

Ears Wide Open

VIOLINIST NIGEL ARMSTRONG EXPLORES EVERY MUSICAL OPPORTUNITY.

BY SARA HUEBNER



Nigel Armstrong PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Fall, 2012, Gould Rehearsal Hall: It was the first rehearsal of Richard's Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, to be featured on the Curtis Symphony Orchestra's first concert of the season. Conductor David Hayes explained the idea behind the work's famous, extended violin solo: the "hero's helpmate," a capricious, nagging, and loving wife.

As the words sank in, covered giggles erupted from behind concertmaster Nigel Armstrong, and he began to blush. As if it weren't enough to know he was about to play this virtuosic solo for the first time in front of the orchestra, Nigel—along with everyone else in the room—was imagining exactly how long locks of hair and a simple dress would suit his tall, slender frame. Mustering up what remained of his dignity and stifling one last laugh, he put his violin to his neck, looked up, and patiently awaited the conductor's downbeat. Within moments, the room was silenced by awe-inspiring violin playing, which Nigel somehow accomplished while grinning through the entire solo.

Now in his second year at Curtis, Nigel Armstrong is seemingly everywhere, sharing a constant smile and a fresh, inquiring approach to music of every sort. As he prepared the Strauss solo and served as concertmaster for the fall orchestra concert, he also rehearsed with the Baroque ensemble, Curtis Collegium, for its collaboration with the Curtis Opera Theatre in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*; and he joined ensemble39, a new-music group comprising Curtis alumni and current students.

Nigel started playing the violin when he was five years old in Sonoma, California. Music was in the atmosphere: "My mother played a bit, mostly Celtic," he recalls. "And the woman who lived across the street, who would become my first violin teacher, I heard her practicing. Apparently I was asking my parents from a pretty young age if I could start violin." Alongside his Suzuki lessons, the infectious rhythms of bluegrass and Stephane Grappelli's gypsy jazz seduced his ears. Before long he found himself improvising tunes. His solo debut as a classical violinist came at age 12, with the Baroque Sinfonia in Santa Rosa, and in 2011 he earned a Bachelor's degree from the Colburn School in Los Angeles.

Just before entering Curtis that fall, he reached the finals of the International Tchaikovsky Competition. Music competitions are, he admits, "an oxymoron" since music is subjective and not easily measured. Still, he found the experience valuable: meeting and hearing other violinists from around the world, learning and performing new repertoire on a rigorous schedule, getting feedback from the jury, and simply being heard. "Fundamentally, competitions are about people hearing you play, without regard to whom you know or what you have done so far."

Nigel definitely was heard. He won the top prize for performance of a contemporary work, *Stomp* by John Corigliano. The piece transported Nigel back to the world of bluegrass fiddling that attracted him as a child. He added his own innovation, inspired by fiddling contests he had attended years before. "I remember seeing one guy in particular who was about 80 years old. He played behind his head, behind his back, and I thought it would be fun to work in something like that." Nigel practiced playing the violin behind his back for weeks, but it wasn't until the day before the finals that he decided to try it onstage. In the video, which brought him international attention online, the transition looks easy and natural, accompanied by his characteristic grin.

MAN OF ALL TRADES

At Curtis, where he holds the Florence R. Laden Fellowship, Nigel has been enjoying the opportunity to exercise his versatility and learn from every experience. He studies with two teachers, Arnold Steinhardt and Shmuel Ashkenasi, and has been attending Ida Kavafian's classes, where students play for one another. As a new member of ensemble39, Nigel

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Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* at

www.InstantEncore.com/curtis



Nigel Armstrong performed the violin solo in *Ein Heldenleben* with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra and conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto in October. PHOTO: DAVID DEBALKO

is working alongside Curtis alumni and students to bring contemporary music to young audiences in unexpected venues. “Nigel is one of my favorite violinists to play with,” says student Becky Anderson, the other violinist in the group. “He has a wonderful combination of musical intelligence and integrity while being very easy to work with—and an absolutely fantastic sense of humor!”

As he prepared the *Heldenleben* solo last fall, Nigel also explored Baroque performance practice, playing first violin for *Dido and Aeneas*. “I really enjoy Baroque playing because there’s a lot more freedom. The expression comes not from vibrato but from timing and articulation and ornamentation over the harmonic structure—the notes you play are not the same every time,” he muses. “It’s like jazz, in some ways, whereas most of classical music is about what you do with the notes that are on the page, how you shape them.”

When he’s not playing violin, Nigel studies languages: German at Curtis, Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania. “I’m fascinated by language and what it says about culture,” he says, and notes a parallel between music and languages. “When we talk it is essentially improvisation,” Nigel explains. “We convey meaning by coming up with these strings of words and we’re adding inflection.”

Nigel graduates from Curtis in May, and hopes to concentrate on solo and chamber music. Summer plans include a performance of the Bach Concerto for Two Violins with Robert McDuffie at Aspen, as well as recitals. Beyond that, he’s not eager to limit his broad interests, saying simply: “I want to be the best violinist I can be.” ♦

Sara Huebner studies trumpet with David Bilger and holds the Philadelphia Orchestra Fellowship. She entered Curtis in 2008.

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