



Robert R. McElroy—Newsweek

Fodor: The kid from Turkey Creek

Fiddler on the Hoof

Who doesn't know the legend of Eugene Fodor, the young Lochinvar of the violin who came out of the West? Born with his boots on, he grew up on a 10-million-acre ranch in Colorado, broke wild mustangs and, during the lonely nights around the campfire, taught himself to play the fiddle. One day Eugene was approached by a tall stranger who said, "Why don't you enter the fiddle shoot-out in Moscow?" And sure enough, the cowpoke from Turkey Creek, the fastest fiddle in the West, whupped all those furriners.

All of which is a Bunyanesque version of the facts. Twenty-four-year-old Eugene Fodor did not quite win the quadrennial Tchaikovsky Violin Competition in Moscow this year: he tied for second place with two Russians (no first place was awarded). But all of Russia thought that Fodor won, and he came home to the greatest acclaim since Van Cliburn's Moscow triumph in 1958. Last week, Fodor came out of the West again to make his New York City debut in Avery Fisher Hall.

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Rawhide: Fodor has the kind of good looks rock stars would envy—curly hair, snow-white teeth, a wiry physique and hands of supple rawhide. But he brought all his extraordinary dexterity to bear on violin pieces that were mostly short, sweet and lightweight. Only two of the works, the second Beethoven "Romance" and Ravel's "Tzigane," had any real heft. Fodor played the Beethoven as if it were a sentimental ballad, but he played the Ravel with an irresistible mix of musicality and muscularity.

For the most part, the program seemed designed to show off Fodor's technique. Almost every work, by such composers as Sarasate, Wieniawski and Paganini, bristled with challenges—sudden changes in intonation, double stop-

ping and leaping arpeggios, which Fodor handled with ease. But from this native of the Rockies, one expected more individuality, a sense of big country rather than small classroom.

Fodor hotly rebuts criticism of his program. "I'm sold on these pieces," he says. "They were written by men who really knew the violin and who, for the most part, played it as well as it could be played. This is violin music. If I had played Bach or Schoenberg, it would have been a different recital. Anyway, I didn't feel like doing them." He leaves no doubt that when it comes to concertos the great romantic works are closest to his taste.

Fodor was turned on to the violin by his father, an amateur musician as well as a businessman. Eugene's older brother John fiddles for the Denver Symphony. The Fodors don't exactly live on the range. Their 80-acre spread is just outside of Denver. The livestock comprises three horses (including Eugene's six-year-old Arabian mare Schezada), a donkey and assorted dogs and cats.

Eugene studied at Juilliard for a year, and later with Jascha Heifetz. "It was like radar the way he discovered sounds," says Fodor. Buoyed by his victory in the 1972 Paganini Competition in Genoa, Fodor entered the harrowing three-week competition in Moscow. One problem was sustaining his strength through the ordeal. At his hotel only one vegetable, cabbage, was on the menu, and that was served only in the morning. "Can you imagine," asks Fodor, "eating cabbage every morning for breakfast?"

Decision: After the finals it seemed all over but the shouting. While the judges deliberated, strangers stopped Fodor in the street to congratulate him. Then the decision was announced. David Oistrakh and Leonid Kogan, teachers of Fodor's co-silver medalists, were jurors. So was a North Vietnamese who awarded Fodor five out of a possible 25 points. An average contestant gets fifteen points.

"Sure I was disappointed," admits the feisty, competitive Fodor. "But no one beat me. It was like winning." He came home to receive gold spurs from Colorado's governor and engagements on all sides, including an exclusive recording contract with RCA. Although Fodor has been playing professionally since 1970, he will soon appear for the first time with such major groups as the Philadelphia, Cleveland and London Symphony orchestras. His fee has quadrupled. Since his return, he has become the first major artist to play in the Ford White House.

Fodor is enjoying every minute of his glory—in addition to skiing, scuba diving and girls. "In Moscow," says Fodor, "the girls brought so many flowers there wasn't room for the fiddle. Since I came home it's better and better—the girls are bigger and bigger."

—HUBERT SAAL

