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Violinist Jennifer Frautschi performs with the NHSO and YSO this month

By David Baker

"The thing about performing," says violinist Jennifer Frautschi, "is that you need incredibly quick reflexes, like a race car driver."

This may not be everyone's idea of the cultured life of a classical musician. But, as this performer explains, life onstage is never predictable.

"Unless you are playing by yourself," Frautschi points out, "things just keep getting thrown at you. Something can go wrong, someone can take a bit more time on a phrase, or your fingers may slip a little bit. Or you may have trouble remembering something. In a chamber concert, the music may fall on the floor. There can be distractions from the audience."

"So," Frautschi continues, "you need to have lightning-quick reflexes to deal with things, to negotiate the turns. This is part of what makes it so incredibly exciting, and why it can get some people freaked out."

In the next few weeks, New Haven will have two opportunities to observe the young violinist under that kind of pressure. To judge from the excitement she has generated in classical music circles in recent years, she'll be more than up to the dual test.

Monday, at the New Haven Symphony Orchestra's Valentine's Day concert, she dips into the standard 19th-century repertoire to tackle the ever-popular violin concerto (1844) by Felix Mendelssohn. On Feb. 26, the Yale Symphony Orchestra hosts Frautschi as soloist in an obscure, challenging work composed in 1981, the First Violin Concerto by Danish composer Poul Ruders.

The scheduling, she says, was just "a nice coincidence." Both orchestras seem to have thought of her at the same time. NHSO Music Director Jung-Ho Pak invited Frautschi to perform after hearing her in a concert.

"Her career path is quite impressive," Pak said, "especially as an Avery Fisher Prize winner. She's not only a virtuoso and an expressive artist, but she's also extremely down to earth and a great communicator with her generation. She's dynamic on stage and definitely has the talent for a long and celebrated career."

Her two area appearances follow a series of exciting events. She won the Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1999, which helped put her on the map in New York and led to bigger honors yet: selection by Carnegie Hall for the 2003-2004 Distinctive Debuts series and her debut recital at Carnegie's Weill Hall last April. She recently joined the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center II for specially selected young artists, in addition to undertaking a European tour and taking first-prize honors in two competitions.

The list continues with debuts with American symphony orchestras large (Los Angeles, Chicago) and small (Madison, Delaware, Charleston), plus performances and workshops

at various festivals around the country. She has worked with such iconic figures as French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, conductor-composer Andre Previn and avant-garde specialist Robert Craft. Her recordings on the Artek label have also met with raves.

Speaking by telephone about her career, Frautschi is friendly, rational and frank. Emerging on the international concert scene at the ripe old age of 31, the glamorous artist is a far cry from the child prodigy fiddlers who impress audiences with their tender years as much as their string technique.

"I was definitely not a prodigy," she declares, without a trace of envy, "and I never experienced an overnight sensation, or any one dramatic career breakthrough.

"It happened so gradually in a sense, though, of course, certain things helped along the way. One thing that was crucial was the teaching I had."

Born in Pasadena, Calif., she started her serious studies with "a great teacher in Los Angeles, Robert Lipsett."

"College also made a difference with so many interesting experiences that changed the way I thought about things." It takes some coaxing to learn that "college" was Harvard. "This isn't something you can hear directly in my playing," she adds, with a laugh.

"Still, these experiences inform everything I do." A linguistics major, Frautschi left Harvard in her junior year to study first at the New England Conservatory and then at the Juilliard School in New York.

She insists, though, "I was no prodigy. That kind of thing requires both an exceptional talent, and in my case (in my childhood years) I just wasn't on that level, and you also have to have a great amount of parental involvement." Which, her tone of voice suggests, really means a stage mother, one of those frustrated artistic types who impose ambition and a grueling practice schedule.

"My parents were not professional musicians," says Frautschi, "but definitely were music lovers, concertgoers, but not fanatical. It's sort of a fluke that both my sister and I got into music as careers. My sister initiated taking violin lessons, and I copied her — I wanted to do the same thing."

Frautschi's sister, Laura, has also made a career as a violinist that included a two-year stint with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. The sisters will appear together later this month in a chamber concert at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"But my parents were only interested in music as one small piece of our entire education. It was not the main focus. I practiced every day, and did some performing, so this was not a totally normal childhood.

"Still, it was well below the norm for most classical music students, who took things very seriously. Among musicians I know, more than 50 percent have families who are active musicians. But my parents focused on a well-rounded education.

"They were very involved in our studies, seeing that we learned other languages,

sending us to study abroad. My solo career was a late development. It was a trade-off. We got to go to normal schools" and, she implies, had a quiet, stress-free childhood.

Another factor that sets Frautschi apart from prodigy violinists is her performance strategy. "I'm not interested at all in flashiness. Which is why, for instance, (Nicolo) Paganini's music is something I love to listen to if someone is performing it in a truly enjoyable way, sort of like eating bonbons. But playing Paganini is no pleasure for me — it's just flashy for the sake of being flashy."

The violinist stresses her interest in delving into what the music is saying. She credits her two years at Juilliard for yielding insight into musical values. "Besides doing some teaching there, I played in a string quartet, combined with my studies with the great violinist Robert Mann." Mann, the famous first violinist of the Juilliard String Quartet for several decades, was noted for launching new works by contemporary composers as well as for masterful interpretations of the classics.

"Robert Mann," Frautschi recalls, "helped me explore what performing is about. It's not about showing off on the violin. My approach is not about me, and not necessarily about the violin. It's much more about exploring music and what the music is saying, what's vital and expressive for the music.

"Playing in the string quartet helped improve my focus, develop my ear. It affected the way in which I listen, something that's only possible in the give-and-take of chamber music playing. You have to listen to four 'voices' and respond to them. So in concertos too, my approach is to listen to the orchestra and play with the orchestra."

Along the way she developed a taste for 20th-century music, thanks to her strong interest in all the arts of the period. "What is most attractive to me, what speaks to me most immediately, is art — in a general sense, including architecture, dance, music, literature — from about 1900 on, really pretty contemporary things, what seems to me the most immediate.

"I relate more immediately to what's current across the board in all the arts. I love contemporary music, but also the beginning of the 20th century. It's an incredible period with Nijinsky, Picasso, Matisse, although this may sound very Euro-centric. But to me, all were incredibly exciting. I also love Bach and Schubert, as individuals but not in relation to their period. At their time, the other arts are less appealing to me."

Frautschi's feeling for the moderns comes through loud and clear on her recent recordings. You hear many performers tackle this repertoire from a sense of duty, with results that seem academic and bloodless. Not Frautschi.

Each of the pieces on her three CDs (Artek 61853-0006-2, 61853-00162 and 61853-00202) — whether she performs with orchestra, piano or completely unaccompanied — leap out at the listener with a demonstration of dazzling technique that also conveys powerful emotion. From the fire and ice of Sergei Prokofiev's wildly contrasting concertos, to the acidic intensity of Bela Bartok's tortuous sonata or the sultry blues flavor of Maurice Ravel, this performer lives these works intensely.

Even an advocate like Frautschi admits that modern and contemporary music requires some extra marketing efforts. She recalls a performance she gave of a 20th-century

work, the violin concerto by Alban Berg, with the Rhode Island Philharmonic in Providence last November. She was asked to make a few remarks about the piece before she played, and to join a discussion with the audience afterward.

"One couple stood up and said, 'The Berg piece sounded discordant. Was that intentional?'" She finds it amusing that people can be so put off by dissonance as to think they're hearing mistakes. Still, discussions like this help by putting modern works in context.

"And a lot of young people find Mozart and Schubert harder to take than the experimental composers. They're used to hearing raw sounds, sometimes just rhythm. This makes them more open to contemporary music than to the classics." This thought keeps her optimistic about the future of serious music.

The interview took place during a brief respite from performing, while Frautschi was visiting Washington, D.C., with her boyfriend, French horn player Eric Ruske. "I am enjoying the break," she says, "although of course I practiced in the hotel this morning. I take my violin everywhere I go. Eric does the same with his horn, but he does something I just couldn't. He'll pick up the instrument and start practicing in an airport waiting lounge. That's one way to deal with all the traveling we do."

Regular jogging helps keep Frautschi in shape. Musicians, she points out, usually share a strong interest in food and eating. "Not necessarily cooking, which I'm just not very good at. And it takes time, which I don't have, being away from home so much. But musicians enjoy the communal experience — you get together, you rehearse, you perform and you eat. It's a very positive interaction."

Still, Frautschi gives every indication that she is most fully alive when she is on stage. She is looking forward to having these two separate opportunities to perform in New Haven, after playing chamber music in the Chestnut Hill Concerts in Madison last summer.

**Why is the busy soloist taking the trouble of memorizing an obscure work like the Ruders concerto, when she could coast on a smaller repertoire? She likes the challenge, says Frautschi, and considers the concerto interesting music, in a somewhat neo-classic mode, involving certain Baroque effects.

George Rothman, music director of the Yale Symphony Orchestra, considers the Ruders work ideal for her. "As soon as I committed to the Ruders concerto," he commented, "I immediately thought of Jennifer Frautschi, whose exploratory sense and beautifully refined playing lends itself so well to this concerto.

"We are both excited to do this piece, which will be her first time performing it and New Haven's first time ever to hear the work. I have performed this work several times at Lincoln Center and in Europe and have recorded it. I've found that audiences respond very well to the concerto and quickly become fans of the work and its composer."

The Mendelssohn concerto, which she performs with the New Haven Symphony, needs no introduction. "It's a piece I just love!" Frautschi says emphatically. "You sometimes forget what a great concerto it is because you've heard it over and over. You start taking it for granted and your senses get dulled. But after playing other types of music, you can

go back and you are reminded what an incredible piece it is."

Whatever the music, she says, she has the same goal in mind. "What I'm trying to do is communicate as much as possible what it is I love about the music."

While performing, she is not thinking of the notes or mentally seeing the score in front of her. "No, and this has to do with the reason I do what I do. It's not just that I love music, because I could be playing music in a different capacity, in private. It's that I love being out on stage, which is not the same as playing chamber music in a room on a private scale.

"Sometimes I still get nervous before a performance, so I can still feel that as I'm coming on stage. I can be aware of the enthusiasm or nonenthusiasm of the audience. But 99 percent of the time I block out the nervousness right away; it just disappears.

"I'm just focused, I'm in the music, hearing what's going on, working on it, dealing with whatever comes up. It involves being completely in communication with the music but not to the point where you are zoned out."

And that, no doubt, is where those race-car-driver reflexes come in.