

## Restless violinist Robert McDuffie keeps searching for new challenges

BY DAVID FLESHLER  
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It's still possible for a concert violinist to make a living touring the world just playing the concertos of Tchaikovsky, Mendelssohn, and Bruch. But such a life would be a bit confining for Robert McDuffie, the American virtuoso who will open the season for Sunday Afternoons of Music Sept. 13 at Gusman Concert Hall in Coral Gables.

McDuffie, whose athletic playing and adventurous repertoire has earned praise around the world, is a musical entrepreneur, operating a conservatory he established in his hometown of Macon, Georgia, running a music festival in Rome, managing a busy solo career and preparing to learn the new violin concerto he commissioned from Philip Glass.

"I call him a small businessman," said his wife Camille, a New York public relations executive who shares an Upper East Side apartment with him and their two children. "He's got so many things going on."

Last week McDuffie, 51, was resuming serious practice after time off to play golf and help his daughter through a bout of swine flu, acquired as the disease swept through Emory University. As for warming up on the violin, McDuffie's method is unique: "When I'm a little out of shape, instead of playing scales and etudes, I just play the Beethoven Violin Concerto over and over." After that, he plans to start work on the Miami program: Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne*, Beethoven's Sonata No. 7 in C Minor and a second half of short pieces.

McDuffie's background is standard for a contemporary concert violinist. He studied with Dorothy DeLay, the legendary Juilliard guru who taught Itzhak Perlman, Midori, Gil Shaham and many others. He has recorded the Mendelssohn and Bruch concertos, and next year will record the Tchaikovsky.

But he has become known for playing works outside the standard repertoire, particularly by American composers. And as a performer, his style is demonstrative and physical, hard-driving without sacrificing sensitivity. He is not one of those violinists often described as refined, suave or elegant, either in his playing or his manner.

"He was a larger than life figure at Juilliard," said JoAnn Falletta, music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony, who became friends with him when both attended the New York conservatory. "He's an athlete. Had he not decided to be a violinist, he would have been a great baseball player. He's so physical about what he does."

With Falletta conducting, McDuffie performed the Miklos Rosza Violin Concerto with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Barber Violin Concerto with the Virginia Symphony and the Bernstein *Serenade* with the Buffalo Philharmonic. When they have the opportunity to choose what to perform, she said, they tend to opt for American works. And his intense style brings out the opposition between soloist and orchestra that's at the heart of the concerto form.

"I've worked with violinists who gloss through and create a seamless performance, but that's not what it's all about," Falletta said. "Audiences come to see the energy and the conflict. There's an element in every concerto of stress, tension and conflict."

McDuffie's aggressive, entrepreneurial manner is reflected in the instrument he will use in Miami. After falling in love with a 1735 Guarnierius del Gesu violin, he assembled a group of investors to buy the \$3.5 million instrument and lease it to him for 25 years. When that long-term rental is up, they can sell the instrument and cash out at a presumed profit, given the fact that fine 18<sup>th</sup> century Cremona violins are not exactly being mass produced.

Immediately after his Miami recital, McDuffie will see the first draft of Glass's new violin concerto, *The American Four Seasons*, a work inspired by the eponymous Vivaldi standard, although it substitutes a synthesizer for the harpsichord. "I'm excited about it," he said. "I'm taking the fall off from touring to learn it." After a December, 2009 premiere with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, McDuffie will take the work on tours of the United States, Europe and Asia, cementing his position as a champion of contemporary violin music.

"He's savvy in the music profession," said David Halen, concertmaster of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, who serves on the faculty of the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer University in Macon. "He needed something to set himself apart, and he found a niche in the performing world playing William Schuman, Barber, Bernstein. He managed to put this consortium together to buy this Guarnierius del Gesu. He's a clever, business-minded musician."



Photo: Mercer University

McDuffie tries to help young musicians acquire a similar sophistication at his conservatory. Concerned that other schools were turning out musical technicians who had mastered their instrument but knew little about business, history, literature or much else, he created a four-year undergraduate program that combined conservatory-level training with a liberal arts education. He spends about three days a month in Macon. "I really love to teach, and I love my hometown," he said. "Everything seemed to click where we could do something relevant in Macon."

On a visit to Rome 15 years ago he fell in love with the city. He established a chamber music festival there—"really just to keep going back"—moved his family there for six months and decided to learn Italian. On airplanes, as others leafed through magazines or watched movies, he studied vocabulary lists. His diligence paid off at a performance of the Bernstein *Serenade* in Italy, where he was able to describe the work to the audience in their native language.

"I think it was one of the great highlights of his life when was he was actually able to tell the story in Italian," Falletta said. "He was so proud of that. I don't know how much of a Georgia accent he had."

Robert McDuffie performs 4 p.m. Sept. 13 at Gusman Concert Hall in Coral Gables for Sunday Afternoons of Music.  
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