



CONCERT: McDuffie makes the strings sing

By James L. Paulk
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Violinist Robert McDuffie lives in New York City, but the red Georgia clay still sticks to his fingers like resin.

He grew up in Macon, married into one of Atlanta's more interesting families and is helping to build a music school at Mercer University in his hometown. He even has a high-powered bunch of groupies from Georgia, many of them partners in an unusual syndicate he formed to buy a fiddle played by Paganini.

And in three concerts beginning Thursday, McDuffie will perform Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with the Atlanta Symphony.

"It really is coming back home. I feel a strong sense of responsibility here in a good way," said McDuffie, 49. "And I know that I have the backing of the audience. I can feel it."

That audience will include his mother, Susan McDuffie, a church organist and music teacher in Macon, and still his biggest fan. She said she realized her son had an unusual talent when he was playing the piano by ear at age 3. By the time he was 6, he had a half-size violin and was taking lessons from Henrik Schwarzenberger, a Hungarian refugee and former concertmaster who had somehow wound up in Macon. By age 8, McDuffie's playing already sounded "like that of an adult, without that scratchy quality," she remembered.

Young Robert continued studying with Schwarzenberger for 10 years. Because he was mostly studying alone with his teacher rather than in ensembles, he was evolving into a soloist, even though only a few people in the world can make a living as a concert violinist.

At 16, McDuffie went off to Juilliard. Eventually, he studied with Dorothy Delay, one of the most influential violin teachers of the past half-century. Her encouragement, and his own considerable confidence, led him to stick by his determination for a solo career. But it took years. In an era when pubescent prodigies are celebrated, he was in his late 30s before he broke into the big time.

Today, McDuffie is something of a violinist's violinist. He tours extensively and has played with most of the world's major orchestras.

He is now collaborating with good friend and renowned composer Philip Glass on a new project. Glass is specifically writing his second violin concerto, to be called "The American Four Seasons," for McDuffie, who will play the North American premiere with the Toronto Symphony and the European premiere with the London Symphony.

McDuffie has also made an important mark in Italy. In 2003, he founded the Rome Chamber Music Festival. With his large network of friends who are professional musicians, he has been able to put together formidable programs for its five seasons thus far.

"I fell in love with the place," he said of Rome. "I decided that I always wanted to spend part of my time there and for my children to grow up going there." McDuffie and his wife, Camille, have two children. Camille is the daughter of the late real estate mogul Mack Taylor — who received a dedication in Tom Wolfe's novel "A Man in Full," which was about a real estate developer.

Lately, much of McDuffie's prodigious energy has been focused on Mercer University, where he has become a music professor and founded the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings.

"I believe we can become the Juilliard of the South," he said.

Students there (the second class just started this fall) spend significant time with working professional musicians whom McDuffie recruits, including top ASO players.

This week, McDuffie and the ASO will showcase some of that talent.

"Friday is going to be Mercer night," McDuffie said. "I'm bringing out Lavena Johanson, one of our top students, to play with me. She's a cellist from the Seattle area, and she was accepted into the major music schools, but she decided to come to Mercer."

McDuffie and Johanson will play the final movement of Maurice Ravel's "Sonata for Violin and Cello."

The violin:

In 1996, McDuffie fell in love with a 1735 Guarneri del Gesu violin with an intriguing history. It once belonged to Niccolo Paganini and Ludwig Spohr — both legendary virtuosi. But there was the price: \$3.5 million.

With "never give up" determination, McDuffie assembled a syndicate of investors, 16 in all. They bought shares in the instrument, then lent it to McDuffie for 25 years. After that time, the investors can sell the instrument, perhaps at a substantial profit.

"The legacy is cool," McDuffie said of the violin, "but what matters is the ability to play without compromise."