

Clarinet soloist Milkis was Benny Goodman student



Professional clarinet soloist Julian Milkis in his Naples home. Julian Milkis, a professional clarinet soloist, takes time to visit his Naples home when in need of a break from his travels around the globe.

He needs a flexible wardrobe: He can be off on a trip to frosty St. Petersburg, Russia; from there, he plays in Fort Lauderdale..

Julian Milkis has a home in Naples. But the clarinet soloist lives all over the planet. Last month he was in his home city of St. Petersburg, Russia, for a slew of performance dates. Next month he will be in Mexico, where he is the artistic director for a new chamber music festival in Rancho la Puerta at Tecate, in Mexico's Baja California.

It will be a wide-ranging festival, with music from Bach to Schubert, Shor, Mendelssohn, Piazzolla, Gershwin, Mihaud, Poulenc and more. One night, however, will be dedicated to the teacher to whom Milkis substantially owes his career: Benny Goodman.

"He changed my sound. He changed my conception, my freedom — all of these things," Milkis declared.

Goodman even set Milkis on the solo path that has served him so well. Milkis still remembers Goodman's words after Milkis came to a lesson, dejected over his future. He

was making his way as a soloist, but he had been offered the audition of a lifetime, for the post of principal clarinet with the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, the alpha of symphony orchestras worldwide. A friend who was concertmaster, Milkis' other friends and even his own father, also a concertmaster, were pressuring Milkis to do it.

It was a regular income and a prestigious position, but a change to becoming an orchestra member and forgoing solo work, for the most part. Milkis remembers showing up at Goodman's home despondent.

Professional clarinet soloist Julian Milkis Friday, Dec. 30, 2016 in his Naples home. (Photo: Luke Franke/Naples Daily News, Naples Daily News)

"He told me, 'Why are you so sad?' When I told him I didn't want to take this job, he said, 'So don't,' " Milkis recalled. Milkis told Goodman that even his father worried Milkis "would starve to death" pursuing a solo career in clarinet. "Benny said 'Forget about it. Do what you love in life.' "

"That was the support I really needed."

His dedication to solo work marks the difference between Milkis and the other clarinet virtuosos performing today, said Leonid Fleishaker of Bonita Springs, Milkis' longtime friend and agent.

"There are very few clarinet soloists in the world. Some emerge from well-known symphony orchestras, like Karl Leister and Stan Drucker. But to have your entire background as a soloist, as Julian does, is really rare," he said. It's brought Milkis dedicated concertos, including one from jazz composer-arranger Dick Hyman, and first recordings of contemporary composers such as Giya Kancheli (who, incidentally has composed a new work commissioned by the Naples Philharmonic, to premiere March 30).. Part of Milkis' stay in St. Petersburg, in fact, was to record Kancheli's clarinet miniatures with Alexander Sevastian, the bayan (accordion) player for Quartetto Gelato.

He's performed for both the Naples Philharmonic and Classic Chamber Concerts, as well as some other familiar orchestras: Toronto Symphony, State Symphony Orchestra of Russia, St.Petersburg (Russia) Philharmonic, Vivaldi Chamber Orchestra, Hamburg Mozarteum, L'Orchestre Nationale de Lyon, L'Orchestre Symphonique Francaise.

Julian Milkis received the Maltese Cross, an incredible honor bestowed upon the wearer by the Knights of Malta.

One little known music fact is that sheer volume of clarinet music alone could provide a soloist like Milkis a long career.

"It's the instrument that has the third largest amount of music written for it," Milkis explained. While piano far outstrips them all and violin is next, the clarinet has captivated composers as far back as Mozart. Brahms broke a long period of silence to write his last four works featuring the instrument, works Milkis calls clarinet "masterpieces."

"In my repertoire I have more than 50 concertos with orchestra and an enormous chamber repertoire," he said. And he will say his repertoire is by no means all its wealth. More than half of his work is in the classical genre, although Milkis says he's receiving more requests to play jazz: "They call me 'king of crossover,'" he said, beaming.

Milkis conferred with Goodman's daughter, Rachel Goodman Edelson, for her role in a documentary about her father's groundbreaking tour of the Soviet Union in 1962. The famed clarinet virtuoso, for whom even serious composers like Béla Bartók composed music, agreed to take the young Milkis much later, after Milkis had won a Carnegie

Hall competition to play a Bartok work, "Contrasts," that had been written for Goodman.

Milkis' teacher at the time told him the master was living in New York, and Milkis decided he wanted to play the work for Goodman.

"My teacher said that was a stupid idea because he does not teach and he's just not interested," Milkis recalled. Undaunted, Milkis called Goodman, then 74. To everyone's surprise, Goodman invited Milkis to his home.

A pin emblazoned with the Maltese Cross given to professional clarinet soloist Julian Milkis sits in his Naples home Friday, Dec. 30, 2016. Milkis was knighted by the Knights of Malta, an incredible honor known as a significant symbol throughout the country of Malta.

"That's how our almost three-year association began," Milkis said. "In the first months, it was very intensive, a lot of work, maybe three, four times a week," Milkis said. "The amazing thing — he had never taught before."

Milkis, whose ebony hair barely betrays any silver, still marvels that it happened.

"I don't know why he did it. His daughter just asked me the same question. and I don't know. But he brought some wonderful things out of me that wouldn't have been possible without him."

Milkis has had good fortune outside music halls. He hedged his bets, earning his masters degree in literature while he was still studying clarinet during his family's move to Toronto. To this day he loves to read, a fortuitous habit for a man who spends so much time on planes.

He has also become the public face of Ricco woodwind reeds.

And now you can call him Sir. In November, Milkis received the prestigious Cross of Malta, making him a Knight of the Orthodox Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Russian Grand Priory. It's a rare award, given to people who exemplify its qualities of charity and hospitality.

Milkis might have liked to have shown that honor to his pianist mother. She once told him in exasperation she would either kill him or have a heart attack trying to teach 5-year-old Julian to play piano

The keyboard was not his instrument, he conceded.

"At 11 I made a B-plus on an exam, which was a disaster. So I got demoted — to the clarinet," he recalled, an impish smile flitting across his face.