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Top violinist makes Front Range debut with Phil

At 31, Jennifer Frautschi is a front-runner among the many young violinists on stage today.

And it's interesting to hear that she's taken her time getting to that position.

"I wasn't a prodigy," says the Pasadena-born artist who makes her Front Range debut with the Boulder Philharmonic on Saturday. "I didn't have that kind of talent."

What Frautschi did have was a sister, four years her elder and a very serious student of the violin.

"I can't remember a time when I wasn't playing the violin," she says. "And yet there wasn't a hint of sibling rivalry. I just wanted to do what my sister was doing."

Yet Frautschi designed her own course to get where she is today.

She studied at the Coburn School, just across the street from Los Angeles' new Disney Hall, and then went on to the University of Southern California.

Even at that point, however, she was hesitant to be "only" a musician. She transferred to Harvard and took courses in linguistics.

Later she studied both at the New England Conservatory and at Juilliard, where her teacher was octogenarian Robert Mann, for a half century first violinist in the Juilliard String Quartet.

"What makes him a great teacher is that he has a clearly defined musical idea in his ear and he comes up with the means to get you there," Frautschi says.

"It was in my 20s that I really developed," says Frautschi, returning to the progress of her career. "And it was the 1999 Avery Fisher Career Grant that really moved things into high gear."

The grant — an honor she shares with such top artists as cellist Yo-Yo Ma and violinist Joshua Bell — focused attention on Frautschi, and she was soon in demand for concerts around the world.

"What's interesting is that I'm now the same age as a number of violinists who have been performing for 20 years or more," she says.

"But that doesn't leave me feeling that I have a lot of catching up to do; it's rather that I'm at a different point in my career than they are."

And that, Frautschi feels, has its advantages.

"I had normal years in high school and college without the pressure of concertizing," she says. "I developed a circle of friends and did a lot of chamber music — something I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise."

Yet there are moments that give Frautschi pause.

"How can I be this old and not have played this already?" she says about a piece that she's just started working on.

"On the other hand, that's what makes life exciting. I go to a concert and hear an older artist sleep-walk through Tchaikovsky, a concerto he's probably played 100 times by then.

"I realize how lucky I am to be playing things for the first time; I can keep them fresh."

For Saturday Frautschi has chosen Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto, written in Paris in 1935, late in the composer's self-imposed exile from the Soviet Union. "It's a score that has its modern aspects — its jagged rhythms, for example," Frautschi says. "But it's really a Romantic concerto set in the 20th century."

Last season Frautschi recorded both Prokofiev concertos with Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony.

Turning to her vision of the next 10 years, Frautschi says she looks forward to gaining an autonomy that will allow her to do exactly what she wants. "I want to commission works from today's composers," she says. "That's very important to me. I want to play new works and bring in an audience to hear them. I want to build an audience that trusts me."

Phil music director Theodore Kuchar completes the Saturday program with Schumann's Overture, Scherzo and Finale and Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony.