

**Interview with Walter Prystawski**  
**January 9, 2002**  
**National Arts Centre**  
***Fourth Stage***

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us where you are from.

My name is Walter Prystawski. I was born in Toronto, and am now from Ottawa.

2. Please tell us your position with the National Arts Centre Orchestra and explain a little about what it entails.

I'm the Concertmaster of the National Arts Centre Orchestra. That means that I'm one of the first violinists. I'm the one that sits closest to the conductor, to his or her left. I play the notes that are in the first violin part and often there are solos written for one violin in the middle of a symphonic piece, so I get to play those as well. I also work with the other section leaders of the orchestra: with the violas, second fiddles, cellos and double basses to arrange and organize bowings so that we all look like we are playing the same piece.

3. What is the most challenging thing about playing the violin?

Our music director, Pinchas Zukerman, is perhaps the finest violinist alive today and I agree with something he says. He says that the two hardest things are to play in tune and to make a nice sound. If you can do that, you've got it more or less made.

4. How much time did you spend practicing as a student and how much time do you spend practicing now?

As a student when I wasn't goofing off I would practice anywhere from between two to six hours a day. Now we have assignments. I know the set of programs we will perform throughout the year so at the beginning of the year, I will look at the pieces and perhaps start learning the more difficult ones. Every week that

we have a new symphony concert we have to prepare the pieces ahead of time so that when we arrive at the first rehearsal we know our parts. At this point, in rehearsal, it's a matter of [getting the orchestra] organized through the work of the conductor. If I'm comfortable and have played the piece a lot of times before then practicing can take an hour or two hours of preparation. If I haven't played a piece before or if it's very difficult then I may spend a week practicing every spare moment; two to four hours a day.

5. How important is a good teacher to a young musician?

Absolutely vital. A good teacher for learning how to play the violin is absolutely crucial. The violin is a very unnatural instrument to hold. You have to twist a lot of body parts (arms, neck and shoulders) in order to play it. Many of the difficulties that kids end up with after a year or two of violin study or violin lessons start because they haven't been helped enough to hold the fiddle in as natural a way as possible. A good teacher is vital, absolutely vital.

6. What advice have you got for a beginner musician or for people who want to start playing the violin?

If you want to start playing the violin first of all you've got to love it. You've got to know that for the first little while you may be making some pretty weird sounds and your folks may think about leaving home. If you persevere and if you find yourself a good teacher, somebody that will help you over the first difficult times, I think that's the most important thing.

7. What are some common errors made by beginner violinists?

One of the errors that kids make when they are learning to play the fiddle is they'll try to play the wonderful pieces, like the Brahms violin concerto, the Sibelius Violin Concerto or other heavy, difficult pieces because they love them so much. Very often if students are not careful they will end up doing themselves harm because they cut corners and take short cuts that aren't there; this can

harm their playing in the future. A good teacher will help students progress at an appropriate rate; that's vital.

8. What do you enjoy most about your career?

The thing I like most about playing fiddle in an orchestra and being concertmaster is working with a whole bunch of people all aiming at the same end result: a concert, a performance of a piece of music. The high that comes from being inspired by a particularly fine conductor is incomparable. The important thing for me is that I love it. I love doing concerts and I get paid for it.