4-1-2013

Seth G.: Classical skills, contemporary flair

Stacy Schorr Chandler
AS A VIOLIN PERFORMANCE major at Furman, Seth Gilliard spent lots of time with Bach, Mozart and all those powdered-wig types. But there were times when he really just wanted to let his hair down, metaphorically, and rock out.

Nowadays, that’s exactly what he does.

Gilliard moved back home to Charleston, S.C., after graduating in 2012 and quickly carved a niche for himself as a pop violinist. He crafts instrumental covers of chart-topping songs by artists such as Ne-Yo, Justin Bieber and Alicia Keys, and composes his own music as well. It didn’t take him long to land some steady weeknight appearances at local restaurants and nightspots, and his weekends are filled with gigs, weddings and private events for people who want to hear a violin sing in the hands of a young man with classical skills and a contemporary flair.

He’s made a name for himself in Charleston, but as befits this age of connectedness, his fame is quickly spreading beyond his hometown. The YouTube page for Seth G. (that’s his stage name) has more than 10,000 subscribers, and the videos that appear there — some in a studio, some showing Gilliard playing to passers-by on Charleston’s busy sidewalks — have attracted more than a million views.

Sound, of course, is a musician’s main medium. But Gilliard, 22, knows that visuals are an important part of modern music appreciation, too.

“With what I’m doing, it’s something different a lot of people haven’t seen before,” he says. “When you have the video component and they’re like, ‘Oh, OK, he’s actually playing this,’ I think it does help as well.”

When he plays, Gilliard is backed by a track (or sometimes a live disc jockey) that provides a foundation for his expressive violin work. There’s percussion and bass and maybe some electronics effects or subtle chords, but the violin is the star of the show.

Gilliard plays with his whole body, swaying gracefully to a slow song or appearing almost to dance to tunes with stronger beats. His face never betrays when he’s playing a technically difficult passage; instead, there’s a smile that transmits the pure joy of a musician in his element.

It’s a long way from Beethoven. But then again, maybe it’s not.

“Without my classical background, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now,” Gilliard says. “Classical music gets your technical abilities where they need to be so that you can play what you want to play. That’s the beauty of it.”

Sometimes, he says, he’ll tuck a classical passage into one of his pop songs or improvise during a live performance using techniques he learned from his work with Furman jazz ensembles his junior and senior years.

Gilliard’s taste for experimenting with instrumental music developed amid his classical training in middle and high school.

“Growing up, and even now, there was definitely a divide between what I was playing on a regular basis and what I was listening to on a regular basis,” he says. “I was listening to pop music, listening to what was on the radio just like everyone else. I just started messing around with different things, just trying to play random stuff that I would hear, figure it out on the instrument. And that just kind of went from there.”

After a while, he decided to see how his interpretations would strike an audience. So during summers and on weekends, he’d find a spot among the crowds in Charleston’s City Market and start to play, leaving his violin case open for tips.

“It was really good money when I was younger,” he says, “and it also gave me the opportunity to play in front of people, and a chance to experiment.”

When he started college at Furman, he shifted his focus to classical music, logging countless hours in practice rooms and rehearsal halls, playing concerts and auditioning for competitions amid all his other schoolwork. But a semester abroad in Italy during his senior year gave him a more open schedule, and he found time to get back in touch with his passion for pop music. He started recording the songs he composed and covered, and a full-time career was launched.

Gilliard released his first EP, “The Introduction of Seth G.,” in February. Four of its five songs are original compositions — but he couldn’t resist just one cover, Ne-Yo’s “Let Me Love You.”

Now he’s working toward his first full-length album, which he hopes to release this year. And, as any working musician must do, he’s concentrating on building his fan base and looking for bigger and better opportunities to perform.

Music-wise, he says, “I’m trying to do more experimental stuff. I don’t know exactly how it’s going to turn out.”

Somewhere, though, one suspects that Bach and Mozart would be proud.

--- STACY SCHORR CHANDLER

The author, a 1999 graduate, is a freelance journalist in Raleigh, N.C. To see Seth Gilliard in action, visit youtube.com/user/sethg or sethgmusic.tumblr.com. Photos courtesy Seth Gilliard.