

Heart Strings

Violinist Eugene Drucker performs – and speaks about his new novel.

Suzanne Chessler
Contributing Writer

Varied strings are attached to Eugene Drucker's performances at this year's Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival — the violin strings he plays either as soloist or with the Emerson String Quartet, the violin strings he recalls as played by his German-born, mentoring father and the violin strings played by the central character in his Holocaust novel.

Drucker joins the festival, which runs June 13-28 at various locations, just as his Emerson colleague, Paul Watkins, enters the event as artistic director. (Watkins is married to the daughter of the late Ruth Meckler Laredo, a famed pianist raised in Detroit.)

The violinist will be returning from Israel, where he performed with the Raanana Symphonette Orchestra. Three concerts commemorated the Judischer Kulturbund, an organization that was allowed to showcase Jewish talents across Nazi-controlled Germany.

Artists, like his father, who were ousted from mainstream cultural opportunities could find work for a time through the Kulturbund, which so many understood was established to impress foreign countries with a ruse of the way Jews were treated.

"I'm intrigued by the theme of 'New Beginnings: Making Music in America,'" Drucker says about the Michigan festival in a phone conversation from his New York home.

"We're going to play Dvorak's American String Quartet, which



Eugene Drucker

was written during the time Dvorak was living in the United States ... when he was visiting a Czech community in Iowa.

"Dvorak became aware of African American and Native American folk music during the time he was in the United States, and he urged American musicians to try to absorb and use some of those influences."

The Emerson Quartet, which this year was awarded the

Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award (Chamber Music America's highest honor), also is presenting works by Charles Ives, a musical pioneer who was interested in hymns sung in Protestant churches throughout New England.

"There also are pieces by Aaron Copland, who has generally been considered the quintessentially American voice," says Drucker, 63. "I'm playing two

ballads for violin and piano that are very rarely played.”

Also on Drucker’s program will be newer works by Andrew Norman and Augusta Read Thomas.

“I’m being given the opportunity to play a piece of my own [*But Then Begins a Journey in My Head*], a suite for violin and piano, and I’m grateful for that,” Drucker says. “It represents my interest in Shakespeare.

“Even though there’s no voice in it, I’ve included program notes and text on which these movements are based. They’re transcriptions of music I wrote for a voice and string quartet based on Shakespeare’s sonnets.

“I hope the audience will have the opportunity to look at the text while listening to me play. I [would like] the music to stand on its own, but there will be a narrative to the piece if people can keep in mind my source of inspiration.”

Drucker’s literary connections also come through his novel, *The Savior*, which will be discussed as part of a performance. The novel follows a German violinist exempted from military service to entertain wounded soldiers. When the musician is sent to play for labor camp prisoners, he examines his own alienation from Jews and his attitudes toward the atrocities.

“A lot of the events are experienced through [the main character’s] relationship to music,” Drucker says. “The main piece is Bach’s Chaconne, and I have often given readings where I would play ... that great piece, which has strong emotional impact.”

Drucker’s violin interests developed in childhood and followed the career of his father, Ernest, who immigrated to the United States in 1938. Ernest Drucker played with the Busch Quartet and later joined the Metropolitan

Opera Orchestra.

“I went to Columbia University at the same time I was going to Juilliard,” says the traveling violinist, who has appeared for the Chamber Music Society of Detroit and the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor. “I was an English and comparative literature major at Columbia.

“During my last two years at Juilliard, I was increasingly less active at Columbia and began to [perform] in New York. I met Philip Setzer, and we formed a student quartet that evolved into the Emerson Quartet. The Quartet recently released *Journeys*, its second CD on Sony Classical featuring music by Tchaikovsky and Schoenberg.”

Drucker explains that he always took some student-like interest in composing and wrote a few pieces during those times. He came back to composing 10 years ago.

“I have enjoyed my musical encounters with Shakespeare because I found inspiration in his verse,” the violinist says.

Drucker, whose performances have taken him to concert halls across America and into other countries, also performs with the Walsh-Drucker-Cooper Trio, which includes his wife, cellist Roberta Cooper. Their son, Julian, a singer-songwriter who just completed his third year at Yale, hopes to compose theater music.

Looking forward to Michigan appearances, Drucker tells of more local string attachments.

“I have a cousin, Daniel Drucker, a Wayne State University math professor who lives in Southfield,” Drucker says. “In the 1990s, I came to play as a soloist with a symphony my cousin belonged to. He’s an enthusiastic amateur violinist.” □

FESTIVAL NOTES

Eugene Drucker launches a lecture/performance series, “Beyond the Notes,” as he debuts with the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, in its 22nd year.

The festival runs June 13-28 at various local venues, including Temple Beth El, which has sponsored the annual event since its start with St. Hugo of the Hills Catholic Church and Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in association with Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings.

The secular presentation

brings back pianist and festival founding artistic director James Tocco. Pianists new to the festival include Alessio Bax and Ran Dank. Debuting violinists include Jaime Laredo, Sharon Robinson and Stephanie Gonley.

There will be two world premieres composed by the consortium Sleeping Giant and performed by eighth blackbird. Mark Grey composed a new festival-commissioned piece.

For a full list of performers and programs, along with ticket prices, visit greatlakeschambermusic.org or call (248) 559-2097.