

Café Concert: Philippe Quint

By Brian Wise
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Philippe Quint, violinist (Neda Navaee)

A few of history's great violinists have dabbled in Hollywood acting. Isaac Stern played another violinist, Eugene Ysaye, in the 1953 film "Tonight We Sing." Jascha Heifetz played himself in 1947's "Carnegie Hall." Even Joshua Bell had a bit part in "The Red Violin," from 1992.

Yet for sheer screen time, violinist Philippe Quint outdoes that prominent pack with his role in "Downtown Express," an independent film directed by David Grubin and produced by Michael Hausman ("Brokeback Mountain," "Gangs of New York"). Quint plays a young Russian Violinist, Sasha, who emigrates to New York to study at Juilliard but falls in love with a singer-songwriter (played by Nellie McKay), much to the chagrin of his classical cellist father Vadim (Michael Cumpsty). (The film premiered earlier this week at Symphony Space, though as of press time, Grubin is looking for a distributor.)

It's a familiar role: Quint himself defected from the Soviet Union in 1991 to study at Juilliard, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the school. He's since gone on to build a busy solo career, getting nominated for two Grammys. In 2008, he gained notoriety for leaving his \$4 million Stradivarius in the back seat of a Newark taxicab (it was returned after the driver discovered it the next day).

“The whole process was a little bit backwards,” Quint said of the film's casting process. “The director of the film was in the process of developing a script. They were looking for folks from the Russian community who would share their experiences with coming to America and the challenges the community faces when they first arrive. I was one of the people to be interviewed.”

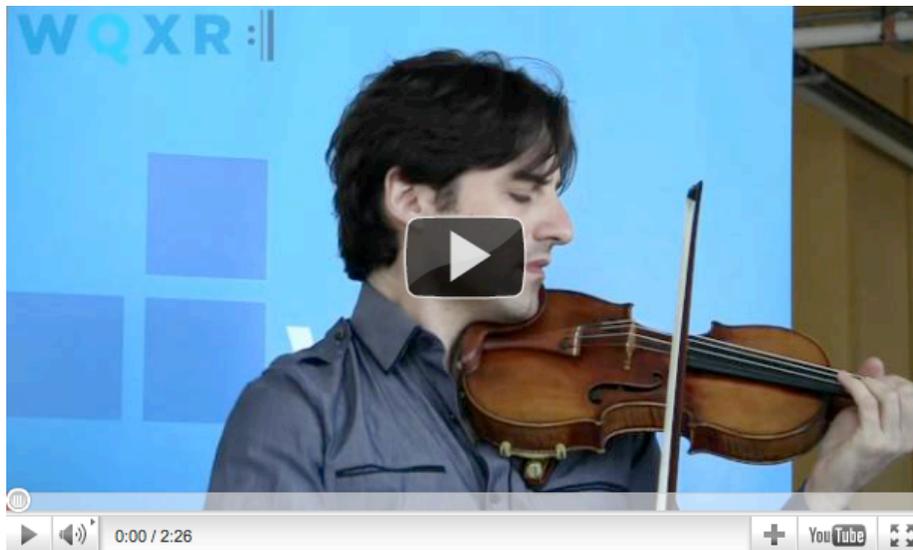
After Grubin learned of Quint’s personal story, the director decided to give the violinist a try. Quint is self-effacing about his limited acting experience, noting that he took lessons with the acting coach Sondra Lee, who has tutored Jane Fonda and rocker Joan Jett, among others.

“For me the greatest actors are Lawrence Olivier and Anthony Hopkins,” Quint said. “You can’t just show up without substantial training in front of the camera and say a couple of lines.”

McKay got the part of Quint’s love interest, Ramona, after Grubin saw her act in the 2006 Broadway revival of *The Threepenny Opera*. “It was a pleasure working with Philippe,” said McKay. “The more you think of something the more you can get in your own way. Instinctively he had such a beat on the part and he’s such a natural presence.”

McKay also played a familiar character; as a real-life singer-songwriter she has released several critically lauded albums mixing pop, jazz and cabaret influences. When she and Quint perform together in “Downtown Express,” it is without the degree of lip-syncing (or violin acting) that is commonplace in many music-related films. In the WQXR Café, she looked on admiringly as Quint performed a virtuosic showpiece that he composed for the film.

"For me this project was pushing me out of the box," said Quint. "It was my first time working with a director. In some earlier interviews I would say 'conductor' instead of 'director.' I've had to correct myself on that several times now."



Video: Amy Pearl; Audio: George Wellington; Interview: Naomi Lewin; Text: Brian Wise
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2D-0ptU1GY&feature=player_embedded

<http://www.wqxr.org/articles/wqxr-features/2011/jun/08/cafe-concert-philippe-quint/#cafe>