

MEANWHILE

By Marcelline Krafchick

From the Metro to the stage

An American conductor steps out of a train in the Paris Metro and hears something staggering — J. S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor played with extraordinary musicianship on an organ.

The conductor, Mark Laycock, music director of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, finds himself following the sound, tunnel after tunnel, and finally comes upon a young man playing a single accordion to produce the three and four parts, including foot pedals. In disbelief, Laycock buys a CD, expecting to find inside some contact information, a company label or some other clue to lead him to this master of his instrument. But there is none.

That was in June 2002.

The master was Petro Odrekhivskyy, 33, a Ukrainian who had come to Paris two years earlier as a member of a folk group but was fully in love with Bach.

Laycock had an idea. He knew of an accordion concerto written seven years previously by the Canadian composer Peter Hall Koprowski and performed once with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Intent on putting together a scenario of the Paris Metro musician playing this piece in Princeton, Laycock packed up a copy of the score, a CD of the Toronto performance, and one of his own orchestra and returned to Paris the following month. But how to find the young man again?

For six days Laycock searched, with only a name that wasn't in the telephone book. He asked the Metro police and the Gustav Mahler Music Library to look for him. Finally, he found an accordionist in the Metro who didn't know Petro Odrekhivskyy but knew someone who did, and had his cell phone number.

The extraordinary accordionist and the determined conductor finally met. And this week, one year after Bach in the Metro, they're rehearsing for a January performance of the Koprowski concerto with Laycock's orchestra in New Jersey.

What are the chances of a street musician's being taken to another country to play with a 65-piece professional orchestra?

And who is Petro Odrekhivskyy? He began playing the accordion at the age of 7 and studied classical music for 12 years in Ukraine. His family, though artists and academics, were not musical, but his passion was Bach. When he decided to stay on in Paris, he took a test to earn a badge that allowed him to play in the Metro for six months. He could not have imagined the outcome.

The Koprowski concerto is demanding, but Odrekhivskyy likes it and is thrilled at the opportunity. Both Laycock and Odrekhivskyy hope the composer will join them in January.

Laycock says, "I'm always thrilled to hear a great musical spirit, and couldn't continue my journey before finding the source of that sound."

He placed one condition on Odrekhivskyy's contract — that he play as an encore Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor.

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