jan. 30, 2004

GEORGIA ROWE: CLASSICAL NOTES

## Mark O'Connor is a fiddler on the move

TIMES CORRESPONDENT

THERE WAS A TIME in the not-too-distant past when the violin was for concert halls and the fiddle was for nightclubs and bluegrass festivals. These days, the lines aren't so distinct, and Mark O'Connor is a big part of the reason why.

O'Connor, who started his career as a folk fiddler, has become one of the classical music world's best-known contemporary composers. In the last few years, his original works have been performed by top orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields.

Yet the 42-year-old musician, who joins the California Symphony on Sunday and Tuesday as the soloist in his own "American Seasons," says he's more than a crossover act. In a recent interview by phone from his San Diego home, he said he's trying to create nothing less than "a new American style of string playing."

The tradition of incorporating folk melodies in orchestral compositions is long and well-documented. But O'Connor says he wants to take the tradition one step further.

"It's always been there," he says, "but mostly as inspiration or to borrow a theme. What I'm trying to do is make much more of a leap and bring in the stylistic aspects of how to play the music. You combine inspiration and thematic material with technique and a playing style, and you can really come up with a whole new music."

Audiences, critics and his fellow musicians seem to agree. O'Connor's "Appalachia Waltz," recorded with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and bassist Edgar Meyer, brought him worldwide recognition as the proponent of a new American musical idiom.

O'Connor, who grew up in Seattle, started listening to music at a young age -- his mother was a classical music fan with a huge record collection -- and he started guitar lessons when he was 5.

He always liked the sound of the violin, though, and at age 11, he switched instruments. After that, he says, "there was no looking back."

He had two influential teachers. The first was Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson -- "the greatest folk fiddler in America," says O'Connor -- and the second was French jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, who became a close friend, bandmate and mentor. Beginning in 1979, O'Connor toured with Grappelli for two years and says the elder musician's impact on him was "extraordinary."

"I still count it as one of the highlights of my musical life," he says. "He added the finishing touches to my playing -- more mature phrasing, his use of vibrato and tonal color and the language of jazz."

Grappelli, he says, was also the first person to help him see beyond musical boundaries. "I saw how he could take something that was so personal and make it music that everybody could love. That gave me the hope that if I kept at it, I could translate my own music into a style that people would want to hear."

Like many musicians, O'Connor spent years honing his skills in a variety of settings. In addition to Grappelli's band, he performed with the Atlanta-based Dixie Dregs, and worked as a Nashville session player on recordings by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Randy Travis, Waylon Jennings, Steve Earle and Lyle Lovett, among others.

A turning point came in 1990, when he decided that he had something to say as a composer. He wrote his first work for orchestra, and titled it "Fiddle Concerto." It was premiered in 1993 by the Santa Fe Symphony, with O'Connor as soloist; since then, he has played it more than 150 times.

For his "Appalachia Waltz," he recruited Ma and Meyer. Lauded for its amalgamation of Texas-style fiddling, chamber trio structure and swinging jazz feel, the work established O'Connor as a composer with credentials.

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"American Seasons" is his fourth concerto. O'Connor modeled it after Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," but says it departs significantly from the Baroque masterpiece.

"Instead of the continuo being a harpsichord, I use guitar, which plants it right in Americana," he says. "Also, with Vivaldi, the concept is the seasons of the year. In mine, it's the seasons of a human life."

O'Connor draws on American musical idioms throughout the "semi-autobiographical" work. The second movement, for example, uses blues and swing rhythms. "I wanted to describe what it was like as a teenager, coming of age in America," he says. "For over 100 years, pop music has had infectious swing rhythms, from the ragtime era of the late 1800s and the Big Band era all the way to rock 'n' roll and rap. They all have something in common, those heavily swung rhythms, and I wanted to play that up. That's what American music is all about."

When he's not composing, touring or recording, O'Connor runs the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp and Strings Conference. The annual music camps convene in Nashville and San Diego, attracting up-and-coming string players from around the country. Students include young bluegrass fiddlers as well as violinists fresh from the conservatory. Do they attend separate classes? "Not in my camps," he says. "They all study together. I have classical violin, jazz and folk music from around the world - Hungarian, klezmer, Mexican mariachi. It's great."

For O'Connor, teaching is both a constant inspiration and a guarantee that those musical traditions will live on.

"It's so exciting," he says. "The students who are coming out of these groups are incredible. And they will be the musical leaders of the next generation."



PREVIEW

- WHO: California Symphony, with violinist Mark O'Connor, performing O'Connor's "American Seasons" and Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4
- WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. Tuesday
- WHERE: Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- HOW MUCH: \$39-\$59 general, \$20 students
- CONTACT: 925-943-SHOW, [www.dlrca.org](http://www.dlrca.org)

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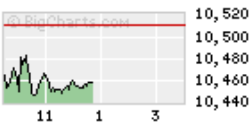
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