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Odin with uncle and mentor, renowned violinist and comedian, Anker Buch.



ODIN RATHNAM

By John Zimmerman



Harrisburg's **Virtuoso**

Charisma. Authority. Passion. Enthusiasm. Incredible talent. These are but some of the words you will hear repeatedly if you ask about Odin Rathnam. He is perhaps most visible in the Central PA region as the Concertmaster of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra. But that is only one of the many hats he wears, not just in the music community, but in the community-at-large. After conducting numerous interviews with members of the artistic realm, both in this region and throughout the Nation, it became increasingly difficult to approach this profile. Not because there was a lack of information. On the contrary, the magnanimous response to questions regarding Rathnam's abilities as a musician, as a leader, as an innovator, and as a member of the community, became almost overwhelming. While it may sound a bit cliché, he seems in many ways, larger than life.

Born and raised in New York City to a Danish mother and an Indian father, he began studying the violin at age six. He has been an active soloist since the age of 15 when, in addition to playing other venues, he was making thousands of dollars as a street musician. This afforded him the ability to be more mischievous than the average adolescent, much less the average adolescent living in New York City. He entered Juilliard at the age of 12 and spent summers training at string schools, first in Denmark under the tutelage of his uncle and mentor, the renowned violinist and comedian Anker Buch (the sort of Victor Borge of the Violin), and later at Meadowmount in New York alongside the likes of Joshua Bell and Robert Chen.

In 1993 he made his Lincoln Center debut at Alice Tully Hall where, accompanied by acclaimed pianist Rohan De Silva, he played works by Stravinsky, Beethoven, Schumann, and Saint-Saens. For an encore he displayed his versatility by performing a program of Gypsy music. Sandy Cullen of the *Patriot-News* proclaimed the recital "[a]n astounding display of energy and endurance...." The same could be said about the man himself no matter what his endeavour.

Prior to coming to Harrisburg, Rathnam had been playing as a freelance violinist with seven different orchestras from Connecticut to Virginia while still at Juilliard. In the fall of 1991 he was recruited as Acting Concertmaster of the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra. The following spring he auditioned and was awarded the permanent position. Rather than commute, as do many symphony musicians, he decided to move to Harrisburg in order to be part of the cultural revolution he saw taking place. From 1993 to 1997 he lived on the West Shore when he decided to move into the City where he is a visible presence. He has become an integral and invaluable part of the cultural revolution he foresaw. Indeed, Harrisburg is experiencing a renaissance and Odin Rathnam is actively and eagerly helping to lead the way.

Much of what drives Rathnam is his intense passion for the violin. "A great violin is like a mate," he says. His relationship with the instrument itself results in a quality of

music that evokes deep emotion that inspires and motivates. His current "mate" is a recent acquisition of the late Venetian school (late 1700s) by an unknown maker. He believes the sound to be as good as any in the million dollar class.

Stuart Malina, Music Director of the Harrisburg Symphony, recognizes this. "He's a phenomenal violinist. We'll start there. He's constantly striving to grow. Accordingly, he's constantly open to ideas." His great ability makes his role as Concertmaster of tremendous value to the symphony. In any symphony orchestra the concertmaster is more than just the lucky violinist who gets to sit next to the conductor. The concertmaster serves as the leader of the string section - the largest part of the orchestra. He is responsible for the sound of the strings, much of which is a function of "bowing." This includes determining the direction the bows will move in any given passage and the distance from the strings and placement on the strings where the bows may jump. Malina notes that Rathnam's awareness of different approaches to bow technique and phrasing is invaluable.

Rathnam also commands the respect of the other musicians. He addresses his section and always communicates with them. Joel Lambdin, Founder of the chamber music group, Harrisburg Players' Collective, sits among the second fiddles with the symphony. He expresses enthusiasm for Rathnam's approach noting that he is quite open to suggestions from within the section and is always trying to re-evaluate. According to Lambdin, he encourages everyone to use their instruments to sing out as a voice to be heard.

Although there was a time when Rathnam was reputed for talking too much and trying to

run rehearsals, he seems to have become more moderate in recent years. From a leadership perspective, Malina points out that he would much rather have a concertmaster who communicates more thoroughly than one who does not care.

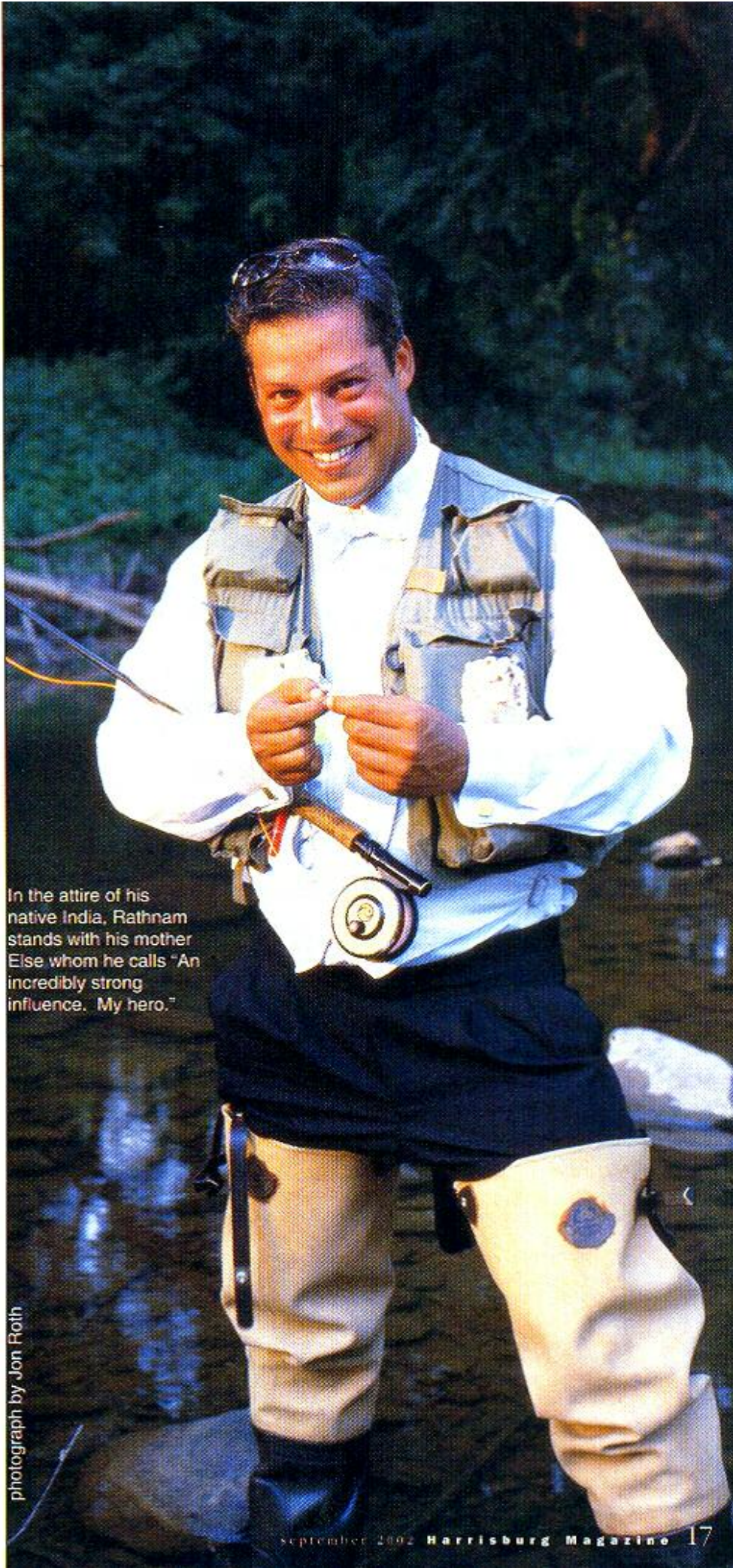
In addition, Malina cites Rathnam's positive attitude and infectious personality as important factors in keeping morale high. Moreover, Malina's own working relationship with Rathnam is strong. Rathnam calls Malina a "deep musician and challenging conductor who will raise the level of all musicians." As Malina grows as Music Director (a position he has held since 2000), Rathnam grows as Concertmaster. They enjoy a friendship within a professional framework which provides for some great collaboration both within the symphony and without. For example, on February 8, 2003, at Market Square Presbyterian Church, the two will perform the complete Brahms Sonatas for Violin and Piano which they hope to play as a benefit for the Harrisburg Symphony (pending sponsorship).



Collaborations of this nature, particularly for the benefit of local charitable organizations, constantly drive Rathnam. He believes that arts organizations and the city must come together with corporate support. In an effort to delve seriously into chamber music and to give it a stronger presence he took a little money, a shoe string budget and a big vision and founded Concertante in 1995. Under Rathnam's leadership the group has gained critical acclaim. He also works closely with other area ensembles, such as Harrisburg Players' Collective, in order to help them gain funding and recruit dynamic talent. He organizes

In the attire of his native India, Rathnam stands with his mother Else whom he calls "An incredibly strong influence. My hero."

photograph by Jon Roth





and plays concerts to raise money for cancer research benefiting such organizations as the Breast Cancer Coalition and Music for Jake. In the spring he hopes to perform the Complete Unaccompanied Sonatas and Partitas of Johann Sebastian Bach for the benefit of three Harrisburg arts organizations. He makes these things happen by working with area businesses, both small and large, to garner financial support. He cites Harco as a real leader in support of the arts and a number of Downtown restaurateurs, most particularly Donnie Brown of the Firehouse Restaurant, who have always supported his endeavours. With each program, once he receives the backing of the business community, he passes it along to the people by using his incredible talent to generate interest in charitable causes and in the music he performs. As he sees it, "Music must be more pertinent than the intrinsic value of the art form itself. We work together to create more opportunities."

With a deep commitment to the City and region, Rathnam has several long term goals that he is actively working to achieve. Rather than smash Mayflies on his stringboard while the Harrisburg Symphony plays summer barge concerts in Riverfront Park, he envisions a permanent concert shell along the riverbanks. He would like to work with the City and generate corporate support that would provide this venue for bringing the music out to the people on a more regular basis. "Anything that increases the symphony's presence in the City is a win." He would also like to create a full-scale music conservatory in Harrisburg. He has several Downtown properties in mind. It would not be merely a place to take music instruction. It would provide theory, ear training, chamber music training, master classes, the whole gamut. The faculty would already be in line, using musicians from the symphony and other area groups. Rathnam believes there is a tremendous amount of talent available in the region and we should not have to farm it out to Peabody, Curtis, and Juilliard, thereby losing it to larger cities. "We need an artistic community that lives here. Not one that comes in and leaves."

"He's a genius when it comes to teaching" says Megan Sweger, mother of six year old Christian who aspires to be a concertmaster one day. Having studied the violin since the age of four, Christian went through his repertoire quickly and needed to move on. He auditioned and began training with Rathnam in April of this year. In addition to technical work, such as scales and developing a strong bow arm, Christian is currently working on the Vivaldi Concerto in A Minor. He practices for three hours each day because he knows that Rathnam is goal directed with his students. However, the lessons flow and are fun and upbeat. "Odin knows how to talk to Christian and treat him as a young man, not a child," says Sweger. The record speaks for itself when it comes to Rathnam's teaching abilities. Over 15 of his students have gone to conservatories including Peabody, Juilliard and Eastman. One student soloed with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the age of 15. A Danish student, Nikolai Znaider, won the Queen Elizabeth Competition (the largest violin competition in the world) and now solos around the globe.

Although it would seem that Rathnam's life is consumed exclusively with musical pursuits, it is not the case. He has a passion for fly fishing that rivals that of the violin. If he is not planning, performing or teaching, you will find him in a stream, waste deep in water, casting his line. He is as intense about his pursuit of fish as he is about his pursuit of musical excellence. Those familiar with the technical nature

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of fly fishing will find this to be a natural connection. It is not merely a question of dangling a worm on a hook in the hope that a little Carp might swim by to nibble. Rather, it requires intense concentration, practice, and focus. Does this sound familiar? As with most avid fly fishermen, Rathnam finds this therapeutic. The motion of casting a line and accurately drawing it back in again is an art form. It also brings a disappointment similar to that which musicianship can bring. Just as when fishing someone else often gets the fish, so too someone else often plays the violin better. Rathnam acknowledges this. "You learn to get used to disappointment. You can't always be the best." Make no mistake about it, however, he will die trying.

ity Ellen Hughes, founder of the Next Generation Festival which brings free chamber music to area universities, observes that "it's phenomenal that he's here". In many ways, he brings to us a mentality that Hughes terms "uncompromising". With a broad vision more common to a New Yorker or one on the international scene (of which he happens to be both), why does a musician of the caliber of Odin Rathnam not seek a more prominent orchestra? Why does he remain committed to Central Pennsylvania for the long haul? If you will pardon the double entendre, is he a big fish in a small stream?

In a sense he is in that he has a personality that fills a room. People in his presence are aware that he is there. However, that is not



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Always innovative and motivated, Rathnam has found a way to combine his love of fly fishing with his love of music and, as always, involve the public. Brahms Viola Quintet in G Major played standing in the middle of the Delaware River? (Which, incidentally might be a bit hard on the cellist.) Well, actually that's not too far off the mark. In collaboration with well-known jazz musician Steve Rudolph, Rathnam proposes to organize a series of fly fishing weekends to take place at a riverside lodge. By day there would be fly fishing with instruction while on the first night would be a jazz concert performed by Rudolph and on the second night a chamber music concert led by Rathnam. Naturally, there would be a fee and, naturally, it would benefit an arts organization.

This synthesis exemplifies Rathnam's approach to all of his undertakings. With almost maniacal energy he strives to bring people and organizations together to advance a cause whether it be cancer research or the personal benefit one receives from inner peace found in a stream. WITF-FM personal-

He cites Harsco as a real leader in support of the arts and a number of Downtown restaurateurs, most particularly Donnie Brown of the Firehouse Restaurant, who have always supported his endeavours.

what causes him to remain and plan for the future here. Rathnam incubated in Harrisburg. When he arrived in 1991 he was not one-tenth the violinist he is today, by his own admission. He grew with the community and with the symphony that embraced him. His goal is to be an even better violinist. He feels a part of the Harrisburg renaissance and is well equipped with the talent and persona to move it along and make a real difference. The truth of the matter is, we need him. And we need more like him. **HBG**