

Classical violinist cuts loose in tango quartet, jazz clubs

Concertgoers who know Claude Sim only as the Colorado Symphony's associate concertmaster might easily assume that he fits the stereotype of a classical musician.

You know: staid and cerebral. The kind of person who pays attention only to Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. Bruce Springsteen? Who's that?

Such an image could hardly be more off the mark.

The 31-year-old violinist has been a musical rebel since childhood, someone for whom sonatas and symphonies have never been enough. Besides fronting occasional gigs at Dazzle, a local jazz club, he is a member of Extasis, a tango quartet that performs monthly at the Mercury Cafe.



CSO violinist Claude Sim's classical roots flow into jazz and tango music. He is a member of the tango ensemble, Extasis, along with bandoneon player Evan Orman. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

The group will conclude the 2008-09 season of the Englewood Arts Presents series, appearing at 2 p.m. Saturday at Hampden Hall in the Englewood Civic Center.

For Sim, a split musical personality is not only normal, it's essential to his well-being. "I have no choice," he said. "I have to be involved in all these things, because I love it. It gives back."

Sim, a native of Northbrook, Ill., began violin lessons when he was 3 1/2, followed by piano. He pursued both until high school. Finally realizing he needed to make a choice, he picked violin.

Classical music has always been his anchor, but never held a monopoly. His parents encouraged him to listen to music of all kinds, and stylistic diversity became a natural part of his musical DNA.

In high school, he became enthralled with jazz and began playing the upright bass. It didn't take long for him to transition to electric bass and join an upstart rock band.

"Perhaps some of it was out of rebellion — teenage angst," he said. "But it was a thrill that I couldn't match anywhere else."

In 1999, Sim earned a bachelor of music degree from Oberlin (Ohio) Conservatory and was hired that fall as the Colorado Symphony's assistant concertmaster — a coup for someone so inexperienced. He became associate concertmaster a year later, and has shared a stand front and center with concertmaster YuMi Hwang-Williams since.

A couple of years after living in Denver, Sim heard about a tango band playing at the Mercury Cafe. He attended a performance of Extasis and was hooked.

"I was really taken aback by the power of the music," he said. "I had never heard the sound of the bandoneon. It's different than the accordion. It has a very dark, melancholic sound — almost tragic sometimes."

When the group's founding violinist, Erin Furbee, another member of the orchestra, left for the Oregon Symphony, she encouraged Sim to apply. He was hired as her replacement in 2002. He is quick to acknowledge that the stylistic adjustment to the looser, earthier sound of tango remains a challenge.

"Every time we play a tango set, I'm trying to switch into a different mode and not be so concerned with certain things that I would put more priority on in a classical performance."

Extasis

Tango. Hampden Hall, Englewood Civic Center, 1000 Englewood Parkway. Extasis, a Denver-based tango ensemble, and two guest dancers will perform under the auspices of Englewood Arts. The group consists of Claude Sim, violin; Evan Orman, bandoneon; Tamara Goldstein, piano, and Susan Cahill, bass. 2 p.m. Saturday. \$10, \$5 youths. 303-806-8196 or englewoodarts.org.