

Meet a Musician: Brian Reagin

From the Concertmaster's Chair to the Cockpit

got into airplanes before violin ever came on the scene," says Brian Reagin, Concertmaster of the North Carolina Symphony (NCS). "My granddaddy used to take us out to the little airport in the country on Sundays and we'd sit and watch the planes land."

He remembers, as a six-year-old in Knoxville, Tennessee, building his first plane out of scrap lumber, couch cushions, and plastic wrap. Not long after, at age seven, Brian was introduced to the violin — but it wasn't just the sound of the instrument that drew him in. "I liked the smell of the wood when I would open the case," he says — and he still does, to this day.

As Concertmaster to NCS for 28 years, Brian has been featured as a soloist more than 100 times; this February, he performs the virtuosic solo sections in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. The piece is based on the Arabian *Tales of 1,001 Nights*, in which the princess Scheherazade weaves enchanting stories each night for her husband, the murderous Sultan, in order to save her life. The solo violin of the concertmaster — the leading first violinist — represents the voice of Scheherazade.

"The theme the violin plays is basically the same over and over, but each time in a slightly different context and with different figurations," Brian explains. "As the soloist, you have to figure out how to be as entertaining as Scheherazade had to be with her stories." Another challenge is that the concertmaster must continually switch between roles as soloist and orchestral player. "And, it's with your own colleagues who you know so well, so you're always on the spot," he says.

Brian has an especially long history with two colleagues in particular — Maria Meyer and David Friedlander — both of whom took violin lessons from him in their school days. In nearly three decades with NCS, Brian has seen the Symphony grow artistically as new generations of talented musicians join the ranks. (Plus, he notes, he's seen the roads improve throughout the state — a significant factor for an orchestra that travels as much as the North Carolina Symphony does.)

The Symphony's mission of education and statewide service was one of the main reasons that Brian left his previous position as Assistant Concertmaster with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra to come to NCS nearly three decades ago. "I thought it was such a cool concept that this orchestra was not playing for the same audience every weekend," he explains. "We're always jumping off the bus in a different place. You feel that you're serving a real purpose."

These days, Brian is often able to skip the bus; he bought a house in the country in Johnston County, so he now lives nearly as close to some of the Symphony's chapter venues, such as Wilmington and New Bern, as he does to Meymandi Concert Hall, the orchestra's headquarters venue in Raleigh. He has cows and chickens for neighbors — and, most importantly, his own airstrip.

Brian's childhood hobby evolved into adulthood; he flies an airplane that he built himself and has logged nearly 1,000 hours in the air. He equates the focus required for flying with that of performing, and sees a parallel between landing an airplane and drawing the bow across the violin strings: "You don't want to crash down and wipe out your landing gear; it's all about speed and timing," he says.

Brian is just as comfortable on the water as he is in the air. He has served for 20 summers as Concertmaster of the Chautauqua Symphony in Upstate New York and his "commute" is by boat across Chautauqua Lake, with his violin tied to a floatation device just in case. Almost every winter for 30 years, he has traveled to the Caribbean for St. Bart's Music Festival, where he is also Concertmaster. A newer endeavor is the All-Star Orchestra in New York City, made up of top players from major orchestras across the United States. Brian has recorded with that ensemble for two summers, along with NCS Principal Bass Leonid Finkelshteyn.

But North Carolina is truly home and Brian would not have it any other way. "I love that I was able to realize my dream of owning my own airstrip, living out in the country, and being close enough to a city to play with a significant orchestra — where else could you do that?" he asks.

Brian Reagin is featured in *Scheherazade*, February 9 at the Wilson Center in Wilmington, and February 10 and 11 at Meymandi Concert Hall in Raleigh.

For tickets and more information, visit ncsymphony.org.

PHOTO CAPTIONS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Brian with his two loves, violin and airplanes, in the 1980s.

At the controls of his 1939 Aeronca Chief airplane, Brian flies over Chautauqua Lake in New York.

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